

# The Brotherhood of the Common Life

by William F. Wertz, Jr.

In two recent essays published in *Fidelio*, “Mozart’s 1782-86 Revolution in Music” (Vol. I, No. 4) and “On the Subject of God” (Vol. II, No. 1), Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. references the “modern Classical forms of Christian humanist secondary education—from the Brothers of the Common Life of Groote and Thomas à Kempis, through Wilhelm von Humboldt’s nineteenth-century reforms.” He argues that the relevant feature of such education, “is emphasis upon use of primary sources’ representation of processes of great discovery, prompting the student, in this way, to replicate that mental experience of the discoverer in the student’s own mental processes.” He further emphasizes that the education of Nicolaus of Cusa, “one of the greatest thinkers in all recorded history,” “was shaped by the influence of that great Grootean teaching order, the Brothers of the Common Life. He assimilated thus, for example, the minds of Plato and Archimedes, and many others.”

In a more recent essay published in *Fidelio*, “On LaRouche’s Discovery” (Vol. III, No. 1), he elaborates further: “The idea of a Christian Classical humanist education, such as that of Groote’s Brothers of the Common



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“Christ on the Mount of Olives,” Martin Schongauer (c.1430-1491).

Life, or the Schiller-Humboldt reforms, the reliving of moments of great, axiomatic-revolutionary discovery, as if to replicate that moment from within the mind of the original discoverer in one’s own mind, is a typification of the relevant way in which the child and youth must be developed morally and formally at the same time.”

This essay will identify the conception of the purpose of education which underlies the Brotherhood, Nicolaus of Cusa’s theological and scientific writings, and the philosophical and aesthetical writings of Friedrich Schiller, which shaped the educational reforms of Humboldt. My discussion will rely upon several writings of the leading Brotherhood figure Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471), who was born Thomas Haem-

erken in the city of Kempen in Germany, fifteen miles northwest of present-day Dusseldorf.

À Kempis’ father was a blacksmith and his mother ran a school for small children. In 1392, at the age of twelve, Thomas journeyed from Kempen to the town of Deventer, in the Low Countries, in order to join a small Brotherhood community founded by Gerard Groote (1340-84). Seven years later he determined to enter the

religious life. In 1406-7 he pronounced the religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and was ordained a priest in 1413. In 1425 he was appointed sub-prior of the monastery of Mount St. Agnes and was entrusted with the training of the novices. He held various other posts in the monastery and in 1448 was elected sub-prior for the second time. He died on July 25, 1471 at the age of 92. Thus, his life of nearly a century began shortly before the death of Groote and spanned the formative years of the Brotherhood of the Common Life as well as the life of Nicolaus of Cusa.

The writings of à Kempis which I will review include *The Imitation of Christ*, his most important book, completed around 1427. In addition, I will refer to *The Christian's Exercise: or, Rules To Live Above the World, While We Are In It*, including a manual for children, a manual for a young adult, a manual for perfection of an adult, and a final one which is on the contemplation of God; to a biography of the founders of the Brotherhood, which includes "The Life of the Reverend Master Gerard the Great Commonly Called Groote," "The Life of the Reverend Florentius, a Devout Priest, and Vicar of the Church of Deventer," and "Lives of the Followers of the Father Florentius"; and to *Meditations With Prayers on the Life and Loving Kindness of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*, a book of meditations with prayers which, given their emphasis on the "imitation of Christ," was undoubtedly very central to the Brotherhood.



## Nicolaus of Cusa and the Brotherhood

BEFORE REVIEWING these writings of à Kempis, it is useful to first identify the historical connection between the Brotherhood and Nicolaus of Cusa.

The story of the Brotherhood begins on September 21, 1374, when the Dutchman Gerard Groote ceded the use of his house at Deventer to some poor women. Five years later he drew up a constitution for the Sisters of the Common Life, the precursor of the Brotherhood. The first suggestion for the formation of the Brotherhood of the Common Life seems to have come from Florentius Radewijns, who joined Gerard Groote in 1380. With the assent of Groote, Florentius gathered together a number of young clerks and copyists who were willing to live a common life, although they took no formal vows.

