

Chapter 1

Late Medieval Contexts



The late medieval period has often been portrayed intellectually in the West as a barren wasteland, studied rarely on its own terms but only as a prelude to the Reformation and the Enlightenment. In some real ways, it was not the happiest time in human history, and it was not the golden age of church history. It was a time of deep devotion and piety, of confession and the threat of purgatory. Concern over sin and personal guilt was exacerbated by the arrival of the bubonic plague, which reached Constantinople in 1347 and spread to most of Europe by late 1348. The mortality rate for those infected was around 70 percent, and by the next decade, the “Black Death” had killed about one-third of Europe. The mortality rate among caregiving priests was also high. Along with the famines of the early fourteenth century, these disasters combined to wipe out perhaps two-thirds of Europe’s population. Such events shaped the economy, theology, and psyche of Europe in profound ways. Death has always been a necessary feature of human experience, but death—not to mention, the end of the world—seemed a little nearer during the fourteenth century.

Many accounts of the late medieval church have focused on the problems leading to the Reformation—for example, the poor training of clergy, their immorality and frequent absenteeism, as well as the anticlericalism and superstitious piety of the laity. Although these features were present, their prevalence has been exaggerated. Some specific acts of corruption, however, were practiced at the highest levels of the church. The sale of indulgences was a practice open to such abuse. An indulgence is a partial or plenary pardon for temporal punishment of sin still due to someone whose guilt has been forgiven. Sin puts one in debt, and, according to debated biblical passages such as Dan. 4:27 and the venerable tradition it came to reflect, almsgiving was interpreted as one way (from the human side) to redeem or atone for sins. Indulgences, which came to include pardon for people already dead and not personally penitent, became an increasingly common revenue-gathering tactic of the church on the eve of the Reformation. Another well-known abuse was simony, the buying and selling of church offices, which encouraged greed and filled clerical positions with untrained and unqualified men.

The papacy itself was under direct assault. In the high medieval period, especially under Gregory VII (d. 1085) and Innocent III (ca. 1160–1216), the popes exercised their authority successfully by means of discipline and excommunication of both spiritual and political leaders. The papal claims of spiritual and temporal jurisdiction reached their apex under Boniface VIII (ca. 1235–1303), though he was ultimately unable to back them up. There was a growing sense that the papacy was concerned more with worldly matters than with spiritual responsibilities, and that the use or threat of physical force was inconsistent with the papal office. When the papacy moved to Avignon (1302–1378) and later was split between Avignon and Rome and two claimants rivaled for power (1378–1415), it seemed to many that the hierarchical church was in its last throes.

The papacy was weakened, but there was still minimal dissension from the Roman Church in the West. One could not exactly go down the street and start a new church, so some spoke out against



The world as it seemed—with the three continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa—to the cartographer Fra Mauro in 1459.

the immoral practices of the clergy and attempted to reform the church from within. These leaders have generally been known as “forerunners” of the Reformation. One of these forerunners, John Wyclif (ca. 1325–1384), came into open conflict with the Roman Church while he taught at Oxford. Like many reform movements before him, he was known for his emphasis on voluntary poverty and preaching, and like many after him, he opposed the doctrine of transubstantiation and advocated the translation of Scripture. Wyclif was condemned during his life and posthumously at the Council of Constance. His followers, the Lollards, became a kind of reform movement in England for the next century and translated the Latin Vulgate into English.

Although the late medieval era was characterized by struggles that would foreshadow cries for reform and, later, schism, it cannot simply be considered a time of decline and struggle in church and society. Contrary to popular opinion and much of the older scholarship on the period, the Western church witnessed a flowering of scholastic theology during this time. Vibrant, competing schools of thought influenced late medieval theology in a variety of directions. William of Ockham (ca. 1285–1347) was the most prominent nominalist and advocate of the so-called *via moderna*. Other theological luminaries during this period include Thomas Bradwardine (ca. 1295–1349), Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358), and Gabriel Biel (ca. 1420–1495). The *devotio moderna* and its most well-known spokesman, Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380–1471), inspired a renewal of piety throughout Western Europe. Late medieval Christianity was neither a monolithic system of thought nor a barren wasteland.

This period has also been described as the Renaissance, a rebirth of knowledge facilitated by a return to the classical sources. In the wake of the Crusades and the immigration of Greek speakers fleeing the Turkish conquest of Constantinople (1453), such classical sources became more readily available in the West. More important, the advent of Johann Gutenberg’s printing press in the 1450s made the mass production and distribution of books a reality, changing forever the world of scholarship and access to learning. The Renaissance was the age of learned humanists, such as Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374), Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), and Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1467–1536). Collectively, the humanistic questioning of authority and philological examination of Scripture would lay the theological foundation for the gradual shift to modernity in Reformation and post-Reformation Europe.

One of the key issues during this whole period, from the time of Boniface VIII to that of Erasmus, was the question of religious authority. As popes struggled to exercise the wide range of authority that some in the office had claimed, and while some were advocating a doctrine of papal infallibility, other theologians were seeking to limit the pope’s power, both spiritually and politically. Most theologians and canonists agreed that Scripture was the primary theological norm, but they differed on who or what should be the norm of interpretation. Should the pope, the ecumenical council, or individual scholastic theologians have the final say on biblical interpretation? And—during the papal schism—which pope, or which theologian and school of thought? For a time, the late medieval church was able to embrace the various tensions created by these debates. But the seeds of schism were being sown, and the harvest would prove to be plentiful.



A. Doctrinal Controversies

Selection 1: Pope Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctam* (1302)

Pope Boniface VIII (ca. 1235–1303) had offended King Philip IV of France, who then cut off French contributions to the Roman Church. On November 18, 1302, Boniface responded to the French king’s assertion of power by issuing the bull—that is, an official papal document—Unam sanctam. Boniface’s argument for supreme papal authority begins with quotations from three authoritative sources: one from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), one from Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) (Epistle 73.21), and a few from Scripture. He proceeds to make his case by means of typological exegesis and appeals to traditional teachings of the church. Boniface’s defense of the supreme authority of the pope over the state was promptly answered by King Philip, who sent men to plunder the papal palace and abduct Boniface himself, who died a few weeks later. A new precedent was set in the ongoing struggle between church authority and state authority.

We are obliged by faith to believe and hold—and we do firmly believe and sincerely confess—that there is one holy, catholic and apostolic church, and that outside this church there is neither salvation nor remission of sins. . . . In which church there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. At the time of the flood there was one ark of Noah, symbolizing the one church; this was completed in one cubit and had one, namely Noah, as helmsman and captain; outside which all things on earth, we read, were destroyed.¹ . . . Of this one and only church there is one body and one head—not two heads,

like a monster—namely Christ, and Christ’s vicar is Peter, and Peter’s successor, for the Lord said to Peter himself, “Feed my sheep.” “My sheep” he said in general, not these or those sheep; wherefore he is understood to have committed them all to him. Therefore, if the Greeks or others say that they were not committed to Peter and his successors, they necessarily confess that they are not of Christ’s sheep, for the Lord says in John, “There is one fold and one shepherd.”

And we learn from the words of the gospel that in this church and in her power are two swords, the spiritual and the temporal. For when the apostles said, “Behold here” (that is, in the church, since it was the apostles who spoke) “are two swords”—the Lord did not reply, “It is too much,” but “It is enough.” Truly he who denies that the temporal sword is in the power of Peter, misunderstands the words of the Lord, “Put up thy sword into the sheath.” Both are in the power of the church, the spiritual sword and the material. But the latter is to be used for the church, the former by her; the former by the priest, the latter by kings and captains but at the will and by the permission of the priest. The one sword, then, should be under the other, and temporal authority subject to spiritual. For when the apostle says, “There is no power but of God, and the powers that be ordained of God,” they would not be so ordained were not one sword made subject to the other. . . .

Thus, concerning the church and her power, is the prophecy of Jeremiah fulfilled, “See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms,” etc. If, therefore, the earthly power err, it shall be judged by the spiritual power; and if a lesser power err, it shall be judged by a greater. But if the supreme power err, it can be judged only by God, not by man; for the testimony of the apostle is “The spiritual man judgeth all things, yet he himself is

1. This typology is loosely based on 1 Pet. 3:18-22.

judged of no man.” For this authority, although given to a man and exercised by a man, is not human, but rather divine, given at God’s mouth to Peter and established on a rock for him and his successors in him whom he confessed, the Lord saying to Peter himself, “Whatsoever thou shalt bind,” etc. Whoever therefore resists this power thus ordained of God, resists the ordinance of God. . . . Furthermore we declare, state, define and pronounce that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff.

