

Luther's Debt to the *Imitatio Christi*

The *Imitatio Christi*, first printed c. 1472, had enjoyed wide circulation in Ms. since the 1420s and appeared in something like 80 printed editions by the start of the 16th century ¹). It is a matter of conjecture whether Martin Luther made his acquaintance with it prior to entering an Erfurt monastery in 1505 at the age of 21 and, if so, whether this experience helped inspire him to make that move. At any rate the familiarity with its pages manifest in his academic lectures and sermons during the years before he became famous suggests an early date for his first encounter. Luther scholars have asserted — without offering proof — that Luther did not know the *Imitatio* ²). It is true there is a dearth of explicit reference to it in the Luther record. But the record is extremely scanty for the early years; for example, only about 8 of Luther's letters are extant for all the years prior to 1516, and Luther's reminiscences in later life reveal little about his youth. Other reasons for Luther's silence about the *Imitatio* will be provided elsewhere in this paper. The *Imitatio* is not a theological treatise and the theological specialists who deal with Luther appear to have only a cursory knowledge of it ³). Something like this must be posited to explain how they have overlooked the literary source from which Luther took probably more than from any other work of comparable length he ever read.

¹) E. DELARUELLE et al., *L'église au temps du grand schisme et de la crise conciliaire* (Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1964), pp. 937-938; J. E. DE MONTMORENCY, *Thomas a Kempis: His Age and Book* (London: Putnam, 1906), p. 134.

²) J. PAQUIER in *Dict. Théol. Cath.*, vol. IX, col. 1257; K. A. MEISSINGER, *Der katholische Luther* (Munich: Lehnen, 1952), p. 24.

³) For example, W. VON LOEWENICH in his *Luthers Theologia Crucis* (Munich: Kaiser, 1929; 4th ed. 1954), pp. 164-166, explains that Luther borrowed nothing from such writers as a Kempis because they recommend only an *imitatio* of Christ while Luther demands a 'conforming' [*conformare*]. On the first page of the *Imitatio* Thomas wrote: « One should strive to conform his entire life to the teachings of Christ [*totam vitam suam illi studeat conformare*]. »

It should be emphasized that Luther's borrowings typically involve fragments; he did not commit himself to a great extent to the program of any other writer. As Lucien Febvre remarked, with some exaggeration, when Luther opened a book he saw in it only one idea — his own. «Un mot, une phrase, un raisonnement le frappent. Il s'en empare»⁴). What he thus took possession of he transmuted into his own personal expression. In 1513 at the beginning of the period when Luther's debt to the *Imitatio* can be studied directly in his lecture notes, this trait is perhaps less pronounced than in 1520, the interval between these dates being the time of Luther's major development. The famous author of 1520 was quite a different person from the recently promoted Doctor of Theology starting to lecture on the Psalms in 1513.

Consider, for example, this early borrowing. Thomas had written (III:2): *Non loquatur mihi Moyses ... sed tu potius loquere, Domine Deus* [Let not Moses speak to me but rather do you speak, Lord God]⁵). In commenting on a verse of Ps. 59 (60), Luther made use of this with no significant change: *Audiam quid loquatur in me non Moses sed dominus* [I will hear not what Moses speaks to me but the Lord]⁶). In the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* of 1520 he recasts this sentence of the *Imitatio* (IV:10): the devout soul *potest ... omni die et omni hora ad spiritualem Christi communionem ... accedere* [can approach Christ in spiritual communion every day and every hour] into *Possum quotidie, immo omni hora ... spiritualiter manducare et bibere* [I can eat and drink spiritually every day, nay every hour] in furtherance of a polemical aim⁷). Our inquiry is limited to Luther's Latin writings since his borrowings can be demonstrated more directly in them, but he can handily turn the language of the *Imitatio* into German, as witness: *Mala conscientia semper timida est et inquieta* (II:6) [A bad conscience is always fearful and without rest] becomes

⁴) LUCIEN FEBVRE, *Un destin: Martin Luther* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1928; 4th ed. 1968), p. 25.

⁵) For a working text of the *Imitatio* I used the edition by F. BREHM (Regensburg: Pustet, 7th ed. 1937) based on the critical edition of M. J. POHL in vol. 2 of the *Opera Omnia* of Thomas a Kempis (Freiburg, 1904-22). Brehm arranges the four opuscula of the *Imitatio* in the conventional order, Bk. IV being the book on the Eucharist.

⁶) *WA* 3, p. 347. Citations from Luther's works are from the Weimar edition (*WA*); correspondence (*WBr*); Table Talk (*WTR*).

⁷) *WA* 6, p. 518.

