

WHO WROTE THE "IMITATION OF CHRIST"?

L' Auteur de l' Imitation et les Documents Néelandais, par Victor Becker, S. J. La Haye, 1882.

Controversia Gersoniana, by C. Mella, S. J. Civiltà Cattolica, 1875.

I Diritti di Tommaso da Kempis diftesi contro le vecchie pretese de' Gersonisti moderni. Revmo. P. Luigi Santini. Roma, 1879, 1881.

AFTER the Gospel, the *Imitation* undoubtedly is the book that reflects with the greatest perfection the light which Jesus Christ brought us down from heaven. It eminently contains the Christian philosophy. Humility, poverty, meekness, purity of heart, sorrow for sins, forgiveness of injury, joy in the midst of persecution, were held by the Saviour, in the sermon on the mount, as the characteristics of His disciples. Nowhere else do we find the same doctrine inculcated with a more persuasive eloquence and simplicity than in the unpretending little volume that all of us have a hundred times perused.

Nothing certainly is more opposed to our corrupt nature; still all, even non-Christians, have admired and praised the book. Filled with the spirit of Christianity it is most uncongenial to the *animalis homo*; still not a single voice has ever dared to protest against it,—precisely as in our day the men least inclined to submit to the Saviour are often the loudest in professing their admiration for his moral precepts. Such is at all times the power of true virtue!

Hence, after the Bible, and particularly the New Testament, the editions of the *Imitation* have been far more numerous than those of the noblest productions of the human mind. Not only the MSS. of the Latin text, written before the discovery of printing, are counted by hundreds; but the printed editions, since the middle of the fifteenth century, almost defy calculation. And they are not limited to the Latin text, because it has been translated, in prose and verse, into all the languages of Europe,—nay, into a great number of the tongues of Asia and Africa, besides a few of the Western continent.

Moreover, the commentaries and treatises suggested by the text bear testimony, by their great number, to the estimation it has always enjoyed. The books and pamphlets also published on the question of authorship alone amount, in the opinion of Mr. Edmund Watherton, to about three hundred volumes,—a wonderful fact, considering the small importance of such questions in ordinary cases.

These assertions, which could be considerably increased in number, are not mere guesses and wild approximations. The modern

Bollandist, Fr. Aloys de Backer, has given the most accurate details on the subject in his remarkable *Essai Bibliographique sur le livre De Imitatione Christi*. A folio volume was required for publishing this extraordinary catalogue; and the collection of these books, if complete, would form a large library.

Still, for the last two hundred years and more, a violent controversy has arisen and continues at this moment in the literary world on the simple question, Who wrote the *Imitation of Christ*? It is after all an unimportant question, because the high value of the book is altogether independent of the name of its author. Still, since in recent times nearly all Catholic reviews have spoken of it in one sense or another, and several non-Catholic periodicals of note have published important articles on it; since, moreover, new documents and MSS. have been quite lately found out, it seems proper that the readers of the AMERICAN CATHOLIC QUARTERLY REVIEW should also receive some exact information on this side of the Atlantic, and know at least the latest aspect of the controversy.

The primary cause of this conflict of opinion was undoubtedly the modesty of the author, and his determination to remain unknown. *Ama nesciri et pro nilulo reputari* was one of the maxims he practiced before inculcating it on others. Accordingly it is worthy of remark that the oldest MSS. did not put forward any name whatever; and it is only from the middle of the fifteenth century that a change was made, and different names of authors appeared in a quite unaccountable manner, namely, those of St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure, Ludolph the Carthusian, Gerson the chancellor of the Paris University, and many others. In an uncritical age a claim of this nature was often decided by the whim of the copyist, what he thought the most probable opinion.

In course of time two names alone remained prominent, those of Thomas à Kempis and of Gerson. The French inclined for Gerson; the remainder of the world proclaimed Thomas à Kempis. This last opinion was almost universal at the end of the sixteenth century; and, as late as 1657, Mabillon acknowledged that he—Thomas—"still enjoyed the *fiduciary possession* that had been granted him from early times." Though the claim of Gerson is now nearly abandoned—the reasons for it will soon be briefly stated—it is proper to insist on the fact that, long before the contestation of the seventeenth century, he had many advocates in opposition to Thomas à Kempis. Old MSS. are found with his name inscribed as the author; and it is not true that "Charles Labbé, charged by Cardinal Richelieu to examine into the question, proposed another claimant for the honors of the hotly-contested authorship

in the person of John Charlier de Gerson, Chancellor of Paris." Labbé only *revived* the title of the chancellor, that was then nearly extinct, as it is to-day. But, after the testimony of Mabillon, confirmed by that of his *confrère*, Thuillier, it must be considered certain that, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Thomas à Kempis was universally recognized as the author of the *Imitation*. How did a *new* name come later to light in the controversy, and on what grounds could this unexpected claim be sustained? This is the first subject of inquiry.

I.

In 1604, Fr. Rossignoli, a Jesuit, found in the house of his order, at Arona, near Milan, a MS. of the *Imitation*, in which the author was called *Abbas Johannes Gersen, Gessen, or Gesen*; these three forms were unaccountably written in the same subscription. That religious house at Arona had formerly belonged to the Benedictines, and Rossignoli concluded that Gersen had been a Benedictine abbot. He was congratulated on his discovery by Bellarmine, who mentioned it as an acceptable solution in his work, *De Scriptoribus Ecclesiasticis*.

But the celebrated Father Rosweyde, of Antwerp, declared himself directly against this opinion, "because," he said, "the claims of Thomas à Kempis were too well established to be in the least shaken by the new discovery." Moreover, Father Maggioli, of the same Society of Jesus, protested that "he himself had brought that identical MS. from his own father's house in Genoa, during the year 1579." The Benedictines, who had left Arona long before, could not have had the MS. in their possession, and the conclusion of Rossignoli that Gersen must have been a Benedictine abbot was altogether unwarranted. Bellarmine, better informed, and having received letters from Rosweyde, changed sides again, and in the following editions of the *De Scriptoribus Ecclesiasticis*, he went back to the advocacy of Thomas à Kempis.

