

KRIJN PANSTERS

SPIRITUALITY AS PROCESS*

Four Dimensions of Following Christ in *The Imitation of Christ*

SUMMARY – *The Imitation of Christ* of Thomas a Kempis († 1471) is a true classic of Christian spirituality. The devotional work consists of four books: ‘Counsels Helpful for the Spiritual Life’, ‘Counsels Concerning the Interior Life’, ‘Inward Exhortation to Holy Communion’, and ‘Book On Inner Consolation’. This article offers a spiritual analysis of the 25 chapters of the first book for the purpose of the modern use of this medieval bestseller in the context of personal and professional growth. It focuses not on static theological statements but on aspects of the spiritual process of advancing on the way to Christ. More specifically, it looks at four distinguished dimensions of following Christ: devotion (*devotio*), virtue (*virtus*), desire (*desiderium*), and dedication (*diligentia*, etc.). The purpose is threefold. First, these four inward dimensions suggest four interrelated ways of going forward, progressing, and growing spiritually. Second, they demonstrate a dynamic approach not only to spiritual fulfilment but also to spiritual texts. Third, they direct our attention to spirituality as a progressive, ongoing process.

INTRODUCTION

The Imitation of Christ of Thomas a Kempis († 1471) is a true classic of Christian spirituality.¹ The devotional work consists of four books: ‘Counsels

* I thank Ad Poirters and Edwin van der Zande, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions for improvement.

¹ For this article, I am using the Latin text with the Dutch translation in Thomas van Kempen, *Navolging van Christus*, trans. Rudolf van Dijk, Kampen: Ten Have, 2008, translating from the Latin with the help of this – very literal – Dutch translation combined with the – much freer – translation in Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Robert Jeffery, London etc.: Penguin Books, 2013. A good introduction to Thomas’s life and work is Greg Peters, *Thomas à Kempis: His Life and Spiritual Theology*, Eugene: Cascade, 2021. See furthermore John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, passim; Paul van Geest, *Thomas a Kempis: Mystagoog op de breuklijn tussen de Middeleeuwen en de Nieuwe Tijd*, Kampen: Kok, 2008; Maximilian von Habsburg, *Catholic and Protestant Translations of the Imitatio Christi, 1425–1650: From Late Medieval Classic to Early Modern Bestseller*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.

Helpful for the Spiritual Life', 'Counsels Concerning the Interior Life', 'Inward Exhortation to Holy Communion', and 'Book On Inner Consolation'.² Whereas these books were also issued separately and published in various sequences throughout the ages,³ the order of books Three and Four in the autograph of 1441 (Communion – Consolation) has been reversed in many manuscripts and this revised order (Consolation – Communion) has become dominant since the fifteenth century.⁴ In this article, I will offer a spiritual analysis of the 25 chapters of the first book⁵ for the purpose of the modern use of this medieval bestseller in the context of personal and professional growth.⁶

² Robert Jeffery translates these as 'Helpful Counsels of the Spiritual Life', 'Directives for the Interior Life', 'On Interior Consolation', and 'On the Blessed Sacrament'. It is unclear, however, why *ammoniciones* used in the title of book 1 and 2 should have different meanings.

³ Already in 1427, the complete *Imitation* must have existed in some form, because we have dated manuscripts from that year with the complete text. Thomas probably kept working on the text until he completed the Brussels autograph in 1441. Robert Jeffery means that the books were *originally* issued separately, but this is debatable. See *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Jeffery, xxxviii.

⁴ Robert Jeffery also uses the order Communion – Consolation, and this 'in order to make a more coherent and satisfactory conclusion to the work'. See *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Jeffery, xxxviii. See especially Rudolf van Dijk, 'Spiritualiteit van de innigheid: Mystiek en kerkkritiek in de Moderne Devotie', in: Idem, *Twaalf kapitels over ontstaan, bloei en doorwerking van de Moderne Devotie*, ed. Charles Caspers & Rijcklof Hofman, Hilversum: Verloren, 2012 (Middelieuwe Studies en Bronnen 140), 247-279, esp. 269-273.

⁵ I will limit myself to book One for practical reasons. The chapter titles are: 1) Of the Imitation of Christ and despising the utilities of the world; 2) On feeling oneself humble; 3) On the teaching by the Truth; 4) On caution in our action; 5) On reading the Holy Scriptures; 6) On uncontrolled tendencies; 7) On avoiding false confidence and conceit; 8) On avoiding too much familiarity; 9) On obedience and discipline; 10) On avoiding a superfluity of words; 11) On acquiring peace and zeal for progress; 12) On the benefit of adversity; 13) On resisting temptations; 14) On avoiding rash judgement; 15) On deeds done by love; 16) On enduring the faults of others; 17) On the monastic life; 18) On the example of the Holy Fathers; 19) On the exercises of the good religious; 20) On the love of solitude and silence; 21) On the compunction of heart; 22) On the consideration of human misery; 23) On the meditation on death; 24) On judgement and the punishment of sin; 25) On the fervorous amendment of our whole lives.

⁶ I refer specifically to the School of Spirituality at Titus Brandsma Institute, Radboud University Nijmegen. From the Institute's website: 'One of the research lines of the Titus Brandsma Institute concerns philosophical-theological research into the current meaning and relevance of the Christian spiritual and mystical tradition and religious life in contemporary society. In what way does spirituality take shape in the professional and social actions of the present time, in contemporary practices and in the context of social organisations? To answer this question, the TBI is developing an education and training program, which focuses on describing, understanding, and guiding the spiritual process of people active in various social contexts. They can participate in the courses, lectures, and master classes of the School of Spirituality', www.ru.nl/titusbrandsmainstitute/schoolofspirituality (5 September 2022).

I will do this by focusing not on static theological statements (e.g., ‘The teaching of Christ transcends all the teachings of the saints. He who had the Spirit would find there the hidden manna’)⁷ but on aspects of the spiritual process of advancing on the way to Christ (e.g., ‘Whoever wants to fully and prudently understand the words of Christ should devote himself to conforming his whole life to Him’).⁸ More specifically, I will look at four distinguished dimensions of following Christ: devotion (*devotio*), virtue (*virtus*), desire (*desiderium*), and dedication. The latter is exceptional in the sense that its spiritual meaning is not contained in the word ‘*dedicatio*’ but captured by various other terms, such as *studium*, *nitor*, *diligencia*, *fervor*, and, most interestingly, even by the term *devotio* itself.⁹

My selection and interpretation of these four *inward* dimensions – certainly central for imitational devotion but nevertheless isolated out of the much broader and richer context of devout spirituality, which includes literary, liturgical, legal, material, and other elements – serves to illustrate three things. First, they suggest four interrelated ways of going forward, progressing, and growing spiritually. Like steady, secure steps on a whimsical walkway toward perfection, they become the most recommendable means and measures for the traveller/seeker/reader-imitator on his way to Christ. Second, they demonstrate a dynamic approach not only to spiritual fulfilment but also to spiritual texts. By identifying four, or three, or six, dimensions as focal points before the actual spiritual reading of a text, they collectively form a grid or reading guide that highlights the spiritual progress contained in it, or the reading glasses that improve the vision of its meaning. Third, they direct our attention to spirituality as a progressive, ongoing process. Consequently, the core meaning and message for today’s reader is no longer that spirituality is *per se* this or that, for example ‘the quest for a fulfilled and authentic religious life, involving the bringing together of the ideas distinctive of that religion and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of that religion’,¹⁰ but that it is rather a progressive process *pur sang* which indeed involves aspiration and inspiration but which for the rest remains fortunately minimally defined.

⁷ *Navolging* I,1,4 (29): ‘Doctrina christi omnes doctrinas sanctorum precellit; et qui spiritum haberet: absconditum ibi manna inueniret (Ap. 2:17)’.

⁸ *Navolging* I,1,6 (30): ‘Qui autem vult plene et sapide christi verba intellegere: oportet ut totam vitam suam illi studeat conformare’.

⁹ Thomas does not use the word *dedicatio*, with one exception in book Three, 1,21 (139): ‘Solomon, the wisest of the kings of Israel, built in seven years a magnificent temple to the praise of your name, and took eight days to celebrate its dedication (*dedicacionis*)’. This, of course, has a wholly different meaning (see below).

¹⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction*, Malden etc.: Blackwell, 1999, 2.

1. DEVOTION

The general meaning of ‘devotion’ is essentially twofold: 1) religious fervor, piety; an act of prayer or private worship; a religious exercise or practice other than the regular corporate worship of a congregation; and 2) the act of dedicating something to a cause, enterprise, or activity / the act of devoting; the fact or state of being ardently dedicated and loyal.¹¹ In the context of the Modern Devotion, of which Thomas a Kempis is a prominent member, devotion is a most central notion. For the Modern Devout, it means ‘to embody “piety”’ (*devotio*) and this, obviously, ‘in the “present day”’ (*moderna*).¹² Rudolf van Dijk has made a study of the use of the term (*devotio / devotus*) in *The Imitation of Christ*.¹³ He describes the rich contents and multiple dimensions of the word and defines it as a result of his source reading as ‘a force within, which can be found by remorse. It helps us to make progress in our commitment to God, provided that we do not seek it in external observances’.¹⁴ One finds devotion and becomes a devout person

first and foremost by going (learning to go) the way of reading, meditating on, and contemplating the hidden dimensions of the Scriptures, both in silence and quiet (on the level of the individual) and in spiritual collation (on the level of the community). Devotion is a deeper dimension of the – either conscious or unconscious – commitment to God that is inherently human. If we want to grow in our commitment to God, we must go the way of *devotio* = the force of interiority. This is the way which Thomas elaborates in his *The Imitation of Christ*. This way calls the person who wants to live a spiritual life (book I), to an interior life (Book II), in which he meets Christ in the Eucharist (Book III), who leads him into what is most interior: the space of the consoling divine Word (book IV).¹⁵

¹¹ From a modern point of view and randomly chosen from a good modern dictionary. See *Merriam-Webster*; www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/devotion. Please note that some of these definitions concern not devotion but ‘a’ devotion. For *devotio*, the *Database of Latin Dictionaries* has: 1) a devoting, consecrating; 2) fealty, allegiance, devotedness; www.brepolis.net. Wiktionary adds: piety, devotion, zeal; www.en.wiktionary.org/wiki/devotio (5 September 2022).

¹² Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers*, 1.

¹³ Rudolf van Dijk, ‘De devotie van de moderne devoot’, in: Van Dijk, *Twaalf kapittels*, 355-368.

¹⁴ Van Dijk, ‘De devotie’, 362: ‘Devotie is dus een kracht vanbinnen, die door vermurwing gevonden kan worden. Ze helpt ons in onze betrokkenheid op God voortgang te vinden, mits wij deze niet zoeken in uiterlijke observanties’.

¹⁵ Van Dijk, ‘De devotie’, 363: ‘(...) in eerste instantie vooral de weg (leren) gaan van lezen, overwegen en schouwen in de verborgenheden van de Schriften, zowel in stilte en rust (op het niveau van de persoon) als in het geestelijk leergesprek (op het niveau van de gemeenschap). Devotie is een diepere dimensie van de al dan niet bewuste godbetrokkenheid die mensen als zodanig eigen is. Willen wij groeien in onze godbetrokkenheid, dan moeten wij

In conclusion, we can say with Van Dijk that a devout person is a person who, in his/her relation to God, neighbor, and herself, *lives interiorly*.¹⁶

Today's 'devotional' reader will be particularly struck by the following four uses of *devotio* in the first book of *The Imitation of Christ*.¹⁷ First and foremost, devotion is an *inner disposition*: 'A good and inward living person arranges his affairs inwardly before he has to deal with them outwardly';¹⁸ 'Deal with humble and simple, with inwardly living and cautious people';¹⁹ 'There is nothing great about it, if a person lives an inward and ardent life without experiencing heaviness';²⁰ 'Therefore, we must prepare ourselves with care in periods of inwardness, and behave with more inwardness';²¹ 'But the saints of God and all the inwardly living friends of Christ paid no attention to what was pleasing to the flesh';²² 'Then every inwardly living person will rejoice and every wicked person will feel guilty';²³ 'How pleasant and beneficent it is to see fervent and inwardly living brothers, compliant and disciplined';²⁴ 'A religious person who attentively and inwardly practices the most holy life and suffering of the Lord';²⁵ and so forth. In this use of *devotio*, it is thus inextricably linked with the direction of one's attention, with virtuous behavior, with inner experience, and with religious practice.