A number of the monastic orders attacked the Brotherhood for not being associated with an order, claiming that they were a monastic order without approval. Therefore, shortly before his death on August 20, 1384,

Groote directed the Brotherhood to adopt the Rule of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine, as a means to overcome the opposition of the mendicant orders. In 1386, Florentius, whom Groote named as his successor, proceeded to build the monastery at Windesheim, a desolate place between Zwolle and Deventer. The first "Prior" of the Order appears to have been John à Kempis (elected in 1398), the elder brother of Thomas.

During the 1390's and the early 1400's, houses of the Brotherhood were established throughout both The Netherlands and also Germany, including in Münster (1401), Osnabrück (1410), and Cologne (1417). Cusanus himself is said to have received part of his education from the Brotherhood at Deventer. Although there is no record of his enrollment, it is clear that Cusanus grew up in an environment influenced by the Brotherhood, and that such an education was certainly available to him.

The connection between Nicolaus of Cusa and the Brotherhood is further supported by the coherence of his writings with the educational method of the Brotherhood, and by Cusanus' close relationship to the Brotherhood in the last decades of his life. In the 1450's, Cusanus, who was by then a Cardinal of the Catholic Church, was sent to Germany and all of the adjacent countries as a legate of Pope Nicolaus V, in order to carry out Church reform. In 1450, Cusanus was a guest of the Brothers of the Common Life in Deventer, where he expressed support for them, viewing them as an important vehicle for bringing about the reforms that he hoped to achieve throughout Europe. In 1451, he gave explicit aid to the reforms that had been launched by the Windesheim congregation in Saxony. Later, in 1464, the year of his death, Cusanus stipulated that a dormitory be founded at Deventer with funds that he set aside for that purpose.

Nicolaus of Cusa, like Gerard Groote before him, was extremely critical of the corruption which existed both within the Holy Roman Empire and the Catholic Church. In his book *On Catholic Concordance*, Cusanus wrote that among the practices then prevalent and requiring correction were "adultery, theft, parricide, perjury, pillage . . . the deception involved in usurious and criminal contracts, in games of dice, in monopolies and similar practices." In respect to the Roman curia, he wrote: "If simony is in a way a kind of heresy, if it is a sacrilege and according to the great Apostle idolatry to burden subordinate churches, a reform is necessary which will take away all these profits—in particular since the whole church is scandalized by the avarice of its rulers, and by that of the Roman curia more than of the other churches."

Nonetheless, for Cusanus the fundamental principle of philosophy is that unity is prior to plurality. Therefore, as expressed in the same book, *On Catholic Concordance*, he

believed all reforms should be carried out within the Church, and, notwithstanding his work for reform, it would be false to portray his role as that of a forerunner of the later Reformation, which split the institution of the Catholic Church both politically and theologically. Cusanus became a Cardinal of the Catholic Church in 1449 and at the end of his life was appointed General Vicar of Rome. The same may be said of the Brotherhood.

As à Kempis documents in his *Life of Gerard the Great*, prior to founding the Brotherhood, Groote attempted to reform the Church through preaching against “heretics, usurers, and clerks that live in concubinage,” and his efforts were met with slander and persecution. “But since the righteousness of the good suffereth the envy of evil men, some persons of corrupt mind, lovers of the world and followers of luxurious living, often spoke against Gerard, for they hated the way of truth, and were enemies of every good thing.” His enemies, including “priests and prelates and wandering friars,” eventually obtained an edict forbidding Groote to preach. “Unwilling to stir up a tumult amongst the people against the clergy,” Groote “yielded in a spirit of humility” and focused his efforts instead on secondary education of the laity. In Groote’s “Profession of Faith,” included as part of à Kempis’ biography of the Brotherhood founder, Groote writes that he hopes that those things he has writ-

ten and preached will be approved by all men, “subject always to the judgment of the Holy Roman Church, to whom with all humility I everywhere and always submit myself.” Thus, the reform efforts of the Brotherhood were never divisive, but rather for the purpose of the Church’s inner renewal. In this spirit, the Brotherhood referred to itself as “The New Devotion.”