[*Papal Primacy and the Universal Church*, ed. P. Empie and T. A. Murphy (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), 106–7]

Selection 2: *Propositions of Wyclif Condemned* (1382 and 1415) and *The Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* (1395)

John Wyclif (ca. 1325–1384) was a professor at Oxford University and a pastor in Lutterworth, England. Because of his controversial writings, he was condemned as a heretic and his followers persecuted. The first set of excerpts is from propositions against Wyclif that appeared at a condemnation in London in 1382 and, with numerous additions, at the Council of Constance (posthumously) in 1415. The second document enumerates several beliefs of the early Lollards, the name pejoratively given to Wyclif’s followers. Many of the reformist views they advocate would be promoted in the sixteenth-century Reformation.

Over a decade after Constance, in order to reinforce the condemnation, Wyclif’s bones were exhumed and burned. The Lollard critique of the church, rejection of transubstantiation, and vernacular translation of Scripture anticipated later reforms; thus Wyclif has been known as the “Morning Star” of the Reformation.

Propositions of Wyclif Condemned

1. That the material substance of bread and the material substance of wine remain in the Sacrament of the altar. . . .

3. That Christ is not in the Sacrament essentially and really, in his own corporeal presence. . . .

30. That the excommunication of the Pope or of any prelate is not to be feared, because it is the censure of antichrist. . . .

42. That it is fatuous to believe in the indulgences of the Pope and the bishops. . . .

The Lollard Conclusions

1. That when the Church of England began to go mad after temporalities, like its great stepmother the Roman Church, and churches were authorized by appropriation in divers places, faith, hope, and charity began to flee from our Church, because pride, with its doleful progeny of moral sins, claimed this under title of truth. This conclusion is general, and proved by experience, custom, and manner or fashion, as you shall afterwards hear.

2. That our usual priesthood which began in Rome, pretended to be of power more lofty than the angels, is not the priesthood which Christ ordained for His apostles. This conclusion is proved because the Roman priesthood is bestowed with signs, rites, and pontifical blessings, of small virtue, nowhere exemplified in Holy Scripture, because the bishop’s ordinal and the New Testament scarcely agree, and we cannot see that the Holy Spirit, by reason of any such signs, confers the gift, for He and all His excellent gifts cannot consist in any one with mortal sin. . . .

3. That the law of continence enjoined on priests, which was first ordained to the prejudice of women, brings sodomy into all the Holy Church, but we excuse ourselves by the Bible because the decree says that we should not

mention it, though suspected. Reason and experience prove this conclusion: reason, because the good living of ecclesiastics must have a natural outlet or worse; experience, because the secret proof of such men is that they find delight in women, and when thou hast proved such a man mark him well, because he is one of them. . . .

4. That the pretended miracle of the sacrament of bread drives all men, but a few, to idolatry, because they think that the Body of Christ which is never away from heaven could by power of the priest's word be enclosed essentially in a little bread which they show the people; but God grant that they might be willing to believe what the evangelical doctor² says in his *Triialogus* (iv. 7), that the bread of the altar is habitually the Body of Christ, for we take it that in this way any faithful man and woman can by God's law perform the sacrament of that bread without any such miracle. A final corollary is that although the Body of Christ has been granted eternal joy, the service of *Corpus Christi*, instituted by Brother Thomas [Aquinas], is not true but is fictitious and full of false miracles. . . .

5. That exorcisms and blessings performed over wine, bread, water and oil, salt, wax, and incense, the stones of the altar, and church walls, over clothing, mitre,³ cross, and pilgrims' staves, are the genuine performance of necromancy rather than of sacred theology. This conclusion is proved as follows, because by such exorcisms creatures are honoured as being of higher virtue than they are in their own nature, and we do not see any change in any creature which is so exorcized, save by false faith which is the principal characteristic of the Devil's art. A corollary: that if the book of

exorcizing holy water, read in church, were entirely trustworthy we think truly that the holy water used in church would be the best medicine for all kinds of illnesses—sores, for instance; whereas we experience the contrary day by day.

6. That king and bishop in one person, prelate and judge in temporal causes, curate and officer in secular office, puts any kingdom beyond good rule. This conclusion is clearly proved because the temporal and spiritual are two halves of the entire Holy Church. And so he who has applied himself to one should not meddle with the other, for no one can serve two masters. It seems that hermaphrodite or ambidexter would be good names for such men of double estate. . . .

7. That special prayers for the souls of the dead offered in our Church, preferring one before another in name, are a false foundation of alms, and for that reason all houses of alms in England have been wrongly founded. This conclusion is proved by two reasons: the one is that meritorious prayer, and of any effect, ought to be a work proceeding from deep charity, and perfect charity leaves out no one, for "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." And so it is clear to us that the gift of temporal good bestowed on the priesthood and houses of alms is a special incentive to private prayer which is not far from simony. For another reason is that special prayer made for men condemned is very displeasing to God. And although it be doubtful, it is probable to faithful Christian people that founders of a house of alms have for their poisonous endowment passed over for the most part to the broad road. The corollary is: effectual prayer springing from perfect love would in general embrace all whom God would have saved, and would do away with that well-worn way or merchandise in special prayers made for the possessory mendicants and other hired

2. That is, Wyclif, who, in his book *Triialogus*, described his views of the Eucharist.

3. The mitre is the headdress of a bishop.

priests, who are a people of great burden to the whole realm, kept in idleness: for it has been proved in one book, which the king had, that a hundred houses of alms would suffice in all the realm, and from this would rather accrue possible profit to the temporal estate.

8. That pilgrimages, prayers, and offerings made to blind crosses or roods, and to deaf images of wood or stone, are pretty well akin to idolatry and far from alms, and although these be forbidden and imaginary, a book of error to the lay folk, still the customary image of the Trinity is specially abominable. This conclusion God clearly proves, bidding alms to be done to the needy man because they are the image of God, and more like than wood or stone; for God did not say, "let us make wood or stone in our likeness and image," but man; because the supreme honour which clerks call *latría* appertains to the Godhead only; and the lower honour which clerks call *dulia* appertains to man and angel and to no inferior creature.⁴ A corollary is that the service of the cross, performed twice in any year in our church, is full of idolatry, for if that should, so might the nails and lance be so highly honoured; then would the lips of Judas be relics indeed if any were able to possess them. . . .

9. That auricular confession which is said to be so necessary to the salvation of a man, with its pretended power of absolution, exalts the arrogance of priests and gives them opportunity of other secret colloquies which we will not speak of; for both lords and ladies attest that, for fear of their confessors, they dare not speak the truth. And at the time of confession there is a ready occasion or assignation, that is for "wooing," and other secret understandings leading to mortal sins. They themselves say that they are God's representatives to judge of every sin, to

pardon and cleanse whomsoever they please. They say that they have the keys of heaven and of hell, and can excommunicate and bless, bind and loose, at their will, so much so that for a drink, or twelve pence, they will sell the blessing of heaven with charter and close warrant sealed with the common seal. This conclusion is so notorious that it needs not any proof. It is a corollary that the pope of Rome, who has given himself out as treasurer of the whole Church, having in charge that worthy jewel of Christ's passion together with the merits of all saints in heaven, whereby he grants pretended indulgence from penalty and guilt, is a treasurer almost devoid of charity, in that he can set free all that are prisoners in hell at his will, and cause that they should never come to that place. But in this any Christian can well see there is much secret falsehood hidden away in our Church.

10. That manslaughter in war, or by pretended law of justice for a temporal cause, without spiritual revelation, is expressly contrary to the New Testament, which indeed is the law of grace and full of mercies. This conclusion is openly proved by the examples of Christ's preaching here on earth, for he specially taught a man to love his enemies, and to show them pity, and not to slay them. The reason is this, that for the most part, when men fight, after the first blow, charity is broken. And whoever dies without charity goes the straight road to hell. . . .

11. That the vow of continence made in our Church by women who are frail and imperfect in nature, is the cause of bringing in the gravest horrible sins possible to human nature, because, although the killing of abortive children before they are baptized and the destruction of nature by drugs are vile sins, yet connexion with themselves or brute beasts of any creature not having life surpasses them in foulness to such an extent as that they should be punished with the pains of hell. The corollary is that, widows and such as take the veil and the ring, being

4. The distinction between *latría* and *douleia* (in Greek) was dogmatized at the Council of Nicaea II (787).

delicately fed, we could wish that they were given in marriage, because we cannot excuse them from secret sins.

12. That the abundance of unnecessary arts practised in our realm nourishes much sin in waste, profusion, and disguise. This, experience and reason prove in some measure, because nature is sufficient for a man's necessity with few arts. . . .

This is our embassy, which Christ has bidden us fulfil, very necessary for this time for several reasons. And although these matters are briefly noted here they are however set forth at large in another book, and many others besides, at length in our own language, and we wish that these were accessible to all Christian people. We ask God then of His supreme goodness to reform our Church, as being entirely out of joint, to the perfectness of its first beginning.

