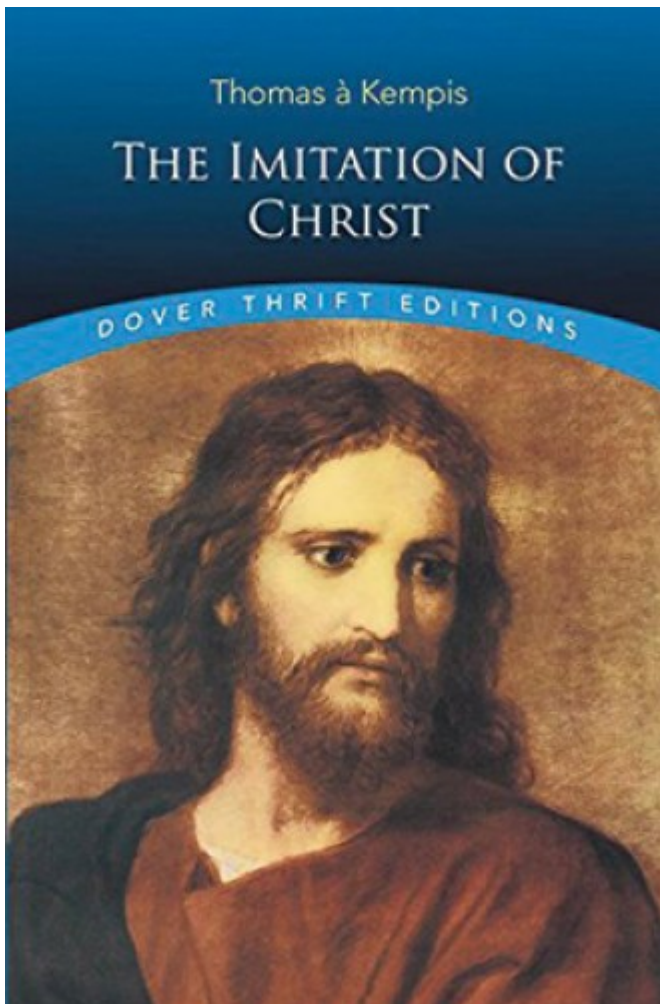


Finding God in the sewer

Struggle on against the powers as if this desperate situation were nothing—because even now it is nothing.

by [Kathryn Tanner](#) in the [December 6, 2017](#) issue

In Review



The Imitation of Christ

by Thomas à Kempis

Dover Publications; Thrift Editions edition



The Spiritual Combat

by Lorenzo Scupoli
Catholic Way Publishing



SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES



Letters to Persons in the World

by Lorenzo Scupoli

Aeterna Press

In these trying times I've taken to reading Catholic devotional literature, written long ago but still in print. Three favorites of mine—*The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis, Dom Lorenzo Scupoli's *The Spiritual Combat*, and *Letters to Persons in the World*, by the devout humanist Francis de Sales—I'd long respected but avoided reading because I suspected them to be inimical to Protestant sensibilities and commitments to structural social change. While still no scholar of these writings—I dip into them only occasionally and simply for solace—I now recognize that nothing could be further from the truth.

Here is no justification for suffering, nor excuse for not even trying and then, of course, failing to change the world. Instead, one finds wise counsel about how not to

be defeated in the struggle to lead a Christlike life when the suffering and failure inevitably come, try as one might to avoid them, in a world wracked by sin and saved only despite itself—indeed, in these between times, saved ever only obscurely (despite salvation's surety) in Christ.

Acknowledge, these texts advise, first one's own weakness and remaining wickedness and then that of the world; feel no surprise, therefore, when events in keeping with such weakness and wickedness arise. When feeling oneself to be most virtuous, suspect oneself all the more, and with that newly won humility come to rely on God all the more devotedly. No need to berate oneself, no need to despair of oneself, for what could one really expect to achieve by one's own power apart from that of God in Christ? Relying on the mercy and unbounded love of God possessed inalienably in Christ, look not to yourself for the victory but to God—and it will come.

Struggle on against the powers as if this desperate situation were nothing, because it is even now nothing (and will one day be made very obviously so) by the victory already won by Christ, apart from all the struggles one is now obligated to make as his follower. If one cannot find God in the sewer, as Luther might have said, one cannot hope to find God anywhere and will inevitably be overcome by the stench. Rather, do what one can in the struggle against one's own sin and that of the world, however inconsequential and disappointing the results. In the eyes of an all-powerful, loving God, that will be enough. Bear in mind the cross of Christ in the hour of one's own inevitable crucifixion by pain and sorrow, and remember that Christ himself was not defeated.

Read the other 2017 Christmas picks [here](#).