Second, devotion is a *quality of things* related to the inner life: 'Therefore, we should read devout and simple books as gladly as books with heavy and

de weg gaan van de *devotio* = innigheid. Dit is de weg die Thomas in zijn *Navolging van Christus* uitwerkt. Deze weg roept de mens die een geestelijk leven wil leiden (boek I), op tot een innerlijk leven (boek II), waarin hij in de eucharistie Christus ontmoet (boek III), die hem binnenvoert in wat het meest innig is: de ruimte van het vertroostend goddelijk spreken (boek IV).

¹⁶ Van Dijk, 'De devotie', 367: 'Een *deuotus* is een *innig levende mens*'.

¹⁷ According to Van Dijk, in book Three of the *Imitation* 'devotion' is a quality, an inner disposition, a category of religious people, and a gift of grace (Van Dijk, 'De devotie', 364).

¹⁸ *Navolging* I,3,16 (35): 'Bonus et deuotus homo opera sua prius intus disponit: que foris agere debet'.

¹⁹ *Navolging* I,8,4 (42): 'Cum humilibus et simplicibus, cum deuotis et morigeratis sociare'.

²⁰ *Navolging* I,13,31 (53): 'Nec magnum est si homo deuotus sit et feruidus cum grauitatem non sentit'.

²¹ *Navolging* I,19,28 (65): 'Ideoque sollicito nos preparare debemus in deuotis temporibus, et deuotius conuersari'.

²² *Navolging* I,22,21 (75): 'Sancti autem dei et omnes deuoti amici christi, non attenderunt que carni placuerunt'.

²³ *Navolging* I,24,23 (84): 'Tunc gaudebit omnis deuotus: et merebit omnis irreligiosus'.

²⁴ *Navolging* I,25,26 (89): 'Quam iucundum et dulce est videre feruidos et deuotos fratres: bene morigeratos et disciplinatos'.

²⁵ *Navolging* I,25,31 (89): 'Religiosus qui se intente et deuote in sanctissima vita et passione domini exercet'.

profound content’;²⁶ ‘Yet the inward learning conversation about spiritual matters helps no little for spiritual progress’;²⁷ ‘In silence and peace, a devout soul makes progress’;²⁸ and ‘Then you will draw more consolation from devout prayer than from a delicious meal’.²⁹ Third, devotion is a *category of religious*, the Modern Devout: ‘Diversity of senses and opinions quite often causes disagreement among friends and townspeople, among monastics and the Devout’;³⁰ ‘After all, you have seen the many examples of the Devout often enough’;³¹ ‘Never promise yourself untroubledness in this life, even if you seem to be such a good monk or Devout hermit’;³² and ‘as a servant of God, moreover a Devout religious, ought to live’.³³ Fourth, devotion is an *aspect of faith* in general: ‘Hence, the prophet devoutly asks’.³⁴

2. VIRTUE

Virtue is essentially ‘a commendable quality or trait’.³⁵ The development and practice of virtues and making progress in them is truly the *leitmotif* of the spiritual program of the Modern Devout.³⁶ The emphasis on continuing to grow in virtue (*profectus virtutum*), a concept that the Devout adopted mainly from the writings of the Franciscan David of Augsburg († 1272), is a distinguishing

²⁶ *Navolging* I,5,4 (38): ‘Ita libenter deuotos et simplices libros legere debemus: sicut altos et profundos’.

²⁷ *Navolging* I,10,12 (45): ‘Iuuat tamen non parum ad profectum spiritualement, deuota spiritualement rerum collatio’.

²⁸ *Navolging* I,20,29 (69): ‘In silencio et quiete proficit anima deuota’.

²⁹ *Navolging* I,24,31 (85): ‘Tunc magis consolaberis super deuota oracione: quam super delicata comestione’.

³⁰ *Navolging* I,14,9 (54): ‘Propter diuersitatem sensuum et opinionum satis frequenter oriuntur dissensiones inter amicos et ciues: inter religiosos et deuotos’.

³¹ *Navolging* I,18,23 (62): ‘qui multa sepius exempla vidisti deuotorum’.

³² *Navolging* I,20,18 (67): ‘Numquam promittas tibi securitatem in hac vita: quamuis bonus videaris cenobita, aut deuotus eremita’.

³³ *Navolging* I,21,13 (72): ‘sicut deceret dei seruum et deuotum religiosum conuersari’.

³⁴ *Navolging* I,22,15 (75): ‘Vnde propheta deuote rogat’.

³⁵ From a modern point of view and randomly chosen from a good modern dictionary. See *Merriam-Webster*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/virtue: 1) conformity to a standard of right; a particular moral excellence; 2) a beneficial quality or power of a thing; 3) manly strength or courage; 4) a commendable quality or trait; 5) a capacity to act; 6) chastity especially in a woman; 7) [virtues plural:] an order of angels. For *virtus*, the *Database of Latin Dictionaries* has: virtue, force, power, efficacy; www.brepolis.net (5 September 2022).

