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ARTICLE I.

REFORMERS BEFORE THE REFORMATION.

BRETHREN OF THE LIFE IN COMMON; AN ACCOUNT OF THE ORIGIN AND PROGRESS OF THE INSTITUTION, AND ITS INFLUENCE UPON LITERATURE AND RELIGION.¹

Barnes.
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LIKE all institutions of a solid character and of a permanent influence upon society, that of the Brethren of the Life in Common, was called into being by the wants of the age and of the country in which it originated. So helpless was the condition of multitudes of individuals in the middle ages, and so destitute of life the scholastic theology, the religion, or rather the superstitions of the church, that associations for mutual relief, and for spiritual edification among the people were certainly altogether natural, if not absolutely necessary. The communities of the Beguins, Beghards and Lollards, which were the first essays to satisfy those necessities, had originally so many defects, and had, moreover, so far degenerated in their character since their establishment, that they either went to decay of themselves, or were suppressed by authority. And yet both the physical and the moral causes which, in that age of political disorder and of ecclesiastical corruption, had awakened a desire for such fraternities, continued in their unabated strength. Nowhere did the civil disorders, and, at

¹ The substance of this Article is taken from the work of Ullmann entitled *Reformatoren vor der Reformation*, Vol. II. pp. 62—201. The work itself has been reviewed in a former number.

the same time, the means of establishing charitable foundations, exist to a greater extent than in the north of Holland, particularly in the self-protected, but flourishing cities of Deventer, Kampen and Zwoll; and it is in these very places that we see the institutions of which we are to treat, under the generous support of wealthy Dutch merchants, spring into existence and flourish. An additional circumstance which gave these establishments importance and power, was that they supplied a third necessity of the times, which proved ultimately to be of more account than mere physical want and stood side by side in importance with the demand for the religion of the heart, I mean the necessity for a more unsophisticated and sound intellectual culture. The service done to humanity in the schools founded by this Christian fraternity is now beginning to be acknowledged by all those who are acquainted with their influence upon the learning and intelligence of the succeeding age, and upon the moral and religious condition of the people at large, preparing them for the reformation of Luther and Zuingle.

The founder of the institution of the Life in Common was *Gerard Groot*, a man of ardent piety, and popular eloquence, who felt a special interest in the education of the young. He was not a man of great literary attainments; his Latin style was not very classical; he probably did not understand Greek or Hebrew at all, and his reading appears to have been limited chiefly to the Scriptures, to writers on canonical law, and to the fathers of the church, particularly Augustine and Bernard. Still he held an honorable place among his contemporaries as a theologian, and, what was most important of all, he was a zealous promoter of sound, and useful knowledge. He might have been a more learned man, might have written Latin in the style of a Poggius, and have possessed the philological treasures and the wit of an Erasmus, and yet not have been so great a benefactor to his age and of posterity,¹ as he actually was in consequence of originating the great enterprise of popular education. Though the institution subsequently outgrew the plan of the founder, and under such men as Agricola, Alexander Hegius and Johan Wessel, exceeded what Gerard ever designed or distinctly conceived, still to him belongs the honor of having originated measures which proved to be an unspeakably great public blessing, particularly to Germany and Holland.

¹ Thomas à Kempis said of him: *Nam totam hanc patriam nostram vita, verbo, moribus et doctrina illuminavit et accendit.*

Gerard Groot was born in 1340 at Deventer, where his father, Werner Groot, held the office of burgomaster. He had a slender constitution, but good talents, and was therefore destined to a literary profession. After his preparatory studies were ended, he resorted to the university of Paris, then the most distinguished in Europe, where he remained from 1355 to 1368. Philosophy and dialectics he is supposed to have studied under the nominalist Buridan, known to all the world by his celebrated dilemma of the ass between two bundles of straw. He pursued theology, his chief study, in the Sorbonne, for many centuries the most renowned seat of that science. His most intimate friend at Paris was Henry Eger, twelve years older than himself, afterwards known as an author. He is also mentioned as Gerard's confessor. In his eighteenth year, young Groot returned home as master of arts, but was soon led, by his thirst for knowledge, to resort to Cologne, where he prosecuted his studies still further and became teacher in the university.

Belonging as he did to a family of rank, he received several benefices; he was made canon of Utrecht and also of Aix La Chapelle. Surrounded with the smiles of fortune, he appeared as one entering upon the ordinary career of a worldly minded prelate. He attended public entertainments, enjoyed the luxuries of the table; wore a splendid robe and a girdle ornamented with silver and an outer garment of the richest fur. With his natural endowments and learning and fortune, he was a man after the spirit of the times. But soon a more serious and earnest state of mind ensued. Even while he was at Cologne, during a public amusement at which he was present, a man, who perceived what he was capable of becoming, accosted him with these words, which were not without effect: "What have you to do here, with these vain amusements? You must cease to be a man of this sort." Still greater effect had the faithful admonitions of Eger upon him, who had, in the meantime, become prior in a monastery near Arnheim. Meeting him one day in Utrecht, he seriously remonstrated with him, turning his attention away from the vanity of earthly things to the pursuit of the chief good. Eger struck the right chord in the heart of his young friend, and the latter resolved on the spot to change his course of life, and, in humble reliance upon God, to renounce the world, and to devote himself to something worthier of his spiritual nature.

From that moment Gerard became a different man. He gave up his ecclesiastical revenues and his paternal estate, burnt his

books of magic on which he had expended much money, abandoned his pleasures, and retired to the monastery of his friend where he spent three years in religious meditation and in the study of the Scriptures. But his eloquence and energy of character fitted him rather for active than contemplative life, and, as he trembled at the responsibilities of the office of priest, and the care of souls, he was made deacon, by virtue of which office he was authorized merely to preach. Thus, at the urgent request of the monks of his order, the Carthusians, he went forth with a noble enthusiasm, publicly to persuade men to a religious life. Having obtained permission of the bishop of Utrecht to preach throughout his whole diocese, he was seen, as were once Peter of Bruys, Henry of Lausanne, and others, travelling from place to place and eloquently discoursing with the people and urging them to repentance and reformation of life. His preaching, eagerly listened to by all ranks of society, sunk deep into the hearts of many. It was not merely the richness and flow of his eloquence that moved the people. They saw before them a man, who, without office and without reward, spake out the language of his own heart, from a depth of conviction and an earnestness of love which left a peculiar impression. As discreet as he was ardent, he sought to avail himself in his discourses of every mood of feeling which he could see depicted in the countenances of his hearers. He would sometimes throw a searching glance over the whole audience, and then address himself directly to that state of mind which he found to prevail. It was of essential service to him that he abandoned the current method of preaching in Latin, and adopted the popular dialect, the low German. Hence at Deventer, Kampen, Zwoil, Utrecht, Leyden, Delft, Gouda, and Amsterdam where he first preached in the native language, the people assembled in such crowds, often without taking food and to the neglect of pressing business, that the churches would not contain them, and the preacher was obliged to hold his services in the open air. When he found a favorable opportunity, he preached almost continually, often twice a day, and sometimes three hours long. The jealousy of the clergy was at length aroused and the zeal of the preacher was checked by the authority of the bishop. This circumstance gave a new turn to Groot's activity, and conducted him immediately to that larger sphere of usefulness for which Providence had designed him.

Another cause had already operated towards producing this result. Gerard had recently made a journey, which had a power-

ful influence upon his character, and was decisive in giving a new direction to his life. In company with Cele, rector of the school at Zwoll, and another intimate friend, he visited, in 1378, the cloister of Grünthal, near the battle-ground of Waterloo, in order to make the acquaintance of the celebrated mystic Ruysbroek, whom he had long known from his writings. Delighted with the simplicity and fraternal deportment of the inmates of the cloister, and still more with the venerable and serene character of the philosophic prior, he remained several successive days to enjoy intercourse with the pious sage, and converse with him respecting the Scriptures and the inner life, from all which a deep and permanent impression was made upon his mind. He afterwards wrote to the brethren at Grünthal, that he had never so tenderly loved, nor so much respected any mortal as he did their prior. The life in common of the regular canons of this cloister and the fraternal spirit which prevailed there, by presenting a beautiful example of Christian union and sympathy, equally affected the heart and influenced the subsequent life of the distinguished visitor. With all these facts before us, we might anticipate the remark of Thomas à Kempis, that Gerard, struck with the simplicity and Christian spirit of Ruysbroek and his brethren, resolved to found an institution on a similar plan.