But the existence of this MS. had already come to the knowledge of Dom Constantine Caietani, a Benedictine of renown, whom Pope Paul V. had made his secretary. A man of great erudition, he was, however, known to his contemporaries for a peculiar mania he had of claiming for his order nearly all great churchmen of former ages. Not only Pope St. Gregory I.; but St. Francis of Assisium, St. Thomas Aquinas, and a multitude of other great men had been, in his opinion, Benedictines, though everybody else knew the contrary.

St. Ignatius Loyola, likewise, had been, he said, a novice in a monastery of St. Benedict, and his celebrated *Book of Exercises*

was but an open plagiarism, being simply a reprint of the *Exercitatorium Spirituale* of Garcia de Cisneros, O. S. B.

The discovery of Rossignoli, consequently, was a godsend to Caietani. He managed to obtain the loan of the MS., and published it at the same time at Rome and Paris, in 1616. But the conclusions he drew from the simple title were, in truth, astounding. Abbot Gersen, or Gessen, had been a Benedictine; the MS. had been written by his hand or at his dictation; he himself belonged to a noble family of the name of Gessen or De Gessate (quite common in Gessa), whose residence near the Benedictine monastery of St. Peter yet bore the name of the newly-discovered abbot. He did not speak of the age of the MS.; there was no date to it.

None of these assertions could ever be proved, but they were boldly affirmed by Caietani, and soon many believed them among the Italians, who felt flattered by this new illustration of their noble country.

Fr. H. Rosweyde, a few months later, published his *Vindicie Campenses* at Antwerp, in which he refuted the arguments of Caietani, and directly the contest assumed vast proportions and has been since carried on with great vigor on both sides. The chief cause of the conflict lay in this, that Thomas à Kempis was a canon regular of St. Augustine, and Gersen, or Gessen, was said to have been a Benedictine abbot. The Augustinians and the Benedictines were naturally desirous of the success of their champions, and on both sides proofs, or at least probabilities, were eagerly canvassed and discussed with all the subtlety natural to interested combatants.

The first question which naturally comes to the mind is the personality itself of the supposed authors. Who was Thomas à Kempis and who was Gersen? The answer to the first question has always been simple, clear, convincing; the biography of Thomas was, in course of time, as solidly established as any historical fact can be. This will be examined later on. The case was wholly different with regard to the personality of Gersen. The first attempt by Caietani to give it life was a failure. He had substituted conjectures for facts. MSS. and old records might, perhaps, furnish more reliable information, and the Benedictines have always, since that time, been ready to furnish the treasures of their erudition in furthering the cause of Gersen. They did so heartily on this occasion.

In 1501 Sessa printed, at Venice, the four books of the *Imitation*, under the name of *Johannes Gerson, Chancellor of Paris*. (It is known that the name of this celebrated writer, who, in the sixteenth century, was thought by many to be the author of the book, was

spelt in half a dozen different ways—Gerson, Gersen, Gersenna, Gorson, etc.) A copy of that edition, when the contest arose, was found at Genoa, with the following note: "*Hunc librum non compilavit Johannes Gerson, Sed D. Johannes. . . . Abbas Vercellensis, ut habetur usque hodie propria manu scriptus in eadem abbazia.*" Caietani found in this note another clue to the biography of his champion. Though the copy itself attributed it to J. Gersen, *Chancellor of Paris*, Caietani contended from the note that the real author, J. Gersen, had been abbot at Vercelli, and in order to be more precise, as there had been two Benedictine abbeys in that city—St. Stephen's and St. Andrew's—Gersen had been abbot of St. Stephen's. Unfortunately this monastery was destroyed in 1580, and the name of Gersen could not any more be seen, *hodie propria manu scriptus*, etc.

The contestation over this copy of the *Imitation* has now lasted two hundred and fifty years, and an impartial reader must now conclude that if it supports any claim it must be that of Gerson of Paris, now abandoned. Moreover, it has been proved recently that the celebrated note is a fraud. It contains a name that has been erased so as to render the sentence illegible. This argument of the Gersenists falls to the ground, if it does not turn against them.

Still it is out of this note that the greatest part of the biography of Gersen has been evolved by his partisans, led by Caietani. Gersen was not only, according to them, a Benedictine abbot but the author of the *Imitation*. His monastery was that of St. Stephen, at Vercelli. The university of that city enjoyed a great renown during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,—an undeniable fact,—but it was not so well ascertained that Gersen "had been a professor in that university," as Caietani pretended, and that by means of the young men who flocked to it from all parts of Europe, he could send copies of the book north, west, and south. The chief proof the Gersenists gave of it was that "a great number of MSS. of the *Imitation* have been ascertained to belong to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries." In case this were true, Thomas à Kempis's claim would be futile, since he was born at the end of the fourteenth century, and he did not publish any work before the beginning of the fifteenth. This was the strong position of the Gersenists.

But none of these assertions can any more, at this moment, be maintained. From the middle of the seventeenth century to a recent epoch there were *doubts* with regard to the existence of the *Imitation* prior to the fifteenth. Had it not been for these *doubts* such men as Mabillon, Thuillier, Monfaucon, and their brethren of the Order of St. Benedict would not have enlisted themselves

under the banner of Gersen, Abbot of Vercelli. The cause of their steadfastness in their opinion lay in the considerable number of MSS. which, from their ordinary rules of criticism, they judged older than the time of Thomas à Kempis. On this question of paleography, consequently, rests the only real difficulty of the case. We shall come back to it as we proceed in this discussion.

It would be tedious, and it is impossible in this short paper, to describe the intricacies of the controversy which then became universal throughout Christendom. Mr. Ed. Watherton has done it in his paper of June 12th, 1880, published in the *London Tablet*. He proves that every new attempt of the partisans of Gersen was successfully met by those of Thomas à Kempis. Thus, in 1630, Walgrave, O. S. B., was answered by Fronteau, Simon Werlin, and Thomas Carr.

