

Humility

AND THE ELEVATION
OF THE MIND TO GOD

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THOMAS À KEMPIS

Translated by
FR. ROBERT NIXON, OSB

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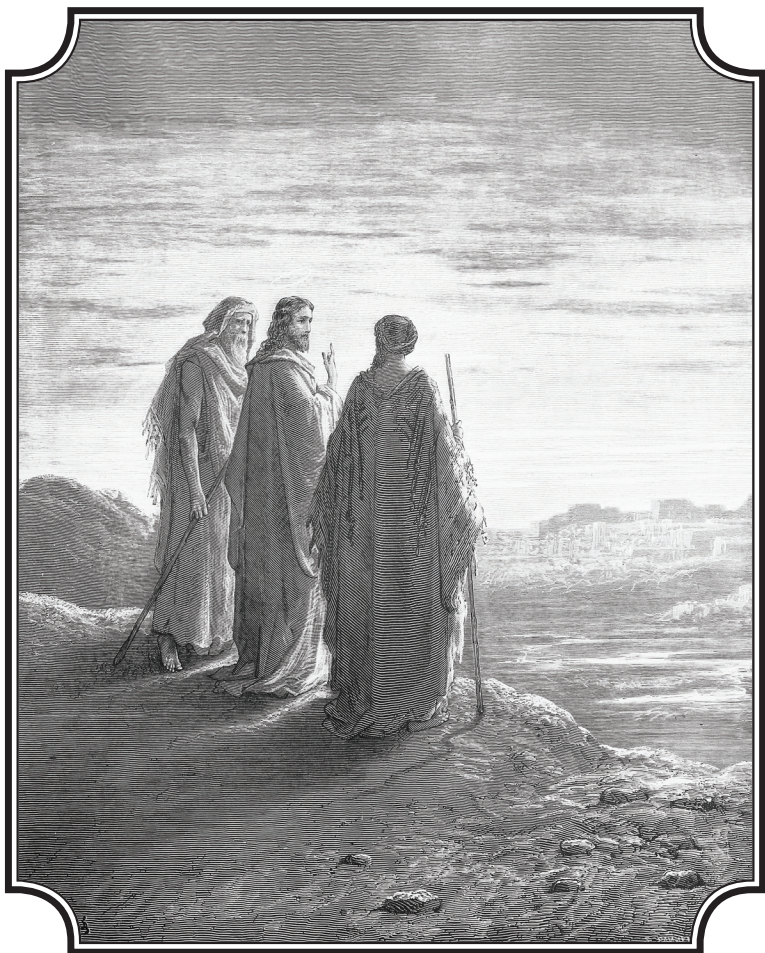
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*To the memory of John Moorehouse,
a wonderful and gifted herald of the Gospel and
dedicated servant of God, the Church, and humanity*

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Jesus and the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus



TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

It is often said that, apart from the Bible, the most influential work of literature in the entire history of Christian spirituality is *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis (1380–1470). It has been a treasured source of inspiration and guidance for followers of Christ for over five hundred years and continues to attract a wide contemporary readership. Among those who were deeply devoted to it were Sir Thomas More, Henry VIII, St. Ignatius Loyola, John Wesley, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Oscar Wilde, and countless others. There are known to be no less than two thousand editions of the work in existence.

Despite the popularity of *The Imitation of Christ*, it is not widely recognized that Thomas à Kempis was also the author of a great many other works in a variety

of genres. Indeed, the complete Latin editions of his writings run to several weighty tomes. And many of his writings, especially his shorter works, remain untranslated.

This volume presents, for the first time in English, three short but wonderful spiritual works of this great author: *Humility*, *The Elevation of the Mind to God*, and a collection of *Devout Prayers*. In these writings, many of the themes of *The Imitation of Christ* are strongly evident, such as the practice of humility, self-denial, and resignation, modeled after the teaching and example of Jesus.

But other aspects of the author's personality are also exhibited. For example, in *The Elevation of the Mind to God*, the reader encounters a passionate and mystical yearning for a God who is utterly transcendent and eternal. In the *Devout Prayers*, there are many touching instances of affectionate and personal piety and devotion, especially to the Virgin Mary and other saints whom the author held particularly dear.

Included in this volume also is an early biography of Thomas written in 1597 by the important Jesuit scholar Heribert Roswed (1569–1629). This brief history offers a fascinating insight into a gifted and passionate man whose life was characterized by faith,

humility, industry, and true dedication to the glory of God and the service of his neighbor.