Boss gewissen das gottis zorn alzeyt furcht und nymmer ruge hatt ⁸⁾ — a literal translation except for the substitution of a favorite phrase «fears God's wrath» for «fearful».

Luther's career of writing for the public was not really launched until 1518, though the extant drafts of his lectures and sermons prior to that date are enough to fill a number of volumes ⁹⁾. One of his first publications, dating from the spring of 1518, shows him trying to write in the manner of the *Imitatio*. This is a brief tract of 8 loosely connected sections which offers advice to one beset with anxiety over his unworthiness to approach the Eucharist. Its title *Sermo de digna praeparatione cordis pro suscipiendo Sacramento Eucharistie* echoes two sentences in Bk. IV of the *Imitatio*. In Ch. 6 Thomas has *Utile est praeparare cor meum ad recipiendum ... tuum sacramentum* [It is profitable to prepare my heart for receiving thy sacrament] and in Ch. 12 *Praepara cum omni diligentia cor tuum* [Prepare thy heart with all diligence].

These sentences reflect the fact that all of Bk. IV (like Bk. III) is written in the form of a dialogue between the soul and the Lord. In his tract Luther twice essays this literary form, presumably inspired by his model. Being at this stage of his career little more than a tyro in the art of writing, he makes an error in naming the person addressed: «Say to thy Father [*patre tuo*] in heaven: 'Behold me, Lord Jesus Christ; look upon my miserable state ...'». In the same section occurs what seems to be Luther's most explicit reference to the author of the *Imitatio*. In developing the theme that scrupulous communicants should approach the sacrament even though feeling themselves unworthy on account of their sins, Luther cites two famous authorities, St. Ambrose and St. Gregory ¹⁰⁾. He then remarks: *Et quidam patrum consulit, ne facile quis se abstinere a communione* [And a certain father advises that one should not lightly remain away from communion]. This is an allusion to Ch. 10 entitled *Quod*

⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 376-77.

⁹⁾ Luther's principal productions before 1518 include sets of lecture notes on the Psalms (1513-15), Romans (1515-16), Galatians (1516-17) and Hebrews (1517-18). Extensive drafts in Luther's hand are extant for the first two courses, briefer notes by students for the others, none of them being published until modern times. Also extant are a few dozen sermons mainly for the years 1514-17 and marginal notes in works by Augustine and Peter Lombard dating from 1509-10.

¹⁰⁾ *WA* 1, p. 333.

sacra communio de facili non est reliquenda [That one should not lightly remain away from Holy Communion]; the word *faciliter* [lightly] also recurs in the middle of this chapter along with the verb *abstinere*. Luther's failure to identify the 'certain father' just after naming Ambrose and Gregory is in accord with the standard medieval practice of citing by name only the more ancient and illustrious authorities. In view of this medieval convention we can see why Luther in his writings and academic lectures does not cite by name so completely undistinguished a writer as Thomas a Kempis, whose motto was *ama nesciri* [love to be unknown].

This passage is indicative of Luther's attitude on the question of authorship of the *Imitatio*¹¹). In his day many of the editions of this work, especially those from presses in Italy and France, were ascribed to John Gerson (d. 1429), Chancellor of the University of Paris and the most famous French theologian and spiritual writer of the 15th century. This practice appears to have originated from the circulation of MSS. during the 15th century containing one or more of the *opuscula* forming the *Imitatio* and authentic writings of Gerson, and was doubtless continued by printers hoping to boost sales with the attraction of a famous author's name. Luther was more than a little partial to John Gerson and cited him by name a number of times. But he was too perceptive a reader to be unaware of the difference between the academic tone of Gerson's writings and the unacademic flavor of the *Imitatio*. Likewise he would recognize the monastic background of the *Imitatio* as incompatible with authorship by Gerson, who as Luther once remarked « was not a monk ».

As for other borrowings from Bk. IV there is the text from Matthew (11, 28): « Come to me all you who labor and are burdened and I will refresh you ». Thomas liked the eucharistic application of this verse so much he quoted it in his introduction to Bk. IV, returned to it three times in the middle of Ch. 1 and still once more to end the chapter (as well as using it later in the book). The evangelist does not, of course, place this verse in a eucharistic context. Whether or not Thomas himself conceived the idea of giving it a eucharistic application or is following a medieval devotional tradition, his treat-

¹¹) J. HUIJBEN and P. DEBONGNIE, *L'auteur ou les auteurs de l'«Imitatio»* Louvain: Editions Erasme, 1957) present an exhaustive study of the authorship controversy, still active. There is considerable contemporary witness for Thomas' authorship, none for any other.