³⁶ Krijn Pansters, *De kardinale deugden in de Lage Landen, 1200–1500*, Hilversum: Verloren, 2007 (Middelieuwe Studies en Bronnen 108), 165–202; Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers*, 266–267.

feature of the spiritual movement. Naturally, the virtues and the advancement in them, or promotion of them, cannot be separated from the Devout pursuit of imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) and the Devout attention to spiritual exercises (*exercitia*) and spiritual progress in general (*profectus*), but the writings in question are clear enough about the central importance of the virtues in them. Progress in the life of virtues constitutes the whole process between beginning and perfection.³⁷ Already in the first houses of the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life (Deventer, Kampen and Zwolle), *proficere in virtutibus* was one of the central concerns. The Chronicle of the brotherhouse at Zwolle, for example, states:

Here, then, with those poor primitive brothers, under the strong rector Lord Gerardus, he [Dirck of Herxen] exercised himself rigorously in all virtues, and continually and daily offering himself to God in all humility, obedience, patience, poverty, and other virtues, he triumphed over all his enemies (...). When he grew and went forward in the holy temple in the Lord, until he met the Perfect Man, for he was already acting in his divine manners, that he might become a lamp, which should not be placed under the bowl, but on the stand (Mt. 5:15), that he might stand for the house of God and give light to all who are there at home (...) he daily strengthened in himself the study of the virtues.³⁸

The Devout sister or brother is completely dedicated to *virtuous growth* toward perfection, in order to become a better person with respect to God, neighbor, and oneself.

Today's 'virtuous' reader will find that it is no different in *The Imitation of Christ*.³⁹ The basic pattern of life is always already *going forward* by following and walking: 'Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness (Jn 8:12), says the Lord'.⁴⁰ Within this pattern, first, one *progresses* in and by the good: 'This

³⁷ Pansters, *De kardinale deugden*, 165-166.

³⁸ *Jacobus Traiecti alias de Voecht. Narratio de inchoatione domus clericorum in Zwollis*, ed. Michael Schoengen, Amsterdam 1908 (Werken uitgegeven door het Historisch Genootschap 3-13), 52-53: 'Hic ergo cum illis pauperculis primitivis fratribus sub strenuo rectore domino Gerardo optime in omnibus virtutibus rigorose exercitabatur, et seipsum continue et cotidie offerens Deo in omni humilitate, obedientia, patientia, paupertate et ceteris virtutibus triumphabat super omnes inimicos suos (...) Quando magis cresceret et proficeret in templum sanctum in Domino, donec occurreret in virum perfectum, jam enim suis divinis moribus agebatur, ut fieret lucerna, que non sub modio, sed super candelabrum poneretur (Mt. 5:15), ut staret pro domo Dei et luceret omnibus, qui in domo sunt (...) ipse cotidie adauxit in se studia virtutum'. See Pansters, *De kardinale deugden*, 170.

³⁹ On making the virtues in medieval religious sources fruitful for modern morality, see Krijn Pansters, *Spiritual Morality: The Religious Orders and the Virtues, 1050-1300* (unpublished diss. Catholic University Leuven, 2019).

⁴⁰ *Navolging* I,1,1 (29): 'Qui sequitur me non ambulat in tenebris (Jn 8,12), dicit dominus'.

should be our task: to overcome oneself, to get a better grip on oneself every day, and to make a little progress for the better';⁴¹ 'If your sense is good, but for God's sake you give it up and follow another, you will make more progress';⁴² 'Rarely do we overcome even one defect perfectly, and we do not get fired up towards daily progress';⁴³ 'He who turns away only outwardly, but does not strike out the root, will make little progress';⁴⁴ 'In trials and tribulations man is tested how far he has progressed';⁴⁵ 'If you want to duly stand and make progress, consider yourself an exile and a stranger on earth (Heb 11:13)';⁴⁶ 'On our way of life depends the course of our progress. For someone who wants to make good progress, much diligence is needed';⁴⁷ 'If you want to make any progress, keep yourself in awe of God (Pr 23:17)';⁴⁸ and so forth. The virtuous person therefore progressively exchanges a lack for a love of renewal, surrender, rigor, and admiration.

Second, one progresses *in and by virtue*: 'If you want to make progress, read humbly, simply and faithfully';⁴⁹ 'In love and patience they went their way. Therefore, they made daily progress in the spirit and gained much favor with God';⁵⁰ 'Yet do not let the progress of virtues go to sleep deep within you!';⁵¹ '(...) fervent desire to progress in virtues';⁵² and so forth. Third, acquiring virtue is an *active process*: 'If only they showed as much zeal for eradicating vices and implanting virtues';⁵³ 'Oh, what great intimacy of prayer, what zeal in

⁴¹ *Navolging* I,3,19 (35): 'Et hoc deberet esse negocium nostrum, vincere videlicet seipsum; et cotidie seipso forcioem fieri: atque in melius aliquid proficere'.

⁴² *Navolging* I,9,11 (44): 'Si bonum est tuum sentire; et hoc ipsum propter deum dimittis et alium sequeris: magis exinde proficies'.

⁴³ *Navolging* I,11,7 (46): 'Raro eiam vnum viciu perfecte vincimus; et ad cotidianu profectum non accendimur'.

⁴⁴ *Navolging* I,13,14 (51): 'Qui tantummodo exterius declinat, nec radicem euellit: parum proficiet'.

⁴⁵ *Navolging* I,13,30 (53): 'In temptacionibus et tribulacionibus probatur homo quantum profecit'.

⁴⁶ *Navolging* I,17,4 (58): 'Si vis debite stare et proficere: teneas te tamquam exulem peregrinum super terram'.

⁴⁷ *Navolging* I,19,5 (63): 'Secundum propositum nostrum cursus profectus nostri: et multa diligencia opus est bene proficere volenti'.

⁴⁸ *Navolging* I,21,1 (71): 'Si vis aliquid proficere, conserua te in timore dei'.

⁴⁹ *Navolging* I,5,10 (39): 'Si vis profectum haurire; lege humiliter, simpliciter et fideliter'.

⁵⁰ *Navolging* I,18,16 (61): 'In caritate et paciencia ambulabant; et ideo cotidie in spiritu proficiebant: et magnam apud deum gratiam obtinebant'.

⁵¹ *Navolging* I,18,23 (62): 'Vtinam in te penitus non dormitet profectus virtutum'.