The translations contained herein will certainly be of profound interest to all those who have been inspired or fascinated by the author's undoubted masterpiece, *The Imitation of Christ*. It is the hope of the present translator that these gentle and inspired writings, offered here in English for the first time, may prove edifying to all who peruse them and may generate further interest in the work of this revered and beloved spiritual author.

The humble translator,
Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB



Portrait of Thomas à Kempis



THE LIFE OF THE VENERABLE THOMAS À KEMPIS

by
Heribert Roswed, SJ

Thomas à Kempis was born in the village of Kempen, located in the diocese of Cologne, and it is from this place that he received his surname. His parents were Johannes and Gertrude. Considered from a worldly point of view, they were distinguished neither by noble lineage nor by wealth. Indeed, their nobility consisted solely in their piety, and their wealth in their probity of life. Yet they lived in a contented manner, supporting themselves by the labor of their hands. To this couple were born twin sons, Thomas and Johannes.

Johannes, named after his father, had been the first to be born. He undertook studies in the city of Deventer. Subsequently, he entered the Order of Canons Regular of the Congregation of Windesheim, joining the community at Mount St. Agnes in the municipality of Zwolle. Having commendably fulfilled various roles and offices for his community, Johannes was eventually to die there a peaceful and holy death.

Thomas was born in the year of the Lord 1380, during the pontificate of Urban VI and the reign of the Emperor Charles IV. After spending his first years with his parents, he was seen to be well suited to literary studies and took himself to Deventer for this purpose. At this time, he was no more than thirteen years of age. One of the factors that encouraged him in this endeavor was the fame of a certain learned priest, scholar, and teacher who resided there, Florentius, whose acquaintance he desired to make. This Florentius was the prefect of a distinguished house of studies. In fact, all manner of studies flourished at Deventer at that time, and it could truly be described then as the "Athens of Belgium."

Having arrived at Deventer, the first concern of Thomas was to meet with his twin brother, Johannes, who was already a student there, and to solicit his

advice and guidance about what steps he should take. His brother recommended him to the renowned Florentius, who graciously accepted him into his establishment—known as the Brotherhood of Common Life—as a student. Thus Thomas, an affable youth of good habits, entered a fraternal community of men who were illustrious both for learning and piety, living and studying under the supervision of Florentius. Needless to say, he delighted in their companionship and profited greatly by their example. He exhibited himself as diligent in his duties within the community, assiduous in his studies, and devout in his prayer.

There, in the space of a few years, he progressed steadily in his academic accomplishments, and no less so in his piety. Indeed, the several volumes of spiritual writings that he authored during this time attest powerfully to this. These works are of such wonderful devotion and utility that they may never be sufficiently praised. While in this house of studies, he dedicated himself to the copying of many ancient manuscripts, thereby bringing considerable benefits to his fellow students and to the community.

From his boyhood, Thomas nourished a fervent attachment to the Blessed Virgin, and it was his custom to offer daily devotions to her. However, the piety

of youth is seldom firm or stable, and in the course of time, he became somewhat less consistent in this practice. Sometimes, when he was busy or distracted, he would skip his daily devotions. Later, such omissions extended to two, three, or four days, and eventually even a week. Alas! Finally, he abandoned altogether his former custom of offering daily homage to the great Mother of God.

Then a vision came to him one night in a dream. He was standing in the lecture room with an assembly of other scholars. His master of studies, Florentius, was there also, and the students were listening attentively as he read to them the words of Scripture. Suddenly, Thomas beheld a cloud coming down from heaven on which stood Holy Mary, the Queen of heaven and earth. Though she was invisible to everyone else, Thomas saw her move around the room and embrace and kiss each of the students in turn with maternal love. He himself felt his devotion to her burn with renewed ardor. Joyfully, he waited for her to arrive at him, hoping and expecting to receive her gracious and kindly embrace.

But when the Mother of God arrived at him, she did not embrace him at all but instead reprimanded him bitterly. "You expect to receive my embrace? You, who neglect to pay me the honor you had once promised to

me? Where have your customary devotions gone? Why have your prayers vanished, the homage which you formerly poured out to me with sighs and tears? Has your love for me grown cold and your ardor become dull? Why does your former piety vacillate thus? Depart from me! For you are surely unworthy of my embrace, since you have neglected such an easy thing as to offer a daily greeting to your beloved!"

