

A Communal Perspective on the Imitation of Christ¹

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Abstract

One of the main ideals of the Christian spiritual life is the imitation of Christ. It is difficult, however, to know what in the life of Christ one should imitate, and how one should imitate it. I argue that imitation should here be taken in the sense of performing rather than in that of copying. Moreover, I argue that the imitation of Christ is often understood in too individualistic a way. We should understand imitation as a community practice rather than as an individual practice: It is the community rather than the individual Christian that should imitate Christ. This helps us to frame these questions in a way that brings their solution within reach.

Introduction: The Imitation of Christ and its Theological Background

According to E.J. Tinsley the imitation of Christ is ‘the classical and normative way of characterizing the Christian spiritual life.’² Already for St Augustine, the love shown by Christ in the Incarnation inspires in us the desire to imitate him³ and this imitation is ‘the ultimate goal ... of conversion.’⁴ For Aquinas, ‘religious perfection consists especially in the imitation of Christ.’⁵ And in our time, Mark McIntosh agrees with them: ‘The response to Jesus that the Spirit evokes ... is not a neutral acknowledgement but a willingness to follow Jesus.’⁶ In light of the importance of the ideal of imitation, I here want to address some difficulties with this ideal.

The theological background of the ideal of the imitation of Christ is the following. Human beings have been created in the image and after the likeness of God (Gen.1:26-27). Through the Fall – or if one prefers, through human sin – this image and this likeness have either been entirely lost, or largely obscured. It needed more than human effort to restore this damaged image or lost likeness. In Jesus, God sent God’s own Son to the world, who was simultaneously God and perfectly human. He reminded humanity of its calling to be in the image and after the likeness of God, for instance in the following dialogue:

(Pharisees:) ‘Should we pay taxes to the Emperor or not?’ Jesus knew their evil thoughts and said, ‘Why are you trying to test me? You show-offs! Let me see one of the coins used for paying taxes.’ They brought him a silver coin, and he asked, ‘Whose picture and name are on it?’ ‘The Emperor’s,’ they answered. Then Jesus told them, ‘Give the Emperor what belongs to him and give God what belongs to God.’ (Matt. 22:17–22 CEV)

The key to understanding Jesus’ answer is a tacit presupposition: God’s image is on us. The answer Jesus gives, says more about the way we should live (giving ourselves to God) than about the specific issue of paying taxes (which seems indifferent to Jesus).

However, more than by His words Jesus reminded his followers of the good life by the example He set through His own person. By becoming Christlike – in the traditional terminology, by imitating Christ – human beings can reflect the perfect humanity of Christ and

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² E.J. Tinsley, ‘Imitation of Christ,’ in: Gordon S. Wakefield (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London ³1986), 208-209, quot. 208.

³ Eric Plumer, *Augustine’s Commentary on Galatians: Introduction, Text, Translation and Notes* (Oxford: OUP, ²2006), 111, 117; cf. *Exp. Gal.* 24.10 (166–167).

⁴ See Patrick Riley, *Character and Conversion in Autobiography: Augustine, Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau, and Sartre* (University of Virginia Press 2004), 43.

⁵ Aquinas, *STh 2a2ae 186,5 sed contra* (Blackfriars ed.).

⁶ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford 1998), 151.

thus become fully human (cf. Rom. 8:29). As *Gaudium et Spes* has it, 'Whoever follows after Christ, the perfect man, becomes himself more of a man' (GS 41). Christ should become alive in us (Gal. 4:19). Thus Christians are called upon to model their lives on that of Christ.

Ways of Imitation: Francis of Assisi, Bernard of Clairvaux, Martin Luther

There are various ways to imitate Christ. Perhaps the most radical form of imitation is exemplified by St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) who, concentrating on Jesus' earthly life, tried to copy Jesus' life in his own life without adding anything new to it. He wanted to mirror⁷ Jesus, his character, his gestures, the story of his life, and even the circumstances in which it took place. St. Francis went so far in his imitation of Christ, that he tried to reproduce in his own life certain events from the life of Jesus. He re-enacted the birth of Christ in Bethlehem (in Greccio, 1223), he fasted forty days and forty nights during the period of Lent in an island on the Lake of Perugia (1223),⁸ and he re-enacted the Last Supper at least three times. Moreover, he so staged the details of his own death and burial, that these also resembled the death and burial of Christ.⁹ In his Rule of 1223, St. Francis recommends brief sermons, 'because our Lord himself kept his words short on earth.'¹⁰