[*Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th ed., ed. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder (Oxford University Press, 2011), 184–90]



Jan Hus at the Council of Constance

Selection 3: Council of Constance (1414–1418)

The Council of Constance met from 1414 until 1418.

Its tasks were (a) to put an end to the Great Papal Schism that began in 1378; (b) to deal with the doctrines of dissenters, such as John Wyclif and Jan Hus (ca. 1369–1415) (Hus was

burned at the stake at the council itself); and (c) to call for reformation of the church in “head and members.” Because this council successfully deposed anti-popes and appointed a new pope (Martin V), it became the paragon of the vibrant but short-lived “conciliar movement,” which sought to subject papal authority to that of ecumenical councils. Although the conciliar ideals stated

in the early sessions would not officially survive to the end of the council, later reformers would still hope for a council to which the pope would be subject.

Session 5 (6 April 1415)

In the name of the holy and undivided Trinity, Father and Son and holy Spirit. Amen. This holy synod of Constance, which is a general council, for the eradication of the present schism and for bringing unity and reform to God's church in head and members, legitimately assembled in the holy Spirit to the praise of almighty God, ordains, defines, decrees, discerns and declares as follows, in order that this union and reform of God's church may be obtained the more easily, securely, fruitfully and freely.

First it declares that, legitimately assembled in the holy Spirit, constituting a general council and representing the catholic church militant, it has power immediately from Christ; and that everyone of whatever state or dignity, even papal, is bound to obey it in those matters which pertain to the faith, the eradication of the said schism and the general reform of the said church of God in head and members.

Next, it declares that anyone of whatever condition, state or dignity, even papal, who contumaciously refuses to obey the past or future mandates, statutes, ordinances or precepts of this sacred council or of any other legitimately assembled general council, regarding the aforesaid things or matters pertaining to them, shall be subjected to well-deserved penance, unless he repents, and shall be duly punished, even by having recourse, if necessary, to other supports of the law. . . .⁵

5. This is the strongest statement of conciliarism, and the common sentiment it proclaims is far different from the Roman Church's later resting its ultimate authority in the pope (see Selection 96).

Session 12 (29 May 1415)

. . . The said holy synod decrees, determines and ordains for the good of unity in God's church that neither the lord Baldassare de Cossa, recently John XXIII, nor Angelo Correr nor Peter de Luna, called Gregory XII and Benedict XIII by their respective obediences, shall ever be re-elected as pope.⁶ If the contrary happens, it is by this very fact null and void. Nobody, of whatever dignity or pre-eminence even if he be emperor, king, cardinal or pontiff, may ever adhere to or obey them or any one of them, contrary to this decree, under pain of eternal damnation and of being a supporter of the said schism. Let those who presume to the contrary, if there are any in the future, also be firmly proceeded against in other ways, even by invoking the secular arm.

Session 39 (9 October 1417)

Since the Roman pontiff exercises such great power among mortals, it is right that he be bound all the more by the incontrovertible bonds of the faith and by the rites that are to be observed regarding the church's sacraments. We therefore decree and ordain, in order that the fullness of the faith may shine in a future Roman pontiff with singular splendour from the earliest moments of his becoming pope, that henceforth whoever is to be elected Roman pontiff shall make the following confession and profession in public, in front of his electors, before his election is published.

In the name of the holy and undivided Trinity, Father and Son and holy Spirit. Amen. In the year of our Lord's nativity one thousand etc., I, N{name}, elected pope, with both heart and

mouth confess and profess to almighty God, whose church I undertake with his assistance to govern, and to blessed Peter, prince of the apostles, that as long as I am in this fragile life I will firmly believe and hold the catholic faith, according to the traditions of the apostles, of the general councils and of other holy fathers, . . . and I will preserve this faith unchanged to the last dot and will confirm, defend and preach it to the point of death and the shedding of my blood, and likewise I will follow and observe in every way the rite handed down of the ecclesiastical sacraments of the catholic church. . . .

[*Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, 1:409, 418, 442]

**B. Piety**

Selection 4: Julian of Norwich, *Showings* (ca. 1393)

*Because late medieval women had no official ecclesiastical authority and rarely even unofficial teaching authority (Catherine of Siena [ca. 1347–1380] being a notable exception), women often left their mark by describing mystical visions they received directly from God. In *Showings, or Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1416), an English mystic, recorded sixteen revelations that she received in May 1373, along with her reflections on their meaning.*

The Fourth Chapter

And at this, suddenly I saw the red blood running down from under the crown, hot and flowing freely and copiously, a living stream, just as

6. These three men all claimed to be pope simultaneously. The Roman Church officially recognizes Gregory XII, whereas the other two are regarded as anti-popes, whose names (and numbers) were assumed by later popes.

it was at the time when the crown of thorns was pressed on his blessed head.⁷ I perceived, truly and powerfully, that it was he who just so, both God and man, himself suffered for me, who showed it to me without any intermediary.

And in the same revelation, suddenly the Trinity filled my heart full of the greatest joy, and I understood that it will be so in heaven without end to all who will come there. For the Trinity is God, God is the Trinity. . . .

I accepted it that at that time our Lord Jesus wanted, out of his courteous love, to show me comfort before my temptations began; for it seemed to me that I might well be tempted by devils, by God's permission and with his protection, before I would die. With this sight of his blessed Passion, with the divinity which I saw in my understanding, I knew well that this was strength enough for me, yes, and for all living creatures who were to be saved, against all the devils of hell and against all their spiritual enemies.

In this he brought our Lady St. Mary to my understanding. I saw her spiritually in her bodily likeness, a simple, humble maiden, young in years, grown a little taller than a child, of the stature which she had when she conceived. Also God showed me part of the wisdom and the truth of her soul, and in this I understood the reverent contemplation with which she beheld her God, who is her Creator, marveling with great reverence that he was willing to be born of her who was a simple creature created by him. . . . Above her is no created thing, except the blessed humanity of Christ, as I saw.

The Fifth Chapter

At the same time as I saw this sight of the head bleeding, our good Lord showed a spiritual sight of his familiar love. I saw that he is to us

7. Well before Julian, the Western medieval church had developed a piety that focused intensely on the crucified body of Jesus.

everything which is good and comforting for our help. . . .

And in this he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God preserves it. But what did I see in it? It is that God is the Creator and the protector and the lover. For until I am substantially united to him, I can never have perfect rest or true happiness, until, that is, I am so attached to him that there can be no created thing between my God and me.

This little thing which is created seemed to me as if it could have fallen into nothing because of its littleness. We need to have knowledge of this, so that we may delight in despising as nothing everything created, so as to love and have uncreated God. For this is the reason why our hearts and souls are not in perfect ease, because here we seek rest which is so little, in which there is no rest, and we do not know our God who is almighty, all wise and all good, for he is true rest. God wishes to be known, and it pleases him that we should rest in him; for everything which is beneath him is not sufficient for us. . . .⁸

And also our good Lord revealed that it is very greatly pleasing to him that a simple soul should come naked, openly and familiarly. For this is the loving yearning of the soul through

8. The language here is Augustinian and reminiscent of the opening paragraph of *Confessions*.

the touch of the Holy Spirit, from the understanding which I have in this revelation: God, of your goodness give me yourself, for you are enough for me, and I can ask for nothing which is less which can pay you full worship. And if I ask anything which is less, always I am in want; but only in you do I have everything.

And these words of the goodness of God are very dear to the soul, and very close to touching our Lord's will, for his goodness fills all his creatures and all his blessed works full, and endlessly overflows in them. For he is everlastingness, and he made us only for himself, and restored us by his precious Passion and always preserves us in his blessed love; and all this is of his goodness.

The Sixth Chapter

This revelation was given to my understanding to teach our souls wisely to adhere to the goodness of God; and in that same time our habits of prayer were brought to my mind, how in our ignorance of love we are accustomed to employ many intermediaries. Then I saw truly that it is more honour to God and more true delight if we faithfully pray to him for his goodness, and adhere to this by grace, with true understanding and steadfast belief, than if we employed all the intermediaries of which a heart may think. . . .

For what I shall say came to my mind at the same time. We pray to God for his holy flesh and for his precious blood, his holy Passion, his precious death and his glorious wounds, for all the blessings of nature and the endless life that we have of all this, it is of the goodness of God. And we pray to him for the love of the sweet mother who bore him, and all the help that we have of her, it is of his goodness. And we pray for his holy Cross on which he died, and all the help and the strength that we have of that Cross, it is of his goodness. And in the same

way, all the help that we have from particular saints and from all the blessed company of heaven, the precious love and the holy, endless friendship that we have from them, it is of his goodness. For the intermediaries which the goodness of God has ordained to help us are very lovely and many. Of them the chief and principal intermediary is the blessed nature which he took of the virgin, with all the intermediaries which preceded and followed, which are a part of our redemption and of our endless salvation.

