

# **The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis**

## **Spiritual Commentary and Reader's Guide**

**Dennis Billy, C.Ss.R.**

### **About the Book**

When reading any text, we bring to it our own personal experience rooted in our particular place and time in history. While we may or may not be aware of it, we interpret the text through the lens of our lived experience. When reading a 500-year-old text in the hope of gaining spiritual insight, we should be aware of the lived experience, or cultural and historical context, of the author. Fr. Dennis Billy's Introduction presents five such lenses or filters through which we can view the text in order to better engage in a dialogue with it. He ably helps bring out its relevance to our spiritual lives. Read this section well and keep it in mind while reading; refer to it often. Here's a quick summary of the lenses:

1. The audience was professed religious at a time when religious vocation was deemed the higher calling and more holy path to God.
2. The interior, individualistic spirituality advocated should be seen as a balance to rather than a rejection of communal devotion, which was prevalent in the monastic life of the author.
3. Following the way of the cross to bind our suffering with that of the suffering Christ was seen as the primary concern of Christian spirituality, and this way of suffering was more limited and narrowly defined than is commonly understood today.
4. There existed a subtle body soul dualism that exalted the soul over the earthly existence.
5. The understanding of the physical world was limited, and due to numerous reasons, late medieval European Christianity was disdainful of the world.

### **Using this Book**

Fr. Fr. Dennis Billy offers succinct introductory notes and plentiful reflection questions for each chapter. Use these for journaling and in your individual prayer. He encourages us to dialogue with the text. An excellent way to do this is with a spiritual book discussion group or small faith-sharing group. Some guidelines for leading such a group discussion follow.

The chapters can be read in any order; you can open a page at random, pick a meditation that is of immediate interest, or read the meditations sequentially. Read as the Spirit leads.

### **Leading a Spiritual Book Discussion**

Leading a book discussion can be a rewarding experience. What follows are some helpful hints on leading a successful group discussion on this and other spiritual books. As with any reading group guide, this is only a guide, and should be modified to fit your group's preferences. Some options include:

- Consider having members occasionally read only the original text of the selected chapters. Have them prepare (orally or in writing) a brief reflection or response to the text before having them read the commentary. Ask them to respond orally or in writing about how the commentary changed their response to the text, if at all.
- Choose a question or questions from each chapter for participants to reflect on after reading, asking them to come prepared to discuss their reflections.

- Ask members to choose a question or topic from the assigned reading that resonates with them. Have them present that question or topic to the group, explaining why they choose their particular topic.
- Ask all members to read all of the assigned reading, but assign each person a chapter for which he or she will lead the discussion. Consider encouraging them to relate the reading to other books on spirituality.
- Begin your discussion by asking about each member's reading experience—no formal preparation necessary.

No matter what options you choose, ask members to mark passages that seem especially meaningful or challenging to them. At your meeting, ask participants to read them aloud to the group. This is one of the best ways to draw members into the discussion. Consider having members solicit responses to the passage and perhaps lead that part of the discussion.

Allow time for socializing or snacks if your group so chooses, but remember to leave plenty of time for discussion of the book.

Good preparation will help the discussion flow smoothly. Consider having one member (or all) look to Scripture—a great source of information on the One we are to imitate! —for relevant passages about the life and teachings of Christ. Also, encourage members to make connections with the writings of other spiritual teachers/writers (a few to consider can be found elsewhere in this guide).

In advance of the meeting, choose some questions to present to the group; some you may choose to assign before the meeting to allow time for reflection and preparation, others will lend themselves to more spontaneous discussion. Encourage members to journal as they read and reflect.

Be attentive to your group members and group dynamics. Don't be afraid to change your original plan if a particularly lively and fruitful discussion develops, taking your discussion in an unplanned direction. However, if you feel that the discussion has gone off track in an unproductive way, use questions you have prepared to refocus the discussion.

As the facilitator, be sure that everyone has a chance to contribute to the discussion. If some members of your group continue to dominate the discussions, it can help to intervene by asking silent members a direct, open-ended question (“What's your response to that?”).

Remember, a book discussion of a spirituality title is more than a discussion of a book. It's about personal growth in a faith journey. It's about fostering community in faith. It's about members engaging with the book in a way that enlightens their faith life. Combining individualistic reflection with communal prayer and discussion can be a great way to achieve the balance that Billy writes of in the introduction.

Format of the Discussion: As a group, decide how you will cover this book. You may reflect on the meditations sequentially over the course of a few meetings. If you are using this as part of a small faith sharing group and time does allow for a more leisurely approach, consider integrating

the discussion of this book with your regular meeting material, the Sunday readings, or personal life discussions.

### **Other Lenses and Reflections...**

Fr. Dennis Billy's commentary helps us to understand the author's lenses and his questions help us to enter into a dialogue with it through our own experience. Consider relating the text to Scripture passages and other's lived experience of God. Begin by considering the following:

On the interior life and the world... In Philippians 4: 11-13, 19-20, Paul writes that he has learned the secret to being self-sufficient no matter the external circumstances in which he finds himself.

On experience versus rational or abstract knowledge of God (see p. 11)... The God of the Old Testament is at times a merciful, loving God and at times seems a vain and vengeful God—this is the *experience* of God of the Jewish people. Where does abstract knowledge lead us in our search for God and understanding of God? What role does *our* experience play?

On the suffering Christ and the way of the cross... Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy, a Byzantine Catholic priest, has a more expansive view of the suffering of Christ. He writes in *Do This in Remembrance of Me*. "The Way Jesus suffers and dies is as much a part of the eternal unchanging essence of His Passion as is the Purpose of His suffering and death. Indeed... His Way is intrinsic to His Purpose and vice versa." According to McCarthy, the way of the cross is based on Jesus going to "His death, rejecting violence, loving enemies, returning good for evil, praying for His persecutors—yet conquers and reigns eternal." [McCarthy's writings can be found online (free download) at <http://centerforchristiannonviolence.org/index.php>.] How do you understand the way of the cross?