And with these well-deserved admonitions having been pronounced, the Blessed Virgin disappeared into the heavens. Thomas, awakening from his slumber, then recognized his own failing. He immediately committed himself to the amendment of his ways. And, lest once more he should lose the embrace of the Mother of God, he resumed his former devotions and thenceforth did not allow one day of his life to pass by without offering his homage to the Blessed Virgin. O happy correction that renewed the bond of love and erased previous negligence by a fresh commitment!

While living in the Brotherhood of Common Life, he was often afflicted by various sufferings of soul and of body. In such cases, he would pray fervently before a crucifix placed upon his wall, expressing himself more by his tears than by his words.

After living for some seven years in the brotherhood, he felt a more determined vocation to consecrated life. Florentius encouraged this vocation strongly, and in 1399, Thomas went to the house of the Canons Regular at Mount St. Agnes near the city of Zwolle. At this time, this community was but a small and obscure one. He took with him a letter of recommendation from his former teacher, Florentius. His brother, Johannes, had entered the same house some years previously and now occupied the position of prior there. He was received readily and with great delight and fraternal affection in accordance with the words of the psalmist: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"¹

As a candidate for consecrated life and sacred orders, he was fervid and enthusiastic in his vocation, yet without any trace of temerity or presumption. After five years in initial formation, he received the habit of religious life, and in the following year, he bound himself to the consecrated life by solemn vows. He was outstanding in his piety, his obedience to his superiors, and his charity and benevolence towards his confreres.

¹ Psalm 133:1.

He never gave rein to idleness, which is truly the font of all evil. Rather, he constantly devoted himself to reading or copying sacred books, both for the common use of the community and his own education. Indeed, he spent much of the night—the time between Matins and Lauds—occupied in this manner. This was done, of course, not without taking its toll upon his physical vigor and mental energies. Out of the books he copied in this manner, there remains in existence a complete Bible, a missal, and many of the writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. These superb manuscripts attest both to the artistry of his penmanship and the magnitude of his industry.

In liturgical prayers within the oratory and the church, Thomas exhibited a degree of reverence and spiritual presence which almost exceeds description. Whenever he chanted the psalms, his face was raised towards the heavens, and he was observed to be captured and seized beyond himself by the very sweetness of the psalmody. It was as if he escaped the bounds of the material world and his soul flew into the celestial realms! Indeed, it was only the toes of his feet which maintained contact with the earth, while all his other members were transported upwards. He would always chant the psalms standing erect, never sitting nor

resting on a bench or stool. And he was always the first to enter the oratory for prayer, and always the last to leave.

Such was the visible delight and enthusiastic animation he displayed in singing the psalms that one of his confreres, making an amusing pun, commented, "Thomas savors these psalms as if he were eating fine salmon!"² Now, the salmon is indeed a most delectable fish to eat. Thomas replied to his confrere's jocular observation with the following pithy retort:

*The salmon is a wondrous fish;
Well cooked, it is a tasty dish.
But, if consumed without due care
Can health, and even life, impair.*

*And thus the psalms, if sung with heart,
All joys of heaven shall impart;
But if with spirits dull they're read
Can leave one's soul dismayed and dead.*

The conversation of Thomas always pertained to God and Sacred Scripture. Even in the presence of important people, if the discussion concerned only worldly

² There is a pun being made here between the word for *psalm* and *salmon*.

matters, he would be silent, as if he were mute or without the capacity for speech. He would not respond, nor would he ask anything, unless some unavoidable necessity compelled him to do so. He much preferred to be seen as entirely ignorant and dull in such matters. However, if the conversation was about God and divine mysteries, his discourse was like a ceaseless river of words, flowing forth with miraculous beauty and crystalline clarity. Whenever he was asked about such things, he would never fail to give a comprehensive and enlightening reply. Nevertheless, it was his practice in such matters always to take some moments for meditation and reflection before answering.

Such was his remarkable eloquence and accomplishment in speech that he quickly became widely renowned as an orator, preacher, and conversationalist. Many would travel from distant cities and regions to visit his community, drawn by the desire of hearing the wonderful words of Thomas.

His brethren were constantly filled with admiration and amazement at the imperturbable patience of Thomas in tolerating adversities and difficulties of all kinds. He not only mildly and benignly tolerated the vices and shortcomings of others but even kindly made excuses for them as much as he possibly could.