Therefore it pleases him that we seek him and honour him through intermediaries, understanding and knowing that he is the goodness of everything. For the highest form of prayer is to the goodness of God, which comes down to us to our humblest needs. It gives life to our souls and makes them live and grow in grace and virtue. . . .

A man walks upright, and the food in his body is shut in as if in a well-made purse. When the time of his necessity comes, the purse is opened and then shut again, in most seemly fashion. And it is God who does this, as it is shown when he says that he comes down to us in our humblest needs. For he does not despise what he has made, nor does he disdain to serve us in the simplest natural functions of our body, for love of the soul which he created in his own likeness. For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the trunk, so are we, soul and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of God. . . .

And therefore this lesson of love was revealed, with all that follows, as you will see, for the strength and foundation of everything was revealed in the first vision. For of all things, contemplating and loving the Creator makes the soul to seem less in its own sight, and fills it full with reverent fear and true

meekness, and with much love for its fellow Christians.

The Seventh Chapter

And to teach us this, as I understand, our good Lord showed our Lady St. Mary at the same time, that is to signify the exalted wisdom and truth which were hers as she contemplated her Creator. This wisdom and truth showed her in contemplation how great, how exalted, how mighty and how good was her God. . . .

And during all the time that our Lord showed me this spiritual vision which I have now described, I saw the bodily vision of the copious bleeding of the head persist. The great drops of blood fell from beneath the crown like pellets, looking as if they came from the veins, and as they issued they were a brownish red, for the blood was very thick, and as they spread they turned bright red. . . .

The copiousness resembles the drops of water which fall from the eaves of a house after a great shower of rain, falling so thick that no human ingenuity can count them. And in their roundness as they spread over the forehead they were like a herring's scales.

At the time three things occurred to me: The drops were round like pellets as the blood issued, they were round like a herring's scales as they spread, they were like raindrops off a house's eaves, so many that they could not be counted. This vision was living and vivid and hideous and fearful and sweet and lovely; and in all this vision which I saw, what gave me most strength was that our good Lord, who is so to be revered and feared, is so familiar and so courteous, and most of all this filled me full of delight and certainty in my soul.

And so that I might understand this, he showed me this plain example. It is the greatest honour which a majestic king or a great lord can do for a poor servant, to be familiar with

him; and especially if he makes this known himself, privately and publicly, with great sincerity and happy mien, this poor creature will think: See, what greater honour and joy could this noble lord give me than to demonstrate to me, who am so little, this wonderful familiarity? . . .

So it is with our Lord Jesus and us, for truly it is the greatest possible joy, as I see it, that he who is highest and mightiest, noblest and most honourable, is lowest and humblest, most familiar and courteous. And verily and truly he will manifest to us all this marvellous joy when we shall see him. . . . For the greatest abundance of joy which we shall have, as I see it, is this wonderful courtesy and familiarity of our Father, who is our Creator, in our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our brother and our saviour. But no man can know this wonderful familiarity in this life, unless by a special revelation from our Lord, or from a great abundance of grace, given within by the Holy Spirit. But faith and belief together with love deserve the reward, and so it is received by grace. For our life is founded on faith with hope and love. This is revealed to whom God wills, and he plainly teaches and expounds and declares it, with many secret details which are a part of our faith and belief, which are to be known to God's glory. And when the revelation, given only for a time, has passed and is hidden, then faith preserves it by the grace of the Holy Spirit to the end of our lives. And so in the revelation there is nothing different from the faith, neither less nor more, as will be seen by our Lord's intention in this same matter, when the whole revelation is completed.

The Eighth Chapter

And as long as I saw this vision of the copious bleeding of the head, I could not stop saying

these words: Blessed be the Lord! In this revelation I understood six things. The first is the tokens of his blessed Passion and the plentiful shedding of his precious blood. The second is the virgin who is his beloved mother. The third is the blessed divinity, that always was and is and shall be, almighty, all wisdom and all love. The fourth is everything which he has made, for I know well that heaven and earth and all creation are great, generous and beautiful and good. But the reason why it seemed to my eyes so little was because I saw it in the presence of him who is the Creator. To any soul who sees the Creator of all things, all that is created seems very little. The fifth is that he who created it created everything for love, and by the same love is it preserved, and always will be without end, as has been said already. The sixth is that God is everything which is good, as I see, and the goodness which everything has is God.

God showed me this in the first vision, and he gave me space and time to contemplate it. And then the bodily vision ceased, and the spiritual vision persisted in my understanding. . . .

In all this I was greatly moved in love towards my fellow Christians, that they might all see and know the same as I saw, for I wished it to be a comfort to them, for all this vision was shown for all men.

Then I said to those who were with me: Today is my Doomsday. And I said this because I expected to die; because on the day that a man or a woman dies he receives particular judgment as he will be forever, as I understand. . . .

Everything that I say about me I mean to apply to all my fellow Christians, for I am taught that this is what our Lord intends in this spiritual revelation. And therefore I pray you all for God's sake, and I counsel you for your own profit, that you disregard the wretch to whom it was shown, and that mightily, wisely

and meekly you contemplate upon God, who out of his courteous love and his endless goodness was willing to show it generally, to the comfort of us all. . . .

The Ninth Chapter

I am not good because of the revelations, but only if I love God better; and inasmuch as you love God better, it is more to you than to me.⁹ I do not say this to those who are wise, because they know it well. But I say it to you who are simple, to give you comfort and strength; for we are all one in love, for truly it was not revealed to me that God loves me better than the humblest soul who is in a state of grace. For I am sure that there are many who never had revelations or visions, but only the common teaching of Holy Church, who love God better than I. If I pay special attention to myself, I am nothing at all; but in general I am, I hope, in the unity of love with all my fellow Christians. For it is in this unity that the life of all men consists who will be saved. For God is everything that is good, as I see; and God has made everything that is made, and God loves everything that he has made. And he who has general love for all his fellow Christians in God has love towards everything that is. For in mankind which will be saved is comprehended all, that is to say all that is made and the maker of all. For God is in man and in God is all. And he who loves thus loves all. And I hope by the grace of God that he who may see it so will be taught the truth and greatly comforted, if he has need of comfort.

I speak of those who will be saved, for at this time God showed me no one else. But in

9. Julian downplays the importance of her visions in comparison with the teaching of the church. Such a sentiment is common among the so-called mystics, challenging the popular dichotomy between (systematic) theology and mysticism.

everything I believe as Holy Church preaches and teaches. For the faith of Holy Church, which I had before I had understanding,¹⁰ and which, as I hope by the grace of God, I intend to preserve whole and to practise, was always in my sight, and I wished and intended never to accept anything which might be contrary to it. And to this end and with this intention I contemplated the revelation with all diligence, for throughout this blessed revelation I contemplated it as God intended.

All this was shown in three parts, that is to say, by bodily vision and by words formed in my understanding and by spiritual vision. But I may not and cannot show the spiritual visions as plainly and fully as I should wish. But I trust in our Lord God almighty that he will, out of his goodness and for love of you, make you accept it more spiritually and more sweetly than I can or may tell it. . . .

The Fifty-Ninth Chapter

And we have all this bliss by mercy and grace, and this kind of bliss we never could have had and known, unless that property of goodness which is in God had been opposed, through which we have this bliss. For wickedness has been suffered to rise in opposition to that goodness; and the goodness of mercy and grace opposed that wickedness, and turned everything to goodness and honour for all who will be saved. For this is that property in God which opposes good to evil. So Jesus Christ, who opposes good to evil, is our true Mother. We have our being from him, where the foundation of motherhood begins, with all the sweet protection of love which endlessly follows.

As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother, and he revealed that in everything,

and especially in these sweet words where he says: I am he; that is to say: I am he, the power and goodness of fatherhood; I am he, the wisdom and the lovingness of motherhood; I am he, the light and the grace which is all blessed love; I am he, the Trinity; I am he, the unity; I am he, the great supreme goodness of every kind of thing; I am he who makes you to love; I am he who makes you to long; I am he, the endless fulfilling of all true desires. For where the soul is highest, noblest, most honourable, still it is lowest, meekest and mildest.

And from this foundation in substance we have all the powers of our sensuality by the gift of nature, and by the help and the furthering of mercy and grace, without which we cannot profit. Our great Father, almighty God, who is being, knows us and loved us before time began. Out of this knowledge, in his most wonderful deep love, by the prescient eternal counsel of all the blessed Trinity, he wanted the second person to become our Mother, our brother and our saviour. From this it follows that as truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. Our Father wills, our Mother works, our good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms. And therefore it is our part to love our God in whom we have our being, reverently thanking and praising him for our creation, mightily praying to our Mother for mercy and pity, and to our Lord the Holy Spirit for help and grace. For in these three is all our life: nature, mercy and grace, of which we have mildness, patience and pity, and hatred of sin and wickedness; for the virtues must of themselves hate sin and wickedness.