Gerard continued his journey from Grünthal to Paris, where he purchased, at no trifling expense, a large number of books adapted to the instruction of the young. On returning to Deventer, he directed his attention principally to the religious education of young men. He had long been accustomed to hold free intercourse with such, and Binterink, of Zutphen, a pious young clergyman, who had frequently accompanied him in his preaching circuits, and Florentius, a youth of great abilities and good attainments, were already numbered among his most familiar friends. In Deventer there was a flourishing school, and the young men belonging to it, particularly those who were studying for the ministry, put themselves, in part, under Gerard's direction. He guided and aided them in their studies, read valuable authors with them, gave to the indigent a seat at his own table, and furnished them facilities for earning something towards their support.

Copying books finally became one of their most important occupations. Gerard's love of the Scriptures and of the writings of the fathers led him to desire a collection of the early Christian literature. He was, as he himself said, avaricious and over-ava-

ricious of good books. In employing the young men to copy valuable theological works, he had a three-fold object in view, the multiplication and circulation of copies, the pecuniary aid of those employed, and their literary and religious training which he designed to connect with their occupation. The circle of students and young friends around him was gradually enlarged till at length they formed a regular association, and a beginning was made in copying and distributing Bibles and religious tracts which continued until superseded by the art of printing.

The circumstance which occasioned a regular organization was the following. One of the young men, Florentius, of whom mention has already been made, then vicar at Deventer, said one day to Gerard, "Dear teacher, what harm would it do, were I and my associates, employed in copying, to put together our weekly earnings and live in common?" "In common!" replied Gerard, "that the mendicant friars would never suffer; they would oppose it with all their power." "What if we were to make the trial?" said Florentius, "perhaps God would give us success." "Very well," replied Gerard, "make a beginning; I will defend and protect you against opposition." This was the germ of a union, which afterwards became widely extended and assumed great public importance.

The community which took its origin in these circumstances had a certain resemblance to the philosophical and ascetic associations of the ancient pagans and Jews, but was freer, less secret, and more practical. It was not wholly unlike the monastic institutions, but it was a system of less constraint, and was animated by a purer and nobler spirit. The practice of these brethren, and the aims of their organization were designed to be conformed, so far as the circumstances and character of the age would allow, to the apostolic model as described in the second chapter of Acts. The association bore the names of *Fratres Bonae Voluntatis*, *Fratres Collationarii*, *Gregoriani* and *Hieronymiani*, as well as that of *Brethren of the Life in Common*. Their means of subsistence were procured partly by manual labor, and partly from the munificence of friends. Only in cases of extreme distress would they beg from door to door. Their property was held in common, and ordinarily each one, on becoming a member, gave whatever he possessed to the fraternity, though at first no strict rule appears to have existed in respect to this matter. Everything was left to be regulated as far as possible by love, and the

voluntary principle was preferred to authority. With the common property thus brought together, and with the donations of the rich, the *houses*, or separate establishments of the society were erected, in which a particular number of members resided, subject to a certain order in dress, food and mode of life, not separated, however, from the world in a monastic manner, but maintaining a constant intercourse with it, and enjoying a general freedom in striking contrast with the principle of obedience to authority, which prevailed in the cloisters. The leading object of the union was to produce, exemplify and promote a practical Christian life. This object they endeavored first to attain among themselves by their social order, manner of life, intercourse and Christian character, which they sought to perfect by religious fellowship and sympathy, by mutual confession and admonition, and by public instruction and worship. They exerted an influence upon society by copying and circulating the Scriptures and other religious books, by giving religious instruction to the people, and especially by reviving and improving the education of the young. In this last respect they formed an era in the history of general culture. Schools had, indeed, been previously established in the principal cities of Holland; at Gravesande in 1322; at Leyden in 1324; in Rotterdam in 1328; in Schiedam in 1336; in Delft in 1342; in Hoorn in 1358; in Haarlem in 1389; and in Alkmaar in 1390. But these schools were not purely literary in their objects; they were rather mercantile speculations. The right to establish schools was farmed by the cities, a circumstance which rendered the charge for tuition so high that none but the wealthy could enjoy their advantages. Besides this, their literary character was very indifferent. The instruction given by the monks in the cloister schools was no better; it was too much limited to mechanical forms; and being imparted by uncultivated and superstitious teachers, it often stood directly in the way of intellectual culture.

The Brethren of the Life in Common, on the contrary, taught gratuitously often, and thereby rendered instruction in reading and writing accessible to all, to the rich and the poor alike; and, what is more important, they imparted new life, and a more genuine and elevated character to school instruction.

The age of Gerard was not, strictly speaking, an age of ignorance; but it was prolific in false, abstruse and useless speculations. It was therefore a great merit to do anything which should withdraw the minds of men from those unprofitable pursuits. As

in the time of Socrates there existed a necessity for bringing contemplative men back to themselves and philosophy from heaven to earth, so among the contemporaries of Gerard nothing was more necessary than that some one should arise to open to the philosophic spirit of the age a new channel, that of a modest, sound and practical wisdom. From this point of view must the efforts of Gerard and his disciples be contemplated in order justly to estimate the limited compass of their studies. It is certainly a defect in a system of education to exclude geometry, arithmetic, rhetoric, logic, grammar and lyric poetry. But such an omission appears in a more favorable light, when it is recollected that he was seeking the cure of a particular disease which infected the public mind, that he proceeded on the fundamental principle that "everything is injurious, which does not either promote virtue or reclaim from vice." Hence, agreeably to this strict rule of utility, many studies in themselves liberal, and, for us of the present age, necessary, were regarded by him as needlessly consuming time, because they were not directly of a moral or religious tendency. Whatever tended merely to make a show, or to nourish and strengthen the passions was discouraged. To this class belonged the disputatious arts of the dialectician, the ambitious seeking for academic honors, the pursuit of those studies which held out the promise of great distinction and emolument, and, finally, useless and pretended mystic sciences such as astrology and magic. The Bible was made the foundation of the new system of education, to which were added select portions of the Christian fathers and the most useful of the pagan moralists.¹ These works were selected with special reference to promoting self-knowledge morality and true piety. "The Gospels," said Gerard, "are to be the root and mirror of thy studies, because they contain the life of Christ; then the lives and the pious sayings of the Fathers (of which Gerard himself, at the request of his friends, had made several collections); next the epistles of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles; and lastly the devotional works of Bernard, Anselm, Augustin and others." The writings of Solomon were placed after those already mentioned. From the order of study here laid down by Gerard, we learn that Christian productions took the precedence of pagan, and the animated, and stimulating form of instruction

¹ The writings most studied were the Bible, particularly the Gospels, the *Meditationes* of St. Bernard, the *Monologium* of Anselm of Canterbury, extracts from Eusebius, Cyril and Chrysostom of the Greek Fathers; Augustine and Bede of the Latin; and of the classical authors, Plato, Seneca and Virgil.

that of the doctrinal and the preceptive. The life of Christ is placed at the head, and the biographies of the saints are, for psychological reasons, made to precede the writings of Paul. By this limited, but energetic system of moral training, in which a living germ of practical wisdom and piety is first of all planted in the soul a new era was introduced in popular education; and soon in Holland, Gelders, Brabant, Friesland, Westphalia and even in Saxony Houses of the Brethren were established and their salutary influence widely felt.

Gerard did not set himself in opposition either to the scholastic theology or to the papacy. His friend and patron, William of Salvarvilla, could write to the pope, "Gerard is thoroughly orthodox, zealous for the unity of the church, and a powerful opponent of the heretics." He himself said to his bishop, "always and everywhere I humbly submit myself to the authority of the holy Roman church." He was strict in observing all the ordinances of the ecclesiastical power. But in spite of all this, in the very bosom of the scholastic theology and of the hierarchy, he prepared the way by a noiseless activity, for throwing off the shackles of both. The germs of a reformation were contained in his principles. By conceiving of the church and the priesthood in such a spiritual way, he was led to seek them in their purity, and vitality, and to attempt to give them a character worthy of their origin. He insisted with great earnestness on the use of the *Scriptures*, and on their wide circulation. He was a close biblical student himself and always urged others to become such. Christ as represented in the Gospels, he incessantly set forth as the foundation of the church and of the Christian life. The primitive, apostolical church was always present to his mind as a model. There he found a pure piety and a glowing zeal such as was not to be found in his own age. According to that primitive pattern, therefore, if not in all things, certainly in all the more essential, he desired to see the church remodeled. He was especially concerned for the restoration of the priesthood to a spiritual character, and contended earnestly against its prevailing corruption. The priest, he maintained, should not strive for ecclesiastical or literary honors; but should aim at humility, at a victory over all selfishness and a life pleasing to God alone.