ment of it is so striking that it may be assumed Luther was impelled to quote the verse — twice — in his own tract from seeing it so applied in the *Imitatio*. Ch. 12, which treats a theme similar to Luther's, is echoed a number of times. For example, Thomas represents Jesus as saying: *Tu mei indiges: non ego tui indigeo* [You have need of me; I have no need of you]. Luther transposes this in his own way: *Deus tuus est bonorum tuorum non indigus, sed bonorum suorum largus in te venit ad te*¹²) [Your God has no need of your good works, but with the abundance of his good works in you he comes to you]. In this same chapter Thomas counsels his reader not only to excite devotion before [*ante*] communion but also to strive to preserve it afterward [*post sacramentum*]. Luther in his Sec. 4 echoes a Kempis with a typical Lutheran sentiment: *Penitentia post quam ante sacramentum digne peragitur* [Penitence is completed worthily after the sacrament rather than before].

II

The program of resignation to the Divine Will which Luther appears to have followed during much of his monastic career¹³) represents one of his more substantial borrowings from Thomas a Kempis. Like Thomas he referred to it as *via crucis*, 'the road of the cross', until 1518 when he introduced his own name *theologia crucis*, 'theology of the cross'. A pervasive theme of the *Imitatio*, the program is given major attention in the closing pages of Bk. II. The final chapter of this book (Ch. 12) and the longest of all the chapters of the *Imitatio* is devoted entirely to the subject of the tribulations of earthly life and how the Christian demonstrates his commitment to the Lord by patient endurance of them. The young Luther would have been deeply moved by this chapter, which opens with a scriptural verse intimately bound up with his anxiety about his salvation: the sentence of damnation in the parable of the Last Judgment (Mt. 25, 41). This is followed by words of consolation such as he was always looking for: that whoever has conformed his life to the Crucified can appear with confidence before the Judge. The tribulations are visited upon all men; no one can escape them

¹²) *WA* I, p. 330.

¹³) In a study of the development of Luther's ideas, PAUL HACKER, *The Ego in Faith* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970) finds this theme dominant in his outlook during the years 1509-18.

though many try to do so. The one who accepts them in a spirit of resignation is following Christ on the true road to salvation. Thomas ends the chapter with a quotation from Acts (14, 22): « We must experience many tribulations to enter the kingdom of God ».

Luther never produced a tract on this subject; his discussions of it are *obiter dicta* to be found mainly in his academic lectures and sermons during the years 1513-19. The spirit of the 'road of the cross' is perhaps more prominent in the lectures on Romans (1515-16) than elsewhere. A notable instance is his account of his acceptance of the experience of involuntary blasphemy of his Creator as a trial best interpreted as a sign of God's favor ¹⁴). As usual in his borrowing ideas and phrases from the *Imitatio* he reproduces them with his own individual stamp. He likes to represent the way of the cross as a quick and direct road to heaven. For, example, in his 1517 sermon for the feast of Epiphany he says « This is a short road, the road of the cross [*via compendii, via crucis*] which leads one most expeditiously to life [*brevissime ad vitam*] » ¹⁵). Here he echoes II:12 of the *Imitatio*: *Non est alia via ad vitam nisi via sanctae crucis* [There is no other road to life than the road of the holy cross]. Two years later in a commentary on Ps. 3 he writes: *Neque ad coelum alia via est quam ista crux Christi* [There is no other road to heaven than that of the cross of Christ] ¹⁶). Were these sentences to be isolated from their sources even an expert would be hard put to say which came from Martin and which from Thomas.

Ch. 12 of Bk. II is entitled *De regia via sanctae crucis* [of the royal road of the holy cross], a phrase repeated in the middle of the chapter. « Royal road » is a metaphor drawn from the O.T. (Num. 21, 22) where it signifies a direct route that proceeds on its course without deviating into byways. It is of interest here inasmuch as Luther in early 1518 introduced it into his lecture course on Hebrews in a passage contrasting the 'passive life' with the 'active life' or 'way of works'. Previously in the lectures on Romans he had employed the metaphor in a discussion of two kinds of sinners which featured the theme of presumptuous security (see below) and made detailed reference to deviations to the right and left ¹⁷).

¹⁴) WA 56, p. 401.

¹⁵) WA 1, p. 124.

¹⁶) WA 5, p. 85.

¹⁷) WA 56, pp. 281-282.

In the lectures on Hebrews the phrase 'royal road' is employed without elaboration and simply as a term of praise in the same fashion as in II:12. In the only extant text of these lectures, a student's notes containing numerous errors of transcription, the metaphor is through some mischance applied to the way of works, giving the impossible reading that the way of works constitutes a 'direct but labyrinthine road' ¹⁸). By this date it was quite out of character for Luther to commend the way of works; he was now calling works bad.