In 1650 the Parliament of Paris was applied to by the Gersenists on account of the insults, as they called them, levelled at Caietani and at the whole Order of St. Benedict by Naudé and other partisans of Thomas à Kempis. Parliament ordered that those insults, on both sides, should be withdrawn, but it "forbade the *Imitation* to be printed with the name of Gersen, and gave permission to the canons regular to print it with the name of Thomas à Kempis." Many champions of Thomas since the time of Rosweyde have enlightened the public on the subject. The chief among them were Philip Chifflet, Abbé de Balerne, Fronteau, an Augustinian, G. Hesper, S. J., and F. Raynaud, of the same society.

In 1671 the Gersenists again applied to Harlay, Archbishop of Paris, for permission to call a meeting of learned men, who should decide if the MSS. on which rested the cause of Gersen had been tampered with. Thirteen MSS. were brought forward, which were pronounced intact. Mabillon, one of the Benedictines present, gave his opinion that some of them belonged to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This question will be directly attended to.

In 1724 Thomas A. Erhard, O. S. B., revived the contest, and the year following Eusebius Amort published his *Plena et Succincta Informatio*—a powerful work in favor of Thomas. It was followed, in 1728, by his *Scutum Kempense*, and later by his *Deductio Critica*, followed, in 1764, by his *Moralis Certitudo*. The case appeared decided in favor of Thomas à Kempis.

Finally, in this century, the discovery of the *Codex de Advocatis* by M. de Grégory produced the last phase of contention. This must be kept for future consideration.

II.

The first important point to be examined is the opinion of Mabillon and other learned Benedictines that several MSS. of the *Imita-*

tion still extant belong to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This being well ascertained, the cause of Thomas would be hopeless; but that of Gersen would still remain doubtful. A great many MSS., particularly from Benedictine monasteries, were brought to Paris in 1671, and attentively examined by the best living paleographers. Among thirteen of them, several were pronounced to belong to the thirteenth or, at least, fourteenth century. Can such a decision be considered irrefragable? Much has been said on both sides of this question. The reflections of Father Victor Becker, S. J., in his *L'Auteur de l'Imitation et les Documents Nerlandais*, appear reasonable—nay, conclusive. He says: "Do you ask a truly competent man if a MS. without date," as they all were, "can belong to a certain epoch? He will be able to give a categorical answer. He will have only to examine if there is nothing in it incompatible with the usages of that epoch; if, for instance, there are no forms of letters or ciphers belonging to a different one. In this case he will say it *can* belong to it. But should you ask further if it *does* actually belong to it, he will have to qualify his answer and submit his judgment to the rules of approximation, because such a question cannot be solved in an absolute manner, and the best paleographers are often deceived. Experience shows that unless his limits as to time are very large, you are not bound to follow his judgment. It will give you only a certain measure of probability. In case there is against it a positive historical evidence the verdict of paleography is altogether valueless. Most competent men have occasionally fallen into errors involving periods of one or two hundred years." Father Becker quotes here a case in point, given *in extenso* by Dr. Acquoy in the London *Spectator*. Hoffman von Fullersleben, at the request of Professor Moll, undertook to decide on the age of a MS. offered him by the Professor. He insisted on the exactness of his decision, after objections had been made, and yet was obliged, in the end, to admit that he had made a mistake of two hundred years. Dr. Spitzen, of Zwolle, has lately proved beyond contradiction that not a word of evidence in favor of Gersen belongs to a period anterior to the fifteenth century, and, moreover, that not a single MS. of the *Imitation* can be with certainty assigned to the thirteenth or fourteenth. More shall be said of Dr. Spitzen.

This he demonstrated in particular with regard to the celebrated *Codex de Advocatis*, which Mgr. Malou, of Bruges, and other recent writers had already before discussed and disproved. M. de Grégory, a Piedmontese, living at Paris, discovered this *Codex* in 1830. It became immediately the cause of a violent outbreak of the old controversy. The MS. itself, being without date and giving no name of author, could not be of any weight in deciding the ques-

tion; but M. de Grégory, whose bias for Gersen was already well known, entered into correspondence with some living members of the Avogadri family, to whom it was pretended the MS. had previously belonged. Hence the name *De Advocatis*, the Latin form of Avogadri.

Soon after, a *Diarium* was discovered among the papers of the family, stating that on February 11th, 1349, a precious *Codex de Imitatione Christi* had been given as a legacy from one brother to the other, and it was immediately averred that this *Codex* was the identical one purchased by M. de Grégory. On a more serious examination, M. Tourlet, of the "École des Chartes," declared that in the date 1349 the 3 might as well be a 5; and the Avogadri family, after ransacking their archives and all the parish registers, announced that not a single entry of births and deaths in the family could be found earlier than the seventeenth century. They believed, however, that their pedigree *could* be traced to 1400. M. Gence, besides, has collected the opinions of many distinguished paleographers to the effect that this *Codex* is not earlier than the commencement of printing.

The whole exposure of this great discovery of M. de Grégory can be read with advantage in the paper of Mr. Ed. Watherton, published in the *London Tablet* of June 12, 1880. The excess of zeal of Dom Caietani in the seventeenth century, and of M. de Grégory in the nineteenth, has more injured than helped the cause of Gersen; and, in particular, the *Codex de Advocatis* has been rendered not only valueless, but positively injurious to his claims, in the eyes of sensible men, by the frantic efforts of its great advocate since 1830, whose labors have all ended in smoke.

Beyond the authority of MSS. whose character is but doubtful, the external evidence is totally wanting on the side of the supposed abbot of Vercelli, since the existence of MSS. anterior to the fifteenth century is not proved. Nothing that he did or wrote, according to his partisans, can bear the light of criticism. It cannot be ascertained that any one ever spoke of him, or quoted the *Imitation* as a work of his, prior to 1400. The pretended texts of St. Bonaventure, containing passages of the *Imitation*, are now admitted to be the production of an unknown author of a later epoch. All the details of Gersen's biography, discussed with an apparent erudition by Dom Caietani and his followers on the same side of the controversy, are evidently spurious; and the assertion of Mgr. Malou, that "the abbot Gersen is a *myth*," seems to be the simple truth.