## The Brotherhood’s Educational Method

ACCORDING TO à Kempis, after Groote had been forbidden to preach, he

caused several books of sacred theology to be written out by the pupils whom he attracted to him by his

excellent discourses: He paid them wages, inviting them to come to his own house and hear the Word of God more often, so that he might dispose them to chastity, and to the amending of their lives, by which means they might become partakers of everlasting blessedness, being fashioned to a new and holy life, if they should renounce worldly courses.

Because of its focus upon copying manuscripts, the Brotherhood placed an emphasis upon original Classical sources, as opposed to secondary textbooks. Moreover, its approach to education, in opposition to the Aristotelian method prevalent in the universities of the time, was not based upon rote learning and merely formal knowledge.

In *The Imitation of Christ*, à Kempis describes the approach taken by the Brotherhood:

What avail is it to a man to reason about the high secret mysteries of the Trinity, if he lack humility and so displeases the Holy Trinity? Truly, it avails nothing. Deeply inquisitive reasoning does not make a man holy or righteous, but a good life makes him beloved by God. I would rather feel compunction of heart for my sins than merely know the definition of compunction. If you know all the books of the Bible merely by rote and all the sayings of the philosophers by heart, what will it profit you without grace and charity?

The Brotherhood also emphasized the teaching of the vernacular languages, as well as Latin and Greek. A common misconception today, is that the use of the vernacular was first championed by the Reformation. But, in fact, reformers as early as Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) had advocated the development and use of the vernacular, as a necessary precondition for the informed participation of a citizenry in the deliberations of a sovereign nation-state. The Brotherhood gave major impetus to this initiative, while also aiding in correcting and making consistent the various Latin translations of the Bible. The



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*The Brotherhood exerted tremendous influence over education in 15th and 16th century Europe. Dozens of its schools enrolled 500-1,000 students apiece, and when the great humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam attended the Deventer school, its enrollment was 2,200. Brotherhood houses produced twenty-five percent of Europe’s pre-Reformation books; Johann Gutenberg, whose invention of the printing press revolutionized learning, was a close Brotherhood associate.*

Brotherhood encouragement of Greek, as well as Latin, helped to lay the basis for the fifteenth-century Italian Golden Renaissance, which was based in large part upon gaining access to original texts of the Greek Classics.

The influence of the Brotherhood rapidly extended beyond its own ranks into the public school system in Deventer and Zwolle, where Groote cultivated the friendship of both teachers and their employers. Through his influence, his close friend, John Cele, became the rector of the city school at Zwolle, where he taught from 1374 to 1417 and attracted as many as 1,200 boys at a time from as far away as Poland, the interior of Germany, the upper Rhine valley, and the distant shores of Flanders. Cele implemented many reforms inspired by Groote, which were later replicated elsewhere throughout Europe.

Three times a day Cele read and explained to his pupils selections from the Bible, in order to encourage them to imitate Christ in their studies. Imitating Christ themselves, the teachers in the school at Zwolle preferred loving warnings to harsh punishment, sought to inculcate a love for individual research by letting pupils delve among the Classics rather than confine themselves to textbooks, and taught the boys the use of their vernacular language. Poor pupils were given money for the books, ink, and paper they needed in school. To take care of each pupil's individual needs, he divided his school into eight classes. In the two highest classes special studies were taught by specialists.

All of these initiatives were a reflection of the most important reform carried out by Groote—which was also the core of the Schiller-Humboldt educational reforms in nineteenth-century Germany—that is, correctly defining the purpose of education as both of the student's mind and of his character, and then encouraging the necessary outlook in the student to accomplish this.



## Groote's Rejection of Academia

A FIRST READING of Groote's "Profession of Faith," might lead one to conclude, wrongly, that he is anti-intellectual. For example, at one point he writes: "Do not spend any time in the study of geometry, arithmetic, rhetoric, dialectic, grammar, songs, poetry, legal matters or astrology." However, a closer reading reveals that he is not anti-*intellectual*, but anti-*academic*. Groote had been trained at the University of Paris beginning in 1355. He obtained a degree of Master of Arts in 1358, and later studied law there for eight years. Nonetheless, he later came to reject academia and the Aristotelian state of

mind which characterizes it.

One way to understand Groote is to view his comments from the standpoint of Friedrich Schiller's famous inaugural Jena University address entitled "What Is, and to What End Do We Study, Universal History," written in 1789. In this, Schiller distinguishes between the philosophical mind, and what he calls the bread-fed scholars or *brotgelehrten*. This latter, according to Schiller, "seeks his rewards not in the treasures of his mind—he expects his recompense from the recognition of others, from positions of honor, from personal security." In his "Profession of Faith," Groote gives the following reasons for his rejection of academia:

- (1) It is very seldom that a man who doth follow knowledge, which bringeth him wealth (as the study of medicine, or of laws, or statutes), is right-minded or just in his reasoning, or righteous, or doth live the more contentedly or uprightly . . . [B]y such knowledge, whose object is gain, his mind is darkened, his passions are aroused, the straightness of his nature is made crooked and his desires are tainted, so that he cannot rightly discern what things are of God, and virtuous, and good for the body.
- (2) Thou shalt never study to take a degree in theology nor strive therefor, because: (a) . . . I may have [knowledge] equally well without a degree; (b) The common life of a university is carnal and is for them that savor carnal things; (c) In many respects thou mayest be hindered from promoting the spiritual health of thy neighbor, from prayer, from purity of mind and from contemplation; and (d) One must be present at many vain lectures . . .

In the same section, Groote indicates his identity as a Platonic Christian in the tradition of St. Augustine:

Of all the sciences of the heathen their moral philosophy is the least to be avoided—for this is often of great use and profit both for one's own study and for teaching others. Wherefore the wiser amongst them, such as Socrates and Plato, turned all philosophy into consideration of moral questions, and if they spoke of deep matters they dealt therewith as in a figure and lightly, dwelling upon their moral aspect (as thou knowest from the blessed Augustine and thine own study) so that some rule for conduct might always be found side by side with knowledge.

The influence of Plato and his Socratic method on Groote is also reflected in his explicit references to St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, Dionysius, St. Anselm, and St. Bonaventure, all of whom followed Augustine in viewing Plato's philosophy as closer to Christianity than any other philosophy.

In his "Profession of Faith" (and this should remind one of Nicolaus of Cusa's later *On Learned Ignorance*), Groote echoes the Socratic maxim: "The knowledge of all knowledge is for man to know that he knoweth nothing. The more a man is assured that he is far from perfec-

tion, the nearer is he thereto.”

Florentius continues in the same vein: “Much study is of little profit, unless it is directed to the amending of one’s life and to ordering oneself diligently to right conduct, for the devil knoweth many things about the Scripture and yet is his knowledge of no profit to him.”



## The Insufficiency of ‘Knowledge’

THUS, FROM THE standpoint of the Brotherhood, knowledge should not be pursued as an end in itself, but must be subordinated to the purpose of fulfilling God’s will, which means amending one’s life so as to serve one’s neighbor for the purpose of improving the condition of mankind on this earth.

The original constitution of the Brotherhood of the Common Life was dedicated to St. Paul. At a later point, the dedication was changed to St. Jerome, based upon the Brotherhood’s own dedication to studying and correcting the Bible as well as copying manuscripts. But the initial dedication to St. Paul reflects its view that knowledge alone is insufficient; for, in I Corinthians 8:1, St. Paul writes: “Knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up. If anyone supposes that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.” This is precisely the idea expressed in Nicolaus of Cusa’s *On Learned Ignorance*, and the reason for Groote’s rejection of academia.

