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Thomas à Kempis

*Complete Works*



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*The Complete Works of*  
**THOMAS À KEMPIS**

(c. 1380-1471)



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**THOMAS À KEMPIS**



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## *Complete Works of Thomas à Kempis*



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## The Translations



*Kempen, a town in the district of Viersen, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, approximately 20 miles northwest of Düsseldorf — Thomas à Kempis' birthplace*



*The centre of Kempen*

## The Imitation of Christ



*Translated by Richard Challoner, 1819 and William Benham, 1905*

The late medieval theologian Thomas à Kempis is the probable author of *Imitatio Christi* (The Imitation of Christ), one of the most influential works of Christian literature. Thomas was born in Kempen in the Rhineland, western Germany. His father, Johann, was a blacksmith, and his mother, Gertrud, was a schoolmistress. In his writings he signed himself “Thomas Kempensis” or “Thomas Kempis”, indicating his place of birth in the traditional classical manner.

In 1392, Thomas followed his brother, Johann, to Deventer in the Netherlands to attend the noted Latin school there. During his studies, he encountered the Brethren of the Common Life, followers of Gerard Groote’s *Modern Devotion* — a movement for religious reform that called for apostolic renewal through the rediscovery of genuine pious practices such as humility, obedience, simplicity of life and integration into the community. The movement believed mainly in austerity for Christians at every level, from clergy to layman, and many followers frowned upon such things as church-led celebrations of certain events.

After completing his Latin studies in 1399, Thomas went to the nearby city of Zwolle to visit his brother Johann, who had become the Prior of the Monastery of Mount St. Agnes. This community was one of the Canons Regular of the Congregation of Windesheim, founded by disciples of Groote in order to provide a way of life more in keeping with the norms of monastic life of the period. Thomas himself entered Mount St. Agnes in 1406. He was not ordained a priest, however, until almost a decade later. During his time there, he was much occupied as a copyist and writer. He received Holy Orders in 1413 and was made sub-prior of the monastery in 1429.

His first tenure of office as subprior was interrupted by the exile of the community from Agnetenberg in 1429. A dispute had arisen in connection with an appointment to the vacant See of Utrecht. Pope Martin V rejected the nomination of Bishop-elect Rudolf van Diepholt and imposed an interdict. The Canons remained in exile in observance of the interdict until the question was settled in 1432. During this period, Thomas was sent to Arnhem to care for his ailing brother, where he remained until Johann died in November 1432.

Thomas spent the majority of his time between devotional exercises in writing and in copying manuscripts. He copied the Bible at least four times, and one of the copies is preserved at Darmstadt, Germany, in five volumes. In Biblical teachings he was widely read and his works abound with quotations, especially from the New Testament.

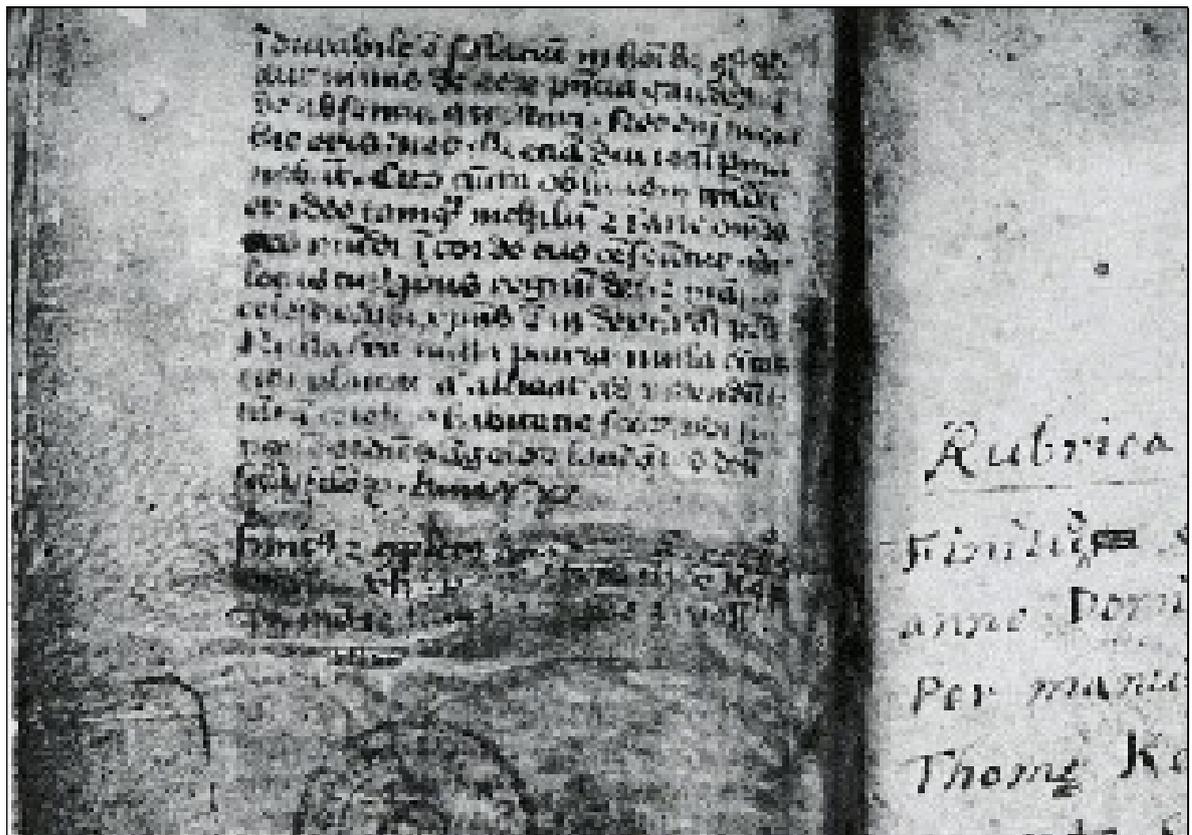
As subprior he was given the responsibility of instructing novices and in that capacity he wrote four booklets between 1418 and 1427, later collected and named after the title of the first chapter of the first booklet: *The Imitation of Christ*. Thomas More later said it was one of the three books everybody ought to own. Thirteen translations of *The Imitation of Christ* and three paraphrases in English appear to have been published between 1500 and 1700.