In the warm debates that took place in Paris in 1671, and the following years, the Gersenists boasted that they had on their side, if not the Parliament, at least the Congregations of Propaganda

and of the Index at Rome, and the deliberate opinion of Cardinal Richelieu. It is now proved that the Congregation of the Propaganda refused to interfere, and referred the petitioners to the Congregation of the Index. Quite recently the R. F. Luigi Santini, Superior-General of the Canons Regular of Lateran, applied to the R. Saccheri, the Secretary of the Congregation of the Index, to ascertain what had been its action at the time referred to, namely, the year 1639; the secretary answered that he had unsuccessfully gone through the records of the sessions of the court during that year. No decision had been taken on the subject. As to Cardinal Richelieu the only share he had in the discussion consisted in ordering that the magnificent edition of the *Imitation*, published at Paris, under his auspices, in 1640, should bear no name of author, as he considered that the question of authorship had not yet been decided. It was still doubtful in his eyes, and he took side with neither of the claimants.

At the end of this brief discussion of Gersen's title to the authorship of the *Imitation* a few words must be added on the claims of Gerson, the Chancellor of Paris. It was seen that, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a certain number of MSS. bore his name, which was then spelt in various ways,—Gerson, Gersenna, Gersen or Gerssem, Garson, etc. It is now difficult to imagine why Gerson was considered the author by any one. The most probable opinion seems to be that his well-known work, *De Meditatione Cordis*, and several others of his ascetic treatises, were often bound together with the *Imitation*, or some of the four books of which it is composed; and several careless amanuenses attributed the whole compilation to the same author. But during his life—he died in 1429—and directly after his death, the *Imitation* was never mentioned in the list of his works. His own brother, the Prior of the *Célestins*, at Paris, being requested by a friend to give an authentic catalogue of them, did not include the *Imitation* in the list. This took place in 1423. A few months before the death of the chancellor, *Jacobus de Ceresio*, one of his intimate friends published another catalogue, which is found in the oldest printed editions of his *Opera Omnia*. The *Imitation* does not appear among them. In several of these early editions it is expressly attributed to Thomas à Kempis. At Lyons, where the chancellor died, the *Imitation* was printed in 1484, under the name of Thomas, and directly after, the treatise *De Meditatione Cordis* appeared with the name of Gersen,—that is, Gerson. This confusion of names—Gersen and Gerson—has been taken advantage of by some Gersenists to vindicate for their champion, John Gersen, Abbot of Vercelli, MSS. whose title-page was meant for supporting the cause of John Gerson, Chancellor of Paris. Father Becker points out in particular four docu-

ments in which the intended deception is but too apparent. This is, indeed, disreputable.

Meanwhile, the candidature of Gerson is now abandoned by all critics. M. Gence, of Paris, was the last man of note who stood for it, and, I think, he is now dead.

III.

The claims of Thomas à Kempis to the authorship of the *Imitation* cannot be sufficiently well understood, unless the Congregation of the Canons Regular of Windesheim, to which he belonged, is to some extent known. Most of the external and internal evidence in his favor is derived from peculiarities connected with this religious body—a branch of the Augustinians—which, I think, has now ceased to exist. It has left, however, an imperishable record, every word of it being clear, definite, and above contradiction. Its interior spirit, its action in the Church, its reformatory power over other Orders, its great men shining with a powerful individuality, though subdued by the most unaffected self-abasement, form one of the most edifying pages of our modern ecclesiastical annals. We possess still the works they wrote, the books they copied, the detailed chronicles of their Congregation, with all the marks of sincerity and truth.

Gerard Groot was the man destined by God himself to be the designer and first builder of the new edifice. After having taken his doctor's degree at the Sorbonne, and completed his post-graduate studies at the University of Prague, he became the most prominent man in Utrecht, his native city, and was loaded with church dignities and benefices. But, being stricken by sickness, he saw the vanity of even ecclesiastical honors, became a simple missionary, and began the work of reform in the Netherlands at the end of the fourteenth century. Witnessing with sorrow the decay of morality among people, churchmen, and monks, a burning zeal inflamed his heart. During the stay of the Popes at Avignon, disorders of every kind had sprung up, and were the forerunners of worse evils, such as disgraced the Church during the great schism that immediately followed. Groot flourished precisely under the pontificates of Gregory XI. and Urban VI.; and when he died, in 1384, the schism had been consummated.

Soon after beginning his missionary labors in the diocese of Utrecht, some difficulty with his diocesan induced him to retire to Deventer, and confine himself to the moral and Christian training of some young men whom he initiated into the "modern devotion," as he called it. Radewijns, a canon of Utrecht, his intimate friend, soon joined him, and proposed to introduce "common life" among the disciples of the new doctrine, who had so far lived in their own

families, and came daily to the house of Gerard Groot for instruction. Gerard consented to this advice with some reluctance, because he feared opposition from other religious communities, in case he showed himself bent on founding a new Order. To obviate the difficulty he discarded from his rule formal vows, but obliged his young men to keep the "evangelical counsels," without binding themselves by any solemn promise. Such was the origin of the "Brothers of Common Life."

This considerate action on the part of the good man did not prevent opposition. As soon as he saw the storm ready to burst he went to Groendael in Brabant, to consult another friend of his,—the celebrated John Ruysbroek, whose ascetic doctrine requires here a word of explanation. The then future Congregation of Windesheim received through Gerard Groot the mystic spirit of Ruysbroek, and the accusations of Gerson against him—Ruysbroek—must be briefly examined. The Chancellor of the University of Paris thought it his duty to censure his doctrine on "mental prayer," and brought forward propositions from his writings that appeared to favor the total absorption of the soul in God in the act of contemplation. When, under Gregory XV., in the seventeenth century, the process of the beatification of Ruysbroek was undertaken at the instance of Thomas of Jesus, this objection of Gerson was made a subject of inquiry, and it was proved that in some other of his writings, Ruysbroek had condemned a mystic sect of his time—the old *Beguins*—precisely for supporting the same opinion. Bellarmine meanwhile declared that the obvious meaning of the propositions objected to was irreproachable, and before him Denys the Carthusian and Albert Le Mire had said as much. The process of beatification, however, was not carried through, for the only reason that, though the meaning of the author was correct, others might take advantage of his expressions to teach a most dangerous error. Bossuet himself, later on, in his controversy with Fénelon, acknowledged the orthodoxy of Ruysbroek, "very different," he says, "from the 'modern quietists,' who endeavor to uphold their mysticism by his authority, though he has pronounced their condemnation."