Luther concluded his most famous composition of 1517, the «Disputation for discovering the worth of indulgences», with the verse from Acts about enduring tribulations noted above as the conclusion of II:12 of the *Imitatio*. Theses 93-95 recall briefly the theme of Ch. 12 and the *Christum sequi* of Thesis 94 suggests the opening sentence of the *Imitatio*. In the long treatise Luther prepared in 1518 as a commentary on the 95 Theses, the *Resolutiones*, he presents the road-of-the-cross theme from a new angle. One of his complaints about the seeking of indulgences had been its motivation of trying to escape the tribulations recommended in Acts and the *Imitatio*. In his discussion of Thesis 58 Luther had frequent occasion to attack certain views of scholastic theologians relating to indulgences. (During the previous summer he had mounted a full dress attack on these adversaries in an academic disputation). Toward the end of this discussion he set up an antithesis between *theologia scholastica* and *theologia crucis* to further his argument and also introduced the term 'theologian of the cross' ¹⁹). During the last week of April 1518 Luther led a disputation at a chapter meeting of his order in Heidelberg in which he gave more extended treatment of these new terms, involving them with both his general polemic against 'works' and his opposition to theologizing on the divine attributes. God is to be discovered only in suffering and the cross. Here also he was recalling a theme of the *Imitatio*: «If Jesus crucified would come into our heart, how quickly and completely we would be taught» (I:25) ²⁰).

¹⁸) WA 57, p. 80. The received text is *Vita passiva est via et semita compendii ad salutem; vita activa est regia, imo ambages viae* [The passive life is a short way and path to salvation; the active way is a royal (direct), nay labyrinthine way]. I suggest transposing *regia* and substituting *circuita* (roundabout), giving *via regia et semita compendii* and *via circuita imo ambages viae*.

¹⁹) WA 1, p. 613.

²⁰) *Ibid.* p. 362. W. von LOEWENICH, *op. cit.*, takes quite a different view from

One of the subsidiary themes of the road of the cross, the willing acceptance of a state of uncertainty about one's prospects of salvation, is discussed by a Kempis and Luther in terms of a presumptuous *securitas* [security]. It has a scriptural basis in the phrase *pax et securitas* in the last chapter of 1 Thess., where it stands as a warning to Christians to remain vigilant for the coming of the Lord. There is a certain ambiguity about the use of the word 'peace' in an admonitory context since peace is a gift promised by Jesus to his followers. Thomas repeats the expression in I:22 as a warning to those who would relax into peace and security even though there is no trace of true holiness in their behavior. But in general he separates *securitas* as an admonitory term from *pax* as a desirable goal.

In his most extended treatment of *securitas* in «On the love of solitude and silence» (I:20) the admonitions are woven into a discourse recommending a life spent so far as possible in the company of Jesus. The concept of security is related to three different human types in a way Luther often employed in his own writings. For the saints *securitas* signifies a reward, not a feeling, and the reward is consequent upon their salutary fear of God. For the wicked, it is a feeling representing their pride and presumption. For the religious, security in this life is not a desirable goal. This discussion concludes with a statement that temptations are profitable to the aspiring soul because they preserve one from relaxing into a state of security and from seeking worldly consolations. The profitability of temptations is of course a well known Lutheran theme.

Warnings about *securitas* appear in Luther's early lectures on the Psalms. For example, in the commentary on Ps. 68 (69) a major theme derives from a sermon of St. Bernard²¹) which deals with laxity in the Church during a time of 'peace' — in contrast to the persecutions and heresies that characterized the early centuries. The appearance of the word 'peace' in the sermon apparently reminded Luther of the phrase 'peace and security' and prompted him to deliver an attack on false security, a topic referred to neither in Bernard's sermon nor the psalm. Here he describes security as the

mine, holding the *theologia crucis* was a theology conceived by Luther without reference to the *Imitatio*.

²¹) «Sermones in Cant.» 33:16 in *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. CHARPENTIER (Paris: Vives, 1867) vol. IV, p. 321.

'worst and most terrible of all perils' and warns that the devil is now attacking the Church by encouraging its members to lapse into a state of security ²²).

Another such discussion is found in the 1515 lectures on Romans — on 4, 4-7 — where Luther's repeated attacks on security, a concept not present in the epistle, have an obvious link to I:20 of the *Imitatio* in that he ascribes *securitas* to those who do not fear God ²³). He describes first a class of people who fail to experience the fear of God because they so readily obtain forgiveness of actual sin in the confessional and thereby fall into *securitas*. A second type includes those who despair at being unable to rid themselves of the effects of original sin. Luther asserts that while these people lack a sense of security they nevertheless are seeking it and do not fear God any more than the other class — even though they are fearful. Again, in a sermon of early 1517 Luther berates those who refuse to take up the cross but seek *securitas* instead in the unworthy pursuit of indulgences ²⁴).