Gerard had also intended to establish a cloister for regular canons for the purpose of exhibiting a higher and purer model of Christian life, but death prevented him. He died as he had lived. The plague then raging in Deventer had seized one of

his friends. As Gerard possessed some medical knowledge, he hastened to the relief of the sufferer and caught the infection. He was not in the least terrified, but said with composure, "Behold, the Lord calls me away, the moment of my departure is at hand; Augustin and Bernard are knocking at the door." To his younger brethren who gathered weeping around his bed, he addressed these, his last words: "Trust in God, my dear friends, and be not afraid of the men of the world. Be firm; for man cannot frustrate what God has determined to accomplish.—Florentius, my beloved disciple, on whom the spirit of the Lord rests, will be your father and rector. Listen to him as you have done to me; for I know not any one whom I can so well trust, whom you can so safely love and honor as being your father." Thus he fell asleep in his native city, on the 20th of August 1384 at the age of 44. He was buried, amid the universal lamentations of the people, in St. Mary's, the church in which his living voice had so often resounded.

Among the productions of Gerard none are more interesting to us than his moral sayings recorded by his biographer, Thomas à Kempis. These furnish conclusive evidence that Gerard constitutes an important link in the succession of the mystical school of piety. Himself excited and influenced by Ruysbroek, he transmitted the same spirit through his favorite disciple, Florentius, and he, in turn, communicated it to Thomas à Kempis. The latter had never seen Gerard; for he could not have been more than four years old, when Gerard died; but no one can fail to recognize, in the moral sayings already referred to, the school from which the Imitation of Christ proceeded. Every one who examines the writings of that circle of men, must perceive that Thomas à Kempis is only one member in the series, that he was formed and attained to the most perfect maturity under the traditional influence, which descended from Ruysbroek and Gerard Groot.

Florentius Radewin, and the more perfect development of the system under him.

The individuals, who succeeded Gerard either as heads of the institution or as chief centres of influence, followed the direction which he had given, improving the system and enlarging the sphere of its operations and thereby giving it increasing importance. The immediate successor of Groot was Florentius Radewin, the

second pillar of the Life in Common, and, as it respects the perfection of the system, a more important individual than Gerard himself.

Florentius was born about the year 1350, and was the son of a respectable and wealthy citizen of Leerdam, in the south of Holland. He was educated at the university of Prague, then very flourishing and much frequented by the young men of the Low Countries. On his return home, he heard the discourses of Gerard, who happened at that very time to be on one of his preaching excursions through the diocese of Utrecht. He was deeply impressed and permanently affected by the remarkable spirit of piety which pervaded those discourses. Soon he became personally connected with Gerard, and finally the warmest friendship was contracted between them. Being of an active and energetic character, he eagerly sought to communicate to others the fire which glowed in his own bosom. He therefore gathered around him a circle of studious young men, who were inclined to devote themselves entirely to a simple, pious, and apostolical life, and, without any formal promise of obedience, to adopt him as their guide. Florentius renounced his place as canon in Utrecht, and went to Deventer, where, in accordance with Gerard's wishes, he was ordained as priest. He was the first of the fraternity who received such ordination. Gerard said on that occasion, "Only this once have I procured ordination for any one, and he, I hope, will prove a worthy priest."

Florentius was less learned than Gerard; and never indulged in subtle speculations which hold no connection with personal piety. But he had all the qualities of a practical man,—an untiring activity, great tact in controlling men, and unusual affability, and, at the same time, a character that inspired awe. One of his friends said of him, "There is no man whom I so much love and at the same time so much fear as Florentius." When he felt constrained to give reproof, no one resisted or apologized for himself. In the severities of a religious life he equalled and even exceeded Gerard. He despised all adulation. As he one day received a letter full of commendation, he threw it down with these words, "Has the man nothing else to write about? If not, it were better to be silent." No employment was too mean for him, not even the duties of the kitchen, to which, according to the example set by Gerard, all the brethren attended in turn. His care for the poor and the suffering was incessant; he often sent them food from his own table, and even gave away the delicacies which he had re-

ceived as presents from his friends. Not less was his concern for the young; he cultivated their friendship, gave them religious advice and consolation, furnished them with books and materials for copying, and in every way promoted their piety and favored their studies. Thomas à Kempis, who had experienced, in his youth, many such kindnesses from Florentius, says in his biography of him, "If all others were to be silent, I could not be so, respecting the benevolent character of Florentius, of which I have received so many proofs myself." The counsels of so wise and good a man were much sought. Said one, "whenever I have followed the advice of Florentius, I have received benefit from it, but injury whenever I have preferred my own way." Sometimes there stood at his door so many persons who came to consult him, that he could scarcely find his way out, or reserve sufficient time for his private devotions and other engagements; but he never dismissed one without either complying with his request, or setting a more convenient time to converse with him. Like Gerard, he gave to his brethren a collection of religious maxims or moral sayings. But we must refrain from giving any examples.

Such was the character of the man to whom Gerard entrusted the supervision of the young fraternity. Let us now see how Florentius carried out the designs of Gerard. Two years after the death of his master, in the year 1386, he consummated the devout wish of his departed friend. In conjunction with other disciples of Gerard, he sketched the plan of a *cloister of Regular Canons*, which was to be the soul and centre of the other inferior associations, whether male or female, of the general society. William, Duke of Gelders, favored the undertaking; wealthy men supported it by giving it landed estates; and the same bishop of Utrecht, who once prohibited the preaching of Gerard, now signified his approbation of the design. Thus originated at Windesheim, a few miles south of Zwoll, a cloister of regular canons in connection with the Brethren of the Life in Common. This was soon followed by others, especially that of St. Agnes, near Zwoll, in which Thomas à Kempis long resided. These establishments for regular canons stood in immediate connection with the Houses of the Brethren. From the latter various individuals passed to the former, while others received ordination and entered upon the public duties of the Christian ministry. The Brethren were also on friendly terms with the better monastic orders, such for example as the Carthusian, Cistercian and Benedictine. In this manner the institution founded by Gerard was developed under a two-

fold form. The regular canons, who were more secluded, and more restricted to a monastic life, formed the heart of the system, the ordinary brethren of the Life in Common, partly priests and partly laymen, constituted the larger, freer and more active portion of the society, being extensively employed among the people, and either residing together in the Houses of the Brethren, or abroad, when engaged as clergymen or as teachers of youth.

The Cloisters seem not to have accomplished all that Gerard and Florentius anticipated. At first the Brethren at Windesheim were very zealous and active, particularly in making manuscript copies of the Bible, and in comparing and criticising the various texts. But with the gradual prosperity and increasing wealth of the establishment, their zeal began to abate, and they finally sunk to the ordinary level of monastic institutions.

The Houses of the Brethren, on the contrary, were in the highest degree successful in fostering and propagating both piety and learning. Here the activity of Florentius was particularly vigorous and effective. In Deventer were established, by his agency, with the aid of the city council, several houses. Of these the most important was the *Rich House*, (*het rijke Fraterhuis*), called also the House of Florentius. About the same time, followed many other similar Houses in the larger towns of Holland and of Lower Germany.

Thus had Florentius, during his rectorship, accomplished very much in enlarging and completing the arrangements of the institution over which he presided. But he was now near the end of his career. He had, perhaps from his excessive severities, long suffered in his health; but at this time he was seized with a mortal illness, and after appointing a bosom friend, Aemilius van Buren, his successor, and giving his dying counsel to the Brethren, saying among other things, "Abide in humility and simplicity of heart, and Christ will abide in you," he expired in the year 1400, sixteen years after Gerard's death, at the age of about fifty. When his body was deposited in the church of St. Lebuin, one of the citizens of Deventer remarked, "whether St. Lebuin was a holy man or not I do not know,—I suppose he was; but I know full well that Florentius was a holy man of God."

It will be in place here to enter into a more detailed account of the institution planted by the hand of Gerard, and nurtured into vigor by the care of Florentius. The entire establishment was an association closely united by internal bonds, and yet so free that each individual could have a spontaneous development

and enjoy his natural liberty, according to the apostolic model. This end was secured by placing the union not so much on the ground of compacts and formal rules, as on the spirit by which all the members were animated. The disorders, incidental to such liberty, were restrained not by authority but by an extraordinary attention to the cultivation of charity. While great results were possible, so long as such a state of things should exist, a failure would be sure to follow, as soon as the spirit of the original founders and members should degenerate in their successors.

Entrance into the fraternity, originally at least, was not attended with a vow binding for life, neither was the conduct of members regulated, as in the cloisters, by minute laws and precepts, but by example and usage.¹ By this means two important points were gained; first, as the continued connection with the society always remained voluntary, the members were always warmly attached to it; and secondly, as the union of all the branches of the general society as well as of all of the members of each body was free and unconstrained, ample room was left for all that variety of form which nature always requires. The different Houses had their own different customs and traditionary forms; and in each of the Houses a certain freedom was allowed for every individual to act in his own way.