Even though St Francis aimed at literally copying the life of Christ, however, he did not avoid making choices in what he copied and what not. It has been noted that he identified above all with the suffering Christ; his whole life became one with the crucified Christ, a *compassio passionis Christi*, a participation in the suffering of Christ.¹¹ Other aspects of Jesus' life that were very important to St. Francis were his poverty and humility. On the other hand, in imitation as he sees it there seems to be little or no place for imitating Christ the healer or Christ as the preacher of good news. This is not to say that St. Francis's ideal of imitation was sombre or dismal; in spite of focussing on poverty, humility and suffering, St. Francis's spirituality is known as a cheerful form of spirituality.¹²

If we call the type of imitation that is characteristic for St. Francis *mimetic* imitation,¹³ St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) is another protagonist of it. He also concentrates on poverty and humility, but in him we do not yet find the focus re-enacting episodes of Jesus' life.¹⁴ The evangelical counsels of poverty, obedience and celibacy seem to belong to the same overall picture. Whoever makes these vows, intends to follow in the footsteps of Jesus:¹⁵ to be without possessions as Jesus was without possession, to renounce one's own will in obedience to one's superior as Jesus did in obedience to the Father ('not my will, but thine, be done' – Luke 22:42), to remain unmarried as Jesus was unmarried.

⁷ Cf. Brother Leo, *The Mirror of Perfection*.

⁸ Brother Ugolino, *The Little Flowers of St Francis of Assisi*, Ch. 7.

⁹ Ephrem Longpré, *François d'Assise et Son Expérience Spirituelle* (Paris 1966), 37-42.

¹⁰ Marion A. Habig (ed.), *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies* (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 3rd ed. 1973), 63.

¹¹ Longpré, François, 46; for the Latin quotation, Longpré refers to Thomas of Celano. On St. Francis, see also Étienne Ledeur, 'Imitation du Christ II: Tradition Spirituelle,' in: M. Viller e.a. (eds.), *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité Ascétique et Mystique VII* (Paris 1971), 1573-1577.

¹² Sigismund Verheij, *Naar het land van de levenden: Regel van Franciscus van Assisi voor de minderbroeders* (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2007), 151.

¹³ *Mimèsis* is the Greek term for copying or mimicry. 'Mimetic representation' is sometimes used as a philosophical term for that form of representation that attempts to be an accurate copy of the original. See, e.g., Ilse Bulhof & Ruud Welten (eds.), *Verloren presenties: Over de representatiecrisis in religie, kunst, media en politiek* (Kampen 1996), 8, 131-136.

¹⁴ R. Newton Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology* (Oxford 1934), esp. 219-221; Ledeur, 'Imitation du Christ II,' 1571-1573.

¹⁵ St. Francis of Assisi, 'The Rule of 1221,' Chapter 1, in: Habig (ed.), *Francis of Assisi*, 31-32.

A turning point in the reflection on the imitation of Christ came with Martin Luther (1483–1546), who firmly rejected the mimetic imitation of Christ. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, for example, he decidedly rejects participation in the suffering of Christ and the imitation of His life as a way to salvation. He suspected that the background of this ideal of imitation was a doctrine of works and a denial of grace.¹⁶ As a result, he preferred the Pauline ideal of the *conformitas Christi*, where both the form (the ideal) and the actualisation of this form in human beings are not the result of human effort or creativity, but of divine grace.¹⁷ I shall not pursue this line of thought here, but retain as a conclusion that Christians should be ‘transformed into a new creation through the Spirit’s work of conforming them to the mystery of Christ’s death and Resurrection.’¹⁸

Problems with Imitation

Luther is important for theological reflection on the imitation of Christ in still another way. He distinguishes between aspects of the life of Christ that may and aspects that may not be imitated:

Many say that Christ having by force driven the buyers and sellers out of the temple, we also may use force against the popish bishops and enemies of God's Word, as Munzer and other seducers. But Christ did many things which we neither may nor can do after him. He walked upon the water, he fasted forty days and forty nights, he raised Lazarus from death, after he had lain four days in the grave, etc.; such and the like we must leave undone. Much less will Christ consent that we by force assail the enemies of the truth; he commands the contrary: ‘Love your enemies, pray for them that vex and persecute you’; ‘Be merciful, as your Father is merciful’; ‘Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and humble in heart’; ‘He that will follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.’¹⁹

