

**NICHOLAS OF CUSA'S LAST SERMONS**  
**(1457 - 1463)**

**Translated and Introduced**

**by**

**JASPER HOPKINS**

Dedicated to PROF. HERBERT W. RICHARDSON, Ph.D.,  
whose Intellectual Genius and Pedagogical Talent  
I have never ceased deeply to admire and respect

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## PREFACE

I decided to self-publish this volume as an e-book and to place it on my web-page (<http://www.jasper-hopkins.info>), thereby making it easily available to any and all would-be readers. Even the cloth editions of my previous two volumes of translated Cusan sermons have been reprinted (with permission of the publisher) on my web-page. These volumes have the titles *Nicholas of Cusa's Early Sermons: 1430-1441* (Minneapolis: Banning Press, 2003) and *Nicholas of Cusa's Didactic Sermons: A Selection* (Loveland, CO: Banning Press, 2008). For permission to translate from the printed editions of the present Latin texts, I am grateful to Felix Meiner Verlag in Hamburg, Germany—specifically to Manfred Meiner and to Johannes Kambylis. Meiner Verlag is world-renown for its support of scholarly work in the academic fields of history, philosophy, and theology. The academic world stands hugely in its debt.

I would also like to express appreciation, and great esteem, for the scholarly work done by the editors of the individual fascicles (of Volume XIX, *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia*) of which I have made use. Their names should not go unnoticed, unmentioned:

1. Heide D. Riemann, Harald Schwaetzer, and Franz-Bernhard Stammkötter, Fascicle 5: *Sermones CCLVIII - CCLXVII*, published in 2005.
2. Heide D. Riemann, Fascicle 6: *Sermones CCLXVIII - CCLXXXII*, published in 2005.
3. Silvia Donati and Heide D. Riemann, Fascicle 7: *Sermones CCLXXXIII - CCXCIII*, published in 2005.

These editors have done exemplary work in collating the extant manuscripts and in tracking down Nicholas's sources, which Nicholas alludes to in a general way rather than so as to provide pinpoint-exact references. I have taken over these editors' source-trackings, leaving aside much of the rich accompanying detail that the editors also contribute in their printed editions. The relatively few corrections and emendations that I list at the end of this present volume in no way slight the meticulous efforts of the extremely competent editors. Indeed, my list contains—with but two or three exceptions—only discrepancies or additions of minor importance.

Nicholas's extensive Latin vocabulary is impressive. It could not have been imagined from his more limited usage in his treatises and

dialogues. Likewise, his extensive utilization of metaphor, symbolism, antonomasia, and dramatization adds a kind of elegance to his otherwise inelegant style. Since Nicholas does not emphasize style, I have avoided paraphrastic enhancement in the translations. My aim has been not to enhance stylistically Nicholas's language but rather to convey accurately his thoughts. Hence, I have included brackets in the attempt to make clear his meaning without rephrasing his ideas. (The use of these brackets may, unfortunately, evoke in the reader a degree of irritation.) Of the thirty-four sermons here translated, eight appeared previously in my volume of *Didactic Sermons*.

That which shines forth in these last Cusan sermons—all of which are homilies on specific Biblical texts—is Nicholas's creative imagination, his wide-ranging familiarity with Scriptural texts, and his display of an array of deep theological themes which, nevertheless, he has no time, within the respective sermons, to develop more than minimally. The introducing of such themes led various of the parishioners to complain that he was preaching over their heads and too abstrusely. (See Sermon CCLXXIV (3).) Yet, the sermons, precisely in terms of their content, serve to round-out the intellectual thinking of this sagacious fifteenth-century German theologian—or, as Kurt Flasch emphasizes, this fifteenth-century German philosopher.

By all means, I wish to thank the University of Minnesota and the McKnight Foundation for granting, through the University's Imagine Fund, financial resources to purchase the Latin texts of Nicholas of Cusa's sermons. I am also grateful to Alice A. Welch, of Wilson Library's Department of Inter-Library Loans, for obtaining in timely fashion books and articles that were of need.

In dedicating this volume to Herbert W. Richardson, I wish to pay tribute to a remarkable contemporary theologian whose synthetic historical grasp, whose penetrating analytic insight, and whose dynamic powers of communication have had an ineluctable, positive influence on the minds of those who know him best. *Er hat auf uns abgefärbt.*

Jasper Hopkins, Ph.D.  
Professor of Philosophy  
University of Minnesota  
Minneapolis, MN

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## INTRODUCTION

Nicholas of Cusa's last sermons are replete with abbreviated theological doctrines—doctrines that Nicholas sketches or alludes to but does not develop. Indeed, given the manner of presentation of a sermon—the limitations on time and detail—Nicholas cannot, in preaching, hope to develop the themes. Sometimes he refers his hearers to other places in which he does address the same topics; and he assumes that his audience knows of these places.<sup>1</sup> On other occasions he simply mentions the limitation of time and mentions the fact that the topic needs further exposition, which he does not claim ever previously to have given or to be going to give.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, a number of these doctrines, scattered throughout the sermons, are crucial to our being able to round-out Nicholas's theological system—something that cannot be done without our taking account of the sermons and their compact doctrinal insights. The few examples that are cited in the following paragraphs serve to illustrate Nicholas's attempt to make his sermons edifyingly *instructive* rather than emotively *inspirational*.