It is important to recognize that St. Paul’s concept of love does not exclude knowledge. In fact, according to the tradition of the Christian humanists St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Cusanus, we can only love that which we know. Rather than excluding knowledge, love actually requires it. But knowledge must be formed by love; if it is not, it is knowledge inflated or puffed up with pride.

In *The Imitation of Christ*, à Kempis himself says: “Well-ordered learning is not to be belittled, for it is good and comes from God, but a clean conscience and a virtuous life are much better and more to be desired.” And he points out that, “On the Day of Judgment we will not be asked what we have read, but what we have done.”

One thing that is striking about *The Imitation of Christ*, or any other of à Kempis’ works, is his use of epigrammatic sayings designed to provoke self-reflection. It was the practice of the Brotherhood in their educational work, which centered on the Bible, to have students write down sayings or excerpts from the Bible or from various Fathers of the Church. The collection of such sayings was called a *raparium*. The basic idea is that the way to self-improvement, is to think about an appropri-

ate saying which helps one to overcome whatever obstacle to creative thinking arises in one’s mind at the moment it occurs. Of course, this is not something new with the Brotherhood. In the New Testament story, when Christ is tempted by the devil in the desert, what does he do? Each of his answers is itself a quote from the Old Testament. So this approach to self-amendment is itself an *imitation of Christ*.

Thus, the Brotherhood standpoint was that one could create genius only to the extent knowledge was subordinated to the moral purpose of charity; this is what the Brotherhood stressed in its educational reforms.



## The Imitation of Christ

IN I CORINTHIANS 11:1, St. Paul says: “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ,” and the Brotherhood initially dedicated itself to Paul, in order to imitate St. Paul as he had imitated Christ. The Brotherhood’s educational method was coherent with this, for

their emphasis on the student’s replicating in his own mind the creative discoveries made by others, rather than on mere rote learning, flowed from their perception of the meaning of Christ as the Word or the *Logos* (eternal reason) become flesh; because, for Christians, Christ is the highest expression of man’s creative reason. Thus, when the student replicates within his own mind the revolutionary creative discovery of another human being, he is, in fact, *imitating that person’s imitation* of the agapic, creative labor of Christ. This is the process necessary for mankind’s continuing self-perfection.

## The Cup of Gethsemane

The unique contribution of Thomas à Kempis in his *The Imitation of Christ* is, that he stresses that to be a true Christian means nothing less than to be willing to drink from the cup of Gethsemane. Thus, in the section entitled: “Of the Small Numbers of the Lovers of the Cross,” he says: “Few will follow Him to drink a draft of the chalice of His Passion.” And then he further says: “If you desire to be a dear and well-beloved friend of Christ, drink effectively with Him a draft of the chalice of His tribulation.”

To imitate Christ means to subordinate our will to that of God, as opposed to operating on the basis of self-centered will. But, given the nature of the world, this necessarily entails going through tribulations, because if one attempts to act on the basis of God’s will in a world which acts contrary to God’s will, one is necessarily going to run into adversity, and one will be forced to drink from the chalice of Christ’s passion.

One of the most striking passages in *The Imitation of Christ* is the following: “Many desire Christ’s consolations, but few desire his tribulations.” For à Kempis, therefore, religion is a form of combat; in the *Imitation of Christ*, he quotes Job to the effect that “the life of man upon earth is a warfare.” And yet, à Kempis says, “there is no other way to life and true inward peace, but the way of the cross.”

Compare this to Friedrich Schiller’s essay “On the Sublime,” where Schiller says that man is only truly free to the extent he is capable of overcoming death through submission to divine counsel. And further, that it is only to the extent that man perseveres in acting out of love for his fellow man, even in the face of great suffering, that he demonstrates that he has a “supersensible” capacity for moral freedom within him.

To those who think that Christianity should not involve tribulation, à Kempis responds: “What saint in this world has been without his cross and without some trouble?” In fact, such tribulations should not be a cause of sadness, but rather of joy. À Kempis writes: “If you bear this cross against your will, you make a great burden for yourself . . .”; but, on the other hand, “If you gladly bear this Cross, it will bear you . . .”

This idea is very near to Schiller’s notion of the beautiful soul, who does his duty with joy, out of the inner desire to do good. Indeed, as St. Paul writes: One should act “without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (II Cor 9:7) If one bears this cross gladly, it will be an easy yoke. This is what Christ did at Gethsemane. One is reminded of Handel’s setting in the *Messiah*: “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt 11:29-30)

### Paradise on Earth

À Kempis continues: “When you come to such a degree of patience, that tribulation is sweet to you, and for the love of God is savory and pleasant in your sight, then may you trust that it is well with you, and that you are in good estate; for you have found paradise on earth.” This is a very striking concept, that paradise, to the extent it exists on earth, is not just the consolations of Christ, nor is it just the absence of adversity; but paradise on earth is to act out of love as the Good Samaritan does, knowing full well that to act in such a way in a world which is hostile to Good Samaritans means with virtual certainty that one is going to meet with adversity. When one has developed the ability to act in that way, one has found paradise on earth.

Christ expresses this same idea in the Sermon on the Mount, when he says: “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and



from *De Re Metallica*, 1556

Gutenberg trained fifty Brotherhood laymen in his new science of printing, and from 1460 to 1500, 450 books were printed at Deventer alone. Crucial to printing was the development of metallurgy; Erasmus’ close friend Georgius Agricola authored *De Re Metallica*, an advanced text on the new mining and metallurgical technologies. The Brotherhood network included humanists Johann Reuchlin and Rudolf Agricola.

persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.”

Now, obviously, our degenerated culture is hostile to this outlook. Today’s world does not recognize the existence of any higher principle, any truth for which it is worth fighting and even dying. To those who do not love the truth—and therefore fear for their lives—persecution and martyrdom are foolishness.

À Kempis continues: “How great a vanity it also is to desire a long life and to care little for a good life.” Again à Kempis is similar to Schiller, in the latter’s discussion of beauty and the sublime. If a person appears to have a beautiful soul under comfortable circumstances, one doesn’t really know whether the person underneath is really beautiful in a higher sense. It is only if the person demonstrates sublimity of mind under adversity, that one knows that he is actually virtuous. À Kempis says: “The time of adversity shows who is of most virtue.” And, finally, he says: “It is good, therefore, to remember often that you came to religion to serve, not to be served, and that you are called to religion to suffer and to labor, and not to be idle or to tell vain tales.”

Related to this is the average person’s attitude towards revenge. We are called upon not only to imitate Christ in taking up the chalice of his Passion; as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, one must also love one’s enemy. In his *Life of Christ*, à Kempis empha-

sizes Christ's words on the cross: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Thus, he writes that we should pardon the offenses of our enemies, "imitating Jesus who has enjoined us to love our enemies and to pray for them who persecute us." It is not enough just to gladly bear the yoke of tribulation by being a Good Samaritan in respect to our family and friends or humanity in general. We must also imitate Christ in loving even our enemies.

### Charity and Humility

In order to imitate Christ, one is called upon to act out of pure love; to do that, one must deny oneself. Thus, there are two elements, charity and humility, which are totally interrelated. Without humility one cannot be filled with charity, because you are filled with pride, which destroys charity. As St. Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians: "He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this God greatly exalted him." (Phil 2:8-9)

St. Paul also writes in Philippians: "Humbly regard others as more important than yourself." (Phil 2:3) How many people actually do this? And yet, in order to act out of charity for others, this most difficult task is an absolute prerequisite. Accordingly, à Kempis writes: "Learn to be unknown."

