

Foreword

AMONG the very numerous and substantial writings of Thomas Hemerken, better known as Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471), attention has been paid mainly to those that were harmoniously assembled into the four books known as *The Imitation of Christ*. Over the centuries this work has seen many translations into various languages, so that after Sacred Scripture itself it has always been the most widely read book and has with good reason been regarded as a spiritual directory for those who seriously desire to cultivate the interior life.

Bossuet called it “the Fifth Gospel,” and Abbot Olivet spoke of it as “the finest book that has emerged from human hands, just as the Gospel came from the hands of God.” A great many Saints were formed with the help of this golden book, as can be seen from the biographies of not a few of them

Oddly enough, however, when à Kempis’s writings were being organized, the opportunity was not taken to gather into a single volume the no less valuable

passages that deal with Mary. This was a serious omission. On the one hand, it meant the neglect of the author's magnificent pages on Our Lady as "the providential way to Christ and God." On the other hand, it meant that the providential way of Mary, as described in the writings of an authentic spiritual teacher, was practically hidden for centuries from so many souls.

There has, of course, been no lack of other authors who have written excellent pages on the important place of Our Lady in our interior life. The point to be made, however, is that in the process of offering *The Imitation of Christ*, this crowning work of Christian asceticism, another crowning work was passed over in silence: I mean one on the imitation of Mary, which is so well described by Thomas. Despite the fact that this imitation or following is subsidiary to the imitation of Christ, the fact remains that God has willed it, too. As a result, it seems that à Kempis's admirable teaching has in this way been drastically and ungenerously reduced.

As I read the seven volumes of M.J. Pohl's critical edition of the writings of Thomas à Kempis, I was continually

enchanted by the beautiful pages Thomas wrote on Our Lady. I also asked myself how it was that we were given an *Imitation of Christ*, a lofty work indeed, but also one that is in practice incomplete since it does not speak of Mary, even though in the author's writings and thought she seems inseparable from Christ.

There have in the past been students who have interested themselves in these Marian writings, but they have not done so in a systematic and organized way. Only recently have L. Locatelli and B. Ferragamo, Montfort Fathers both, attempted a systematic organization of the material, with a translation into Italian. Suitably enough, they laid out their work in four books and titled it *The Imitation of Mary*, in parallel with *The Imitation of Christ*. But except in the case of those who have had the good fortune to read their work, it does not seem to have pushed through the curtain of silence around these Marian writings of à Kempis.

I have had to deal with two difficulties in selecting and organizing all the Marian writings of Thomas à Kempis and in translating them into Italian. The first was

unavoidable, inasmuch as the author did not plan and organize these writings as a unified work. The second urged me to respect the semantic expressiveness of the Latin text and even the lexical choices that embellish it, and thereby avoid the complaint of Francesco D'Ovidio, who claimed that a translator (*traduttore*) is always somewhat of a traitor (*traditore*).

With an eye on the text published by Fathers Locatelli and Ferragamo, I have thought it useful to keep the division into four books that are broken up into chapters and subdivided into numbered passages. At the same time, however, I have applied a personal criterion that I think more suitable for bringing together all of the author's Marian texts without omission, as well as for giving them a more appropriate organization and division in view of a logical rational development. In addition, I thought it helpful to give each of the four books a title indicating its contents. (In my Italian translation I have worked from Pohl's critical edition of the author's Latin writings.)

In this work, then, I have sought to set forth in a systematic, organized way the

valuable teaching of Thomas à Kempis on Our Lady. For the majority of readers the book will be something quite novel, as I said above. It will also be novel for not a few students of theology and spirituality. And, since we go to Christ through Mary, *The Imitation of Mary* will be a valuable guide on the way to Him and will, together with *The Imitation of Christ*, form up an inseparable pair—indeed, a providential pair for those who desire to live the spiritual life seriously.

The work will help us better understand Mary's maternal role in relation to us and its inseparableness from the role of Christ, as Cardinal Anastasio Ballestrero says in his fine work *Il Mistero di Maria [The Mystery of Mary]* (Piemme, 1995): "It is not I who seek out Mary, but it is God Who offers her to me; it is not I who love her, but the Lord Who tells me to love her."

We are called upon to love Mary as Christ loved her and, even before that, as God the Father loved her. What is it that rouses this faith in us? What does it mean to develop a personal relationship with the Virgin, when we are conscious that it is not

we who seek out Mary, but that God Himself sets her on our path and places her in our lives just as He placed in her the mystery of the Incarnation?

In a world in which the sense of sin has almost disappeared, the sense of goodness is likewise obscured by relativism, and clarity about life seems a utopian dream. In a world that no longer believes in purity of life, the contemplation of Mary can be bread for our journey and can fill our life with profound aspirations.

Romolo Sbrocchi



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BOOK 1

MEETING MARY

CHAPTER 1

How To Greet the Glorious Virgin Mary

ALTHOUGH I am without merit and am, indeed, conscious of my many sins, I have the utmost trust in Your Passion, Lord Jesus, and in the merits of Your Mother, the glorious and holy Virgin Mary. It is upon her that I wish to dwell for a moment; I pray, therefore, that I may be made worthy of doing so, since I dare not approach her without first being given permission.

I am well aware that due to my unworthiness I ought not present myself before this supremely worthy woman whom even the Angels admire and venerate, while exclaiming: “Who is this that arises from the desert of the world and overflows with the delights of paradise?”

2. Therefore, dearest Mary, it is unseemly that I should dare to dwell on the thought of your beauty and your greatness, for I am but dust and ashes and am even the vilest creature on earth since I am a

sinner and inclined to every kind of perverse act.

You, however, have been made higher than the heavens; you have the world beneath your feet and are worthy of honor and reverence because of the exalted state of your Son. Your ineffable kindness, which transcends every imagination, enchants me and draws my affections to you, for you are the comfort of the afflicted and always ready to help wretched sinners.

3. I am very much in need of great consolation and especially of your Son's grace, because I am utterly unable to help myself. But if you, most merciful Mother, condescend to look upon my littleness, you can in many ways help and strengthen me with abundant consolations. Therefore, as soon as I feel burdened with difficulties and temptations, I shall have immediate recourse to you, for where grace abounds, mercy is more at hand.

4. If, then, I would attempt to grasp your exceptional glory and greet you in a worthy way from the depths of my heart, I must advance with a very pure spirit, for those who presume to approach your door

without due reverence obtain not glory but a justified disgrace. Anyone approaching you must proceed with the greatest reverence and humility, but also with great hope of being admitted in virtue of your mercy and clemency.

5. I come to you, therefore, with humility and reverence, with devotion and confidence, and with the greeting of Gabriel on my lips—a greeting that I joyously repeat with head bowed in respect and with hands open in deep devotion. I pray that this greeting may be repeated a hundred, a thousand, and even more times on my behalf by all the heavenly spirits. Indeed, I do not know anything dearer and more worthy I can offer you than this greeting.

6. Listen now to one most enamored of your name: “Heaven rejoices and earth is amazed when I say: Hail, Mary! Satan flees, hell trembles when I say: Hail, Mary! The world becomes contemptible, the flesh foul, when I say: Hail, Mary! Sadness disappears and joy returns when I say: Hail, Mary!

“Tepidity vanishes and the heart is inflamed with love when I say: Hail, Mary!