The theme of *securitas* is of particular interest in that by 1519 Luther had reversed himself on it. The new attitude is disclosed in the 1519 commentary on the final verse of Ps. 4 — « You, O lord, have wonderfully established me in hope ». In his exegesis of this verse Luther first points out that unless the monks, who seek an outer security by leading a solitary life, also establish for themselves an inner security, they are hypocrites. He then declares the meaning of the verse to be that one must feel secure and confident about his salvation. Those pestilent theologians who teach us to be doubtful and uncertain about whether we are in possession of divine grace must be mightily detested and condemned ²⁵). From this time on we hear repeated insistence on the right to feel 'a comfortable certainty of my salvation'. Luther's divergence from a Kempis in 1519 on the theme of *securitas* heralds his future estrangement from the *Imitatio* described at the end of this paper.

III

All four books of the *Imitatio* have impressive openings and all of them left a mark on Luther's memory. The first chapter of

²²) WA 3, pp. 424-425.

²³) WA 56, p. 280 f.

²⁴) WA 1, p. 141.

²⁵) WA 5, p. 124.

Bk. III, which represents Christ speaking to the soul, begins with a series of sentences patterned after the beatitudes (Mt. 5, 3-11): «Blessed are ...» Luther appears to recall one of these in his sermon for Epiphany of 1517 (cited above) when contrasting a human preacher with God, who teaches the soul inwardly. The sentence of Thomas reads: *Beatae plane aures, quae non vocem foris sonantem, sed intus auscultant veritatem docentem!* [Blessed are the ears that listen not to the voice sounding without but to the truth teaching within]. Luther makes a similar point: *Praedicator potest dicere ad aures ... Deus autem intus ad cor sonat et docet* [A preacher can speak to the ears, but God addresses and teaches the heart within²⁶]. He then repeats the expression *intus et foris* [within and without], a favorite Kempian antithesis. Echoing a phrase of III:43 where Christ is speaking: *intus sum doctor veritatis* [I am the inward teacher of truth], Luther continues to display his remarkable verbal memory in using the words *Deum, Doctorem intus* [God, the inward teacher] and twice repeats the word *veritas*.

Book I begins with a topic on which Thomas and Martin are most thoroughly in accord: that learning is not merely an intellectual process but must transform the learner's emotional life as well. In his opening chapter Thomas shows how one who would become truly illuminated and set free from blindness of heart must imitate the life pattern of Jesus and in particular must meditate [*meditari*] on the life of Jesus. Many hear the gospel, he says, but do not really feel it. In deprecation of the arid theologizing of the schools, an attitude emphatically shared by Luther, he composed one of his more memorable sayings: «I would much rather feel compunction [*sentire compunctionem*] than know how to define it»²⁷). It is not difficult to imagine the impact of these opening lines of the *Imitatio* on a reader fully as insistent as their author on the indispensable role of emotion in matters of religion, a reader, moreover, plagued with his own inability to feel compunction for his sins.

One of Luther's earliest recorded responses to the theme of compunction (and self-revelation of his personal handicap) is his commentary on Ps. 76 (77) in 1514. (Earlier in a marginal gloss on

²⁶) *WA* 1, p. 124.

²⁷) The word *compunctio* is one of the quasi-theological terms of the *Imitatio* that appears in all four books.

Ps. 38 (39) he had written: «This psalm is more readily explained for those who are in a state of compunction, as in Ps. 76 *infra*») ²⁸). This psalm opens with a highly emotional lament by the psalmist over the unhappy situation of his people, seemingly abandoned by God; as pointed out by modern exegetes this is an unusual subject for an individual lament and may have puzzled Luther. Then follows a shorter section in praise of God and his works which exhibits quite a different emotional tone from the first section. In his commentary, after several pages of routine discussion, Martin abruptly remarks that «this psalm is obscure ... I think it describes a man meditating while in a state of compunction» ²⁹). He then proceeds with a verse-by-verse exegesis of the psalm from this point of view in which he repeatedly refers to Augustine's account (*Confessions*, VIII) of the emotional cataclysm he experienced at the time of his conversion as an illustration of a man experiencing compunction ³⁰).

