

FROM THE 15TH TO THE 21ST CENTURY

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Last month's article was largely derived from the writings of Francis of Assisi and the spirit of humility he passed on to the Franciscan family. A new year and a new decade have begun and to mark this beginning we move from the 1200's to the 1400's. One of the classics of Western spirituality is **The Imitation of Christ** by Thomas à Kempis. It was composed between 1418 and 1427 by this humble member of the *Devotia Moderna* movement. This community based reform movement came as a response to a Church that was perceived as being led by lukewarm and lazy clergy; *Devotia Moderna* flourished in Northern Europe and even beyond. Their origins were not that different than those of the Franciscan movement 200 years earlier. The book was written in Latin in the Netherlands. Kempis' classic work is divided into four 'books' and I offer here a few ideas from the Second Book, "Directives for the Interior Life." This section contains instructions about attaining inward peace, purity of heart and a good conscience, patience and submission to God's will by taking up the Cross. These are all basic Christian principles of prayer and Gospel living.

Kempis weaves a theme of humility all through the book, and in this second division he

writes elegantly about having a proper disposition for carrying the Cross. (He sounds very Franciscan at times, if you ask me.)

One of the joys of praying the Divine Office is the wealth of spiritual writings we have at our fingertips in Office of Readings. On Tuesday of the 3rd Week of Advent the Church selected a large portion of Kempis' Second Book of the *Imitation*. Humility is held up as the main virtue by which we become perfectly aligned with Jesus because a humble person "stands firm in God, not in the world." God dwells in the humble person and humility is the path to eternal life. Then comes this statement I found to be a great springboard for prayerful reflection about our world:

Keep peace within yourself, then you will be able to create peace among others. It is better to be peaceful than learned. One who lives at peace suspects no one. But the person who is tense and agitated by evil is troubled with all kinds of suspicions; this person is never at peace within nor permits others to be at peace.

December 8, 1975 Paul VI promulgated his massive and significant apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nunitandi*. He wrote exhaustively about how each Christian and we, as Church, announce the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of Peace in our daily lives. In order to proclaim the Gospel of peace faithfully, a person must first be a person of peace. I've held his words all these years and when I reread the passage above from *Imitation of Christ*, I immediately thought of Paul VI's beautiful exhortation and concrete advice.

January 1 is the **World Day of Peace** in the Catholic Church, along with being the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. Paul VI established the feast in 1967 in light of John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* and his own encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. If you go to

the web site of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops you can find a treasure trove of resources about peace, papal documents about world peace and more (usccb.org). I mention this World Day of Peace in light of that quote from *The Imitation of Christ* and Paul VI's exhortation.

We are presently living in pure upheaval. Manners and gracious living seem foreign until you meet a 12 year old who speaks respectfully and gratefully to you. The climate in the entertainment world is darkly colored by lawsuits about sexual harassment or misuse of money, privilege and public image/stardom. And you know I cannot not mention the political arena these days. The impeachment process by itself is a symptom of lost values and concern for the common good by many, many politicians of all parties. Money and power underlie the darkness in our culture, guided only by the god of selfishness. I don't want to see our country return to the days of Ward and June Cleaver and Ozzie and Harriet. The 50's and 60's are faded memories and we simply can't return to the days of huge fins on Plymouths, pearls while doing housework and stores closed on Sunday.

I do, however, believe firmly that we Children of God have a powerful role to play in being people of peace, called by the Gospel and our recent popes to proclaim the Kingdom of God! We can bring Light into the darkness around us and bring hope to those who have had their dreams taken from them.

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On the 3rd Sunday of Advent I preached about the healing of the nations and how we, ordained and not ordained, all share in the healing ministry of Christ. If you know any of Church history, you know that healing has been consistently a major presence of God's continuous work in all of us in Jesus. From the hands of Jesus to the Apostolic and post-Apostolic eras to 2020 we have all been

called to peacefully assist in restoring God's creation to its pristine innocence.

