Today’s primary readings focus on piety. We’ll concentrate on them. Both belong to the tradition of devotion moderna or “Modern Devotion,” begun in the late 1300’s and popular in German- and Dutch-speaking Europe by 1500. This tradition’s “aim was to keep religion simple, devout, and charitable” (Steven Ozment, The Age of Reform 1250-1550 [New Haven: Yale, 1980], 96). It was theologically orthodox, impatient with scholasticism, and loyal to the Church.

· Dietrich Kolde’s Mirror for Christians (Janz #12) is the time’s most popular German devotional training guide for lay people. Our selection centers on prayer at meals, through the night, and at the time of death. Kolde’s prayers are Christ centered and draw deeply from Scripture. Perhaps most remarkably, they exalt faith, that thing Catholics were supposed to have forgotten about: “O dear Lord, I believe that a good Christian is obliged to believe… Strengthen me in this holy faith.” And they pray not that God would record our merits in a heavenly ledger, but that God would have grace on sinners, like the master of the vineyard had mercy on his late coming laborers (Matt. 20:1-16).

Christ, Scripture, faith, grace: These are the four themes of the Reformation! What Luther will insist on as the Gospel is present here in The Mirror, and more generally in the devotion moderna. (Now you know one of the places from which Luther “rediscovered” the Gospel: contemporary Catholic spirituality. Like Erasmus of Rotterdam, Luther was influenced by the devotion moderna [Ozment 97].)

· Another feature of The Mirror is its rather otherworldly individualism. This is even more pronounced in our second selection, from The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis (Janz #12; see p. 5-6). These readings are about life before God, but not about life together. I hope you’re asking, “Why either/or instead of both/and?” Because in medieval spirituality, the two are in tension, for at least two reasons:

First, God is to be found in introspection, in the inner life. This reflects an Augustinian influence woven deep into Western Christianity. Kempis’ spirituality is deeply otherworldly. It centers in denial of the passions, personal discipline, constant contemplation, and solitude and silence (Janz 5-6). Salvation is a move from slavery to sinful passions into the beatific vision.

Second, introspection has become an individual exercise. This emphasis, while foreign to Augustine, becomes common in medieval Catholic spirituality. Three of the four parts of Imitation are about the inner life, and the fourth is about the Eucharist (a rite that has long deteriorated into an exercise in individualism). These readings show us that the Reformation is not, as Graham Chapman claims in The Meaning of Life, about the emergence of “the individual.” The conscience of the individual is already the fundamental unit of Catholic piety. (This helps explain why Imitation is the only medieval text that most Protestant evangelicals have ever heard of, let alone read. “Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.” The technical term for this is “Platonism” if you want to be charitable, “Gnosticism” if you don’t.)

Alongside these spiritual similarities exist practices you probably find alien:

· There is the emphasis on death. Since Americans prefer to deny our own deaths, ignore the deaths of loved ones, and regard the fictional and real deaths of strangers as forms of entertainment, the medieval way of death is foreign.

Sure, some of the distance owes to the trauma of medieval European life, through which this tradition of spirituality travels on its way into the sixteenth century. Social history is right to make that point. It helps us understand both the anxiety of the age, and the waning of that anxiety as Europe’s prospects brighten. (The devotion moderna is in some ways falling out of step with its
times. Its spirituality, along with practices like indulgences and Masses for the dead, are becoming less sustainable.) But is it a full explanation? Would medieval Europeans have recognized themselves in this analysis?

What if we see things this way because of our cultural location? “Medieval Europe was obsessed with death because life was miserable.” Subtext: Wealth is normal; suffering is aberrant. Americans should be obsessed with pleasure, for we live in comfortable times. Economics etc. are the controlling forces in human history. Yet poverty and suffering don’t produce this emphasis in, say, sub-Saharan Africa, or Russia. Why aren’t these people obsessed with the afterlife like medieval Europeans? Partly because their spiritual traditions aren’t Augustinian or individualistic. [Question: How is or isn’t the social history recounted in Lindberg and George definitive for the shape of late medieval German spirituality?]

What’s the connection? After Gregory I, Augustine comes to be understood in a way that produces widespread ignorance and anxiety over one’s salvation. This is not because Augustine is predestinarian. It is because he appreciates the power of sin even after baptism and conversion experiences, and Catholic practice turns the sacraments of baptism, penance, and Eucharist into means of dispensing grace that is constantly being lost through sin (George 25). The effect is a chronic, un-Augustinian, spiritual insecurity (George 28). Kolde says elsewhere in The Mirror, “There are three things I know to be true that frequently make my heart heavy. The first troubles my spirit, because I will have to die. The second troubles my heart more, because I do not know when. The third troubles me above all. I do not know where I will go” (Janz, Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran [Toronto: Edwin Mellon, 1982]).

· Another feature of The Mirror we may find odd is the prominence of Mary. After having prayed so eloquently to Jesus at the point of one’s death, why spend as much time praying to Mary? After having admitted that one’s life rests in God’s mercy, in Jesus’ blood, in the redemption of his death, why then plead that “if you [Mary] do not help me my battle is lost”? Why call Jesus his redemption, then Mary his hope and confidence? Why so much remembrance of Jesus’ mother at Golgotha?

    It is not as if these prayers address Mary instead of Jesus, or Mary first and then Jesus, as in the Protestant stereotype. The easy answers will not do; something more complex is going on. It involves the role of fellow Christians, dead as well as living, in Christian faith and life. It also involves the anxiety of the age. When my faith is weak, I call upon the faithful to strengthen me, and Mary is a pretty obvious choice. It especially involves medieval eschatology (see Sep. 5).

    To anticipate some of that discussion, we can say that the European experience of (often alienating) suffering and death, and its traditions of introspection, monasticism, sacramental theology, prayer, anxiety, and eschatology combine to produce what I’ll call a spirituality of the subway. Think of a commuter train packed with people. All are on their way somewhere “together”; but their “community” is really mere coincidence. They are a collection of individuals. To get where each wants (or has) to go, they get along together. But it is their destination, not their present circumstances, that occupies them. They are consumed with what will happen on their arrival and worried about arriving on time (or at all), rather than focused on the here and now. “All their hopes and aims [are] directed towards those good things that are eternal” (Kempis; Janz 8). They look past each other. They make room for each other and sometimes smile superficially; but woe to the one “deeply engrossed in earthly affairs,” who tries to start a real conversation or goes after the best seat. The subway pilgrim is just passing through.

    Next time you find yourself on 101, or surrounded by “strangers” in church or chapel, you might reflect on whether here they are so different from us after all.