And so Jesus is our true Mother in nature by our first creation, and he is our true Mother in grace by his taking our created nature. All the lovely works and all the sweet loving offices of beloved motherhood are appropriated to the second person, for in him we have this godly

10. That is, prior to the revelations.

will, whole and safe forever, both in nature and in grace, from his own goodness proper to him.

I understand three ways of contemplating motherhood in God. The first is the foundation of our nature's creation; the second is his taking of our nature, where the motherhood of grace begins; the third is the motherhood at work. And in that, by the same grace, everything is penetrated, in length and in breadth, in height and in depth without end; and it is all one love.

[*Julian of Norwich: Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 181–92, 295–97]

Selection 5: “Lord, Who Am I?” (early fifteenth century)

The manuscript designated “Beinecke 757” was a typical late medieval devotional book intended to facilitate the daily piety of lay-people. Among the many prayer settings included in its pages, this prayer to be recited before communion serves as a counterexample to the later Protestant caricature that Mass was a rote ceremony in which the status of the worshiper’s heart was of no consequence.

Lord, who am I or what kind of person that I should dare come up to your table, I who am about to receive your most sacred body? I know, nevertheless, I know and truly confess that you are able to make me worthy, you who alone can make pure something conceived from impure seed. I beg you all powerful, all sweet, and all holy one, that through the merits of the blessed Virgin Mary and all your elect you may teach me and permit me with such purity of heart and cleanliness of mind, with such devotion and reverence, to come up to so admirable a sacrament, as far as is fitting and expedient.

I implore, that when my heart stirs with the sweetness of your blessed presence, there may be complete cleansing of my spiritual languor, there may be washing away of my sins.¹¹ May I have constant protection against dangers. May my heart be enflamed with your love. Let my soul taste now how sweet you are, Lord, tasting you so completely that the voluptuousness of the flesh not deceive it.

O delectable bread! O sweetest food! O desirable meal! O sweet feast restoring all things, and in you never failing! May it please you that now, taking you up faithfully, expeditiously, and purely, my soul the sinner may receive moral virtue from you in this its journey; and thus it may perfect its journey through you and to you without the impediment of Satan. Small is the house of my soul, Lord, whither you may come, and by your grace it may grow larger for you. It is ruined; repair it. It has done many things that offend you.

But to whom except you will I cry? Make me pure by my eyes. Mortify your servants in my members and all lustful actions so that you, king of virgins and lover of chastity, may take up peaceful lodging in my tabernacle. You who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, God for ever and ever. Amen.

[Trans. Margot Fassler, in *Worship in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Change and Continuity in Religious Practice*, ed. Karin Maag and John D. Witvliet (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 21–22]

Selection 6: Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ* (1418)

This anonymous manual of spiritual devotion has traditionally been ascribed to

11. This prayer reflects the intimate connection in the sacrament joining the heart of the worshiper, Christ's bodily presence, and the forgiveness of sins.

Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380–1471), a Dutch monk belonging to the Brethren of the Common Life. The purpose of the book is to lead believers to perfection by following in the steps of Jesus Christ. The book’s simple but profound aphorisms reflect the late medieval piety known as devotio moderna, which continues to inspire readers.

Book One: Thoughts Helpful in the Life of the Soul
The First Chapter
Imitating Christ and Despising All Vanities on Earth

“He who follows Me, walks not in darkness,” says the Lord (John 8:12). By these words of Christ we are advised to imitate His life and habits, if we wish to be truly enlightened and free from all blindness of heart. Let our chief effort, therefore, be to study the life of Jesus Christ.

The teaching of Christ is more excellent than all the advice of the saints, and he who has His spirit will find in it a hidden manna. Now, there are many who hear the Gospel often but care little for it because they have not the spirit of Christ. Yet whoever wishes to understand fully the words of Christ must try to pattern his whole life on that of Christ.

What good does it do to speak learnedly about the Trinity if, lacking humility, you displease the Trinity? Indeed it is not learning that makes a man holy and just, but a virtuous life makes him pleasing to God. I would rather feel contrition than know how to define it. For what would it profit us to know the whole Bible by heart and the principles of all the philosophers if we live without grace and the love of God? Vanity of vanities and all is vanity, except to love God and serve Him alone.

This is the greatest wisdom—to seek the kingdom of heaven through contempt of the world. It is vanity, therefore, to seek and trust in riches that perish. It is vanity also to court

honor and to be puffed up with pride. It is vanity to follow the lusts of the body and to desire things for which severe punishment later must come. It is vanity to wish for long life and to care little about a well-spent life. It is vanity to be concerned with the present only and not to make provision for things to come. It is vanity to love what passes quickly and not to look ahead where eternal joy abides.

Often recall the proverb: “The eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing.”¹² Try, moreover, to turn your heart from the love of things visible and bring yourself to things invisible. For they who follow their own evil passions stain their consciences and lose the grace of God.

The Second Chapter
Having a Humble Opinion of Self

Every man naturally desires knowledge,¹³ but what good is knowledge without fear of God? Indeed a humble rustic who serves God is better than a proud intellectual who neglects his soul to study the course of the stars. He who knows himself well becomes mean in his own eyes and is not happy when praised by men.

If I knew all things in the world and had not charity, what would it profit me before God Who will judge me by my deeds?

Shun too great a desire for knowledge, for in it there is much fretting and delusion. Intellectuals like to appear learned and to be called wise. Yet there are many things the knowledge of which does little or no good to the soul, and he who concerns himself about other things than those which lead to salvation is very unwise.

Many words do not satisfy the soul; but a good life eases the mind and a clean conscience inspires great trust in God.

12. Eccles. 1:8.

13. These are the opening words of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.

The more you know and the better you understand, the more severely will you be judged, unless your life is also the more holy. Do not be proud, therefore, because of your learning or skill. Rather, fear because of the talent given you. If you think you know many things and understand them well enough, realize at the same time that there is much you do not know. Hence, do not affect wisdom, but admit your ignorance. Why prefer yourself to anyone else when many are more learned, more cultured than you?

If you wish to learn and appreciate something worth while, then love to be unknown and considered as nothing. Truly to know and despise self is the best and most perfect counsel. To think of oneself as nothing, and always to think well and highly of others is the best and most perfect wisdom. . . .

The Third Chapter The Doctrine of Truth

Happy is he to whom truth manifests itself, not in signs and words that fade, but as it actually is. Our opinions, our senses often deceive us and we discern very little.

What good is much discussion of involved and obscure matters when our ignorance of them will not be held against us on Judgment Day? Neglect of things which are profitable and necessary and undue concern with those which are irrelevant and harmful, are great folly.

We have eyes and do not see.

What, therefore, have we to do with questions of philosophy? He to whom the Eternal Word speaks is free from theorizing. For from this Word are all things and of Him all things speak—the Beginning Who also speaks to us. Without this Word no man understands or judges aright. He to whom it becomes everything, who traces all things to it and who sees

all things in it, may ease his heart and remain at peace with God.

O God, You Who are the truth, make me one with You in love everlasting. I am often wearied by the many things I hear and read, but in You is all that I long for. Let the learned be still, let all creatures be silent before You; You alone speak to me.

The more recollected a man is, and the more simple of heart he becomes, the easier he understands sublime things, for he receives the light of knowledge from above. The pure, simple, and steadfast spirit is not distracted by many labors, for he does them all for the honor of God. And since he enjoys interior peace he seeks no selfish end in anything. What, indeed, gives more trouble and affliction than uncontrolled desires of the heart?

A good and devout man arranges in his mind the things he has to do, not according to the whims of evil inclination but according to the dictates of right reason. Who is forced to struggle more than he who tries to master himself? This ought to be our purpose, then: to conquer self, to become stronger each day, to advance in virtue.

Every perfection in this life has some imperfection mixed with it and no learning of ours is without some darkness. Humble knowledge of self is a surer path to God than the ardent pursuit of learning. . . .

If men used as much care in uprooting vices and implanting virtues as they do in discussing problems, there would not be so much evil and scandal in the world, or such laxity in religious organizations. On the day of judgment, surely, we shall not be asked what we have read but what we have done; not how well we have spoken but how well we have lived.

Tell me, where now are all the masters and teachers whom you knew so well in life and who were famous for their learning? Others

have already taken their places and I know not whether they ever think of their predecessors. During life they seemed to be something; now they are seldom remembered. How quickly the glory of the world passes away! . . .

How many there are who perish because of vain worldly knowledge and too little care for serving God. They became vain in their own conceits because they chose to be great rather than humble.

He is truly great who has great charity. He is truly great who is little in his own eyes and makes nothing of the highest honor. He is truly wise who looks upon all earthly things as folly that he may gain Christ. He who does God's will and renounces his own is truly very learned.

The Fourth Chapter Prudence in Action

Do not yield to every impulse and suggestion but consider things carefully and patiently in the light of God's will. For very often, sad to say, we are so weak that we believe and speak evil of others rather than good. . . .

Not to act rashly or to cling obstinately to one's opinion, not to believe everything people say or to spread abroad the gossip one has heard, is great wisdom.

Take counsel with a wise and conscientious man. Seek the advice of your betters in preference to following your own inclinations.

A good life makes a man wise according to God and gives him experience in many things, for the more humble he is and the more subject to God, the wiser and the more at peace he will be in all things.

The Fifth Chapter Reading the Holy Scripture

Truth, not eloquence, is to be sought in reading the Holy Scriptures; and every part must be read in the spirit in which it was written. For in

the Scriptures we ought to seek profit rather than polished diction.

Likewise we ought to read simple and devout books as willingly as learned and profound ones. We ought not to be swayed by the authority of the writer, whether he be a great literary light or an insignificant person, but by the love of simple truth. We ought not to ask who is speaking, but mark what is said. Men pass away, but the truth of the Lord remains forever.¹⁴ God speaks to us in many ways without regard for persons.

Our curiosity often impedes our reading of the Scriptures, when we wish to understand and mull over what we ought simply to read and pass by.

If you would profit from it, therefore, read with humility, simplicity, and faith, and never seek a reputation for being learned. Seek willingly and listen attentively to the words of the saints; do not be displeased with the sayings of the ancients, for they were not made without purpose.

The Sixth Chapter Unbridled Affections

When a man desires a thing too much, he at once becomes ill at ease. A proud and avaricious man never rests, whereas he who is poor and humble of heart lives in a world of peace. . . .

True peace of heart, then, is found in resisting passions, not in satisfying them. There is no peace in the carnal man, in the man given to vain attractions, but there is peace in the fervent and spiritual man.

The Seventh Chapter Avoiding False Hope and Pride

Vain is the man who puts his trust in men, in created things.

14. Cf. Isa. 40:7-8.

Do not be ashamed to serve others for the love of Jesus Christ and to seem poor in this world. Do not be self-sufficient but place your trust in God. Do what lies in your power and God will aid your good will.¹⁵ Put no trust in your own learning nor in the cunning of any man, but rather in the grace of God Who helps the humble and humbles the proud.

If you have wealth, do not glory in it, nor in friends because they are powerful, but in God Who gives all things and Who desires above all to give Himself. Do not boast of personal stature or of physical beauty, qualities which are marred and destroyed by a little sickness. Do not take pride in your talent or ability, lest you displease God to Whom belongs all the natural gifts that you have.

Do not think yourself better than others lest, perhaps, you be accounted worse before God Who knows what is in man. Do not take pride in your good deeds, for God's judgments differ from those of men and what pleases them often displeases Him. If there is good in you, see more good in others, so that you may remain humble. It does no harm to esteem yourself less than anyone else, but it is very harmful to think yourself better than even one. The humble live in continuous peace, while in the hearts of the proud are envy and frequent anger.

The Eighth Chapter Shunning Over-Familiarity

Do not open your heart to every man, but discuss your affairs with one who is wise and who fears God. Do not keep company with young people and strangers. Do not fawn upon the

15. The late medieval maxim "To those who do what is in them God will not deny grace" was a popular saying among some scholastic theologians, such as Gabriel Biel (ca. 1420–1495), but opposed by strict Augustinians. The writer here expresses the sentiment from within an otherwise Augustinian context.

rich, and do not be fond of mingling with the great. Associate with the humble and the simple, with the devout and virtuous, and with them speak of edifying things. Be not intimate with any woman, but generally commend all good women to God. Seek only the intimacy of God and of His angels, and avoid the notice of men.

We ought to have charity for all men but familiarity with all is not expedient. Sometimes it happens that a person enjoys a good reputation among those who do not know him, but at the same time is held in slight regard by those who do. . . .

The Ninth Chapter Obedience and Subjection

It is a very great thing to obey, to live under a superior and not to be one's own master, for it is much safer to be subject than it is to command. Many live in obedience more from necessity than from love. Such become discontented and dejected on the slightest pretext. . . .

Go where you may, you will find no rest except in humble obedience to the rule of authority. Dreams of happiness expected from change and different places have deceived many.

Everyone, it is true, wishes to do as he pleases and is attracted to those who agree with him. But if God be among us, we must at times give up our opinions for the blessings of peace.

Furthermore, who is so wise that he can have full knowledge of everything? Do not trust too much in your own opinions, but be willing to listen to those of others. . . .

The Tenth Chapter Avoiding Idle Talk

Shun the gossip of men as much as possible, for discussion of worldly affairs, even though sincere, is a great distraction inasmuch as we are quickly ensnared and captivated by vanity.

Many a time I wish that I had held my peace and had not associated with men. Why, indeed, do we converse and gossip among ourselves when we so seldom part without a troubled conscience? We do so because we seek comfort from one another's conversation and wish to ease the mind wearied by diverse thoughts. Hence, we talk and think quite fondly of things we like very much or of things we dislike intensely. . . .

Therefore we must watch and pray lest time pass idly.

When the right and opportune moment comes for speaking, say something that will edify.

Bad habits and indifference to spiritual progress do much to remove the guard from the tongue. Devout conversation on spiritual matters, on the contrary, is a great aid to spiritual progress, especially when persons of the same mind and spirit associate together in God.

The Eleventh Chapter

Acquiring Peace and Zeal for Perfection

We should enjoy much peace if we did not concern ourselves with what others say and do, for these are no concern of ours. How can a man who meddles in affairs not his own, who seeks strange distractions, and who is little or seldom inwardly recollected, live long in peace?

Blessed are the simple of heart for they shall enjoy peace in abundance.

Why were some of the saints so perfect and so given to contemplation? Because they tried to mortify entirely in themselves all earthly desires, and thus they were able to attach themselves to God with all their heart and freely to concentrate their innermost thoughts.

We are too occupied with our own whims and fancies, too taken up with passing things. Rarely do we completely conquer even one vice, and we are not inflamed with the desire to

improve ourselves day by day; hence, we remain cold and indifferent. . . .

The greatest obstacle, indeed, the only obstacle, is that we are not free from passions and lusts, that we do not try to follow the perfect way of the saints. Thus when we encounter some slight difficulty, we are too easily dejected and turn to human consolations. . . .

If we let our progress in religious life depend on the observance of its externals alone, our devotion will quickly come to an end. Let us, then, lay the ax to the root that we may be freed from our passions and thus have peace of mind.¹⁶

If we were to uproot only one vice each year, we should soon become perfect. The contrary, however, is often the case—we feel that we were better and purer in the first fervor of our conversion than we are after many years in the practice of our faith. Our fervor and progress ought to increase day by day; yet it is now considered noteworthy if a man can retain even a part of his first fervor.

If we did a little violence to ourselves at the start, we should afterwards be able to do all things with ease and joy. It is hard to break old habits, but harder still to go against our will.

If you do not overcome small, trifling things, how will you overcome the more difficult? Resist temptations in the beginning, and unlearn the evil habit lest perhaps, little by little, it lead to a more evil one.

If you but consider what peace a good life will bring to yourself and what joy it will give to others, I think you will be more concerned about your spiritual progress.

The Twelfth Chapter

The Value of Adversity

It is good for us to have trials and troubles at times, for they often remind us that we are on

16. Cf. Matt. 3:10.

probation and ought not to hope in any worldly thing. It is good for us sometimes to suffer contradiction, to be misjudged by men even though we do well and mean well. These things help us to be humble and shield us from vainglory. . . .

When a man of good will is afflicted, tempted, and tormented by evil thoughts, he realizes clearly that his greatest need is God, without Whom he can do no good. Saddened by his miseries and sufferings, he laments and prays. He wearies of living longer and wishes for death that he might be dissolved and be with Christ. Then he understands fully that perfect security and complete peace cannot be found on earth.

The Thirteenth Chapter Resisting Temptation

So long as we live in this world we cannot escape suffering and temptation. Whence it is written in Job: “The life of man upon earth is a warfare.”¹⁷ . . .

Yet temptations, though troublesome and severe, are often useful to a man, for in them he is humbled, purified, and instructed. The saints all passed through many temptations and trials to profit by them, while those who could not resist became reprobate and fell away. There is no state so holy, no place so secret that temptations and trials will not come. Man is never safe from them as long as he lives, for they come from within us—in sin we were born. When one temptation or trial passes, another comes; we shall always have something to suffer because we have lost the state of original blessedness.