Still a substantial union, both external and internal, was steadily aimed at. The Houses always stood in communication with each other; and besides this, general meetings of the rectors were regularly held. The heads of all the Houses met annually, the Dutch and the German separately, to deliberate and decide upon matters of common concern. The rector of the principal House at Deventer was the natural superior, at least, of all the Dutch fraternities. The arrangement, however, was not of the nature of a hierarchy, but was patriarchal. He was regarded as the father of the whole society, and was so styled. This patriarchal feature of the institution explains the mode of appointing the rector at Deventer, which was not by election, but by designation from the last incumbent, a circumstance which invested the office with the greater solemnity and authority.

The organization of a House of the Brethren was ordinarily as follows. About twenty brethren lived together with a common purse and a common table. They were divided into three classes, priests, clerks and laymen. The number of priests was at first very small, because the whole society inherited the scruples

¹ *Secundum laudabiles consuetudines domus antiquae.*

of Gerard and trembled at the awful responsibilities of the priestly office. At a later period, a larger number received ordination, some entering upon the public ministry and receiving office and therefore dissolving their external connection with the Houses, others remaining in that connection and exercising their clerical functions among the Brethren. There were commonly four, sometimes a larger number of priests in one House, and about twice as many clerks; the remainder consisted of persons in their novitiate, or those who had taken up only a temporary residence with the Brethren. Admission into the order, which was never granted except after earnest and frequent solicitation, inasmuch as the Brethren kept themselves at the furthest remove from the proselyting spirit of the mendicant friars—was always preceded by a probationary residence of one year. During that period the probationers were kept under strict supervision; and it was expected of them not to visit their friends in the interval, lest they should thereby become entangled again with secular affairs. Their property also was ordinarily applied to the use of the fraternity. One of the sayings of Florentius was, "Wo to the man who, while living in the community, seeks his own, or says of anything, it is mine." Those who, at the close of the year, wished to become permanent members, were admitted as clerks, and their condition corresponded to that of monks, except that no vows for life were required of them. Each one retained the right of withdrawing at pleasure with the understanding, however, that on so doing, he was to pay a stipulated sum to the fraternity. In dress and manner of living there was less constraint than in cloisters. The ordinary dress was a grey mantle, coat and pantaloons without ornament, together with a grey cap, whence they were called *cucullati*. Those who were upon probation had the hair shorn from the crown of the head. The mode of life in each House was very regular, particular hours being set apart for devotion, writing and manual labor. During the time of sitting at table some book was read, each of the Brethren in turn officiating as reader. One individual was appointed at each time to notice and correct any irregularities, and was called *corrector errorum in mensa*. Though certain offices were established for the sake of order, there was a general equality, like that which exists in families. Over each house presided a rector, prior, or praepositus, elected by the brethren; the other offices were those of vice-rector, steward, scriptuarius, who superintended the business of copying manuscripts, the librarius, the magister novitiorum, the

infirmarius, the hospitarius, and a few mechanics. But in these matters, as might be expected, there was no exact uniformity.

After the same manner, there were formed female societies of the Life in Common. Even Gerard had founded, in a separate house, totally disconnected from the other establishments, a female community, the members of which were to lead, in retirement, a life of devotion and industry. Sewing and weaving and the instruction of the youth of their own sex, constituted their chief employment. John Binterink founded a new convent for females, a little out of the city of Deventer, and presided over both the old and the new establishments for a period of twenty-six years. When he commenced these labors there were sixteen sisters connected with the association; at the time of his death there were one hundred and fifty. Such houses were rapidly multiplied, as was the case with those of the Beguins at an earlier period; and they were soon regularly organized after the manner of the *Beginasia*. A superintendent, or Martha, presided over each house; a sub-Martha was stationed at her side. In Utrecht resided the superior, or the Martha, who had the supervision of all the houses in that country, and who visited them all at least once a year. Besides this office which related more particularly to the external deportment of the members, and the general order of the establishment, there belonged to each house a priest, who exercised the functions of a spiritual guide. Community of goods prevailed more in the houses of the females than in those of the males. One of the chief benefits resulting from these female associations; was that through them the religious spirit of the general body found a readier entrance into private families. But as there was otherwise nothing very peculiar in their influence, we will return to the institutions of the Brethren.

The labor of the Brethren was judiciously distributed. Such mechanical arts as were needed were practised by those who were skilled in them. Among the regulations for the houses in Wesel, of which there were three, are found directions for tailors, barbers, bakers, cooks, gardeners, butlers, as well as for teachers, copyists, bookbinders, librarians and readers. In the house at Rostock the brethren employed in common manual labor were divided into *laymen* and *mechanics*. Notwithstanding these divisions of labor, a certain equality was restored, inasmuch as the clerical and literary members took part, as far as was practicable in the menial services, and those of lower employments, in turn,

participated in almost every labor of the clerical members. To such an extent did the spirit of the family prevail over that of caste. The employment most common to all, was that of copying books. The zeal which Gerard, from religious motives, manifested for this branch of labor was inherited by Florentius and imparted by him to the entire fraternity. Florentius himself was not a skilful copyist; but he encouraged his brethren to practise the art, and gave such aid as he could by polishing and ruling the parchment, selecting passages and correcting the copy. Particular hours were set apart each day for copying, especially for the benefit of the poor. The more elegant copyists, such as Thomas à Kempis, prepared beautiful copies of the Bible and of favorite theological works, which were deposited in the libraries of the Brethren. Others were occupied with copying useful books to be given away to indigent young persons, or religious tracts to be distributed gratuitously among the people.¹

The occupations of the brethren depended in great measure on the circumstances and character of the different houses. In some houses a practical tendency prevailed; in others intellectual activity, and some were scarcely anything more than mere industrial establishments. Much, too, depended on the pecuniary condition of the houses; for while many of them were very poor, others were rich and even sumptuous. The house at Hildesheim, was a sort of ecclesiastical warehouse, where missals, mass-weeds, surplices and the like were furnished. In the convent of St. Mary's near Beverwijk, the brethren traded in parchments, honey, wax and salt fish. The brethren at Hattem, on account of their poverty, practised at first nothing but husbandry and weaving; after becoming more prosperous, they were also engaged in literary employments, and finally established a school which was not without repute. There was a similar diversity in the cloisters of the regular canons. The celebrated cloister of Agnesberg or Mount St. Agnis near Zwoll, where Thomas à Kempis lived, was originally very poor. Others, as that near Hoorn, called the jewel of Westfriesland, were very rich.

The largest number of these establishments, however, retained the character which their founders designed, and were of that middling class, which were not obliged to resort wholly to manual labor, nor, on the other hand, were allured to a life of ease and

¹ Has not the origin of tract distribution generally been referred to too late a period?

luxury. Their chief aim was to promote religion among the common people, and education among the youth.

For the spiritual improvement of the people two kinds of religious service were established, preaching, and what were called *collations*, or a religious meeting that bears the same relation to public preaching that a little refreshment does to a regular meal.

Upon the prevailing mode of preaching, Gerard and his institution exerted the happiest influence. As early as the time of Charlemagne the priests were often desired to preach in a language that the people could understand, but, for the most part, to no purpose. Only a few individuals, as the Dominican monk, John of Vicenza about the year 1250, and the Franciscan, Berthold of Ratisbon, who died in 1272, distinguished themselves from others by preaching practically and in the native language. But Groot gave a general impulse in favor of such preaching, and, in his day, a large number of preachers, undoubtedly excited by him, made the pulpit a place of commanding moral power, in Holland. So Wermhold at Utrecht, Henrici at Amersford, Gonde at Zwooll, Aurifaber at Haarlem, Dou at Amsterdam, and Paulus at Medenblik, men who, though they did not belong to the Brethren of the Life in Common, labored heartily in their spirit. Binterink and Gronde were among the most celebrated preachers of the fraternity. The manner of preaching among the Brethren was animated and popular. They spoke from inward impulses, and therefore with simplicity and with power. They animated their discourses by a liberal use of striking examples, and gave them form and authority by weighty sentiments and remarks drawn from the writings of the more pious and able of the church fathers. Their long discourses, which in some instances extended to six hours, probably have had some influence in the formation of that practice, still peculiar to the Dutch preachers, of delivering sermons of an almost interminable length.

The *collations* were less public and less formal than the ordinary church services. They were, at first, most common in the houses of the brethren, and were generally holden in the afternoon of the Sabbath and of festival days. A passage of Scripture, commonly from the Gospels, was read, explained and applied to practical life. Sometimes the speaker proposed questions to his audience. Such services, which were often held also among the common people, and also in the popular dialect excited a great and wide-spread interest, so that many legacies were left to the Brethren on the condition that, on festival days, such meet-

ings should be held for the benefit of the common people. Similar instructions were given on proper occasions in more private circles in social life.

But the most important service by far done to the public by the Brethren, was that of educating the young. By that means they succeeded in forming a new generation. In this work also their activity varied according to the occasion. In many cases, they had no separate schools of their own, but entered into a voluntary connection with existing schools, aiding the pupils by providing them with books, by holding literary and religious intercourse with them, and by procuring for them employment or support. In other instances they opened schools themselves, and gave instruction in reading, writing, music, in Latin both oral and written, and in religion, and most of all in biblical history. In other schools still, they sometimes had a participation by taking the charge of particular classes without any further connection. So it was in the celebrated school at Deventer, which was founded before Gerard's time. After the institution of the Life in Common, this school and the Brethren spontaneously entered into coöperation with each other. The rectors of the school were generally friendly to the order, many of the pupils either were supported by it, or recommended to wealthy and benevolent individuals, who furnished them both board and rooms. These pupils commonly participated both in the labors and in the religious exercises of the Brethren. At the time of Florentius, John Boheme was rector of the school at Deventer, and being a great admirer of the former, and an almost constant attendant on his preaching, he was predisposed to favor in every possible way those who were recommended by him. Thomas à Kempis says, in his life of Gronde, "When I came to Deventer to study, I also visited Windesheim, where I found among the canons my brother, John à Kempis. At his suggestion I went to see Florentius whose name was already widely known. He procured for me a gratuitous support in the family of a much respected and pious matron, and gave me books, as he was accustomed to do to others." By such a coöperation of the Brethren, the school at Deventer became very flourishing. Wherever the brethren had a house, there a large number of scholars was sure to be found, sometimes even a multitude, as at their school at Herzogenbush, where there were, at times, no less than twelve hundred pupils; and at Gröningen where there were nearly as many. The reason why their schools were so much frequented was, in part at

least, that the indigent were aided in their support by the Brethren, and though tuition was not universally free, it was generally so to poor students. In Herzogenbush the pupils, besides their division into some school classes, were distinguished as *divites*, *mediocres* and *pauperes*, the first of which are supposed to pay full tuition; the second, half of it; and the third nothing at all. Over the door of the House of the Brethren in that place was written the following distich:

Interes gratis docui quos pressit egestas,
Et mercede, quibus eors satis ampla fuit.

Where so large a number of pupils were collected, the office of teacher could be made permanent. This circumstance in the schools of the Brethren introduced an important change, and did much towards checking the wandering habits of the school-teachers of that age. The personal connection between teacher and pupil became intimate, influential and lasting. Whole cities even where such schools were established, received a new and remarkable intellectual stamp. In Amersford, for example, a knowledge of the Latin, about the middle of the sixteenth century, is said to have been so general, that the common mechanics could understand and speak Latin. The more intelligent merchants understood Greek, the maidens sung Latin hymns, and a tolerably correct Latin could be heard in the streets. This picture may be a little too highly colored, but it is certain that the Brethren made great and successful efforts to restore and propagate a purer Latinity.

In the schools, as in the church, the tendency of these efficient labors of the Brethren was to Reformation. Their earnest, active, disinterested efforts for the education of the young, was a novel thing. It was apparent that they were designing to raise up a new generation of men. Still more obvious was this in their method of instruction. They cast away at once from their text-books all the scholastic nonsense, and abandoned what was entangled and useless for what was sound and practical; and the barbarism of the middle ages for the simplicity and purity of the ancients. The *Mammotrectus*, the *Gemma Gemmarum*, the *Doctrinale Alexandri de Villa Dei*, and other school books, which the papal church protected as sacredly as it did its doctrines, were unceremoniously thrust aside by the Brethren, and the works of the ancients substituted in their place. Alexander Hegius and John Sintius in the school at Deventer have deservedly secured

to themselves an imperishable name for the boldness and decision with which they conducted their pupils back to a knowledge of antiquity.

The foregoing account embraces what is most essential in the organization of the Brethren of the Life in Common. In what follows we have to consider its further development under two particular forms. At the very beginning, the Brethren, as if by natural instinct, resorted to *the use of the native language in giving religious instruction*. But from this period forth, it became with them a subject of definite consideration, and a settled principle of action. Not only did they hereby acquire a great power in their discourses over the minds of the people, but they also prepared the way for introducing with more effect the Bible and other religious books into the popular language. This is one of the two forms of activity above indicated. The other is the collection of the traditional doctrines relating to practical religion and the moral teachings of the leading men of the fraternity into a living, connected and complete form, so as to make a deep and lasting impression on the public mind. The former work was accomplished under the auspices of Gerard Zerbolt. The latter was effected with a success almost unparalleled by Thomas à Kempis. Both of these agencies, whether designed to be so or not, tended to prepare both the intellect and the hearts of the people for the preaching of Luther. To these two individuals, therefore, we must direct our attention.

Zerbolt, and the use of the Native Language in Religious Instruction.

As a contemporary of Florentius, though about seventeen years younger, Gerard Zerbolt distinguished himself among the Brethren at Deventer. He was born at Zütphen about the year 1367, and is therefore often called Gerard of Zütphen. After going through his elementary studies at other schools, he came to that of Deventer, in which he was principally educated, and entered into the most intimate connection with Florentius and the Brethren. Even when a boy, he manifested an extraordinary eagerness for study. He hung upon the lips of his teachers, and when the hour of instruction was ended, always regretted that it was so short. This thirst for knowledge was never abated, and was modified only by taking a particular direction after his entrance into the fraternity. He was incessantly employed in reading, studying, and copying the Bible and other religious books, allow-

ing nothing but his devotions and his meals to interrupt him. He was wholly indifferent to other matters, rarely could tell after dinner, what he had eaten, and injudiciously neglected his health even when ill. But he was by no means unskilled in secular business; he was well versed in law, and was possessed of such a sound judgment that he was often consulted by Florentius and employed by him in legal transactions. Called away once on such a case, as he was returning to Deventer, he was seized with an illness at Windesheim which proved fatal. Aemilius van Buren, in the unreserved manner of the Brethren, said to him, "it seems to me brother, that you are near your end;" "so it appears to me also," was the reply; and soon he expired in the year 1398, the thirty-first of his age and about two years before Florentius. Excessive study and a want of due regard to his health, may have hastened his premature death. In his life he was equally remarkable for his zeal in collecting books, and for his bold efforts in behalf of the Bible.

Gerard Groot, a great lover and diligent collector of good books, had left his library to the house of the Brethren at Deventer. Florentius and Gronde, who were appointed librarians, had greatly increased the collection. But no one equalled Zerbolt in this respect after he was made librarian. His attachment to valuable authors was almost unbounded. He was accustomed to say, "such works do more by way of preaching and instructing than it is possible for us to express." A beautiful manuscript was more attractive to him than a feast. He therefore kept the copyists constantly employed, collected books from every quarter, and preserved them with the greatest care. And yet as zealous a librarian as he was, he never forgot, that men were not made for books, but books for men; and consequently took pleasure in lending from his choice collection to the clerks of distant houses, that they also might be instructed and benefited. Men of a purely practical character might easily regard such a zeal for books as excessive and injurious. So it was in fact. As one of the Brethren was upon his dying bed, Florentius asked him, in what respect he thought the institution might be improved. The dying man replied among other things: "We have too many books; the most important ought to be selected, and the rest sold and the money given to the poor." Florentius, more intelligent and more sound in his views, honored the good intention of the brother, but did not follow his advice. The impulse which Zerbolt gave in favor of copying manuscripts and of collecting good libraries

was perpetuated among the Brethren; and it must be confessed, that in an age when the art of printing was unknown, it was of the utmost importance in two respects, first because both teacher and pupil found only in the libraries of the Brethren the kind of books that were needed for their intellectual culture, and secondly, because through their untiring industry alone, could such a novelty as religious tracts in the native language be furnished for the common people in numbers sufficient to produce general effect.

This brings us to the second important agency of Zerbolt, that which related to the use of the Bible and other religious books in the vernacular tongue. On this subject in particular, did he employ all his talents and eloquence in writing for the public. It is certainly very extraordinary that in such an age, about one hundred and thirty years before Luther published his theses, this distinguished young man should speak out so fully and so powerfully on this point, as to create a general demand, which was never fully satisfied till Luther published his version of the Scriptures. We are to place the merits of Zerbolt the higher from the fact, that among his contemporaries even such men as Gerson should call in question the expediency of giving the Bible to the common people in their own language.

The treatise which Zerbolt wrote *De Utilitate Lectionis Sacrarum Literarum in Lingua Vulgari*, and which was designed for the learned and therefore written in very good Latin, pleads energetically, with a practical good sense and an earnestness free from all fanaticism, for the right and the duty of all laymen to learn for themselves the will of God directly from the Scriptures. He maintained that there was in the Bible a plain and simple sense intelligible to all, to the substantial comprehension of which no profound investigations or long trains of reasoning were necessary, but that, on the contrary, the meaning shines forth by its own light without the necessity of much labor or controversy. But he conceded that there are other truths in the Bible more profound and obscure, which must be earnestly studied and reflected upon in order to be understood. The one is milk for babes, the other strong meat for men. Simple and uneducated people, children in knowledge, may not only without injury or danger, but with great profit, as the best of the Fathers have maintained, read for themselves in a language which they understand those parts of the Scripture, which set forth a simple and practical Christianity. Obscure parts of the Bible, and different theological writers they

cannot understand ; these it is better for them to let alone. These views he supports in the following manner. " The Scriptures are not given for any one class in particular, but they contain instruction for persons of every class. Sometimes they enjoin general precepts equally applicable to all, but more frequently, they address their instructions to particular classes of individuals. At one time they speak to the beginner in religious knowledge, at another to those more advanced. Now they teach the way of life to the perfect, now to every variety of moral condition. Consequently they are designed for persons of every class, in order that men, estranged as they are from themselves, and ignorant of their true character, may learn their condition from the mirror of God's word. What rational person will venture to say that laymen commit sin, when they make that use of the Bible for which God gave it, namely to learn their sinfulness and heartily repent and reform? Why should they not receive the divine law as well as other more general blessings from God, since the law of God and the Holy Scriptures occupy the highest place among the blessings of Heaven? The people cannot justly be excluded from this blessing, and the divine consolations by which the soul receives its life and nourishment." The Bible, he continues in effect, is designed to give support to the law of nature, so that man may already learn what is left in obscurity there. Immersed as the common people are in worldly affairs, they need to have the dust removed which has beclouded the mental eye, and, at particular seasons to suspend their business, and turn their attention inward upon themselves and view their character and wants by the light of God's word. It is required of them even by law, that at certain times they go to church to hear the gospel ; but why preach to them from the Bible, if they ought to be ignorant of it? But if they can be benefited by oral teaching, why can they not read in books the same that is read or preached to them from the pulpit? They surely learn and retain little from what they hear in discourses fifteen minutes long, and that in an unknown tongue. If they are allowed without censure to read worldly productions, which are often corrupt and seductive, it is absurd to prohibit them from reading the Scriptures, by which the love of God, and a longing for their heavenly home is enkindled. Jerome, Augustine, Gregory and Chrysostom always exhorted the people to study the Scriptures, which they would never have done, had they regarded the practice as injurious or unlawful. That the people should read the word of God in their own language is suf-

ficiently proved by the nature of the case. The whole Bible was originally in the language of the people to whom it was given. If it is unlawful for the people at large to read the Bible in their native language, why did the prophets and the apostles write the several books of it in the language of the people rather than in a foreign language? From the earliest times the church has given translations of the Scriptures into different languages. The Jews had the Bible in Hebrew, the Chaldeans in Chaldee, the Greeks in Greek, the Arabians in Arabic, the Syrians in Syriac, the Goths in Gothic. The Romans, the Egyptians, the Indians, the Russians, the Sclavonians, the Gauls and all nations have the Scriptures in their own language. If, then, they are read in nearly all languages under heaven, why should they not be read in German also? He urged similar considerations in favor of employing the German, instead of the Latin language, in the prayers and hymns of the church. These sentiments and a corresponding practice among the Brethren not only gave depth and interest to those religious services which were the vehicle of a spiritual Christianity, but they tended to deliver the nation from the yoke of Roman laws, language and customs, which cramped the development of the national spirit. When the Germans heard German preaching, read a German Bible, had a German theology, and prayed and sung in German, they were internally severed from Rome; but it was reserved for Luther, to complete the work and bring the inward sentiment to a decisive outward act.

Thomas à Kempis, and the practical Religion of the Brethren in its most flourishing state.

There were in the community of the Brethren two theological elements, the one practical, the other doctrinal; the one designed more for Christians in general, the other for the smaller circle of reflecting and philosophic minds. These might be united in one man, or they might be so far separated, that one individual might give a preponderance to the former and carry it to the highest degree of perfection, and another to the latter. Such a separation actually took place. The two most distinguished men of the fraternity, who were born and bred in its spirit, Thomas à Kempis and Johan Wessel were the purest representatives of these two elements, the former preceding in point of time, as was natural perhaps, and setting forth ascetic Christianity in its noblest and most winning form, the other unfolding in the clearest and most per-

fect manner in that age the system of Christian doctrines. From the nature of the case, the theologian would more readily come in collision with the authority of the church than the ascetic. But while the one was breaking through the incrustation which had been formed over society, the other was preparing a warm germinal principle in the heart of the people, which would supply new life and energy when the incubus of antiquated formalism should be thrown aside. To form Thomas for this great work assigned him by Providence everything conspired, natural constitution and temperament, early domestic training, education in the schools, the whole tenor of his life and the moral condition of the age.

The character of his mind, in its original stamp, was evidently predisposed to a quiet, contemplative, introverted life. There breathes in all his writings a peculiar spirit of satisfaction and repose, and there beats gently a pulse of inward joy, cheerfulness and delight. We feel, as we read, that the writer moves only in this inner spiritual circle, but in this is perfectly happy. The cell, narrow indeed, but cheered by the love of God and of Christ, is to him a paradise, which he would exchange only for heaven. The duties of subjection, of prayer and other acts of devotion are to his taste the choicest delicacies. The renunciation of self, and devotedness to the interests of others, are the very elements of his life. Whatever he enjoins upon others, he himself performs with the greatest pleasure and enthusiasm.

Thomas Hamerken (*Malleolus*) was born in the year 1380, in the small but pleasant village of Kempen, situated in the vale of the Rhine not far from Cologne. Hence his name *Thomas von Kempen*, or *Thomas à Kempis*. His parents were of humble birth and lived in moderate circumstances, of which he made no secret, but like Luther, often referred to his low origin with the utmost simplicity and freedom. His father, who was an ordinary mechanic, gave him an example of industry and perseverance; his mother, who was distinguished for the fervor of her piety, early instilled into his susceptible mind the sentiment of a warm and devout love for divine things. Thomas undoubtedly gave signs of good talents very early, else the thought of giving him an education could hardly have been entertained, for, being poor, he was entirely dependent on the benevolence of others. The Brethren of the Life in Common were accustomed to aid precisely this class of boys. Consequently, in his thirteenth year he resorted to Deventer, the place of the most flourishing establishment of the Brethren. The relation of this house to the school of Deventer

ter has been already described. At first Thomas appears not to have been connected with the fraternity; but afterwards, at the suggestion of his brother John, then canon at Windesheim, to have presented himself to Florentius. The latter both won the ardent affection of Thomas and inspired respect for himself. Florentius also supplied him with books, and procured for him a home with a pious matron, somewhat as Luther was provided with one, when he was in similar circumstances, at Eisenach. The advantages of the friendship of Florentius were numerous and great. Thomas himself mentions a circumstance which well illustrates this remark. Boheme, then rector of the school at Deventer, though a rigid master, was a friend of Florentius. As the boy came one day to the rector to pay his tuition fee, and to redem the book which he had given as security, the rector asked him, who had supplied him with the money? When he was informed that it came from Florentius, he returned it with these words, "Carry it back; on his account the debt shall be cancelled." Thomas took part in the religious devotions of the Brethren, and soon yielded himself up entirely to a manner of life with which he was so much charmed. Not long after, he was formally received into the house of the Brethren, in which, at that time, there were about twenty clerks, three laymen, a steward, a cook and a tailor. His associate, and most intimate friend was Arnold van Schoonhoven, a youth of ardent piety, with whom he occupied the same room and bed. The warmth of this young man's religious affections and the cordiality of his acts of devotion, kindled a similar ardor in the susceptible heart of Thomas. "I saw myself," said the latter, in the biography of his friend, "inflamed for devotion by his zeal; and often wished I might have but for a few moments such grace as he seemed constantly to enjoy."

By the side of this youthful example of piety, stood the more imposing and authoritative example of Florentius, whom Thomas venerated and loved beyond any other mortal. He was accustomed to carry to his revered master and friend all his mental anxieties and to receive those directions which allayed his fears and which conducted him to a state of serenity and joy. This tender relation between the genial boy and the mature man extended itself to the minutest matters. Florentius was frequently so indisposed that he could not eat at the common table. In such cases, he took his meals at a small table in another apartment, and Thomas enjoyed the distinction, at such times, to be his company and to wait upon him. "I, though unworthy," says he, in

his life of Florentius, "was often invited by him to prepare his table, and brought to him the little which he needed and attended to his wants with the utmost pleasure." So deep an impression did the character, example, and conversation of Florentius make upon the affectionate youth, that he ever after retained the image in his mind and stamped it distinctly upon all his writings.