*The Imitation of Christ* was composed in Latin and is divided into four books of detailed spiritual instructions: (i) “Helpful Counsels of the Spiritual Life”, (ii) “Directives for the Interior Life”, (iii) “On Interior Consolation”, and (iv) “On the

Blessed Sacrament". The text's devotional approach emphasises the interior life and withdrawal from the mundanities of the world, as opposed to the active imitation of Christ practised by other friars. The devotions of the books emphasise devotion to the Eucharist as the key element of spiritual life. A handbook for the spiritual life arising from the *Devotio Moderna* movement, *The Imitation of Christ* is perhaps the most widely read Christian devotional work after the Bible, and is regarded by many as a devotional and religious classic.



*A portrait of Thomas à Kempis dated to 1460*

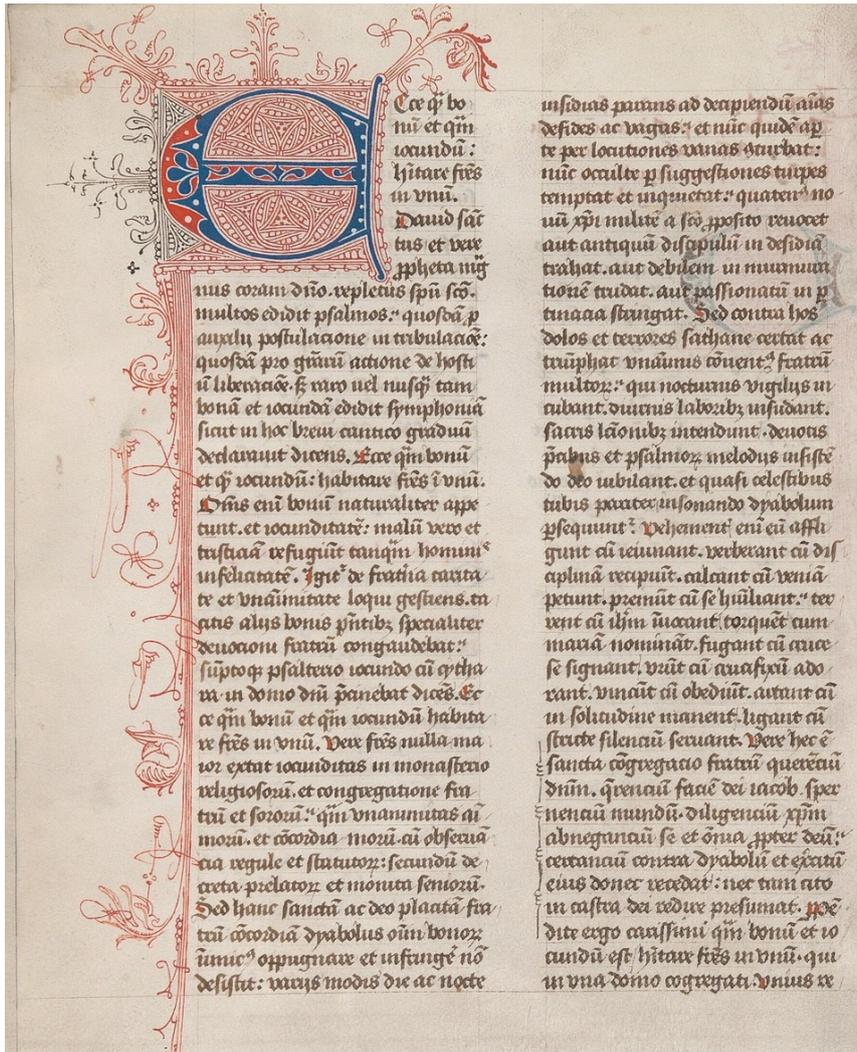


The manuscript of 'De Imitatione Christi', Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Brussels, Belgium

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Richard Challoner Translation, 1819

William Benham Translation, 1905



Excerpt from the manuscript "Opera" (Works), written by Thomas in the second half of the fifteenth century

# Richard Challoner Translation, 1819

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