⁵² *Navolging* I,23,23 (79): 'feruens desiderium in virtutibus proficiendi'.

⁵³ *Navolging* I,3,24 (36): 'O si tantam adhiberent diligenciam ad exstirpanda vicia et virtutes inserendas'.

virtue';⁵⁴ 'The life of a good religious person should excel in all virtues';⁵⁵ and 'Without care and caution you will never acquire virtues'.⁵⁶ Fourth, virtue, no matter how unambiguously moral, is at all times religious virtue. It remains, in the first place, an interior quality lived out in relation *with God*: 'only a virtuous life makes one loved by God'.⁵⁷

3. DESIRE

The essence of desire is 'longing or craving'.⁵⁸ A short search on Google already shows in what ways desire can be considered an essential element of spirituality: Spiritual desire is the key to cultivating spiritual disciplines; Spiritual growth begins with spiritual desire; We must earnestly desire spiritual gifts;⁵⁹ and so on. In the context of medieval spirituality, and more specifically of the Modern Devotion, both bad desires and good desires are constantly at work. The Devout brother Gerhard Zerbolt of Zutphen († 1398), for example, says that the will will be ordered and reformed when the harmful desires (*desideriis*) by which one is carried away have been eradicated.⁶⁰ He also says that the means of purifying oneself of all sins is to desire (*desidera*) to do opposing exercises.⁶¹ Desire is thus both negatively and positively a decisive driver of the spiritual process. We read, for example, that a Devout brother was uncommonly untroubled in mind and body by sexual desire,⁶² and that 'work with the hands restrained concupiscent desire'.⁶³ Conversely, a Devout sister had a

⁵⁴ *Navolging* I,18,19 (61): 'O quanta deuocio oracionis, quanta emulacio virtutis'.

⁵⁵ *Navolging* I,19,1 (62): 'Vita boni religiosi omnibus virtutibus pollere debet'.

⁵⁶ *Navolging* I,25,47 (91): 'Sine sollicitudine et diligencia numquam acquires virtutes'.

⁵⁷ *Navolging* I,1,8 (30): 'sed virtuosa vita efficit deo carum'.

⁵⁸ From a modern point of view and randomly chosen from a good modern dictionary. See *Merriam-Webster*; www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/virtue: 1) conscious impulse toward something that promises enjoyment or satisfaction in its attainment; 2) longing, craving; 3) something longed or hoped for; 4) a usually formal request or petition for some action. Please note that some of these definitions concern not desire but 'a' desire. For *desidium*, the *Database of Latin Dictionaries* has: a longing for, desire, love, affection; www.brepolis.net (5 September 2022).

⁵⁹ www.davidschrock.com/2016/12/30/spiritual-desire-the-key-to-cultivating-spiritual-disciplines; www.qbchurch.org/daily-nugget/2017/10/spiritual-growth-begins-with-spiritual-desire; www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-we-must-earnestly-desire-spiritual-gifts (5 September 2022).

⁶⁰ S. van der Woude, *Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen: Over de hervorming van de krachten der ziel*, Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij Holland, 1951 (Klassieken der Kerk: Tweede Reeks 3), 91. See Pansters, *De kardinale deugden*, 178.

⁶¹ Van der Woude, *Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen*, 92. See Pansters, *De kardinale deugden*, 178.

⁶² Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers*, 139.

⁶³ Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers*, 188.

burning desire to convert good people and draw them toward the virtues,⁶⁴ and conversion begins with a 'goodly desire for spiritual progress'.⁶⁵ Likewise, with regard to the struggle against sin:

The Brothers above all saw themselves as passing out remedies or antidotes, these drawn from their reading, their admonishing and their sayings. To combat gluttony, the most primal of animal *desires*, one had to counterpose the forces of interiority, along with a *desire* for things heavenly; best was to cultivate sobriety, not too much food, not too much fasting.⁶⁶ [emphasis KP]

Devout spirituality is thus a dialectic process in which one substitutes through combat and cultivation in one's heart, mind, and body the carnal and material desires for moral and spiritual ones.

Today's 'desirous' reader will find herself both very near to and very far from the Devout conceptions of desire in *The Imitation of Christ*.⁶⁷ Very near, because desire is defined in ways that may resonate with today's experience as spiritual desire:⁶⁸ 'It happens, however, that many experience little desire from the frequent hearing of the Gospel: because they do not have the Spirit of Christ (Rom: 8:9)';⁶⁹ 'In You is everything I want and desire';⁷⁰ 'If God was always the pure focus of our desire';⁷¹ '(...) then return to yourself, in accordance with your desire for devotion';⁷² 'All their longing was pushed up to what is permanent and invisible';⁷³ and '[A great confidence to die happy after all is given by] fervent desire to progress in virtues'.⁷⁴ Very near, furthermore, because – when it comes to knowledge – desire is purely natural: 'Every human being naturally desires to know'.⁷⁵ Unlike spiritual desire, however, this natural desire can turn

⁶⁴ Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers*, 57.

⁶⁵ Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers*, 77.

⁶⁶ Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers*, 294. See also Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers*, 302: '(...) stirring up spiritual desires to counter carnal desire'.

⁶⁷ On the meaning of desire in medieval monastic spirituality, see especially Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1974².

⁶⁸ God Himself also desires. See *Navolging* 7,6 (10): 'sed in deo qui omnia prestat, et seipsum super omnia dare desiderat' ('God, who brings all things into being and desires to bestow himself above all things').

⁶⁹ *Navolging* I,1,5 (30): 'Sed contingit quod multi ex frequenti auditu euangelii paruum desiderium sentiunt: quia spiritum christi non habent'.

⁷⁰ *Navolging* I,3,11 (34): 'in te est totum quod volo et desidero'.

⁷¹ *Navolging* I,14,4 (54): 'Si deus semper esset pura intencio nostri desiderii'.

⁷² *Navolging* I,19,21 (64): 'si iam vltra vacat redde te tibi, prout deuocio tua desiderat'.