Many people try to escape temptations, only to fall more deeply. We cannot conquer simply by fleeing, but by patience and true humility we become stronger than all our enemies. The

man who only shuns temptations outwardly and does not uproot them will make little progress; indeed they will quickly return, more violent than before.

Little by little, in patience and long-suffering you will overcome them, by the help of God rather than by severity and your own rash ways. Often take counsel when tempted; and do not be harsh with others who are tempted, but console them as you yourself would wish to be consoled.

The beginning of all temptation lies in a wavering mind and little trust in God, for as a rudderless ship is driven hither and yon by waves, so a careless and irresolute man is tempted in many ways. Fire tempers iron and temptation steels the just. Often we do not know what we can stand, but temptation shows us what we are.

Above all, we must be especially alert against the beginnings of temptation, for the enemy is more easily conquered if he is refused admittance to the mind and is met beyond the threshold when he knocks.

Someone has said very aptly: “Resist the beginnings; remedies come too late, when by long delay the evil has gained strength.”¹⁸ First, a mere thought comes to mind, then strong imagination, followed by pleasure, evil delight, and consent. Thus, because he is not resisted in the beginning, Satan gains full entry. And the longer a man delays in resisting, so much the weaker does he become each day, while the strength of the enemy grows against him.

Some suffer great temptations in the beginning of their conversion, others toward the end, while some are troubled almost constantly throughout their life. Others, again, are tempted but lightly according to the wisdom and justice of Divine Providence Who weighs

17. Job 7:1.

18. Ovid, *Remedia amoris* 91-92.

the status and merit of each and prepares all for the salvation of His elect.

We should not despair, therefore, when we are tempted, but pray to God the more fervently that He may see fit to help us, for according to the word of Paul, He will make issue with temptation that we may be able to bear it.¹⁹ Let us humble our souls under the hand of God in every trial and temptation for He will save and exalt the humble in spirit.

In temptations and trials the progress of a man is measured; in them opportunity for merit and virtue is made more manifest.

When a man is not troubled it is not hard for him to be fervent and devout, but if he bears up patiently in time of adversity, there is hope for great progress.

Some, guarded against great temptations, are frequently overcome by small ones in order that, humbled by their weakness in small trials, they may not presume on their own strength in great ones.

The Fourteenth Chapter Avoiding Rash Judgment

Turn your attention upon yourself and beware of judging the deeds of other men, for in judging others a man labors vainly, often makes mistakes, and easily sins; whereas, in judging and taking stock of himself he does something that is always profitable.

We frequently judge that things are as we wish them to be, for through personal feeling true perspective is easily lost.

If God were the sole object of our desire, we should not be disturbed so easily by opposition to our opinions. But often something lurks within or happens from without to draw us along with it.

Many, unawares, seek themselves in the things they do. They seem even to enjoy peace

of mind when things happen according to their wish and liking, but if otherwise than they desire, they are soon disturbed and saddened. Differences of feeling and opinion often divide friends and acquaintances, even those who are religious and devout.

An old habit is hard to break, and no one is willing to be led farther than he can see.

If you rely more upon your intelligence or industry than upon the virtue of submission to Jesus Christ, you will hardly, and in any case slowly, become an enlightened man. God wants us to be completely subject to Him and, through ardent love, to rise above all human wisdom.

The Fifteenth Chapter Works Done in Charity

Never do evil for anything in the world, or for the love of any man. For one who is in need, however, a good work may at times be purposely left undone or changed for a better one. This is not the omission of a good deed but rather its improvement.

Without charity external work is of no value, but anything done in charity, be it ever so small and trivial, is entirely fruitful inasmuch as God weighs the love with which a man acts rather than the deed itself.

He does much who loves much. He does much who does a thing well. He does well who serves the common good rather than his own interests.

Now, that which seems to be charity is oftentimes really sensuality, for man's own inclination, his own will, his hope of reward, and his self-interest, are motives seldom absent. On the contrary, he who has true and perfect charity seeks self in nothing, but searches all things for the glory of God. . . .

19. See 1 Cor. 10:13.

If man had but a spark of true charity he would surely sense that all the things of earth are full of vanity!

The Sixteenth Chapter Bearing with the Faults of Others

Until God ordains otherwise, a man ought to bear patiently whatever he cannot correct in himself and in others. Consider it better thus—perhaps to try your patience and to test you, for without such patience and trial your merits are of little account. Nevertheless, under such difficulties you should pray that God will consent to help you bear them calmly.

If, after being admonished once or twice, a person does not amend, do not argue with him but commit the whole matter to God that His will and honor may be furthered in all His servants, for God knows well how to turn evil to good. Try to bear patiently with the defects and infirmities of others, whatever they may be, because you also have many a fault which others must endure.

If you cannot make yourself what you would wish to be, how can you bend others to your will? We want them to be perfect, yet we do not correct our own faults. We wish them to be severely corrected, yet we will not correct ourselves. Their great liberty displeases us, yet we would not be denied what we ask. We would have them bound by laws, yet we will allow ourselves to be restrained in nothing. Hence, it is clear how seldom we think of others as we do of ourselves.

If all were perfect, what should we have to suffer from others for God's sake? But God has so ordained, that we may learn to bear with one another's burdens,²⁰ for there is no man without fault, no man without burden, no man sufficient to himself nor wise enough. . . .

20. See Gal. 6:2.

The Seventeenth Chapter Monastic Life

If you wish peace and concord with others, you must learn to break your will in many things. To live in monasteries or religious communities, to remain there without complaint, and to persevere faithfully till death is no small matter. Blessed indeed is he who there lives a good life and there ends his days in happiness.



A monk in his habit

If you would persevere in seeking perfection, you must consider yourself a pilgrim, an exile on earth.²¹ If you would become a religious, you must be content to seem a fool for the sake of Christ.

Habit and tonsure change a man but little;²² it is the change of life, the complete mortification of passions that endow a true religious.

He who seeks anything but God alone and the salvation of his soul will find only trouble and grief, and he who does not try to become the least, the servant of all, cannot remain at peace for long.

You have come to serve, not to rule. You must understand, too, that you have been called to suffer and to work, not to idle and gossip away your time. Here men are tried as gold in a furnace. Here no man can remain unless he desires with all his heart to humble himself before God.

Book Two: The Interior Life The Sixth Chapter The Joy of a Good Conscience

The glory of a good man is the testimony of a good conscience. Therefore, keep your conscience good and you will always enjoy happiness, for a good conscience can bear a great deal

21. Cf. 1 Pet. 2:11.

22. That is, the monastic garb and haircut.

and can bring joy even in the midst of adversity. But an evil conscience is ever restive and fearful.

Sweet shall be your rest if your heart does not reproach you.

Do not rejoice unless you have done well. Sinners never experience true interior joy or peace, for “there is no peace to the wicked,” says the Lord.²³ Even if they say: “We are at peace, no evil shall befall us and no one dares to hurt us,” do not believe them; for the wrath of God will arise quickly, and their deeds will be brought to naught and their thoughts will perish.

To glory in adversity is not hard for the man who loves, for this is to glory in the cross of the Lord. But the glory given or received of men is short lived, and the glory of the world is ever accompanied by sorrow. The glory of the good, however, is in their conscience and not in the lips of men, for the joy of the just is from God and in God, and their gladness is founded on truth.

The man who longs for the true, eternal glory does not care for that of time; and he who seeks passing fame or does not in his heart despise it, undoubtedly cares little for the glory of heaven.

He who minds neither praise nor blame possesses great peace of heart and, if his conscience is good, he will easily be contented and at peace.

Praise adds nothing to your holiness, nor does blame take anything from it. You are what you are, and you cannot be said to be better than you are in God’s sight. If you consider well what you are within, you will not care what men say about you. They look to appearances but God looks to the heart. They consider the deed but God weighs the motive.

23. Isa. 48:22.

It is characteristic of a humble soul always to do good and to think little of itself. It is a mark of great purity and deep faith to look for no consolation in created things. The man who desires no justification from without has clearly entrusted himself to God: “For not he who commendeth himself is approved,” says St. Paul, “but he whom God commendeth.”²⁴

To walk with God interiorly, to be free from any external affection—this is the state of the inward man.

Book Three: Internal Consolation
The Fifty-Fifth Chapter
The Corruption of Nature and the Efficacy
of Divine Grace
The Disciple

O Lord, my God, Who created me to Your own image and likeness, grant me this grace which You have shown to be so great and necessary for salvation, that I may overcome my very evil nature that is drawing me to sin and perdition. For I feel in my flesh the law of sin contradicting the law of my mind and leading me captive to serve sensuality in many things. I cannot resist the passions thereof unless Your most holy grace warmly infused into my heart assist me.