To him Gerard Groot went for advice in his perplexity, and received for answer that the best way to quiet all opposition was to found a *new* congregation, but to adopt for its rules those of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine. His Order would be simply a branch of the Augustinians, and the members of other orders could not object to its novelty. The proper authority from Rome could be easily obtained.

Groot immediately assented to the advice of Ruysbroek, but soon after he died, and Radewijns found himself at the head of

the new undertaking. He must be considered the *de facto* founder of the new canons regular. In his intention, the "Brothers of the Common Life" should not be absorbed into them, but would continue to form a body apart, subordinate to the "canons," having, however, their own rules and scope.

The new superior founded, in 1387, the first convent of his congregation at Windesheim, six miles from Zwolle, in the province of Over-Yssell, Holland. Six "Brothers of the Common Life" had been previously subjected to some religious training among the monks of Emsteyn, near Utrecht, and they were the first inmates of the new convent. In course of time the house of Emsteyn, after having been the mother of Windesheim, was associated with it, and became its daughter. The Convent of Mount St. Agnes, near Zwolle, formerly a monastery of friars, adopted likewise the rules of Windesheim. In its walls Thomas à Kempis spent the greatest part of his life. Soon after, Groenendael and several other Belgian convents managed to be united with the "Windesheim Chapter." Scarcely thirty years after its foundation, the mother-house of the new congregation counted as many as forty-five houses—thirty-seven of men and eight of women—under its control.

These Canons Regular of St. Augustine had scarcely anything in common with the canons of cathedrals or collegiate churches. Groot himself and Radewijns had left their canonries of Utrecht, as the first step necessary on their part to embrace another life. Instead of a large revenue, of an ostentatious display in prelatial functions, of an easy individual mode of living, the canon of Windesheim was strictly a monk. He spent a great part of his day in the offices of the choir, and the remainder in copying manuscripts, teaching school to children or young men, spending hours in mental prayer, and giving only a short time to sleep. Humility and obedience was the primary rule of his conduct. Bodily austerities, fasting, inward mortification seldom gave place to self-indulgence of the most innocent kind. This happened only in the greatest festivals of the Church, when abstemiousness, silence, rigorous self-control, were not as strictly commanded as usual, and human nature, always allowed to play to some extent, was granted a higher degree of freedom under the wings of religion.

Details of this nature, of which the *Imitation of Christ* is full, give the best idea of this new asceticism. It was designed as an incentive to other religious bodies, so as to induce them to renew their fervor, nearly extinct at the end of the fourteenth century. There are great reasons to believe that, except among the Carthusians, the Cistercians, and Dominicans, regularity was the excep-

tion in religious houses during those dreary times of the great schism.

A large number of ascetic writers issued from the new cloisters and sanctuaries. But a peculiarity soon appeared in all of them, which was not pointed out except long after. The train of ideas, the style, some remarkable peculiarities of expression, characterized all the authors belonging to the Congregation of Windesheim, and in our day a powerful proof that Thomas à Kempis wrote the *Imitation* is derived from these special characteristics.

IV.

Thomas Hämerken was born at Kempen, near Cologne, in 1379. In 1395 he entered the school founded at Deventer by Florentius Radewijns; and consequently never knew Gerard Groot, who had died eleven years sooner. Some writers have pretended that he entered as a novice in 1375; and his profession not having taken place but six or seven years later, a sort of confusion was introduced into his biography which otherwise is as clear and precise as that of any of our contemporaries. Father Victor Becker, S. J., in the book quoted at the head of this paper, proves from Thomas himself that he entered as a *donatus* in 1399. He consequently did not take the habit at Deventer, but was only a pupil in the school of Radewijns. It is in 1406, on the day of *Corpus Christi*, as he himself relates, that he took the habit at Mount St. Agnes, where his elder brother, John, was prior; and he made his profession the year following. He was ordained priest in 1412 or 1413, and began directly to compose his ascetic treatises, among which the four books of the *Imitation* must now be counted. These were not written all at once as a systematic work. According to Mr. Edmund Watherton, the first book, *qui sequitur me*, was composed in 1414. The Kirksheim MS., still extant (copied from Thomas's original MS., written in 1425), bears the date of the same year,—1425. The Oxford *Codex* has also his name, and the date of 1438. The celebrated Antwerp *Codex*, in his own handwriting, and with his own name, is dated 1441. The earliest *dated* MS. produced by the Gersenists is the Parma *Codex* of the year 1466, which spells the name as *Gersem*. In the Mõlk MS., dated 1421, claimed also by Gersen's partisans, this date does not refer to the *Liber primus de Imitatione Christi*, but to the *Contemplatio St. Bernardi de Passione Domini*. The two MSS. were only bound together at a subsequent time, as was then frequently done. Consequently, the Parma *Codex* (1466) is the oldest the Gersenists can quote. These dry details are of great importance, as shall soon be seen.

Thomas à Kempis—from Kempen—spent, as was said, the greatest part of his life at Mount St. Agnes, near Zwolle, and the re-

mainder in other houses of his order, and died a nonagenarian in 1471. In his humility he managed to avoid being elected to any dignity in his own congregation, except that once he was subprior. His *Sermones ad Novicios* are a proof that he was also for a while Master of Novices. His great occupation in the monastery was transcribing and composing books of devotion. Not less than thirty-four, exclusive of the four books of the *Imitation*, are universally admitted to be his production. Accordingly, he must not be considered a mere scribe or copyist, as he has been represented by some Gersenists, but many manuscripts written by him were of his own composition. He, however, never put his name to anything that came from his pen; and this was the general custom among the members of his congregation, who went further still, and seldom divulged the names of their brethren who had produced popular works found in the hands of the multitude. Unavoidable indiscretions nevertheless have furnished us, fortunately, with precious testimonies of the greatest weight on the question of authorship of the *Imitation*, and to this our attention must now be directed. It is but a sequel to the biography of Thomas à Kempis.