In the work entitled, "The Valley of Lilies," à Kempis says, "Examples teach better than words." This was true in his own case. He had a longing heart, which eagerly selected and appropriated whatever was excellent in others, and was intent only on its own highest improvement. Thus he saw the whole fraternity, and his friends in the best light, and was benefited by things which might have left but slight traces upon less susceptible and less generous minds. Take the following as a striking example. "One day," he remarks, "in the winter season, Henry Brune was sitting by the fire and warming his hands; in the mean time, he turned his face to the wall, and offered silent prayer. On perceiving this, I was deeply affected, and ever afterwards loved him the more." However insignificant the circumstance might be in itself, and however idealized it may have been in the mind of the young observer, the main point retains all its importance, namely, that his heart was a rich and generous soil into which no good seed could be accidentally cast without springing up.

After Thomas had thus passed seven years at Deventer, Florentius, on a certain festival day, when he perceived that the young man had betrayed much religious emotion, called him aside and addressed him thus: "My dear son Thomas, the time has arrived when it is necessary for you to decide on your course of life; you are now at the Pythagorean point where two ways diverge. You see the vexations and the perils of the world, its short-lived joys and its regrets. You know that we must all die and render to God and to Christ an account of our life. Wo to them who cannot do it, with a good conscience! What good would it do one, if he should gain the whole world and yet ruin his soul? Attend, then, to your salvation. But, as you have often heard, there are two ways which lead to salvation, the one that of an active, the other that of a contemplative life. The former is pursued by those who worthily serve Christ by good works, the latter, which is more acceptable to God, is followed by those who with Mary sit at the feet of Jesus. Whichever of the two you shall choose,

you will pursue it with more safety and benefit in a cloister than in the world which lieth in wickedness.—If you should ask, what place I could recommend, I would say that for those who have been educated here, one of the two cloisters of regular canons recently founded by our community, would be the best." This suggestion decided the future career of Thomas. On the following day he took a letter of recommendation, and resorted to the convent of St. Agnes.

This cloister was situated in the vicinity of Zwoll, on a slight elevation, a healthy and pleasant spot, along which flowed the river *Vechte*. It was established without great pecuniary resources, and was at this time, weak, and without any kind of distinction. But that circumstance was of no account with Thomas. He was kindly received, and regarded the place as a retreat which the hand of Providence had provided for him. Here he spent all the remainder of his long life, during which he gained a great name in the world, and thus gave distinction to the small cloister to which he belonged.

He was not precipitate in his final decision, but passed five years in his novitiate, and did not take the monastic habit till the sixth year, nor the vow till the year following. But with him the decision, once formed, was irrevocable. As he was priest, his chief employment in the cloister was religious instruction. Besides this, he copied valuable books, and composed numerous works of his own. He was a distinguished copyist, and always manifested delight in beautiful manuscripts. An elegant copy of the Bible in four volumes, a missal and select works of St. Bernard, all executed by his hand, were preserved in the cloister. His own work, the *Imitation of Christ*, he copied several times.

Of a life thus quietly spent in retirement little can be said that is adapted to enliven biography by way of incident. It passed like a smooth silvery stream, from whose surface was reflected a cloudless sky. Quiet industry, lonely meditation, and secret devotion filled up the successive days of his life. In consequence of his peaceful state of mind, and regular habits, he lived to an advanced age. He died July 1471, at the age of ninety-one, or ninety-two.

In his work on *Spiritual Exercises*, he enjoined "during the whole course of life, the union of humility and Christian cheerfulness." In another work he describes the man of God as "of a placid countenance, calm and agreeable in his address, prudent and orderly in his deportment, and always diffusing among

others peace and happiness." In these few sketches, he has drawn his own portrait. All who knew him, testify that, through his whole life, he manifested love to God and man, that he cheerfully endured every suffering, and that he was indulgent to the faults and weaknesses of his brethren. In his personal habits, he was neat, temperate, chaste, contented and cheerful. His chief effort was to maintain an undisturbed repose and peace of mind. Hence he was reluctant to intermeddle with worldly affairs, avoided intercourse with the great, and was silent when the conversation turned upon such subjects, lest his passions should be aroused, and the charm of sweet contemplation be broken. But he was far from being taciturn, his disposition for friendship was always strong, though with him the love of God was its only permanent bond. When God and divine things were the subject of discourse, he was in his natural element, and was exhaustless in his resources, and highly eloquent. Many persons came from a great distance in order to hear him.

In acts of devotion, public and private, he was diligent and earnest; in singing particularly, it has been observed of him, that he always stood erect, never leaning on anything for support; that his face was often directed heavenwards, and appeared as if transfigured, and that his whole body seemed spontaneously to follow the direction of his soul. Once a monk said to him, that he "seemed to relish a psalm as he would a salmon." "I do indeed," replied he, "but I nauseate it, when I see men singing listlessly."

In his personal appearance, he was small of stature, but well proportioned; his countenance was fresh and its expression animated, though his complexion was a little dark; his eyes were piercing and so strong, even in old age, that he never made use of glasses. Under an old likeness of him which Franciscus Tolensis saw, stood these characteristic words: *In omnibus requiem quaesivi, sed non inveni, nisi in abditis recessibus et libellulis.*

From the foregoing account, it will appear, that only a part of our nature is represented in Thomas à Kempis. That part, however, is an essential one; and the embodiment and exhibition of it, in his works, most perfect. The unity of character, which we observe in him, is the more complete, as there was nothing in the course of his life to disturb the natural bias of his mind. With the wide world he had little to do. Literature was to him a secondary pursuit, a means simply to a religious end. He was not, strictly speaking, a scholar, nor did he cultivate directly even the

art of persuasion. The aim of his whole life was directed to one single object, namely, to attain for himself, and to bring others to attain to the religious end of his being. Everything else was postponed to this. The love of God and the inward repose resulting from it, and the happiness of uninterrupted communion with him, were constantly before him as the sole object of desire. And that object he reached as few others have done. To thousands he has been not so much a publisher of that heavenly peace as a magnet, drawing them to it.

At this point of our narrative, it will be suitable to say a word concerning his writings. A theological system is not to be sought in such a writer as Thomas à Kempis. He was not a speculative thinker. It was not the force of logic, but the simplicity and strength of moral feeling that gave him his perfect unity and consistency of character. His writings, therefore, exhibit no philosophic generalizations, no statement and illustration of broad principles, but an inexhaustible treasure of sententious sayings, an oriental fertility in proverbs, in which the same material of practical wisdom and piety is wrought into an endless variety of forms. In the piety of Thomas we discover two ingredients, the one essential, the other more accidental, namely Christianity and monasticism. The latter would naturally limit the popularity of his writings to a particular age, the former preserves them from oblivion, and gives them the freshness of perpetual youth.

Those of his writings which are most tinged with the monastic hue, are his sermons delivered in the cloister, his *Disciplina Claustralium* and *Dialogus Novitiorum*, together with his letters and poems. His biographies of distinguished members of the community may also be reckoned as belonging to this class, inasmuch as they were designed to be attractive portraiture of the ascetic life.¹ The works in which a spiritual Christianity predominates over the monastic element are the *Imitation of Christ*,²

¹ He wrote full biographies of Gerard and Florentius, and sketches of the lives of the best of the disciples of Florentius, namely, Gronde, Binterink, Berner, Brune, Zerbolt, van Buren, Viana, Schoonhoven, and of Cacaba's, the pious cook in the House of Florentius. These are found in the edition of 1560, Volume III. pp. 3—142; in the edition of 1728 at the beginning of the last volume. As Thomas was intimately acquainted with these individuals, his account of their lives is very truthful and graphic. The reader imagines that he sees the men living and moving before him, and feels at home among the Brethren of the Life in Common. The life of Florentius is the most attractive and is the fullest of those little individual traits which are the charm of Biography.

² Ullmann, who has given in an appendix the result of an elaborate inquiry

Soliloquies of the Soul, the Garden of Roses, the Valley of Lilies, the treatise on the Three Tabernacles, and a few other minor essays.

Among these, the *Imitation of Christ* justly holds the highest rank. Next in merit is the *Garden of Roses*, which is still more sententious in its character.

The moral and religious views of Thomas à Kempis, cannot be said to have originated wholly in his own mind. The mystical theology is very much a matter of experience; and this experience was partly one's own and partly transmitted from generation to generation. Thomas draws largely from the stream of tradition which had flowed down through the Brethren of the Life in Common. Side by side with his own, he introduces the experiences, maxims and examples of other members of the community, who had lived before him. He did, indeed, by a process of assimilation make them all perfectly his own. They all bear the marks of his own peculiar genius. It is his heart that beats in every sentiment.