Inasmuch as the psalmist uses here no word with the sense of 'compunction' and makes no mention of any personal transgression as the source of his intense grief, Luther's interpretation must be described as more than a little arbitrary. After completing his exegesis of the verses of the second section of the psalm — the hymn of praise — to which the theme of compunction is totally irrelevant, he nevertheless begins his conclusion with the statement that the purpose of the entire psalm is to show a man in a state of compunction who is calling upon the Lord for salvation. From various indications in the commentary it would appear that the emotional outpouring in the first section of the psalm reminded Luther of the treatment of compunction in the *Imitatio* as well as of the passage in the *Confessions*, and inspired this highly personal exegesis ³¹). The final paragraph of the commentary strongly supports this view:

Whoever has not experienced this compunction and meditation is quite incapable of explaining this psalm. Consequently it is also difficult for me because I am without compunction and yet I speak about compunction. For no one speaks of or

²⁸) *WA* 3, p. 221.

²⁹) *Ibid.*, p. 537.

³⁰) It is significant that Luther employs here the *Imitatio* term *compunctio* rather than Augustine's *contritio*.

³¹) The verb *meditari*, appearing in I:1 of the *Imitatio* and twice in the psalm (Vulgate) may have helped link them in Luther's memory.

listens to any scripture worthily unless his feelings are in harmony with it so that he experiences within himself [*intus sentiat*] what he hears and speaks outwardly, and exclaims: 'Oh, how true that is'! Therefore because I cannot experience compunction, I refer you to the example and experience of St. Augustine ³²).

The point of this conclusion, that one must *feel* the message of Scripture in order to understand it, is simply a Lutheran version of the theme of a Kempis in his opening chapter.

Another aspect of Luther's approach to Scripture which reflects a theme of the *Imitatio* appears in a letter to his friend Spalatin of January 18, 1518. Thomas had written (III:31): « That learning which comes to us from above by divine infusion [*influentia*] is far nobler than what can be laboriously acquired by human talent [*ingenio*] ». In describing to Spalatin his own way of reading Scripture Luther says: « Scripture cannot be understood by study or talent [*ingenio*] ... No one is a teacher of the divine word except the Author himself ... You must altogether despair of both your own efforts and talent [*ingenio*], trusting solely in the infusion [*influxu*] of the Spirit » ³³).

At the beginning of Bk. II of the *Imitatio* there is a passage that seems to have touched a sensitive spot in Luther. In his discourse on the inner life with God Thomas suggests that those who find themselves unable to engage in contemplation [*speculari*] of high and heavenly matters should instead take refuge in the passion of Christ and dwell in his sacred wounds. For in the wounds of Jesus they will find help in their tribulations ³⁴). For Luther the chief of all high and heavenly matters was predestination, the consideration of which was so likely to arouse his anxiety he attempted to avoid it so far as possible. The occasion of his dealing with predestination in the commentary on Rom. 9, 15-16 in the spring of 1516 seems to have recalled to memory the passage from the *Imitatio* and he repeats the suggestion of Thomas, adapting it to his own situation. « Let no one

³²) WA 3, p. 549.

³³) WBr 1, pp. 133-134.

³⁴) *Si nescis alta speculari et coelestia, requiesce in passione Christi: et in sacris vulneribus ejus libenter habita... Si... bene purgatus esses, omnia tibi in bonum cederent.* (II:1). [If you can not contemplate high and heavenly matters, take refuge in the passion of Christ and gladly dwell in his sacred wounds. If you were thoroughly cleansed (*purgatus*) all things would tend toward your well being].

rush into this contemplation [*speculandis*] who has not yet purged his mind lest he fall into an abyss of terror and despair but first purge the eye of his heart by meditating on the wounds of Jesus Christ. I myself would not speak of this [predestination] if not forced to do so by the requirements of my office ... The wounds of Jesus Christ are a safe enough place for me » ³⁵).

IV

Other ways of trying to cope with his anxiety problem that Luther adopted from suggestions in the *Imitatio* can be found in his utterances on into the 1530s. The famous Table Talk accounts of his disputes with Satan tend to obscure the fact that like the author of the *Imitatio* he advocates avoidance of such debates. Do not dispute [*noli disputare*] with evil thoughts that come from the devil [*cogitationes immissas a diabolo*] writes Thomas (IV:18) and Martin strongly seconds this recommendation. *Cum diabolo et suggestionibus ... nihil disputas* he writes in his 1514 commentary on the third penitential psalm ³⁶), echoing another phrase of Thomas, *suggestionem spernere diaboli* [spurn suggestions of the devil]. Luther's reason for this policy is that the devil can't be bested in an argument, being incomparably more clever [*astutio*] than all of us, a capability Thomas denoted by the same term [*diabolus et astutia illis*]. Instead of disputing with the devil one must treat him with contempt and mockery [*contemnendus est miser et deridendus*]. This passage is from IV:10 entitled « That one should not lightly remain away from Holy Communion » (cited above). In his psalm commentary Luther also recommends treating the devil with contempt. The principal discussion