⁷³ *Navolging* I,22,22 (75): 'Ferebatur totum desiderium eorum sursum ad mansura et invisibilia'.

⁷⁴ *Navolging* I,23,23 (79): '[Dabit namque magnam fiduciam feliciter moriendi] feruens desiderium in virtutibus proficiendi'.

⁷⁵ *Navolging* I,2,1 (31): 'Omnis homo naturaliter scire desiderat'.

into too much desiring: 'Rest from the inordinate desire to know; for in that is found a great deal of scattering and deception'.⁷⁶

Very far, on the other hand, because inherently carnal connotations clash with today's more positive experience of corporality: 'Emptiness is following the desires of the flesh and desiring that for which you must later be severely punished';⁷⁷ 'Nor do these [external things] tempt him to the desires of his sinful inclination';⁷⁸ 'The desires of our sensuality beckon us to go out';⁷⁹ and 'There will come a time, when you will desire one day or hour to better yourself, but I don't know if you will get it'.⁸⁰ Awkward and uncomfortable for our sensibilities is the threat entailed in these exhortations, encouragements, admonitions, and alerts. Here, as with so many medieval texts, the question remains how to interpret these passages in their historical contexts without becoming cynical and detached.⁸¹ How can this be done when we read rather 'distressing' statements that recommend a passionate striving for self-debasement and obedience with words like these: 'Truly great is he who is small in himself';⁸² 'The more humble a person is in himself and the more subject to God, the wiser and more peaceful he will be in all respects';⁸³ and 'Wherever you go, you will not find rest except in humble submission, under the authority of a superior'.⁸⁴ A theme to be discussed further in modern-day *collationes*!

⁷⁶ *Navolging* I,2,5 (32): 'Quiesce a nimio sciendi desiderio: quia magna ibi inuenitur distractio et deceptio'.

⁷⁷ *Navolging* I,1,15 (31): 'Vanitas est carnis desideria sequi: et illud desiderare vnde postmodum grauius oportet puniri'.

⁷⁸ *Navolging* I,3,17 (35): 'Nec illa trahunt eum ad desideria viciose inclinacionis'.

⁷⁹ *Navolging* I,20,35 (69): 'Trahunt desideria sensualitatis ad spaciandum'.

⁸⁰ *Navolging* I,23,31 (80): 'Veniet, quando vnum diem seu horam pro emendacione desiderabis: et nescio an impetabis'.

⁸¹ On dealing with (troublesome) truths in medieval spirituality, by way of the example of Franciscan spirituality, see Krijn Pansters, 'Framing Francis: Devotional Discrepancies and Generational Risks in the History of Franciscan Spiritualities', in: Charles Caspers & Hans Geybels (Eds.), *The Dynamics of Devotions: About Signposts, Thresholds and Stumbling Blocks in the History of Christian Religious Life*, Louvain 2023, forthcoming. On a positive reading emphasizing the 'beautiful impact of the text', see Pieter G.R. de Villiers, 'Peace in the Spirituality of Thomas á Kempis: An Aesthetic Perspective on the *Imitatio Christi* 4.25', in: Pieter G.R. de Villiers & D. François Tolmie (Eds.), *In the Divine Presence: Essays in Honour of Kees Waaijman on His 80th Birthday*, Bloemfontein: University of the Free State, 2022 (Acta Theologica Supplementum 33), 137-156.

⁸² *Navolging* I,3,34 (37): 'Vere magnus est: qui in se paruus est'.

⁸³ *Navolging* I,4,8 (38): 'Quanto quis in se humilior fuerit et deo subiectior: tanto in omnibus erit sapiencior et pacacior'.

⁸⁴ *Navolging* I,9,5 (43): 'Curre hic uel ibi: non inuenies quietem nisi in humili subiectione, sub regimine prelati'.

4. DEDICATION

The fourth dimension of following Christ as found in *The Imitation of Christ* from the perspective of spirituality as a process is dedication. The word ‘dedication’ has several meanings: 1) an act or rite of dedicating to a divine being or to a sacred use; 2) a devoting or setting aside for a particular purpose; 3) a name and often a message prefixed to a literary, musical, or artistic production in tribute to a person or cause; 4) self-sacrificing devotion and loyalty; and 5) a ceremony to mark the official completion or opening of something (such as a building).⁸⁵ Relevant for our discussion is ‘an act or rite of dedicating to a divine being or to a sacred use’ but especially ‘self-sacrificing devotion and loyalty’. Dedication, according to Rudolf van Dijk, who translates *devotio moderna* with ‘renewed dedication’,⁸⁶ is one of the three main meanings of the word *devotio* (next to ‘pious devotion’ and ‘Modern Devotion’).⁸⁷ Accordingly, and in summary,

the motto of the Modern Devotion applied to all of them: serious dedication and diligent devotion in the face of the Almighty, for the edification of the community, and for the perfection of the devout ‘self’.⁸⁸

In other words, the Devout are dedicated, diligent, and devoted in their spirituality toward God, community, and the self.

Today’s ‘dedicated’ reader may be inspired by the fact that the meaning of dedication is contained in several strong terms with comparably compelling contents. A whole range of direction-determining and action-motivating definitions are at his/her disposal. First and foremost, there is *studere* (pursue, devote oneself,

⁸⁵ *Merriam-Webster*; www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dedication (5 September 2022). For *dedicatio*, the *Database of Latin Dictionaries* has almost nothing, and nothing like ‘self-sacrificing devotion and loyalty’, www.brepolis.net (5 September 2022).

⁸⁶ Rudolf van Dijk, ‘De spiritualiteit van de devote regulier: Beschouwingen over de Agnietenbergkroniek van Thomas van Kempen’, in: Van Dijk, *Twaalf kapitels*, 311-352, here 321: ‘vernieuwde toewijding’. This translation is likely based on Koen Goudriaan (Ed.), *Vernieuwde innigheid: Over de Moderne Devotie, Geert Grote en Deventer*, Deventer: Arko Uitgeverij, 2008.