Thus Luther poses the question in which respects it is permitted to imitate Christ, and answers that Christ may only be imitated when He has explicitly prescribed this by means of a commandment. In this way, Luther introduces an important problem: What are the criteria for imitation? In which respects should we imitate the life of Jesus, and in which respects not? Should we imitate His clothing, His diet, His haircut? The way in which He behaved towards His mother? His driving the money-changers and traders from the Temple? His poverty, His celibacy? His suffering? H.J. Cadbury claims in this connection that ‘an imitation of Christ that imitates the first century ideas of history and nature is no more demanded than one that imitates a contemporary diet and clothing of Jesus,’²⁰ and thus implicitly rejects the way in which St. Francis imitated Jesus.

Luther’s criterion for imitation – imitate Jesus only when He Himself issued instructions to that end – sounds attractive, but is difficult to apply. (1) It would be necessary to distinguish

¹⁶ WA 7, 58, 31ff. Cf. Dennis Ngien, *The Suffering of God according to Martin Luther’s ‘Theologia Crucis’* (Frankfurt aM 1995), 35-37; Tinsley, ‘Imitation,’ 208.

¹⁷ See Olavi Tarvainen, ‘Der Gedanke der Conformitas Christi in Luthers Theologie,’ *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 22 (1953), 26-43.

¹⁸ Thomas D. McGonigle, ‘Three Ways,’ in: Michael Downey (ed.), *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 963–965, quot. 965.

¹⁹ *Tischreden* 1, 775; abbreviated in: Heinrich Fausel, *D. Martin Luther: Leben und Werk 2 – 1522 bis 1546* (München 1966), 79. I give the translation by William Hazlitt, published by The Lutheran Publication Society and now fulltext available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/tabletalk.txt>, CCXIX.

²⁰ Quoted by Tinsley, ‘Imitation of Christ,’ 208.

between commandments which Jesus gave to certain groups only, and commandments which He gave to all. Thus it is sometimes claimed that the commandment to imitate Jesus in His poverty was directed at the disciples only (Mat.10:9, Mark 6:8, Luke 9:3, 10:4; but cf. also Acts 2:44-45), and that consequently not all Christians are expected to live without possessions.²¹ For example, Jesus says to the young man that for entering into eternal life, keeping the commandments suffices. The selling of his possessions and distributing the proceeds among the poor are explicitly connected with striving for perfection and becoming a disciple (Mat. 19:16-26; more radical: Mark 10:17-27, Luke 18:18-27). Consequently, it seems that we should distinguish between different forms or degrees of imitation.

(2) The next problem with Luther's criterion is, that it can plausibly be argued that certain aspects of Jesus' life should be imitated, even though Jesus does not explicitly command it. This goes, for example, for Jesus' attitude towards children. Jesus had a very open and loving attitude towards children (Mark 10:14 par.), but does not explicitly prescribe the same attitude to His followers. But can one imitate Christ without adopting a similar attitude?

(3) A third problem that is not solved by Luther's criterion, is *the way in which* we should imitate various aspects of Jesus' life. Let me give two examples. First, how should we imitate Jesus' poverty? As often, St. Francis took a very radical line, and he expected his friars to be dependent upon what people gave them, and lived himself accordingly. For him, poverty involved sleeping in the open and hunger.²² More often, however, the counsel of poverty is given a less radical interpretation. Acts 2:44 has: 'All who believed ... had all things in common' (WEB). In this way the commandment of poverty is often interpreted by monastic orders and congregations: The individual members have no possessions, but the community has. Thus interpreted, poverty can become very comfortable. In many cases, both now and in the past, religious communities were quite wealthy, and their members lived in relative prosperity. In contemporary Western Europe, few monks and nuns live in a poverty comparable to that of an unmarried mother with children on social security. And even if they do, they do not live in the same fear of unexpected costs: 'What can I do if my washing machine breaks down?' 'If I am a month behind on my rent, I could be expelled from my house.' In case of emergency, their congregation or order will look after them. This is not to deny, of course, that having no personal possessions can be a real sacrifice. But it does show, that even seemingly straightforward forms of imitation like the imitation of Christ's poverty, involve interpretation and choice. This cannot be otherwise, because our circumstances are different from the circumstances in which Christ lived.

A second example serves to show the same. The admonition to take our cross upon us (Mat. 10:38; cf. Luke 14:27, Mark 8:34) is an admonition to imitate Christ, who died on the cross. If Christ's sentence to death was at least partly a result of His claim that He was the Son of God (as seems to be implied in the Gospel), no disciple of Christ could take up his cross in exactly the same way Christ did. In the early Church, this counsel has been taken literally by martyrs and confessors, but even they differed on the question whether one should actively seek martyrdom or just remain true to Christ when it arrived.²³ Nowadays, literal martyrdom is no longer a live option in Western societies, and the order to take our cross upon us has again to be reinterpreted. Does it mean that we should actively seek suffering? Then we arrive at the

²¹ See, e.g., Emmanuel V. Severus, 'Nachfolge,' in: Christian Schütz (ed.), *Praktisches Lexikon der Spiritualität* (1988; rpt. Freiburg 1992), 914.

²² See, e.g., St. Francis of Assisi, 'The Rule of 1221,' Chapter 9 and Brother Ugolino, *The Little Flowers of St Francis of Assisi*, Ch. 8.

²³ Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 2010), 19-44; cf. Theofried Baumeister, 'Martyrer, Martyrium II Literarisch,' in: *LThK*³ Vol. 6, 1437-1439, esp. 1438.

spiritual practice known by the name of mortification. Mortification may include autoflagellation in imitation of the flagellation of Christ before His death on the cross. It may include fasting, not eating what one likes most, or eating what one dislikes. It is, as the etymology of mortification shows, a form of dying, dying to the flesh, which may be interpreted as imitating Christ who died on the cross.²⁴ The problem with this form of imitating Christ is that Christ's own attitude to food and drink can certainly not be summed up in the sentence: Christ was an ascetic. There are clear indications in the New Testament that when he was not fasting, Jesus loved food and drink and did not object to the ordinary use of them. He not only made water into wine and fed large numbers of people to their satisfaction at various occasions (e.g., Mt. 14:13–21), but he was also especially known for his meals with other people and was occasionally called a glutton and a drunkard, and contrasted with the more ascetic habits of John the Baptist (Mt. 11:39, Lk. 7:34). When confronted with disease and illness, Jesus did not regard these as opportunities for mortification; He and His apostles healed the sick. It is not so clear that imitating Jesus requires mortification. Does taking up one's cross mean that one accepts suffering when it arrives, then? New circumstances should lead to a reinterpretation of what it means to imitate Christ. Thus, even if it would be clear which aspects of Jesus' life we should imitate, this does not mean that we also know how to imitate these aspects.

Towards a Solution of the Problems 1: Representation between Copying and Performing

There is no easy solution for the problem of criteria for the imitation of Christ. It seems clear to me, that Luther is right that Christians should not try literally to mimic the life of their Saviour: Copying is neither feasible, nor desirable.²⁵ Nevertheless it might in some cases be desirable – contrary to the views of Luther – to imitate aspects of the life of Jesus which he did not command us to imitate. In any case, imitation should not be taken in the sense of mimicry or copying, but in the sense of emulation: The way in which we can imitate Christ depends upon the person we are and the circumstances we live in. In this connection the Dutch Catholic philosopher Ilse Bulhof draws a useful distinction from aesthetical theories.²⁶ She starts from the presupposition that imitation is a form of representation. Whoever imitates Jesus, represents Him, renders Jesus present in our own circumstances. Now there are two ways of representing a work of art. Firstly, in the way one renders a picture present: By copying it. And secondly, in the way one renders a musical composition or a play present: By performing it. Such a performance, however, is not a copy but a creative interpretation. A good performance of a musical composition not only does justice to the intentions of the composer, but also shows something of the personality, the talents, accomplishments and ideas of those performing it. According to Bulhof, the imitation of a person should be like the performance of a play or a musical composition rather than like the copying of a painting. Imitation is a creative process²⁷ with two focuses: the model or person to be imitated, and the imitating person. How to imitate Christ depends both on Who Christ is and on who we are. Different characters and different talents make different forms of imitation possible.

²⁴ According to an alternative interpretation, mortification is 'the activity of dying to one's compulsive pursuit of lesser goods in order to pursue with undiluted energy and affection relationship to God, the ultimate good of the whole human being.' Margaret R. Miles, 'Mortification,' in: Wakefield (ed.), *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 270–271, quot. 270.

²⁵ See Martin Honecker, *Einführung in die theologische Ethik: Grundlagen und Grundbegriffe* (Berlin 1990), 150.

²⁶ Ilse N. Bulhof, 'Levenskunst,' in: Bulhof & Welten (eds.), *Verloren presenties*, 152-174.

²⁷ Cf. also Ernst Wolf, *Peregrinatio II: Studien zur reformatatorischen Theologie, zum Kirchenrecht und zur Sozialethik* (München 1965), 241, who – referring to Roman-Catholic moral theology – speaks of 'schöpferische Nachfolge.'

Part of what I mean here was recognized at Vatican II by the Council Fathers when they distinguished between various *degrees* of imitating Christ. The religious life (that of nuns and monks) is called a 'closer imitation' (LG 44) of Christ.²⁸ But here I would like to say more: Various representations of Christ may differ not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively. There are not only various degrees in the imitation of Christ, but there are also various forms. Implicitly, this has been sanctioned by the Church by the variety of religious orders and congregations that it recognizes; their diversity is not merely a diversity of degree. The same applies to the distinction between the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood; In *Lumen gentium* 10 it is explicitly stated that 'they differ essentially and not only in degree'; nevertheless, they are part of the same body of Christ and therefore 'ordered one to another.'²⁹ The variety of forms of imitating Christ, however, is greater than the distinction between the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood suggests, and even greater than the variety of orders and congregations suggests. There are so many forms of serving Christ outside religious communities! In the end, one might say, there are so many forms of imitating Christ as there are people.

By emphasizing the variety of possible imitations of Christ, however, we run the risk of making the concept of imitation so vague that one cannot possibly say what its borders are. And if that would be the case, the concept would become useless. Here again, Ilse Bulhof's analysis of imitation is helpful. Bulhof claims that the purpose of imitation is representation, and this is obviously correct. Why does one hang a copy of one of Rembrandt's paintings on the wall? Because one wants to look at this painting, and for that it should be in some way present. Why do many people place a photograph of their children on their desks? Here again, the photographs render their children present to them, and then they know whom they are working for. Neither the copy of the painting nor the photograph of the children are ends in themselves; their meaning derives from the original, so to say. This also applies to the imitation of Christ. When we imitate Christ, our imitation – if it succeeds – is no end in itself. Its meaning derives from Christ: He should be made present to the world. That is what imitation is about.

Towards a Solution of the Problems 2: Imitation as Communal Enterprise

Representing Christ to or in the world, however, is not primarily a task for the individual believer. It is a task for the community, for the Church. On making Christ present to the world, a beautiful saying is sometimes attributed to St. Theresa of Avila:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours,
yours are the eyes through which is to look out
Christ's compassion to the world.
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good,
yours are the hands with which he is to bless men now.³⁰

²⁸ This closer imitation conforms to the evangelical counsels and is described in more detail in the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965).

²⁹ A. van de Beek specifies that the distinguishing characteristic of the ministerial priesthood is that it represents *Christ's love for His Church*. See his *Lichaam en Geest van Christus: De theologie van de kerk en de Heilige Geest* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2012), 211–212.

³⁰ See, e.g., <http://thebyzantineanglocatholic.blogspot.com/2008/10/teresa-of-avila.html>; on the ascription to St Theresa, see <http://anunslife.org/2006/09/20/saint-teresa-of-avila-prayer/>.

This saying does not require that each of us becomes a body of Christ, so that Christ would now have ever so many bodies, but that all of us together become the one body of Christ. In this, Theresa – if it is she – merely follows St Paul, who in 1 Corinthians 12 both emphasises that all Christians together are Christ's body, and that individual Christians are parts of that body with distinct functions: The community needs all of its members like a body does so.³¹

The proposal that I present to you here today, then, is that we see the imitation of Christ as a form of representing Christ in the world, and that we acknowledge that the representation of Christ is a task not for the individual Christian, but for the Church as a whole. By imitating Christ we should not each of us become miniature Christs; rather, all of us together should represent the one Christ in the world. This seems to be the position the Council Fathers take in *Lumen gentium* also: 'All the members must be formed in his likeness until Christ be formed in them' (7). The Council Fathers here mix the terminology connected with imitation ('must be formed in his likeness') with that of the Church as the Body of Christ ('members'). Christ must 'be formed in them.' Note, by the way, the passive terminology: The initiative lies with Christ rather than with the humans imitating Him. But what's more important for us here: Christ must not be formed in *each of them*, but in them *as the members of the one Body*.