Throughout his life, he always displayed exemplary temperance, moderation, modesty, and humility. His care in providing for the needs of others was diligent and indefatigable, and his enthusiasm for the cultivation of the liturgy and the beautification of the oratory and church was unbounded. Yet he viewed all things, except those pertaining to God and to true religion, as mere vanities and passing shadows. Indeed, his detachment from worldly vanities and mundane business was such that the mere mention of them was apt to fill him with tedium and distraction.

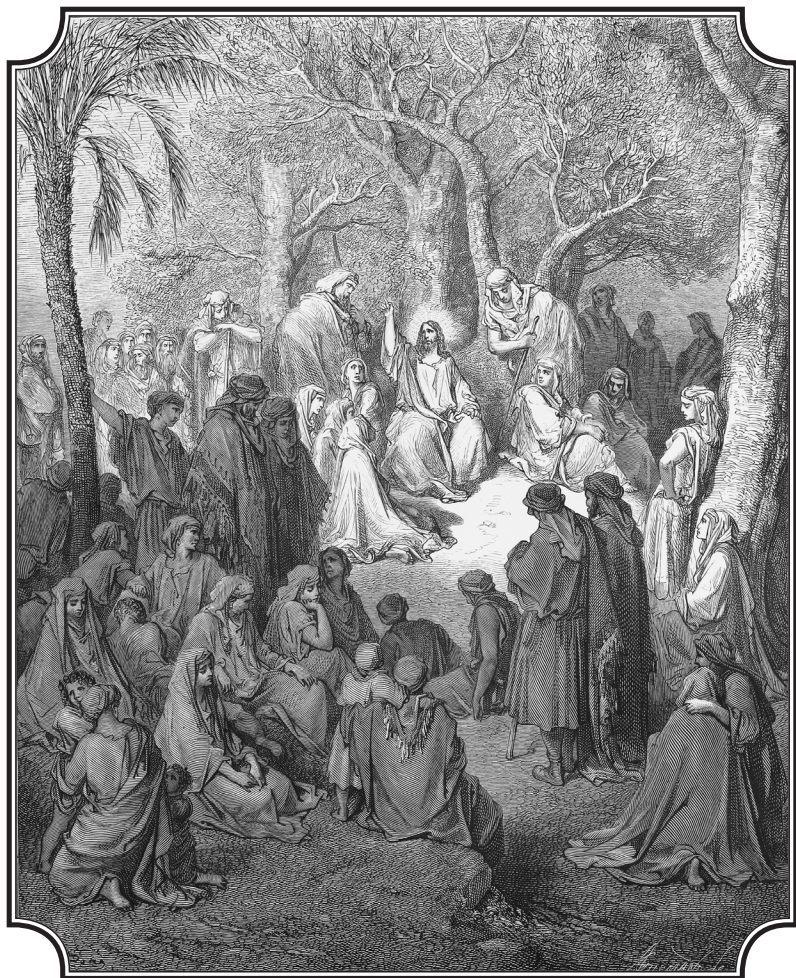
Thomas was so greatly enamored of sacred reading and the solitude of his monastic cell that he formulated a kind of personal motto expressing this love. This he frequently repeated verbally and would inscribe in his books. It read thus: "In all things I have sought rest. But I have found it nowhere, except in hidden corners and in books!"

His mercy and kindness was such that while still a young man, he was chosen as subprior of his community. Afterwards, he was elevated to the position of procurator, or domestic prefect. Although he performed these duties with all diligence, the primary calling of his heart remained that of divine contemplation and prayerful studies. For this reason, he was

soon relieved of these onerous offices and returned to his former role of subprior. This role he fulfilled creditably for a great many years.

In stature, he was rather below average height but of muscular build. His complexion was ruddy and somewhat swarthy. His vision was most acute, so that he never had recourse to the aid of spectacles or other such devices, even as he approached his final days.

When Thomas had meritoriously completed seventy-one years of religious life at Mount St. Agnes with great fruitfulness to his community, he was called by the Lord to the Mount of Eternity. Indeed, he had long contemplated his return to his heavenly homeland with the most fervent longing and joyful anticipation. His blessed soul, departing from the earthly dwelling place of his mortal body, ascended to the eternal tabernacle of heaven to enjoy there the wonderful vision of God forever. He died peacefully in the ninety-second year of his mortal life, in the year of our Lord 1470, on the twenty-fifth day of July.



