

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Imitations and Impressions

When I was growing up, two of the most popular entertainers on television were the impressionists Rich Little and Frank Gorshin. They were known for their imitations of James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart, George Burns, Richard Nixon. If I remember correctly, Rich Little even did an uncanny Carol Channing.

These characters were amazing. They *became* the people they were imitating. Close your eyes and you could swear you were hearing the real Cagney or the real Nixon. (Of course, for a while it seemed like everybody was doing Nixon—the hunched shoulders, the furrowed brow, the anguished look of a tormented basset hound. He was an easy mark.)

Imitation is the highest form of flattery—and, to my mind, a legitimate form of human cloning. The imitator manages to inhabit the imitated. He begins to act like his subject, sound like him—even, perhaps, think like him. The lines blur.

All of this came to mind as I was reading *The Imitation of Christ*. Thomas à Kempis's book is rightly considered a classic. It's instructive. It's fearless. It's timeless. (And, to my mind, it's also about a hundred pages too long—but that's another subject.)

The point of the book is that by imitating the greatest life ever lived, we can elevate our own lives and approach something resembling holiness. Christ is the model we are to copy. But the Imitation of Christ is not like an imitation of Cagney—it has nothing to do with curling your lip or calling anybody a dirty rat. Rather, it has everything to do with humility, suffering and sacrifice. The gestures we mimic are interior.

Thomas à Kempis's take on Christian life is extreme—it was written, after all, six hundred years ago, and mortification has fallen out of fashion. (There is a lot of talk in the book about how wretched and worthless we all are—notions that, in the Age of Oprah, might raise a few eyebrows.)

But Thomas à Kempis was on to something that Rich Little and Frank Gorshin would appreciate. He understood that to imitate Christ you have to slip into His skin—to inhabit Him, and to see the world through His eyes.

It is a world of both sublime beauty and frustrating heartbreak, where a procession of palms leads ultimately to a crown of thorns. It is a world we are challenged to embrace and to endure and, finally, to forgive.

In short, to imitate Christ, we learn, is to be willing to walk to Calvary every day.

Modern Christians have boiled down the philosophy of Thomas à Kempis to a four-letter bumper sticker: WWJD. What Would Jesus Do? During Lent, as we trudge ever closer to Calvary, and watch the hill loom before us, it's a question that is haunting—and daunting.

And if prayed over, it might make us all Imitators of Christ—impressionists who can make a lasting impression on the world.

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STATIONS OF THE CROSS

“Praying the Stations with Mary, the Mother of Jesus”
Fridays during Lent, at 7:30 p.m., followed by Benediction