⁸⁷ Van Dijk, ‘De spiritualiteit’, 348: ‘Thomas van Kempen uses *devotio/devotus* broadly in three meanings: 1) devotion, dedicated; 2) piety, devout; 3) movement of renewed interiority’ (‘Thomas van Kempen gebruikt *devotio/devotus* globaal in drie betekenissen: 1) toewijding, toegewijd; 2) vroomheid, vroom; 3) beweging van vernieuwde innigheid’).

⁸⁸ Rudolf van Dijk, ‘Tot vertroosting en ter herinnering: De Agnietenbergkroniek in het licht van de Moderne Devotie’, in: Van Dijk, *Twaalf kapitels*, 129-198, here 182: ‘voor allen gold het devies van de Moderne Devotie: ernstige toewijding en ijverige plichtsbetrachting voor het gelaat van de Almachtige, tot opbouw van de gemeenschap en tot vervolmaking van het devote “zelf”’.

commit, endeavor): ‘So our highest pursuit should be: to meditate in the life of Jesus Christ’;⁸⁹ ‘Whoever wants to fully and tastefully understand the words of Christ should devote himself to conforming his whole life to Him’;⁹⁰ ‘Therefore, commit yourself to detaching your heart from the love of visible things and transferring yourself to the unseen’;⁹¹ ‘Because they have endeavored to mortify themselves completely of all earthly desires’;⁹² and so forth. Second, there is *niti* (strive, seek): ‘After all, he does everything for the glory of God and strives in himself to be free from all self-interest’;⁹³ ‘Who fights a harder battle than he who seeks to overcome himself’;⁹⁴ ‘Striving to stand as strong men in battle, truly, we would see the Lord’s help upon us from heaven’;⁹⁵ ‘No one can remain peaceful for long either, who does not strive to be the least and subject to all’;⁹⁶ and so forth. Third, there is *diligencia* (zeal, care, caution): ‘If only they showed as much zeal for eradicating vices and implanting virtues’;⁹⁷ ‘And for someone who wants to make good progress, a lot of care is needed’;⁹⁸ ‘No one is worthy of heavenly consolation, if he does not carefully exercise himself in holy attrition’;⁹⁹ ‘Be vigilant and cautious in the service of God’;¹⁰⁰ and so forth. Fourth and final, there is *fervor* and *zelum* (fervor, zeal): ‘Fervor and progress were to increase daily, but now it already seems great if someone can keep a little of his initial fire’;¹⁰¹ ‘What a tremendously fervent zeal for spiritual progress they had!’;¹⁰² ‘Oh, how great

⁸⁹ *Navolging* I,1,3 (29): ‘Summum igitur studium nostrum sit: in vita ihesu christi meditari’.

⁹⁰ *Navolging* I,1,6 (30): ‘Qui autem vult plene et sapide christi verba intellegere: oportet ut totam vitam suam illi studeat conformare’.

⁹¹ *Navolging* I,1,20 (31): ‘Stude ergo cor tuum ab amore visibilium abstrahere: et ad invisibilia te transferre’.

⁹² *Navolging* I,11,5 (46): ‘Quia omnino se ipsos mortificare ab omnibus terrenis desideriis studuerunt’.

⁹³ *Navolging* I,3,14 (35): ‘quia omnia ad dei honorem operatur: et in se ociosus ab omni propria exquisicione esse nititur’.

⁹⁴ *Navolging* I,3,18 (35): ‘Quis habet forcius certamen; quam qui nititur vincere seipsum?’

⁹⁵ *Navolging* I,11,11 (46): ‘Si niteremur sicut viri fortes stare in prelio: profecto auxilium domini super nos videremus de celo (Jr 41:16)’.

⁹⁶ *Navolging* I,17,8 (58): ‘Non potest eciam diu stare pacificus: qui non nititur esse minimus, et omnibus subiectus (1 Pe 2:13)’.

⁹⁷ *Navolging* I,3,24 (36): ‘O si tantam adhiberent diligenciam ad exstirpanda vicia et virtutes inserendas’.

⁹⁸ *Navolging* I,19,5 (63): ‘et multa diligencia opus est bene proficere volenti’.

⁹⁹ *Navolging* I,20,23 (68): ‘Nemo dignus est celesti consolacione: nisi diligenter se exercuerit in sancta compuncione’.

¹⁰⁰ *Navolging* I,25,1 (86): ‘Esto vigilans et diligens in dei seruicio (Mt 26:50)’.

¹⁰¹ *Navolging* I,11,17 (47): ‘Feruor et profectus cotidie deberet crescere; sed nunc pro magno videtur: si quis primi feruoris partem posset retinere’.

¹⁰² *Navolging* I,18,7 (60): ‘Quam magnum zelum et feruorem ad spirituales profectum habuerunt’.

was the fire of all godly people in the beginning of their holy way of life!';¹⁰³ 'Every day we must renew our life plan and arouse ourselves to zeal';¹⁰⁴ and so forth. Connected to dedication in *The Imitation of Christ*, finally, are words like *intendere* (pursue), *sperare* (hope), *querere* (want), *appetere* (long), *proponere* (intend), *conor* (attempt), *se dare* (apply oneself); and *attendere* (pay attention to).

CONCLUSION

Many definitions of spirituality are inherently dynamic, stressing the process of progress in the 'divine-human relationship'¹⁰⁵ and using notions such as 'strive', 'self-transcendence', and 'search'. Spirituality, for example, is 'The experience of consciously *striving* to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of *self-transcendence* toward the ultimate value one perceives';¹⁰⁶ 'An individual's *search* for ultimate or sacred meaning and purpose in life';¹⁰⁷ 'geistgewirkter *Selbsttranszendenz*';¹⁰⁸ 'The *search* for a *transforming* knowledge of God';¹⁰⁹ and 'The way in which a person understands and lives within his or her historical context that aspect of his or her religion, philosophy or ethic that is viewed as the loftiest, the noblest, the most calculated to lead to the fullness of the ideal or perfection *being sought*'¹¹⁰ [italics KP]. Correspondingly, in this article, I have tried to illustrate the importance of considering spirituality as a progressive process by using the example of four essential – but far from exclusive – elements of the imitation of Christ in the eyes of Thomas a Kempis: devotion, virtue, desire, and dedication. Whereas certain readers may be spiritually drawn to one or more of these dimensions (input), all dimensions

¹⁰³ *Navolging* I,18,18 (61): 'O quantus feruor omnium religiosorum, in principio sue sancte institutionis fuit'.