There is need of Your grace, and of great grace, in order to overcome a nature prone to evil from youth. For through the first man, Adam, nature is fallen and weakened by sin, and the punishment of that stain has fallen upon all mankind. Thus nature itself, which You created good and right, is considered a symbol of vice and the weakness of corrupted nature, because when left to itself it tends toward evil and to baser things. The little strength remaining in it is like a spark hidden in ashes. That strength is natural reason which, surrounded by thick darkness, still has the

24. 2 Cor. 10:18.

power of judging good and evil, of seeing the difference between true and false, though it is not able to fulfill all that it approves and does not enjoy the full light of truth or soundness of affection.

Hence it is, my God, that according to the inward man I delight in Your law, knowing that Your command is good, just, and holy, and that it proves the necessity of shunning all evil and sin. But in the flesh I keep the law of sin, obeying sensuality rather than reason. Hence, also, it is that the will to good is present in me, but how to accomplish it I know not. Hence, too, I often propose many good things, but because the grace to help my weakness is lacking, I recoil and give up at the slightest resistance. . . .²⁵

How extremely necessary to me, O Lord, Your grace is to begin any good deed, to carry it on and bring it to completion! For without grace I can do nothing, but with its strength I can do all things in You. O Grace truly heavenly, without which our merits are nothing and no gifts of nature are to be esteemed!

Before You, O Lord, no arts or riches, no beauty or strength, no wit or intelligence avail without grace. For the gifts of nature are common to good and bad alike, but the peculiar gift of Your elect is grace or love, and those who are signed with it are held worthy of everlasting life. So excellent is this grace that without it no gift of prophecy or of miracles, no meditation be it ever so exalted, can be considered anything. Not even faith or hope or other virtues are acceptable to You without charity and grace.

O most blessed grace, which makes the poor in spirit rich in virtues, which renders him who is rich in many good things humble of heart, come, descend upon me, fill me quickly with

your consolation lest my soul faint with weariness and dryness of mind.

Let me find grace in Your sight, I beg, Lord, for Your grace is enough for me, even though I obtain none of the things which nature desires.²⁶ If I am tempted and afflicted with many tribulations, I will fear no evils while Your grace is with me. This is my strength. This will give me counsel and help. This is more powerful than all my enemies and wiser than all the wise. . . .

Let Your grace, therefore, go before me and follow me, O Lord, and make me always intent upon good works, through Jesus Christ, Your Son.

**The Fifty-Eighth Chapter
High Matters and the Hidden Judgments of God
Are Not to Be Scrutinized
The Voice of Christ**

My child, beware of discussing high matters and God's hidden judgments—why this person is so forsaken and why that one is favored with so great a grace, or why one man is so afflicted and another so highly exalted. Such things are beyond all human understanding and no reason or disputation can fathom the judgments of God.

When the enemy puts such suggestions in your mind, therefore, or when some curious persons raise questions about them, answer with the prophet: "Thou art just, O Lord, and righteous are Thy judgments"; and this: "The judgments of the Lord are true and wholly righteous."²⁷ My judgments are to be feared, not discussed, because they are incomprehensible to the understanding of men.

In like manner, do not inquire or dispute about the merits of the saints, as to which is more holy, or which shall be greater in the

25. See Rom. 7:7-25.

26. Cf. 2 Cor. 12:8-9.

27. Ps. 119:137; 19:9.

kingdom of heaven. Such things often breed strife and useless contentions. They nourish pride and vainglory, whence arise envy and quarrels, when one proudly tries to exalt one saint and the other another. A desire to know and pry into such matters brings forth no fruit. . . .

Some are drawn by the ardor of their love with greater affection to these saints or to those, but this affection is human and not divine. I am He who made all the saints. I gave them grace: I brought them to glory. I know the merits of each of them. I came before them in the blessings of My sweetness. I knew My beloved ones before the ages. I chose them out of the world—they did not choose Me. I called them by grace, I drew them on by mercy. I led them safely through various temptations. I poured into them glorious consolations. I gave them perseverance and I crowned their patience. I know the first and the last. I embrace them all with love inestimable. I am to be praised in all My saints. I am to be blessed above all things, and honored in each of those whom I have exalted and predestined so gloriously without any previous merits of their own.

He who despises one of the least of mine, therefore, does no honor to the greatest, for both the small and the great I made. And he who disparages one of the saints disparages Me also and all others in the kingdom of heaven. They are all one through the bond of charity. They have the same thought and the same will, and they mutually love one another; but, what is a much greater thing, they love Me more than themselves or their own merits. Rapt above themselves, and drawn beyond love of self, they are entirely absorbed in love of Me, in Whom they rest. There is nothing that can draw them away or depress them, for they who are filled with eternal truth burn with the fire of unquenchable love.

Therefore, let carnal and sensual men, who know only how to love their own selfish joys, forbear to dispute about the state of God's saints. Such men take away and add according to their own inclinations and not as it pleases the Eternal Truth. . . .

Be careful, then, My child, of treating matters beyond your knowledge out of curiosity. Let it rather be your business and aim to be found, even though the least, in the kingdom of God. . . .

The man who thinks of the greatness of his own sins and the littleness of his virtues, and of the distance between himself and the perfection of the saints, acts much more acceptably to God than the one who argues about who is greater or who is less. It is better to invoke the saints with devout prayers and tears, and with a humble mind to beg their glorious aid, than to search with vain inquisitiveness into their secrets.

The saints are well and perfectly contented if men know how to content themselves and cease their useless discussions. They do not glory in their own merits, for they attribute no good to themselves but all to Me, because out of My infinite charity I gave all to them. They are filled with such love of God and with such overflowing joy, that no glory is wanting to them and they can lack no happiness. All the saints are so much higher in glory as they are more humble in themselves; nearer to Me, and more beloved by Me. . . .

Many ask who is the greater in the kingdom of heaven when they do not know whether they themselves shall be worthy of being numbered among its least. It is a great thing to be even the least in heaven where all are great because all shall be called, and shall be, the children of God. . . .

Woe to those, therefore, who disdain to humble themselves willingly with the little children, for the low gate of the heavenly

kingdom will not permit them to enter. Woe also to the rich who have their consolations here, for when the poor enter into God's kingdom, they will stand outside lamenting. Rejoice, you humble, and exult, you poor, for the kingdom of God is yours, if only you walk in the truth.

[*The Imitation of Christ* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1940; reprint, 1962), 1–24, 62–64, 195–98, 202–7]



C. Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam

Biographical Note: Desiderius Erasmus

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (ca. 1467–1536) was the son of a priest and he spent his early years in a monastery. Here he came under the influence of the Brethren of the Common Life, whose devotio moderna inspired works such as The Imitation of Christ.

Erasmus entered the University of Paris to study Greek. He traveled widely throughout the European continent and England. He became a sought-after tutor and a prolific writer. Because of the depth and breadth of his classical learning, he began to distinguish himself as the greatest of the Christian humanists. This erudition is on display in his Adages, a collection of about eight hundred classical aphorisms and proverbs that he later expanded to three thousand.

Erasmus's enthusiasm for returning "to the sources" is evident in his many editions of the Greek New Testament, first printed in 1516 in Basel, Switzerland. These Greek texts, which included extensive philological annotations, would become the New Testament of the reformers. His pursuit of the original text led to some noteworthy modifications, none more controversial than his

omission of the comma Johanneum (1 John 5:7), which in the West had become perhaps the greatest proof text for the doctrine of the Trinity. His method inspired the text criticism that would become the heart of modern historical-critical biblical exegesis.

Erasmus is remembered also for his unflinching wit and satire. He caricatured the worst features of monks, scholastic theologians, and clergy, taking the church establishment to task for its hypocrisy and lack of ethics. Moriae encomium (The Praise of Folly), a book he dedicated to Sir Thomas More, represents the height of his incisive cultural critique.



The voluminous literary output of Erasmus includes works of constructive theology and spirituality, which were highly regarded by many of his contemporaries. Although they were kindred spirits in many ways, Martin Luther and Erasmus differed on many issues, especially on the role of the human will in salvation. After Erasmus's Freedom of the Will (1524) was countered by Luther's Bondage of the Will (1525), there was little prospect for cooperation between these two. Erasmus did remain on good terms with many other reformers.

Erasmus never joined the reform movement or broke with the Roman Church. Yet, because of his anticlericalism and desire to return to a simple, biblical Christian faith, Erasmus had much in common with the reformers. His books were later censured by the Roman Church and universally viewed as supportive of Protestantism. Indeed, though it is an exaggeration and oversimplification, there is a kernel of truth in the old saying that "Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched it."