The Sermon on the Mount



HUMILITY

A commendation of humility, which is
the foundation of all virtues

I

"Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart,"¹ says the Lord. Our highest teacher and lawgiver, Jesus Christ, urged us to learn the virtue of humility. For whoever cultivates this marvelous virtue will quickly arrive at spiritual perfection. But without humility, no amount of study of Sacred Scripture or theology, nor any efforts at good works are able to achieve anything lasting. In vain are all our labors unless they are accompanied by humility.

The very first lesson of Christ is, therefore, humility of heart; for this is the foundation of all virtues and

¹ Matthew 11:29.

indispensable to the attainment of eternal salvation. Whoever desires to receive grace now and eternal life in the world to come should, therefore, study Christ's lesson and example of humility with diligence. But whoever neglects humility will lose any benefits their good thoughts and works would otherwise have gained them.

It behooves each Christian soul to meditate carefully on the teachings of Christ. This includes all religious, all priests, all bishops, all servants, all nobles, all commoners, all the educated, and all the simple. And Christ teaches us humility, not pride. He teaches us useful things, not vanities. He teaches what is true, not what is false; what is heavenly, not what is earthly.

II

Any person who imitates the example of Christ will quickly become wise and happy. Humility was a particular virtue of Christ; it is therefore feared by the devil and despised by the world. But those who hold it firmly in their hearts are pleasing to God and his angels. Such people will have a secure and blessed passage from this world to the next in accordance with Christ's words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."²

² Matthew 5:3.

Without humility, there is neither salvation nor real virtue. Nor can any action done without humility be pleasing to God. Any work or deed—no matter how noble or persevering—achieves nothing for the soul if it is motivated or accompanied by pride and arrogance.

Profound humility is a stronghold of all the virtues and triumphs over all their enemies. The one to whom humility is granted shall exult in the grace of Christ. For it makes a person like the Lord's intimate friend, who will willingly and joyfully submits himself to whatever Divine Providence determines. The truly humble person ascribes all good things he does to his Creator and is willing to resign himself in all imaginable situations.

But without humility, any aspirations or pretensions to sanctity remain empty and fruitless. External piety and uprightness mean nothing unless accompanied by internal humility. While humility is a ladder ascending to the highest blessedness, its absence can easily cast the soul down to hell. An example of this is to be found in the parable of the humble and contrite tax-collector and the proud and presumptuous Pharisee.³ Call to mind and be horrified at the fate of Lucifer, who in his pride was cast out of heaven. Consider the humble

³ See Luke 18:9–14.

poor man, Lazarus, who was taken up by the angels to rejoice in the bosom of Abraham.⁴

Thus it was that the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus, proclaimed in her wondrous canticle, “He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly.”⁵ There are, indeed, a vast multitude of examples of this in Sacred Scripture, aside from those mentioned above. For new spiritual perils arise daily for all those who grow proud because of their imagined virtue or strength.

III

The person who is intent upon gaining the approval of others and being thought of as great becomes more and more distant from God. And such people pass away like the vanishing smoke or fading shadows.

Everyone who is proud becomes impure in the sight of God. Proud people do not truly know themselves, nor do they perceive their own calling, condition, and destiny clearly. The more pride raises up one’s own self-estimation, the more liable one becomes to the judgment of God. The one who climbs high in pride, raises himself up for an inevitable fall. The humble

⁴ See Luke 16:19–31.

⁵ Luke 1:52.

person, however, who keeps his feet firmly planted on the ground, will stand securely.

Hidden pride is a most pernicious vice, the more so since it is not recognized and does not recognize itself. On the outside, it may appear gentle, mild, and even humble. Yet inside, it burns away bitterly. The person who is subject to such pride becomes inordinately elated when he is successful but is disturbed and dejected in the face of adversity or failure.

The one who seeks to condemn others and justify himself ends up condemning himself by displaying his pride and arrogance. It is typical of a proud person to seek to please himself and to trust entirely in his own opinions. Such people are often quick to criticize others and to deride those who seem simple to them.

But the proud position themselves so that they are liable to fall into dangerous delusions, errors, and adversity. For it reflects a distorted and perverse sense of judgment to think always well of oneself but to be hasty to think ill of others.

IV

Pride is difficult to overcome except through enduring much suffering, performing menial duties, and facing difficult and desperate situations. The person who

finds it difficult to obey the instructions or directions of another is very far from true humility. But humility is the precious root of all virtues. It readily brings forth the fruit of obedience, which soon ripens into the flower of charity.

The truly humble person is honestly aware of his own weaknesses and failings. He judges himself more strictly than he judges others and regrets his wrongdoings and sins constantly and sincerely.