The first in importance is that of John Busch, or Buschius, a personal friend of Thomas, an illustrious member of the Windesheim Congregation, a holy man often employed by his ecclesiastical superiors in the reform of German monasteries. Several of the books he wrote are still extant, among them his *De Viris illustribus de Windesem* and *De Origine Modernæ Devotionis*. They were both undertaken at the command of the general superior of the order, John Van Naalwrijk. Rosweyde published an edition of both, under the common title *Chronicon Windesemense*.

This must be considered an *official* production of the congregation. Such documents, as is well known, always require in their author a strict adherence to truth, and can be entirely relied upon. Leibnitz besides has rendered to the veracity of Busch the following testimony: "*Buschium non dissimulare corruptelas, neque adulari suis, manifestum est.*"

In the twenty-first chapter *De Viris Illustribus*, speaking of the death of John Vos Van Heusden, Busch refers to a visit he himself received a few days previous from two brethren of St. Agnes' Convent: "*Quorum unus,*" he says, "*frater Thomas de Kempis, vir probatæ vitæ, qui plures devotos libros composuit, videlicet qui sequitur me, de Imitatione Christi, cum aliis.*" Dr. Spitzel has lately proved, with the clearest evidence, that the words *videlicet*, etc., are not an addition by a more recent scribe, as has been pretended, but belong to the text itself of Busch.

The second testimony is that of Hermann Ryd, also a contempo-

rary of Thomas, who published a description of the convents of the Windesheim Congregation in his time, and says: "The brother who wrote the book of the *Imitation* is called Thomas. He is superior of the Monastery of Mount St. Agnes, near Zwolle. He still lived in 1454, and I, Brother Hermann, of the Monastery of Newwerk, near Magdeburgh, being sent that year to the general chapter, have spoken with him." At that epoch the four books of the *Imitation* were always published together, under the general title *Imitation of Christ*. At an earlier period, Busch had spoken only of the first book, under the simple title *qui sequitur me*, which are the initial words of the first chapter.

It would be tedious, and it is not possible here, to quote all the contemporary testimonies. Father Becker enumerates as many as sixteen unexceptionable witnesses who had either seen and conversed with Thomas à Kempis, or at least had listened to those who had lived with him, and must have been well informed on the subject. Would not this be considered sufficient evidence of authenticity in favor of any ancient or modern work? The affirmation of reliable contemporaries is the strongest external evidence.

But the "internal evidence" is still more striking, and deserves to be given at a greater length. Already more than two hundred years ago, G. Hesper, a Jesuit of Ingoldstadt, collected a large number of Germanisms, as he called them, found here and there in the *Imitation*, and he concluded that the writer must have been a German, translating unconsciously his own vernacular language into Latin. He did not make any distinction between the High and Low Dutch dialects. His book, entitled *Lexicon Germanico Thomæum*, was published at Ingoldstadt in 1651.

About the same time Thomas Carr, an English Augustinian,—his true name was Miles Pinckney; he had probably taken the name of Carr as a disguise in England,—insisted on the remarkable resemblance of the phraseology of the *Imitation* to that of the other *authentic* productions of Thomas à Kempis, and directly concluded that he was the author. He could not, he said, be an Italian, as Gersen was supposed to be. The book bears no trace of Italian phraseology in the Latin text.

In 1650, again, Father Reynaud, S. J., brought forward two new arguments in favor of Thomas. First, the similarity between the style of the *Imitation* and that of the productions of other writers belonging to the Congregation of Windesheim; and secondly, the frequent use of the words *devoti* and *devotio* common to the book and to the school of Gerald Groot. In recent times other locutions have been pointed out which considerably increase the strength of the argument. Within the last few years Father Becker, Dr. Spitzner, Karl Hirsche, Santini, etc., have given a remarkable ex-

tension to this branch of internal evidence; they have, in fact, carried it to the height of demonstration. Conviction, it is true, results mainly from the number of texts which are brought into juxtaposition. In Father Becker's volume more than a hundred pages are exclusively devoted to this discussion, divided into four most interesting chapters. A few general remarks—the only thing possible here—will scarcely give the reader a glimpse of the reality.

In the first place, the expressions called *Germanisms* by Father G. Hesper, in 1651, belong, in point of fact, to the Netherland dialect, or Low Dutch, not to the German language properly so called. Two hundred years ago the pure German, or High Dutch, bore a much greater resemblance to the Flemish than it now does. It is known that during the last hundred years a number of great writers have transformed the German language into the classical shape it has now assumed. The Low Dutch itself (or Flemish) has considerably changed in *another* direction, and the actual Latin text must be examined in reference to the vulgar language, such as it was more than four centuries back. Few writers of the present age are competent. Mgr. Malou, it seems, has failed in some of his attempts on account of his limited knowledge of the old Flemish. Dr. Spitzen, on the contrary, is a master of this kind of philological criticism. Father Becker has popularized his efforts. He gives fifteen full pages of comparative quotations, so that even a reader unacquainted with the Flemish, old or new, is struck with the certainty that only a writer whose vernacular was the Low Dutch of that time could write the quaint Latin of the volume familiar to all of us.

In the second place, the Latin text alone of the *Imitation* is a conclusive proof that the author belonged to the Congregation of Windesheim. There are many expressions in it that are frequently found in the authors of that school and *nowhere else*. Abundant proofs are furnished by Father Becker, and the conclusion is irresistible that the book was written by a monk of this order. As it is easily ascertained that the same is true with regard to the other works of Thomas à Kempis that are universally acknowledged as authentic, it is difficult to resist the conviction that he wrote also the *Imitation*. The Latin text certainly does not bear the marks of the Augustan age, but, on the other side, it broadly differs from the mediæval Latin by the use of certain words and sentences peculiar to the Windesheim Congregation and to the style of Thomas à Kempis himself. Father Becker proves, for instance, that the words *religiosus*, *monasterium*, *prælatus*, *cella*, *monachus*, have a peculiar meaning in the Order of Canons founded by Gerard Groot. This had already been remarked by Father Reynaud in the seven-

teenth century. The numerous examples quoted by Dr. Spitzen and Father Becker give to the argument a cogency it never possessed before.

Thirdly, the *Imitation of Christ* contains many allusions to *facts* known to have happened in the Netherlands during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, some of which occurred in the neighborhood of Zwolle and Mount St. Agnes. This brings on the discussion of historical events, which we are compelled to leave unnoticed, though they add a great strength to the argument.