³⁵) Like Thomas, Luther here uses the word *speculandis* in the sense of 'looking at' or 'contemplating', with no suggestion of the pejorative sense often found in his works. Typically he combines ideas from the *Imitatio* in his own way; it is by meditating on the 'wounds of Christ' that a man becomes cleansed (*purgate*) and fit for contemplating the mystery of predestination. Luther's repeated reference to the need *(WA 56, p. 400) of 'purging' as preparation for the *speculandis* strongly suggests he here had in mind this chapter of the *Imitatio*. H. A. OBERMAN in *Forerunners of the Reformation* (New York: Holt, 1966), pp. 200-201, would associate this passage in the Romans lectures with a Table Talk item (Nr. 1490) in which Luther recalls Staupitz' advice about taking refuge in the 'wounds of Christ' to avoid anxiety about predestination. It is not unlikely that Staupitz himself is here indebted to the *Imitatio*.

³⁶) WA 3, p. 218.

of this topic in the *Imitatio* is found in III:6, where Thomas provides a model address to Satan :

« Depart, unclean spirit, blush for shame, you wretch ! You are indeed unclean to say such things to me. Begone, you most wicked liar, you have no part in me. But Jesus will be with me like a mighty champion and you will stand confounded ».

The *locus classicus* for Luther's account of his own methods is the letter of July 1530 from the Coburg fortress to Jerome Weller, a fellow sufferer from anxiety over his salvation³⁷). While this letter includes a number of recommendations Luther did not find in the *Imitatio*, e.g., his wish that he could think up some spectacular sin to commit that would outmaneuver Satan, there can be found in the letter numerous phrases Luther recalled from his past when he was an ardent reader of Thomas. Besides repeating much of the language just cited, Luther speaks in three places of the devil vexing [*vexare*] his victims, as had Thomas in both the first and last books of the *Imitatio*. At one point Luther provides a little set speech for Jerome to direct against Satan (though distinctly un-Kempian in tone) and ends his letter with some direct discourse in which, taking his cue from the address quoted above from the *Imitatio*, he reminds Satan that Jesus Christ is his protector.

In a condensed account of a recent anxiety attack in a letter to Melanchthon in the summer of 1527 he says : « I almost lost Christ in storms of despair and blasphemy against God »³⁸). The expression 'lose Christ' comes from Bk. II, Ch. 8, « On familiar friendship with Jesus », in which Thomas remarks that whoever loses Jesus [*perdit Jesum*] loses more than the whole world. Contrariwise, to know how to hold on to Jesus [*Jesum tenere*] is great wisdom. The phrase 'to take hold of Christ' is one of Luther's favorites for denoting a technique by which he tries to ward off an anxiety attack. 'To lose Christ', on the other hand, is his way of saying he has succumbed to one. This language is found repeatedly in the text of the 1531 lectures on Galatians, a principal source of information on Luther's devices for dealing with the anxiety states.

³⁷) WBr 5, pp. 518-519.

³⁸) WBr 4, p. 226.

By this time he had reduced to a stereotype the way of describing the alternation of moods he experienced. Likewise he had perfected the technique of defending against anxiety by reading the experience into Scripture. For both of these procedures he had earlier found helpful instruction in the pages of the *Imitatio*. An admirable model was provided by Thomas in «On the lack of all consolation» (II:9). Here he interprets a series of verses in Ps. 29 (30) to illustrate the experience of the infusion of grace into the soul and its subsequent withdrawal:

« This alternation of mood [*alternationis modus*] is often experienced by great saints and ancient prophets. A certain one said when grace was present: 'I declared in my prosperity: I will never be removed'. But when grace was withdrawn, he reveals his experience, adding: 'You turned your face away from me and I was troubled'. But he does not despair over this; instead he calls more earnestly on God and says: 'To you, O Lord, I will cry, and I will make supplication to my God' ».

Thomas continues through two more verses of the psalm in this vein, providing Martin with an unforgettable example of what was to become one of his favorite approaches to Scripture³⁹).

Another way of describing this alternation is in terms of 'two times'. The scriptural source of this theme is found in the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, which begins with a series of 14 antithetical pairings to illustrate the proposition that everything has an appointed time. From this list Thomas selects the last member, a 'time for war' and a 'time for peace' [*tempus belli et tempus pacis*] to provide a framework for a warning against the danger of security (in time of peace) and of discouragement (in time of war) (III:7). He displays no interest in the other 13 pairs, which include times for love and hate, acquiring and losing, speaking and being silent, etc. But elsewhere he substitutes other names for the time of war, e.g., time of 'adversity' (III:7), time of 'labor' (III:49) and time of 'temptation' (I:19; III:3). In his earlier works Luther occasionally alludes to the theme of the 'two times'. In the first lectures on Galatians (1516-17) he remarks that all sin reduces to a lack of faith: an evil love in 'time

³⁹) Cf. the comment of 1519: « The Psalms were composed by the Holy Spirit to console those who suffer tribulation ». (WA 5, p. 102).

of prosperity' and an evil fear in 'time of adversity', using language employed by Thomas ⁴⁰).