Thus, à Kempis writes of Christ's washing the feet of the Apostles:

I bless and thank thee, O Lord Jesus Christ . . . for that very great example of thy most profound humility, which thou, ministering as a servant, hast shown and left to us for our imitation, as well as to point out the great design of thy coming; whilst thou . . . didst so exceedingly humble thyself for us, as to deign with thy blessed hands . . . most affectionately to wash and wipe the feet of poor fishermen, thy servants, . . . thou didst not omit to wash in like condescending love the feet of thy very malicious enemy, of thy most wicked betrayer.

This notion of humility leads to the importance of yielding thanks to God even in the face of tribulation or adversity. Nicolaus of Cusa emphasizes in "On the Gift of the Father of Lights," that "[e]very best gift and every perfect gift is from above, from the Father of lights." (I James 1:17) Similarly, in the "Hunt for Wisdom," Cusanus emphasizes that we should refer any laud of ourselves to God above, or to put it another way, to the Composer, i.e., God, who is in us, as opposed to referring that laud to ourselves, because we are merely created, and as created, not ultimately the source of the good which we do. There is also a practical consequence to *not* giving thanks to God: one becomes susceptible to pride and self-love, which destroys both the very good that was done, and one's capacity to continue to do

good. As à Kempis says: "If you refer all goodness to me, from whom all goodness comes, then all your inward affections will be purified and made clean, which otherwise would be evil and centered in yourself and other creatures." And, in *The Imitation of Christ*: "Forsake coveting and you will find great rest. Truly the very perfection of man is a perfect denying and a complete forsaking of himself."

In our modern, hedonistic culture, self-denial is falsely portrayed as asceticism or monasticism. But when Christ preaches that man should deny himself, he is not talking about asceticism. Instead, he is saying that self-denial eliminates self-love and pride, and therefore creates the basis for active benevolence.

### Nature and Grace

In the "Hunt for Wisdom," Cusanus develops the idea that God, Who is the beginning, is also the end or terminus of all of our actions. In *The Imitation of Christ*, there is a discussion of nature and grace in which this notion of terminus is central. À Kempis, in comparing nature and grace, writes: "Nature looks to her own gain as the end and purpose of her work. But grace . . . does all things purely for God, in whom she finally rests." Thus God, as opposed to nature in itself, is the terminus. "Nature gladly accepts honor and reverence; grace refers all honor and reverence to God." "Nature is greedy, and takes more gladly than she gives . . . . But grace is sympathetic and generous to the poor . . . and judges that it is better to give than receive." "Nature inclines to the love of creatures . . . . But grace draws a man to love of God and of virtue . . . ." "Nature draws all things . . . to herself. . . . But grace renders all to God, from whom all originally flows and springs. Grace ascribes no goodness to herself and does not presume of herself. . . ."

In *The Christian's Exercise*, à Kempis develops additional ideas which are totally coherent with the theology of Cusanus. The overall title of the piece, *Rules To Live Above the World, While We Are In It*, calls to mind Cusanus' notion that God is Not-other, i.e., He transcends that which is created or other. He is not a creature, but at the same time the Not-other is the "other of the other"; He is "all in all," i.e., He is immanent or present in the world. By learning to live above the world at the same time that one is in it, one is imitating God in that respect.

Part I of the *Exercise* is a "Children's Manual Containing Holy Instructions and Meditations for Forming the Minds of Children." Its major thrust is that unless one becomes like a child, one cannot enter Heaven; Schiller develops a similar concept in "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry." À Kempis presents a series of exercises arranged according to the letters of the alphabet. The child is sup-

posed to write this alphabet in his heart, through studying each day what is said in each of these exercises. For example, the letter “A” is “Aim not to be great or popular in the world.”