Fourthly and finally, not only peculiar expressions, whole sentences—nay, entire paragraphs—are met with in the *Imitation* which perfectly coincide with passages preserved to this day in the writings of Gerard Groot, Van Schoonoven, Busch, and others, but Dr. Karl Hirsche, in his grammatical researches on the *Imitation*, has fallen upon a new proof, altogether unexpected and extremely remarkable. This consists both in the rhythm and rhyme and in a punctuation of a very peculiar nature. Everybody had remarked the rhyme in the *Imitation* without paying great attention to it, because, since St. Leo the Great, it has often been used by ecclesiastical writers. But in the case of the *Imitation*, when it is combined with the rhythm and the punctuation discovered by Dr. Hirsche, it becomes a characteristic of all the works of Thomas à Kempis, and of them alone. This punctuation is extremely simple, not having more than four characters, each marking a longer or shorter pause; but when the text is read with a strict adherence to its rules, a new sense, as it were, suddenly comes out, and the profound maxims we all know, that have often so deeply struck all of us, make a much deeper impression still and convince the reader that this is indeed what the author intended.

The same, more or less, is visible in all the works of Thomas à Kempis, and of no one else. This discovery of Dr. Hirsche points directly to Thomas as the only author to whom the *Imitation* can be ascribed. Father Becker, following up the hint, has done for the second *Sermon to the Novices*—a work undoubtedly of Kempis—what Karl Hirsche had accomplished for several chapters of the *Imitation*. The conclusion need not be pointed out.

V.

The external and internal evidence, so striking in the case of Thomas à Kempis, is almost totally absent in that of Gersen. This has been sufficiently proved. For a long time the MSS. appeared to be in his favor. Great paleographers of the seventeenth century, most of them of the Benedictine Order,—Mabillon among them,—declared that several of those documents brought to Paris in 1671 could not be more recent than the thirteenth or fourteenth

century. If proved, this would have been fatal to the claims of Kempis. Many men consequently became convinced of it, owing to the affirmation of Mabillon, and supported the cause of Gersen. From a more careful study of the case, however, the verdict of paleography remained but doubtful, as was seen, and left intact the strong proofs derived from history and philology.

Recently new researches in libraries and public records have brought forth a number of MSS. of the *Imitation* unknown to Mabillon and his brethren. They have been classified with respect to their origin, place of deposit, and peculiar marks bearing on the probable author. This has given a new turn to the question, and the cause of Thomas, instead of being weakened by the consideration of MSS., receives an additional strength that can scarcely be exaggerated. A lucid account of it is found again in the work of Father Becker, and our simple task must consist in giving a brief synopsis of it. Becker himself follows Spitzen, whose book appeared only two years ago. This, accordingly, is the last aspect of the controversy, and it is to be hoped that before long the question will be altogether settled. Many recent conversions of Gersenists render it very probable.

In the first place, it is important to ascertain the number of MSS. still extant. In 1671 the Benedictine monasteries chiefly had been ransacked, and among those brought to Paris only thirteen had been selected on which Mabillon rested his cause. Father Mella, in his *Controversia Gersenniana*, confining himself to the side in which he felt interested, enumerated, in 1875, twenty-one bearing the name of Gersen and twenty-nine without any name—fifty in all. The number known at this moment is far greater, and as new ones are often discovered, it must be inferred that many more exist still which have never been brought out from the shelves of old libraries.

M. Arthur Loth, of Paris, wrote in 1874, in the *Revue des Questions Historiques*, that he had ascertained the existence of one hundred and eighty-six MSS., of which one hundred and sixteen came from Germany alone. Besides Germany, researches were made by him in Flanders, France, Italy, and England. But more recent investigations have rendered his last labors almost useless. Dr. Grube, for instance, instead of one hundred and sixteen MSS. derived from the whole of Germany, mentions forty-five contained in the Royal Library of Munich alone, and most of these are not specified in the catalogue of Mgr. Santini, more recent than that of Loth. This last gentleman found only thirty MSS. in Belgian Flanders; there are nearly as many in the Royal Library of Brussels alone. M. Ruelens, keeper of the department of MSS. at Brussels, thinks that in Belgium there must be about a hundred. In Eng-

land, where M. Loth found only three, sixteen are enumerated by Mr. Kettlewell in his book, *The Authorship of the De Imitatione Christi*.

The Netherlands, whose libraries had been pillaged and devastated by the Reformers, were, until lately, supposed to contain only a few. Father Becker, in a private search of his own, ascertained the existence of thirty-two of them, though he could not obtain access to several important libraries, in which he thinks there must be others.

At the present moment very nearly three hundred MSS. of the *Imitation* are inscribed in the catalogues of the most noted libraries of Europe, and there is no doubt that many more are still unknown. Strange to say, few, comparatively, are met with in France and Italy—a rather damaging fact for the cause of Chancellor Gerson and of Abbot Gersen.

Many MSS. do not bear the name of any author. Leaving aside those who ascribe the book to Gerson, Ludolph the Carthusian, and others, whose claims are now altogether discarded, it is ascertained that only *twenty* show on the title-page the name of Gersen; more than *fifty* that of Thomas à Kempis. That the book itself was not very well known in Italy in the sixteenth century seems probable from an anecdote related by Bartoli in his *Life of St. Ignatius* (t. ii., p. 251). When Ignatius went to Monte Cassino to give the exercises to a grandee of the Court of Charles V., he found it useful to present every monk of this great Benedictine convent with a copy of the *Imitation*, which they had not yet procured. This little story does not speak well in favor of Gersen.

But the remarkable fact of the actual distribution of the manuscripts in the various countries of Europe has a striking and almost systematic character of great strength in the present controversy. The reflections of Father Becker on this subject deserve quotation. We translate (page 216):

“Southern Germany—chiefly Bavaria—is more rich in manuscripts of the *Imitation* than the northern provinces, for the same reason that there are more in Belgium than in Holland,” namely, the fierceness of the persecutions at the time of the Reformation in Saxony and the Netherlands, whilst in Bavaria and Belgium the Catholics enjoyed peace. “Belgium contains a greater number of those manuscripts than any other country, relatively to its size. . . . In case the *Imitation* had been written by an Italian abbot, it is not in Germany, but in Italy that the majority of them should be found, particularly because the convents of Italy were not devastated and destroyed as they were in Holland and Northern

Germany during the religious wars," yet "very few comparatively are found in Italy—*apparent rari nantes in gurgite vasto*" (page 217).

