CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“PERSEVERE!...GOD WILL HELP YOU!”¹
THOMAS À KEMPIS’S SERMONS FOR THE NOVICES
AND HIS PERSPECTIVE ON PASTORAL CARE

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Up until the Second World War, Thomas à Kempis (1379/1380–1471) was the only author from the Netherlands to literally attain world fame.² He owes this position to just one of his many works: The Imitation of Christ.³ Since its composition in the fifteenth century, The Imitation has made its way from medieval priests’ studies to the bedside tables of pious Christians throughout the world, including fictional ones, such as those of British novelist Barbara Pym’s spinsters. The work’s enduring popularity is clear from the continuing stream of new editions, reprints and translations in virtually every language.

The present article, however, will concern itself with a different text, the Sermones ad novicios regulares, which Thomas à Kempis wrote in his capacity as master of the novices at Mount Saint Agnes (Agnietenberg) near Zwolle, a community of regular canons of Windesheim. It is one of several works that he wrote for their education, and provides insight into his views on pastoral care, as far as it was provided inside

¹ This quotation is from Thomas à Kempis, Sermones ad novicios regulares, Opera Omnia 6, ed. M.J. Pohl (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1904), Sermon 14, p. 99. I was fortunate to write much of this article with a view of the Ascension Mosque in Jerusalem and to the sound of its muezzin. Moreover, as if the view of one of the most holy places in Christendom and Islam were not enough, I was also in the inspiring company of my colleagues Dr. Ed Noort and Dr. Fred Leemhuis, along with 26 students. It is to them that I dedicate this article. Among the students I especially thank Judith van der Wel for her psychological insight in Thomas à Kempis’s teaching strategies.
² Since the Second World War, Anne Frank has surpassed him. Like the Imitation, her diary has been translated into virtually all languages of the world since its first publication in 1947.
³ Thomas à Kempis, De imitatione Christi Libri quator, ed. T. Lupio (Vatican City, 1982). In the meantime, the debate around Thomas à Kempis’s authorship of The Imitation of Christ appears to have been settled in his favor. See Paul van der Geest, “De sermones van Thomas à Kempis. Een terreinverkenning,” Trajecta 2 (1993), pp. 305–326, there p. 305.
a religious community.¹ My purpose is to investigate how Thomas à Kempis attempted to guide the young brothers in their first steps on the path towards the spiritual perfection that was the goal of religious people. How did he define it? How did he function as a pastor? How did he try to help the novices to reach spiritual perfection? What was his perspective on the relationship of shepherd and flock, i.e. the master and the novices? How do his ideas connect to the wider context of the Devotio Moderna, particularly within the Chapter of Windesheim?

These questions are pressing ones in view of the intellectual history of the Devotio Moderna, which could well be summed up as the tale of the continuous and frantic search for the right path to perfection. This was a matter of life or death: the wrong way would lead to eternal death in hell, the right way to eternal life in heaven. It would be disastrous if, after a lifetime of working at perfection, a brother or sister were to find that they had taken the wrong path after all. Thomas à Kempis belonged to the second generation of the Devotio Moderna, when many adherents opted for the life of a regular canon or canoness rather than for the existence without vows of a Brother or Sister of the Common Life, as had been common at the start of the movement. In Thomas’s day, as far as the Brethren and Sisters of the Common Life were concerned, even if they did not reform their communities to full monasticism, in the course of the fifteenth century there was a strong tendency towards a more withdrawn life.⁵ This shift is connected with a change in ideas about how to reach the spiritual perfection that was the ultimate aim of religious people.

What follows will be divided into five sections. First, I shall provide some data on Thomas à Kempis and his community at Mount Saint

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⁵ The creation of private chapels in many communities is a sign of this. Previously, the Sisters and Brethren of the Common Life had used the parish church. Compare this, for instance, with the history of Brand’s House, a community of Sisters of the Common Life at Deventer: G. Dumbar, ed., Analecta seu vetera aliquot scripta inedita ab ipso publici juris aliquot scripta (Deventer, 1719–1722) 1, pp. 171–172.