Part IV of the *Exercise* is called “Elevation of the Mind to God Containing an Exercise for the Fathers in Christ; or, the Way to Divine Contemplation.” Here, à Kempis discusses much of what one sees in the work of Cusanus in terms of rising above the level of the senses and of discursive reason, to the level of a mental intuition of God, the Creator. “I seek not after Thee, through the corporal senses, or by corporal images, for then in vain should I seek. I seek Thee not without, but within. I seek Thee in myself and not only above all sensible, but even above all intellectual, reasons and ideas, where Thou shineth into my intellect.”

One finds here the influence of Dionysius’ negative theology (as expressed in his *On Divine Names*), when à Kempis writes: “The Eternal Word of God, is not expressed with many Words, nor conceived with various Imaginations; neither is it penetrated by any created Understanding; but is rightly said to be more than unspeakable (or superineffable) and incomprehensible.”

In order to be able to achieve the vision of God, the reader is instructed to ascend above all that is in this world: “Raise thyself above thyself. Transcend everything that is done in time: Abandon everything that is created.” “Thy heart must be thoroughly purified, before thou canst be fit to see Him.” By thus ascending above that which is “circumscribed” in the visible domain to that which is invisible, we can achieve a mental intuition or intellectual vision of God.



### ‘Be Perfect as Our Father In Heaven Is Perfect’

DECADES AGO, Lyndon LaRouche raised the necessity that every moral person become perfect, using the image of each drinking from his own cup of Gethsemane. In his “Philosophical Letters,” Friedrich Schiller stressed the same concept, explicitly referencing Christ’s Sermon on the Mount: “Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect, says the founder of our faith.” Schiller then writes, “Weak humanity grew pale at this command, therefore He explained Himself more clearly: Love one another.”

In the appendix to *Rules to Live above the World, While We Are In It*, à Kempis includes a short work entitled, “The Fundamental Maxims of the School of Christ,” which concludes:

Be thee therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect, Matthew V.

This is the last and fundamental rule given by our Lord; showing us, that we ought not to stick in *any* degree of virtue and piety, but to be continually pressing forward to the *utmost perfection, by an habitual Imitation of God*, more especially of Love and Beneficence. And in this One are contained all the rest.

À Kempis elaborates further in another short work entitled: “The Beggar and No Beggar: or, Every Man a King If He Will. A Parable Containing an Example of a Perfect Man in Christ.” After the beggar showed a learned doctor that the true way to God consists in “true and perfect resignation of the will with profound humility,” the doctor asked the beggar, “whence he came?” The beggar answered that he “came from God.” When the doctor asked him “where he found God?,” he said “where I left all creatures.” To the question “where he had left God?,” the poor man answered, “In clean hearts, and in men of good will.”

Then the doctor cried out, “Good God! What art Thou?” He said, that “he was a King.” “Art thou then a King?” said the doctor. He replied “Marvel not; I am verily a King.” The doctor pressed him to know, “where his Kingdom was?,” to which he answered, “My Kingdom is in the Soul.” But said the doctor, “What brought thee to such a perfection? What made thee a king?” He answered, “It was my silence, contemplation and union with God. I could rest in nothing which was less than God.”

For à Kempis, as for Cusanus and Lyndon LaRouche, to become perfect, one must employ neither the “sensual eye,” nor the “rational eye” of the soul, but rather one must ascend so as to see by means of the “mental eye,” which is the “superior face of the soul,” as it is turned to that which is eternal rather than toward the temporal. In *The Christian’s Exercise*, à Kempis writes that this divine art of employing the mental eye, “is perpetually advancing forward, and studying to bring forth evermore new births of truth, and births of devotion.”

For the Brotherhood of the Common Life, Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh, is “the *creator* of the world.” To become perfect, therefore, implies that every human being, even the least of our brethren, such as the poor children whom the Brotherhood educated, is capable of becoming a Christ-like king and of dwelling thus in the kingdom of God, which is within our souls. If one thus imitates Christ as the creator of the world, one is then capable of bringing forth evermore new births of truth and devotion. Only if we live thus above the world, in *imitation of Christ*, can we be an efficient cause of the good within this world. Then, and only then, will every child be able to say, “I am verily a king.”