"Striking remarks of the same nature justify the conclusion that, judging from the present localities where these manuscripts are found in greater abundance, the author must have lived and written in Germany or the Low Countries (Belgium or Holland),—that is to say, wherever the Canons of Windesheim and the Brothers of Common Life had established their houses. And though the relative number of those documents in the various countries of Europe leaves the pre-eminence doubtful between the Low Countries and Germany, still the dates which many of them bear [a remarkable feature in the present case] evidently favor Holland, and give a new strength to the cause of Thomas à Kempis."

A last peculiarity deserves a brief mention. Many manuscripts distributed through the former range of country occupied by the Canons of Windesheim contain only one or two of the four books of the *Imitation*, without any common title. Nearly all those belonging to Italy, on the contrary, have the four books, as with us, and bear the common heading, *Imitatio Christi*. This must be considered a positive proof that the manuscripts of the first series are older than those of the second. It cannot now be denied that the work appeared successively in four distinct parts, with a particular title for each part. On this Father Becker justly remarks, "If the *Imitation* had been written in the thirteenth century, and published entire at once, as we have it to-day,—a common supposition of the Gersenists,—the publishers of the fifteenth century would not have brought forward the four books as *independent* treatises. It would have been preposterous to give them piecemeal to the public, as they did, for the only pleasure of offering them afterwards in their former and original shape, as a whole." This, in our opinion, is an important reflection.

After a number of general remarks of the same nature on the manuscripts of the *Imitation*, many of which could not be even mentioned in this paper, Father Becker passes to the consideration of some particular manuscripts whose titles and other indications bear strongly in favor of Thomas à Kempis.

As was seen, the Benedictines of the seventeenth century relied mainly for their opinion in favor of Gersen on several manuscripts which they thought anterior to the fifteenth century. They won over to their cause many adherents who have ever since ardently supported the same opinion. Further researches have lately brought forward other manuscripts dating from the beginning to the middle of the fourteenth century, consequently anterior to the oldest ever produced by the Gersenists, whose age is exactly that of 1466. The notes and titles of these new documents being entirely

in accord with the well-known biography of Thomas à Kempis, furnish another remarkable proof that he was the author. Thus the consideration of manuscripts—the only strong support of the Gersenist cause—takes a different turn, and speaks now in favor of the adverse party.

Father Becker comments on the celebrated copy of the Gaesdonck Monastery, which Dr. Karl Hirsche thinks is the nearest in point of perfection to the autograph of Thomas dated 1441. It bears the date 1427.

Another copy, coming originally from Nimeguen, now in the Royal Library of Brussels, is exactly of the same age,—1427.

Another yet, from the Convent of Ewich, near Atterdorn, in Westphalia, was written the year previous,—1426. The three must have been copied from the original, known to have existed in 1425 in the neighborhood of Utrecht. Two other copies, one from the Abbey of St. Trond, the other from Ochsenhausen, bear also the date of 1427. "The fact," remarks Father Becker, "that the *Imitation* was copied simultaneously, in 1427, at Ewich, Doetinchem, and Nimeguen, proves that there were older manuscripts in the same countries." An allusion has just been made to an original copy existing near Utrecht in 1425.

But the autograph of Thomas à Kempis, dated 1441, and now preserved in the Royal Library of Brussels, would alone secure his claims to the authorship. This manuscript, whose authenticity has never been controverted, contains thirteen different treatises, all bound together, the *four* books of the *Imitation* (each with its separate title) being placed at the head in the manuscript. All agree that these thirteen treatises were written by Thomas à Kempis; but it has been said that he was only the copyist of the *four* books of the *Imitation*, though he had himself composed the nine following opuscles. This, Mabillon maintained in the discussion of 1671 at Paris. The only reason he gave in support of his opinion was the note written at the end of the manuscript: "*Finitus et completus A. D. MCCCCXLI, per manus Fratris Thomæ Kempis in Monte Sæ. Agnetis prope Zwollas.*" The words *per manus Fratris*, etc., proved, in the eyes of Mabillon, that he only transcribed the work of another. Still, the great Benedictine acknowledged that the nine treatises published after the *Imitation* in the same manuscript were the composition of à Kempis, and the note being written at the end referred equally to all.

It is known besides that the writers of the Windesheim Congregation, particularly Thomas à Kempis, never declared themselves authors of the books they published, and kept their well-known maxim, *ama nesciri*, etc. Another fact that Mabillon did not probably know, and which would have silenced him, has been ascer-

tained by Father Becker. In the Burgundian Library of Brussels, there are manuscripts containing authentic works of Thomas, among others his *Sermones ad Novicios*, ending with the same formula, *Finitus et scriptus per manus Fratris Thomæ Campensis A. D. MCCCCLVI*.

An additional observation of Father Becker must be copied here: "Thomas could not be ignorant of the fact that in 1441 the *Imitation* was read and admired by many men, who believed he was the author. In case he was not, he would have induced them in error by copying this golden book in the same manuscript with other works of his own composition. His well-known modesty, leaving aside his veracity, could not have suffered it. Finally, the erasures and alterations by his own hand, with which this manuscript is full, prove beyond contradiction that he was the author of it. An author alone can take such liberties with a manuscript, particularly in the case of such a book as the *Imitation of Jesus Christ*."

At this moment learned men in Italy are openly in favor of Thomas. Twenty years ago this would have been considered extraordinary, if not impossible. A number of Benedictine fathers in Germany and France have also abandoned the cause of Gersen, in spite of the efforts of their *confrère*, Dom C. Wolfsgruber, in the book he published at Augsburg in 1880. Everything is evidently preparing for a universal acknowledgment of the claims of à Kempis, and for the final success of the powerful and numerous advocates he has counted on his side during the last three hundred years.