Once we see the imitation of Christ in this light, we can take real steps toward solving the problems with imitation that we have noted earlier on. On this interpretation, Luther's objection that imitating Christ is a form of trying to achieve salvation of one's own accord no longer holds, since it is obvious that the members cannot exist apart from the Head and are dependent on it for their own functioning.

When we take poverty as an ideal to be pursued by the community rather than by the individual, this helps us to think about this in a balanced way as well. Above I quoted Acts 2:44: 'All who believed ... had all things in common.' Read in its context, it is quite obvious that this text is about imitation. Acts 2:42 reads: 'And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and communion, in the breaking of bread and the prayers.'³² The apostles' teaching at this stage cannot have been some sort of doctrinal system; rather, the teaching will have concerned the most basic convictions concerning Jesus: That He was risen from the dead (Acts 2:31–32) and that He was the Son of God (Acts 8:37). The word translated by 'communion,' *koinoonia*, denotes both the community between the early Christians among themselves (they ... 'had all things in common') and their relation with Christ. This is pregnantly expressed in 1 Corinthians 10:16: 'The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion of the body of Christ?' (ASV). Also in Acts 2:42, the 'Apostles' ... communion' is not just a fellowship among human beings, but a fellowship with Christ. Since St. Paul uses *koinoonia* in a Eucharistic context, it seems natural to interpret 'the breaking of bread' eucharistically, so that this phrase is not about having a meal but about the presence of Christ. But even if we interpret this phrase non-sacramentally, it is still about the presence of Christ: the breaking of bread was quite characteristic for Christ, as becomes clear from the fact that the men of Emmaus recognized Christ while breaking the bread (Lk 24:30). Here also, the Christian community acts in imitation of Christ. This also explains a peculiarity of the text: It does not say that the community continued in prayer (which is how some translations – probably motivated by a dislike of formulaic prayers – interpret this text), but that they continue in 'the prayers.' This phrase suggests that it is not prayer in general that

³¹ More on the Church as the Body of Christ in my 'Trinity and Church: Trinitarian Perspectives on the Identity of the Christian Community,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12/1 (2010), 33–45.

³² ASV. I changed the translation of *koinoonia* by 'fellowship' in 'communion,' to highlight that this is the same word as that used in 1 Cor. 10:16 and translated by 'communion.'

is intended here, but a series of known prayers. What is more natural, in this context, that that the prayers here intended are the prayers for which Jesus was known, the Lord's prayers and the Psalms that Jesus used to pray. These prayers also are part of the imitation of Christ.

In brief, Acts 2:42 is about the imitation of Jesus: about remembering His Resurrection, about living in fellowship with Him and celebrating the Eucharist, about continuing Jesus' prayer on earth – in short, about the early Christian community mediating the presence of Jesus' to the world. In this light, we can now understand Acts 2:44: Also this is about imitating Christ. It is not the individual Christians that sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with the poor; no, the individual Christians sold their possessions and brought the proceeds to the Apostles, and these shared them with the poor. It was the community as a whole that helped the poor; the wealthy took part in the communal imitation of Christ. This does still not specify precisely how we should imitate the poverty of Christ, but it does make clear at what level we should try to decide this in the first place: at the level of the community as a whole.

If we interpret imitation as a communal enterprise, moreover, we can better understand what is meant by taking up one's cross in imitation of Jesus. If we apply this order to the community, it can be seen to mean that whenever one member of the community must bear a cross, the community as a whole should help in bearing it: 'If one member suffers, all suffer together with it' (1 Cor. 12:26).

Conclusions

I have analyzed the inner logic of the ideal of the imitation of Christ and argued that it is not without problems. The main problem is that it is difficult to know both what in the life of Christ one should imitate, and how one should imitate it. I have argued that imitation should here be taken in the sense of performing rather than in that of copying. Moreover, I have argued that one can solve these problems at least in part if one takes a communal view of imitation: It is the community rather than the individual Christian that should imitate Christ. And I have tried to show in what ways this communal approach to imitation helps to solve the problems that I had raised earlier on.

Abbreviations

ASV – American Standard Version (1901)

CEV – Contemporary English version (1996)

GS – Gaudium et Spes

LG – Lumen Gentium

LThK – Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche

OUP – Oxford University Press

STh – *Summa Theologiae*