Though Thomas was himself but little versed in classical literature, his disciples, Lange, Spiegelberg, Liber, and, most of all, Agricola and Hegius, contributed much to the revival of ancient learning in Holland and Germany. While he was friendly to all pure knowledge, he found his chief delight in practical wisdom of a religious nature. His leading course of thought is this. We all naturally seek for something to make us happy; but we can never find it in the things of the world. The world has nothing substantial; everything in it is transient, and all its pleasures are attended with sorrows. There is here no true satisfaction, but disappointment, change, misery and death. We cannot find in the society of others what we need. They are frail, changeable, and deceitful. The chief good cannot be found in them. Nor is there anything in ourselves on which we can rely for happiness. We are full of weaknesses and of sin, and are either sunken in sensuality or lifted up with pride and self-sufficiency. God alone can satisfy the wants and the longings of the human soul. Union with him is the only sure felicity, a union effected not by an act of ours, but by the grace of God. Grace is the love of God imparting itself to men, giving them true freedom, and power to do what is right. By imitating Christ, Thomas did not mean the

respecting the author of the *Imitation of Christ*, thinks there is no longer room to doubt that it was written by Thomas à Kempis. While the external evidence is said to be in his favor, the internal is pronounced irresistible.

watching and imitating of his example in particular things, but the complete formation of Christ within us. Hence the peculiar manner in which he treats that subject in his chief work.

Although he was a good Catholic, the hierarchy had no significance with him. His inward spiritual life led him to place no high estimate on any external magnificence and show. It is a remarkable fact that in all his writings, he never alludes to the pope but once or twice, and then to show that neither he nor his leaden bulls are anything but dust and ashes.¹

Decline and Fall of the Community.

Early efforts were made by the jealous mendicant friars whose influence over the common people and over the young was very much weakened, to crush the institution which had supplanted them. They maintained that there were only two lawful modes of life, the secular and the monastic; that the Brethren were a *genus tertium*, neither the one nor the other, and consequently were living in violation of the canonical law. Zerbolt wrote an elaborate defence, which it is not necessary to notice particularly here. A more violent assault was made by Matthew Grabow, once a member of the community at Gröningen. He brought an accusation before the council of Constance, in which he aimed at nothing less than the destruction of the order. But Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, the most influential man of the times, and Peter D'Ailly, of Cambay, and twelve other distinguished theologians, espoused the cause of the party assailed and the accuser of the Brethren was condemned. No danger henceforth was to be feared from without, and a period of great prosperity ensued.

In order to form a correct general estimate of the success of the fraternity, it will be necessary to distinguish the different periods of its history. Its flourishing period extended from the beginning of the fifteenth century to the beginning of the sixteenth. During that time, it sent out its fresh religious influence, and gave a strong impulse to the public mind, and raised the education of the young to a new and proud distinction. A reforming council,

¹ Sapient est ille, qui spernit millia mille.

Omnis sunt nulla, Rex, Papa, et plumbea bulla.

Cunctorum finis, mors, vermis, fovea, cinis.—*Hortul. Rosar.* IV. 3.

Comp. Vallis liliior. XXV. 3. Nemo unius diei certitudinem vivendi habet, nec impetrare potest a Papa, bullam nunquam moriendi.

and even popes and cardinals favored its interests. The people flocked from all quarters to its places of worship, and the youth to its schools. Within the same interval of time, particularly between 1425 and 1451, most of the Houses of the Brethren were established. In the Netherlands, we find the fraternity settled not only at Deventer, Zwoll and Windesheim, but at Amersford, Hoom, Delft, Hattem, Herzogenbush, Gröningen, Gouda, Harderwijk, Utrecht, Brussels, Antwerp, Louvain, Ghent, Grammont, Nimeguin, and Doesburg. Beyond the borders of the Netherlands, there were Houses at Emmerich, Munster, Cologne, Nieder Wesel, Osnabrück, Hildesheim, Herford, Rostock and Culm. Indeed, they were found up the Rhine as far as Swabia, and in the interior of Germany as far as Merseburg.

In the course of the sixteenth century, there was a very observable decline. The last House established by the Brethren was that in Cambray in the year 1505, which continued however only till 1564. In so celebrated a place as Zwoll there were only three students in 1679. The last member of the establishment at Rostock, Arsenius, died in 1675. Only a very few Houses, as that at Munster, were in existence, at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

The institution could retire from the scene of action with honor; it had accomplished its end. The causes of its decay were not assaults from without, but the altered circumstances of the times. The age of improvement which the Brethren in part, at least led on, had outstripped them. Other mightier agencies were in successful operation, and theirs were no longer necessary, nor would these, in fact, have been any longer adequate to the exigencies of society, in that age. They belonged rather to a preparatory dispensation. They were like the morning star, which fades away, when the sun appears.

The Brethren had always used great diligence in copying books. But the art of printing now rendered such labor useless, and the more so from the circumstance that at the very beginning, it was applied to the same object, to multiplying copies of the Scriptures, of other religious works and of useful school books. As soon as the presses of Gutenberg, Faust, and Schöffer were in successful operation at Mayence and Eltville, the Brethren at Marienthal in the vicinity, began to turn their attention to the art, and established a press, at the latest, in 1474, and perhaps as early as 1468. Their example was followed by the Houses at Herzogenbusch, Gouda, Louvain, Rostock, and by the cloister Hem near Schoon-

hoven. The well known Parisian printer, Jodocus Badius, called Ascensius from his native place Asche, near Brussels, who published excellent editions of the ancient classics, was educated in one of the schools of the Brethren. But the rapid progress in printing soon made in all the countries of Europe, rendered the labors of the Brethren, in this respect, comparatively unimportant.

The second cause of prosperity to the institution was its strong and commanding position in respect to education. It had established schools where none were existing before, had done away the monastic mode of instruction and substituted a better, and had actually reared in its own bosom and sent out many excellent teachers. But in this work, also, it was now outdone. The best of its students, such as Hegius, Van den Busche, and Dringenberg, established independent schools, in which a more liberal course of study was pursued, and, consequently, the rush of students was now to the latter instead of the schools of the Brethren. Besides, a new impulse in favor of ancient learning had been given from another quarter, from Italy, which stood in more immediate contact with Germany, and henceforth the latter country took the precedence of Holland, so much so that Dringenberg, Agricola and Erasmus, the most distinguished of the Dutch scholars settled in Germany, where the universities were beginning greatly to excel the schools founded by the Brethren.

The third cause of the celebrity of this order, the use of the native language in religious instruction, had become very common, and especially, at the opening Reformation, it ceased to be a distinguishing mark of those who had done so much to introduce it. Most of all did the Reformation itself, in its whole extent, overshadow the feebleness of the Brethren. All these circumstances tended to bring the institution of the Life in Common to its termination, and to dismiss the Brethren from the field, the expiration of their term of service having arrived.

If now we review the facts which have come before us in this narrative, we shall perceive that the fraternity, formed by Gerard, stood in intimate connection with the course of important events in the progress of religion. Like everything truly excellent and great, it had its origin in the remote past, and looked forward prophetically to the distant future. In its intention, and, to no small extent, in its spirit also, it was formed after the model of the apostolic church at Jerusalem; and in an age of darkness it was the first gleam of that twilight which preceded the Reformation. In some re-

pects, though in very different degrees, it resembled the associations of the Pythagoreans and the Essenes, the mother church at Jerusalem, and the nobler monastic institutions, especially that of the earlier Benedictines. In later times, the Pietists, and the Moravians, and in the present age, societies for circulating the Scriptures and for promoting Christian knowledge among the people and education among the youth, and, in fine, all our benevolent institutions remind us more or less vividly of the Brethren of the Life in Common.

The most striking analogy by far exists between the Pietists and the Brethren. The former aimed at reviving vital religion in the Lutheran church, without assailing the stiff theology of the orthodox. As they were viewed with suspicion by the church, and often violently opposed, a necessity arose for forming—very much after the manner of modern voluntary associations—little fraternities, in order to act with more effect in promoting piety, and to secure mutual protection and support. So the Brethren also still adhered to the Catholic church, and, without controverting the scholastic theology, gave their attention to matters, in their view, more important—to the cultivation of spirituality in religion. Both the Pietists and the Brethren, aimed at the religion of the heart; both were averse to idle speculation, and were devoted to practical piety; both had recourse directly to the common people and to the youth; both sought to produce in all the persons under their influence, separation from the world, deep repentance for sin, and an ardent personal piety; both held private and social meetings for religious edification in the free exercises of which laymen participated; both made free use of religious tracts in propagating their sentiments; both had a centre of operations, Deventer and Halle, with which all the other establishments were closely connected; both aimed at making all the inmates feel as if they were members of the same family, and under the influence of this sentiment the young received their entire course of intellectual and religious training; both were extensively engaged, in the manner which two such different periods required, in the publication of the Scriptures and other religious and valuable books; both had a powerful reforming influence upon the schools, and upon the general character of the age.