¹⁰⁴ *Navolging* I,19,3 (62): 'Omni die renovare debemus propositum nostrum, et ad feruorem nos excitare'.

¹⁰⁵ Random definition, taken from Kees Waaijman, who has developed a theory of spiritual 'transformation' in the context of a 'divine-human relational process'. See Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, Leuven: Peeters, 2002, 6, 312.

¹⁰⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, 'Spirituality in the Academy', in: *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), 676-697, esp. 684.

¹⁰⁷ C.R. Snyder & Shane J. Lopez, *Positive Psychology: The Scientific and Practical Explorations of Human Strengths*, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007, 261.

¹⁰⁸ Erwin Möde (Ed.), *Theologie der Spiritualität – Spiritualität der Theologie(n): Eine fächerübergreifende Grundlagenstudie*, Regensburg: Pustet, 2007 (Eichstätter Studien: Neue Folge 57), 21.

¹⁰⁹ Kenneth Leech, *Experiencing God: Theology as Spirituality*, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002, Preface.

¹¹⁰ Walter Principe, 'Toward Defining Spirituality', in: *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 12 (1983), 127-141, esp. 136.

may have inspirational or transformational effects on specific readers' spiritual processes (output).

The Imitation of Christ is a superb representative of the kind of spiritual conceptualization (to be found in the majority of texts from the Western spiritual tradition) that concentrates on *moving forward* toward spiritual fulfillment and *proceeding* toward spiritual perfection. The route onward (to Christ, to union, to heaven) usually receives the greatest attention. The dynamics of spiritual progress is demonstrated in many passages in Thomas's popular devotional text, both as a whole and in each of its four books. In book One, chapter 25, we read:

There is one thing that keeps many from *progress* and ardent *improvement*: the trepidation of the difficulty and *effort* of the *struggle*. Indeed, more than others, they *advance* in virtues, who *endeavor* to overcome most bravely that which is hardest and most opposed to them. For there man makes more *progress* and earns more abundant grace, where he more *overcomes* himself and mortifies himself in spirit. But not all have an equal amount to *overcome* and mortify. Yet a *cautious follower* will be more capable of *progress* even if he has stronger urges than another, who, though accommodating, *strives* less *ardently* for virtues. Two things especially contribute to great *improvement*: forcibly *withdrawing* from the vice to which nature is inclined and *standing ardently* for the good that one lacks most. You must also *try harder* to avoid and *overcome* those things that most often annoy you in others. Seize your opportunity everywhere to *make progress*. Then, when you see or hear good examples, you will be *urged* to portray them. But if you have noticed something objectionable, guard against doing the same. And if you have sometimes done something, *try to improve* on it *quickly*.¹¹¹ [italics KP]

Either individually or collectively read, texts like these will quickly reveal their spiritual dynamic beyond the letter.

My main purpose, though, has been to draw attention to a definition of spirituality as a process *pur sang*, as a personal, progressive, and prolonged way or course essentially independent of specific inputs (e.g., the experience of a

¹¹¹ *Navolging* I,25,15-24 (88): 'Vnum est quod multos a profectu et feruenti emendacione retrahit: horror difficultatis seu labor certaminis. Enimuero illi maxime pre ceteris in uirtutibus proficiunt: qui ea que sibi magis grauia et contraria sunt virilius vincere nituntur. Nam ibi homo plus proficit, et gratiam meretur amplioem: vbi magis seipsum vincit et in spiritu mortificat. Sed non omnes habent eque multum ad vincendum et moriendum. Diligens tamen emulator valencior erit ad proficiendum eciam si plures habeat passiones: quam alius bene morigeratus, minus tamen feruens ad virtutes. Duo specialiter ad magnam emendacionem iuuant; videlicet subtrahere se violenter ad quod natura viciose inclinatur: et feruenter instare pro bono quo amplius quis indiget. Illa eciam studeas magis caueri et vincere: que tibi frequencius in aliis displicent. Vbique profectum tuum capias: ut si bona exempla videas vel audias, ad imitandum accendaris. Si quid autem reprehensibile consideraueris: caue ne idem facias. Aut si aliquando fecisti: cicius emendare te studeas'.

relationship) or outputs (e.g., a response to and a reflection on this experience). Such a formal, viz., form- rather than content-oriented, focus on spirituality allows for an interpretation in terms of 'existence' rather than 'essence' and accommodates the always dynamic character of the Holy Spirit's action, of spiritual development in people's lives and experiences, and of inner movements and means, rather than outer requirements and imperatives, determining spiritual paths. Viewing spirituality 'formally' and (thus) as an ongoing process means: principally taking into account all possible 'material' variants of spirituality-in-development, be it ecclesial, eclectic, contemplative, active, a combination thereof, or otherwise.¹¹² It also means having available an interpretational framework for the spiritual process of those, for instance, who, in imitation of Thomas a Kempis himself, 'progress greatly in virtue, progressing from day to day, always adding fervor to fervor, devotion to devotion, virtue to virtue, with the result that everyone wonders at their fervor and devotion'.¹¹³

¹¹² Here, I am using Sandra Schneiders's and Kees Waaijman's distinction between material and formal object. See Sandra M. Schneiders, 'The Study of Christian Spirituality', in: *Studies in Spirituality* 8 (1998), 38-57, esp. 39; Waaijman, *Spirituality*, 426.

¹¹³ See 'The Life of Thomas à Kempis', in: Peters, *Thomas à Kempis*, 143-148, esp. 147.