In his brief lecture course on 1 John in the autumn of 1527 he introduces the theme in his remarks on the verse: « There is no fear with love, for perfect love casts out fear » (4:18) ⁴¹). Since Luther was often in a state of anxiety he interpreted as fear, this verse was rather a problem for him. He mentions instances in the N.T. where the apostles were said to be afraid, and asserts that all saints fear death. On the other hand, Paul and the other apostles rejoiced in tribulation. This development prepares the way for the statement that Christians have two times. Not surprisingly these are the same pair Thomas had extracted from the long list in Eccles. 3. In time of peace we are free of the temptation to doubt our faith and our conscience is at peace with God. The time of war is a time of temptation, when we are assailed by the devil, who destroys our peace. Luther then proceeds to relate the time of war to 4:18 of the epistle by reading into it his experience during an anxiety attack: « In time of war ... whatever is feared is hated. Who fears God fears him as a judge; indeed, he even hates God » ⁴²).

To help account for the absence of explicit reference to the *Imitatio* in Luther's utterances of his later years it may be noted that the development of his basic theological outlook, the *sola fide*, which was substantially complete by 1519, owes little if anything to the teachings of the *Imitatio* and that during the 1520s he became progressively alienated from those teachings ⁴³). A parallel situation is observable in his relation to Augustine. As Luther revealed in the Table Talk of 1532: « At first I devoured rather than read Augustine. But when the door to Paul was opened to me so that I understood justification by faith, it was *aus mit ihm* ⁴⁴). In the same Table Talk entry he disparages the *Confessions* as a work which « teaches nothing ».

⁴⁰) WA 57, p. 70.

⁴¹) WA 20, pp. 760-762.

⁴²) *Ibid.*, p. 761.

⁴³) This remark applies likewise to the anonymous 14th century mystical tractate which Luther published from MS. (for the second time) in 1518, giving it the title *Theologia Deutsch*. He speaks of his great indebtedness to this work in his preface, but there seems to be no subsequent reference to it in the Luther record, and in a lecture of the 1530s (WA 40-III, p. 199) he denounced mystical writers as hypocrites.

⁴⁴) WTR 1, Nr. 347.

One of the earlier indications of Luther's estrangement from the *Imitatio* can be seen in the 1520 essay *De Libertate Christiana* ⁴⁵). While this work exudes a spirit of piety somewhat reminiscent of the *Imitatio* and echoes it verbally here and there, it also contains a sharp rejection of a major theme of a Kempis. Ch. 11 of Bk. IV is entitled «That the Body of Christ and Sacred Scripture are most necessary for the faithful soul». In developing this theme Thomas declares that without these two a good life is impossible. Luther repudiates this position, asserting that only one thing is necessary for a Christian, the word of God. Besides pointedly opposing his *unum* to the *duo* of Thomas, he avoids any reference to the Eucharist in this exposition of what he holds to be essential for the Christian way of life.

The following spring Luther published a brief German tract on the «worthy reception» of the Eucharist that stands in interesting contrast to his 1518 Latin tract discussed above ⁴⁶). Much of the 1521 tract is polemical; Luther repeatedly admonishes his audience not to receive the sacrament as an act of obedience to the ecclesiastical law requiring reception during the Easter season. In Sec. 11, in veiled but unmistakable reference to the *Imitatio*, especially to IV:12, he develops the charge that an unspecified 'they' have frightened 'us' away from the sacrament even though 'they' wanted to help us by teaching us we must be 'perfectly pure' to receive it. Repeating this complaint in Sec. 13, Luther clearly indicates his growing disaffection for an author he had once greatly admired. To mark the completion of this process, there is recorded in the 1532 Table Talk his attack on a way of life withdrawn from the world as a means of fostering devotion to Christ. Luther exclaims: «Down with those who say: 'Desire to be alone and you will have a pure heart' » ⁴⁷). The phrase 'pure heart' definitely points to the *Imitatio* and the impulse to caricature its teaching demonstrates a distaste for it probably more pronounced than he now felt for the *Confessions* of Augustine.

H. Rix

⁴⁵) WA 7, p. 50 f.

⁴⁶) WA 7, pp. 692-97.

⁴⁷) WTR 2, Nr. 1329.