



THOMAS À KEMPIS 1380-1471

There is great diversity in the people we're bringing to your attention as we study Christian history. Thomas à Kempis was a quiet Catholic cleric born in 1380 during the Medieval Period. Thomas grew up in Germany and left home at a young age to attend a monastery to learn the skills of a scribe. He became a copyist, carefully copying two copies of the Bible and several other manuscripts. He was a part of a monastic order known as Canons Regular: priests living in community, sharing their property, giving hospitality to pilgrims and travelers, and doing public ministry. He devoted his time to prayer, study, copying manuscripts, the teaching of novices, offering Mass, and hearing the confessions of people who came to the monastery church. From time to time Thomas was given a position of authority in the community of monks, but he consistently preferred the quiet of his cell to the challenge of administration. He was pleasant but retiring. The other monks eventually recognized Thomas's talent for deep thought and stopped troubling him with practical affairs.

Thomas wrote a number of sermons, letters, hymns, and information about the lives of the saints. He reflected the mystical spirituality of his times, the sense of being absorbed in God. The most famous of his works by far is *The Imitation of Christ*, a charming instruction on how to love God. This small book, free from intellectual pretensions, has had great appeal to anyone interested in probing beneath the surface of life. "A poor peasant who serves God," Thomas wrote in it, "is better than a proud philosopher who . . . ponders the courses of the stars." The book advised the ordering of one's priorities along religious lines. "Vain and brief is all human comfort. Blessed and true is that comfort which is derived inwardly from the Truth." Thomas advised where to look for happiness. "The glory of the good is in their own consciences, and not in the mouths of men."

His teachings were widely read and his works abound in Biblical quotations. He wrote:

"Without the Way, there is no going,
Without the Truth, there is no knowing,
Without the Life, there is no living."

His most famous work, *The Imitation of Christ*, was first issued anonymously, in keeping with his regular habit to seek no recognition for his efforts. He once wrote, "If thou wilt receive profit, read with humility, simplicity, and faith, and seek not at any time the fame of being learned." *The Imitation of Christ* has come to be, after the Bible, the most widely translated book in Christian literature. Eventually its authorship was attributed to Thomas. He died August 8, 1471 in Germany in the same monastic obscurity in which he had lived. He left behind a wealth of written material which is still studied and analyzed today.