The humble person does not readily judge his superiors and those positioned above him, lest he incur the judgment of God himself. He does not perturb or vex his peers and equals. Rather, he honors the seniors, tolerates those who exhibit shortcomings, prays for those who are tempted, and helps those who are in need.

When two humble people are associated together, they will always get along well with each other. But when two proud people are associated together, they will compete with each other and dissensions will inevitably arise. The truly humble person may be safely praised, for—regardless of the praise and the recognition of his merits—he remains mindful of his fragility and weaknesses. Moreover, he does not forget that the eyes of God are upon him at all times, observing his thoughts and actions, and even every movement of his heart.

V

It is a very useful practice to train oneself in humility. It is wise to fear the unseen judgment of God and to think often about one's final end. It is characteristic of a truly humble person not to be greatly affected by human praise. For the one who is intent upon heavenly glory will not consider earthly glory as something of any great consequence.

In contrast, the person who seeks to be praised and glorified during this life will never be firmly established in the truth. Such a person, who is intent upon human praise and approval, cannot genuinely love God above all else, or will—at best—love God with only a divided heart.

Those in positions of authority who remain humble are particularly dear to God and will receive fitting honor from him. The one who is subject to others, and accepts this humbly, will be crowned with a great reward in heaven. The person who is sober and chaste becomes a companion to the angels and is an adornment to the human race. And the one who flees from the tumult of worldly activities will make steady progress in chastity and self-control.

The devout person loves and cultivates times of solitude so that he may contemplate God more freely and

intently. The monk who is silent and given to constant prayer shall walk with God and penetrate the mysteries of heaven. The one who does good works and endures injustices patiently will gather wonderful fruit for himself in the future.

But the person who is occupied with considering subtle and sophisticated questions and problems, and so neglects the virtue of humility, digs a pit for himself into which he will surely fall. The one who ambitiously aspires to a lofty and exalted position in this world climbs a perilous scaffold, which may serve as a lethal gallows for the soul.

The prudent person, however, does nothing rashly or on impulse. The faithful person will neglect nothing pertaining to virtue and morals and will not commit any deceit. People who are truly just examine all the causes of a matter and all its circumstances before offering any judgment. But almost all of us are deceived at times by merely apparent goodness and false and specious righteousness.

VI

The one who trusts too much in his own opinions and judgments exposes himself to grave perils. It is generally wiser to defer to those who are more experienced

and more knowledgeable. To seek the advice and the prayers of others is a sure sign of humility.

Often, indeed, God speaks to us through the words of another person. And he may tell us, by this means, things he has not revealed directly. The perfection of humility and obedience is displayed by one who is ready to hear the voice of God even through an inexperienced person or by one who replies to any angry person with mildness. Obedience is due to all legitimately constituted superiors. The one who is truly humble will obey even in trivial or difficult matters.

What benefits the spirit most of all is conscious acts of profound humility. The person who deliberately overcomes his own preferences, desires, or opinions also overcomes thereby the enemy of the soul. For humility is indeed the most powerful weapon against the wiles of the devil.

What is so rare and marvelous as the person who does admirable things, yet who still views himself with humility? When this happens, it is not the result of any personal effort or merit but purely the freely-given grace of God.

VII

In this life, the hazards and attacks of the devil assail us both from right and from left, from both the outside world and from within our own hearts. There is no more powerful weapon against these hazards and attacks than true humility and devout prayer made with a pure conscience. With each proud thought that enters the mind and with every haughty sentiment that springs up in the heart, the soul encounters a new snare or trap.

A humble person does not become proud when he finds something good or meritorious in his thoughts or actions. Rather, he recognizes it as a gift from God and gives sincere thanks for the grace he has received.

The person who humbles himself acts wisely and judiciously and avoids a great many dangers. Humility helps obtain forgiveness for our shortcomings and helps to reconcile us to God; it builds up our neighbor, it frustrates the devil, it opens heaven to the sinner, and it purges away all sins. But many souls become deceived and dejected through the illusions of pride and so end up stumbling badly.

Be humble, therefore, and always be mindful of your own lowliness, recalling your weaknesses and

failings—lest you should fall a prey to the devil and so become displeasing to God. For the kingdom of heaven receives no one except for the truly humble, and the Lord chooses none but those free from presumption and pride. Indeed, God withholds his approval even from the righteous unless their righteousness is founded upon and accompanied by the wonderful and Christlike virtue of genuine humility.