So I propose to you and people who will listen that we allow God, St. Francis, the popes, Thomas à Kempis – whomever you need and choose as guide – to transform us from grumps to gracious heralds of the Kingdom of Peace. It means all of us have to change (a little or a lot) but God's grace has done wonders from the first days of creation and God continues to create new life within and around us. Let's get concrete now, okay?



Here I am at three when my brothers and I were reimagined into cowboys by Santa. On the right is my great niece, Madeleine Marlene the day she stood up in her crib for the first time at 7 months, so proud of herself. Children of innocence. Children of God. Loved into existence to someday proclaim the Kingdom of Peace. Each and every one of us were at one time just this innocent. And we can be restored to that innocence again and again through the Sacraments of Anointing of the Sick and Penance. The gift of the Eucharist is the ultimate moment of reconciliation with God and the Church. One of the most splendid effects of sacramental encounters with God is that we have the opportunity to become messengers of peace. As God forgives and heals us, we are enabled, even emboldened to carry out the command of Jesus to heal others (Matthew 10).

I have come to learn by experience that healing comes very often in spiritual and psychological ways, not just physical. I'm not negating physical healings – witness Lourdes and the process of canonization among many ways to see physical healing as part of our Christian heritage. However, so many sources of pain and suffering today arise from hatred. People give each other permission to use vitriolic speech and/or verbiage that encourages rude, even dangerous behaviors. And I've written about the culture of lies we are smothered with wherever we turn. Guns...enough said. Racism flourishes. Mother Church was broken yet again this year. Neglected children at borders or kidnapped, all losing their dreams and even lives. Healing – even with God's help, is it possible that our world can be healed? I say, YES!

I spent two weeks this past November on an educational excursion along the western coast of Norway. Most of the days were spent in the rugged beauty of fjords and frigid seas, even touching the northernmost point of the European continent and the Russian border. Along the way we were reminded constantly that Earth is a very precious gift that needs to be cherished and begs for respect now! Norwegians keep everything clean and are very observant about conservation. Citizens above the Arctic Circle have to rely completely on each other for survival in those extreme conditions and they do! They truly care about the common good and healing our planet. We also can. Think GREEN!

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Here at home in the U.S. we can bring about healing on many levels. Even a few moments of quiet prayer to begin a new day can bring calm and a certain equanimity that God is with you before going into the office.

Acting as a mature adult with manners can have a wonderful, even disconcerting effect on people who don't expect someone to be nice to them. Speak honestly with your spouse or children about your concerns without being judgmental or accusatory. Ask a close friend if you can accompany her or him to a chemo treatment. Listen to Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 to relax. Discover more about Franciscan spirituality, Thomas Merton, Hildegard of Bingen, Edith Stein, Meister Eckhart or other spiritual greats. Gather friends to discuss issues of faith or guide your family mealtime discussion to contemporary concerns. Look at your parish as to how you can possibly serve in a new capacity. Turn the tide of a political discussion from a boiling over pot to a conversation that allows for disagreements in a respectful manner. Ponder how Jesus handled situations during his ministry of peace-making confronted injustice and religious/political anger.

I know for a fact that the advice I've shared here by Paul VI and Thomas à Kempis are great lessons and that they can effect every single human being. We all have the innate ability to become peace and therefore have the innate ability to "create peace among others." Our country has been damaged deeply by amoral politicians. Our Church has been deeply wounded by clerical abuse. Our world has been slain innumerable times by wasteful living, plastics and nations who toss away restrictions on offshore drilling and waste management. Our hearts are shattered because of hate speak, violence and leaders who refuse to even begin some kind of gun control reform.

You and I must become peace so those wounds can be healed in the tradition of Jesus Christ. We can and we **must** make a difference. I do not want to live in a wounded world. God didn't put us here to be miserable.

Thanks for all you do to support our ministries at St. Peter's and beyond. You're in our prayers of gratitude. God fill you with peace always. *Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm*