Ascetic Spirituality: 
A Conversation With Thomas a Kempis and Ignatius of Loyola

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Hmmm.
Will the title of this post pull you into reading it, or will it push you away?

Pull you in because you don't know what it means and you are intrigued?
Pull you in because you have some glimmer of understanding and you want to know more?

Or . . .

Push you away because it sounds obscure and not worth your time?
Push you away because it sounds medieval if not barbaric.

NOTE: Since I do these posts once a week, there are a number of times when they are a bit more like an essay than a post. If it is easier for you to read this as a document, here is this exact article as a PDF you can print out (sans images).

I am currently reading in the Gospels, of the life, ministry and teaching of Jesus.

Alongside that, I am also reading a number of the spiritual classics. Some of this I do as part of my devotional time, others are more for purposes of study, although I have found in the last year or so that my time of study more and more feels like it is just an extension of my devotional life. More and more, I have the Eric Liddel experience, "I feel His pleasure" when I read, study, think His thoughts, wonder about His ways and encounter His Presence hovering around me as I do this. But that is another post for another time.

The spiritual classics I am sitting with are:

- Augustine (but for the moment only dipping in to him from time to time - mainly his Confessions),
- Jonathan Edwards (frequent dives into the refreshing, deep waters of his Religious Affections),
- Thomas a Kempis (my daily conversation partner as I work through the Imitation of Christ),
- Jean-Pierre de Caussade (an occasional conversationalist, I can only engage him in small doses at this time, not through any fault of his The Sacrament of the Present Moment),
- G. K. Chesterton (witty dialogue with this jester who unsettles the pompous and proud, and so of course, he unsettles me... using mainly secondary sources like The Quotable Chesterton),
- Kierkegaard (some occasional forays, which I hope will become more frequent, into his spiritual writings) reading Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard),
and of course, always Ignatius. Ignatius is more than a conversation partner. He along with several of his Jesuit interpreters, are my main spiritual directors and teachers in this season of life.

But this post is mainly about a Kempis and his *Imitation* and Ignatius and his *Exercises*.

Spiritual classics are "classics" for a reason. They are classics because they contain a wisdom that has endured over time (centuries) and which transcends the original culture. Classics have an abiding capacity to speak to the deepest needs of our humanity.

And yet, I think a Kempis and his "classic" which is described as "the most widely read spiritual work of all time" is "wrong" on many things.

I find myself arguing or ignoring or skipping over a number of things a Kempis says. For those who are unfamiliar with *The Imitation of Christ*, it is arranged as four "Books" with each Book having many short chapters. A chapter may be half a page or three of four pages.

There are times when I find myself resisting entire chapters. Then, there are other chapters where something in every paragraph speaks to me. So, today, I thought I needed to spend some time considering my resistance and understanding it.

I am an Evangelical on the Ignatian Way of Proceeding.

I am an Evangelical with strong Reformed tendencies on that Ignatian Way.

I am a Reformed Evangelical with certain Post-modern flavors on the Ignatian Way.

I am not a monastic, I am not a Roman Catholic, and I am not a Jesuit (although at times I sort of, kind of, whimsically imagine myself as an Evangelical Jesuit, although not practicing celibacy, poverty, obedience, community, missionality, general intelligence, etc. -- but aside from that I am an Evangelical Jesuit).

I say that to give a context to what I say next. As I journaled and reflected on my resistance, here are some things I found:

**ONE:**
I resist a Kempis when his spirituality is based on certain distinctives in Roman Catholic theology which I think are wrong. And not only is a Kempis Roman Catholic, but he is specifically a theologically medieval Roman Catholic. I make no apologies about departing from a Kempis on those matters. (For example, Purgatory.)

**TWO:**
I resist a Kempis when he has a theological perspective that is not necessarily Roman Catholic, but which I believe is faulty in its understanding. For example, there are times when a Kempis sounds too much like a legalist and fundamentalist who puts way too much emphasis on a life of good works as the way to righteousness. If I were to lift certain paragraphs out of *The Imitation* and give them to you without the benefit of knowing the author, you wouldn't give them a second consideration due to their tenor.

**THREE:**
This one is another specific example of Reason Two, but it is so significant that it needs mentioned. As a medieval monastic, a Kempis is a dualist. He continually has sharp demarcations between Christ and culture, the sacred and secular, the spiritual and the worldly. He is far removed from an "all of life
redeemed worldview" way of thinking. And therefore, a main strategy of a Kempis is withdraw from the world. Of course, the monastic way was a way of withdraw for, among other reasons, the purpose of holiness. The world is corrupting and the preferred strategy for resisting that corruption is to flee. Like the ancient desert fathers (and mothers) who fled to the wilderness, a Kempis counsels flight.

I think dualism is one of the plagues of the Christian faith and a way that leads to serious spiritual deficiencies in one's life and even worse, to the neglect of God's cultural and missional mandates to infect this world with redemptive love. (By the way, Ignatius, as you will see, is a needed corrective to a Kempis). With that said, while some resistance is good, at the same time, I need a Kempis to push me on this very matter, for as the beloved apostle said, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in in the world - the cravings of the sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the Father but from the world" (see 1 John 2:15-17). If the sins of some parts of Christianity are a rigid separation and joyless legalism; for a much larger part of contemporary Christianity, it is a willful neglecting of holiness and a thoughtless accommodation to the pleasures of this world.

FOUR:
And here is where this post is headed, a Kempis provides an Ascetic Spirituality that is both repulsive to the contemporary Christian mind, and yet a desperately needed medicine for our prevailing soul sickness.

Ascetic spirituality is the way of self-denial concerning those powers within us and the temptations around us, for the purpose of godliness and holiness, of having our lives fully conformed to the image of Christ.

To give some biblical perspective, when John the Baptist comes striding out of the wilderness as a prophet and forerunner, we meet one who has been schooled in ascetic spirituality.

When Jesus talks about cross-carrying and self-denying he is talking about ascetic spirituality. When Paul talks about putting sin to death (mortification) he is talking about ascetic spirituality.

Here are some examples of the "disciplines of ascetic spirituality."

The practice of silence and solitude is an ascetic approach to resist the busyness, the noisiness and the endless distractions of the world, which keep me obliviously apart from the loving Presence of God. So the practice of silence and solitude is a discipline of withdraw and retreat. This is currently one of the few ascetic ways that is popular and desirable for many.

The practice of simplicity (and poverty) is an ascetic approach to resist the dominant spirit of the ages, the love of Mammon and the heart tendency to personal indulgence and over-indulgence. Over-indulgence is a way of life for so many of this. To practice simplicity which says no to most things as unnecessary encumbrances and hindrances - well, this is extremely rare. And to go even farther and practice what has been called "holy poverty" (St. Francis), there are very few who go this way.

The practice of humility and obscurity is an ascetic approach to the egocentric need for status, position, honor, and acclaim. Surely, this is a part of what Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount when he told us to do generous works of charity in secret. In a celebrity culture, in a world of image-doctoring, in a Facebook, networked world where everyone is the star of their own show, how rare is this practice of obscurity. And how necessary for many of us!

The practice of fasting as the ascetic way of taming the physical appetites that control us. In the language of Ignatius (and a Kempis and the Apostle John) we have many inordinate attachments to the lusts of the flesh and the world and these ascetic practices are means of breaking those attachments.
The practice of chastity (look the word up, it is a rich word) and for some celibacy is the ascetic way of resisting another of the counterfeit gods of the ages and that is sensuality and the unbridled pursuit of sexual pleasures. Need I say any more of this in our cultural age?

The practice of obedience is an ascetic way of resisting our inner "master of the universe" who is in control and answered to no one. Obedience is the willing, trusting surrender of one's control to another.

I find myself resisting a Kempis on these things and yet needing his guidance. I may think he goes too far and not always like his tactics, but I need these correctives. There are certainly many aberrant examples of ascetic practice that were common then and now. But they are the aberrations and I cannot use abuse as my excuse to ignore the right ways commended to me.

So when I can get past my wrong resistance, I am able to notice how strong these "worldly powers" are in my life. I know that the spiritual warfare I am called to includes warfare against the distortions of these passions. Ascetic spirituality provides perspectives and methods of resistance against those worldly powers. Which ones we use and the ways in which we practice them will need careful consideration and wise application, but there is need for a renewed Ascetic Spirituality.

Finally, here is how Ignatius borrows deeply from a Kempis, but goes considerably beyond him. I even like to see Ignatius as an "upgrade" to the spirituality of The Imitation of Christ.

First, Ignatius himself was profoundly grateful for a Kempis and The Imitation of Christ was his constant companion through life. The contributions of a Kempis are everywhere in the Ignatian Exercises and the criticisms I offered are not ones that are directly voiced by Ignatius (although I think he articulates them through his original way of proceeding on the spiritual/missional journey).

Second, Ignatius has a world engaging spirituality and not the world fleeing monastic approach. For Ignatius, there would be no monastic walls to keep the worldliness way from pious monks, his Jesuits were a missional order who saw the "world as their house." Instead of withdrawing from the evil and brokenness of this world, the Jesuits immersed (incarnated) themselves into those very places. They were servant-leaders doing the work of Christ in the world.

Third, Ignatius encouraged the Jesuits to become learned and wise in a wide variety of disciplines and literatures of the emerging modern world. Jesuits became mathematicians, scientists, anthropologists, educators, historians . . . if you can think of a field of inquiry, there was most likely a Jesuit who was at the forefront of the exciting discoveries in that time of history. Literature, theatre, music, art - what a Kempis would see as harmful distractions to the life of contemplation - the Jesuits pursued for the glory of God.

Fourth, Ignatius added a strong word of grace all throughout his exercises. Ignatius was a kindred soul with the Apostle Paul who boldly stated that he worked harder than anyone else, and yet he was no self-made man; rather, from beginning to end, he was a grace-made man. Ignatius never tires of reminding us, daily, ask for the grace and gifts of the Lord that are necessary. Without them, you will not progress on the journey.

Fifth, Ignatius used key ideas from Ascetic Spirituality and wove them into the Jesuit DNA, but he softened (actually eliminated) the extremes of asceticism that were common in other orders and societies of his day. He forbid certain common practices to be done by his Jesuits and mitigated many others. Ignatius did so because he practiced severe asceticism in his early years as a follower of Christ and did lasting damage to his body. This was hard earned, painfully acquired wisdom on his part.

Sixth, Ignatius teaches ascetic ways of spiritual formation in the broader context of a theology/spirituality of Loving Presence. Ignatius was a beloved in love with the Lover of his soul. Without this, ascetic
spirituality will inevitably go wrong. Because of this Love, Ignatius was motivated to do all that was needed, to rid himself of any attachments that pulled his heart away from the love of God.

So, for the sake of Love, I will continue to read Thomas a Kempis. I will monitor my resistance, reflect, pray and discern its source and nature. I will continue to allow Ignatius to guide me along on the journey.

And I will continue to ask for the graces I need to practice the ascetic disciplines that wean me from my disordered attachments.

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