One may initially feel startled when in Sermon CCLXVIII (50) one finds Nicholas maintaining that God is more merciful than just. For, usually, earlier theologians were inclined simply to assert that God is both merciful and just in such a way that—as Anselm maintains in *Proslogion* 9-11—the two attributes are compatible. If anything, Anselm accentuates *justice* when he states, in *Proslogion* 9-11, that God's mercy is begotten from His justice. Anselm calls God *completely and supremely* just, without in *Proslogion* 9-11 ever speaking of Him as completely and supremely merciful. Rather, Anselm chooses to emphasize the view that God is *justly* merciful to redeemed sinners. This Anselmian way of framing the relationship between God's mercy and His justice prevents Anselm and those who follow him from ever claiming that divine mercy exceeds divine justice, for it flows out of divine justice. In this light one finds it startling that Nicholas would go beyond saying with Anselm that God's mercy is *just* to saying that the exercise of God's mercy exceeds the exercise of His justice. Yet, interestingly, in this same sermon that veers from Anselm, Nicholas indicates that he is following Augustine.

As in the late sermons, the early sermons, too, occasionally show Nicholas disagreeing with Anselm. For Anselm had taught, in his *Cur*

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*Deus Homo*, that the Virgin Mary was without original sin when Jesus was conceived in her womb. According to Anselm, in *Cur Deus Homo* II, 16, Mary was born with original sin but she was cleansed of all sin by means of her faith, after the Annunciation, in the future redeeming life and death of her Son—faith in Him as Messiah and Savior. Thus, she was free of original and actual sin at the moment of conception. By contrast with this teaching, Nicholas in his early sermons teaches that Mary was *not* born with original sin; rather, her soul was cleansed of original sin at the time it was infused into her body prior to her birth,<sup>3</sup> and after her birth she lived a completely sinless life.<sup>4</sup> In the late sermons Nicholas continues to exalt Mary, as he does in Sermon CCLXXVIII, which contains dramatization in which Mary dialogues with the Apostle John, with whom she speaks as mother to son. For from the Cross Jesus assigned the two of them familiarly to each other.<sup>5</sup> So although Nicholas, following the tradition, refers to Mary as *theotócos*, the God-bearer, the Mother of God: she is also alluded to as the mother of John the Apostle. And, presumably, Nicholas would agree with Anselm that Jesus is also John's Mother and ours.<sup>6</sup>

Although Nicholas agrees with Anselm most of the time, he is sometimes torn between Anselm and Augustine. In an early sermon he identifies himself with Anselm's theory of the Atonement.<sup>7</sup> But in a late sermon he aligns himself with Augustine's Devil-Ransom theory.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, he sees no conflict between the two, for he shows no recognition of Anselm's critique (in the *Cur Deus Homo*) of the Devil-Ransom Theory.<sup>9</sup>

Other striking, but abbreviated, theological doctrines abound in Nicholas's sermons. In Sermon CCLXXXIV (9) Nicholas teaches that those individuals who have not heard the gospel are not condemned by God if they have not acted against their conscience. He draws this doctrine from Jesus's words in John 15:22, where Jesus says of the Jews: "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin: but now they have no excuse for their sin." This doctrine contrasts with the doctrine of those who hold that all heathen are unbelievers who will be damned in Hell. Once again, Nicholas does not develop his own doctrine either here or elsewhere. One wonders whether he would be inclined to say that because the heathen who have not heard the gospel are *non-believers* without being *unbelievers*, they will not be subject to eternal punishment (if they have not acted against their conscience) but also will not enter into eternal bliss. Will they then enter into Limbo?

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Or will they have a future chance—in the new heaven and new earth—to believe or not to believe? Or will God, whose mercy exceeds His justice, excuse them because of their ignorance? Or will they be assigned to the lesser levels of Purgatory? Or is their condemnation—of whatever degree and type—an instance of Divine Predestination? A reader of Nicholas’s sermons may well wish that Nicholas had elaborated on this hastily mentioned theme of excusable or mitigating ignorance.

Nicholas does, however, make it clear that good works do not justify a man in the eyes of God. For no man is justified apart from faith in God and in Christ.<sup>10</sup> This theme, stressed later by the Reformer Martin Luther, was always a theme indigenous to Roman Catholic theology—as Nicholas, following the instruction of St. Paul, bears witness. One difference, however, between Luther and Cusanus is that Luther starkly bellows forth the tenet that man is saved *sola fide*, whereas Nicholas emphasizes, with St. James, that faith is but dead faith unless it is accompanied by good works. Accordingly, maintains Nicholas, although works *sine fide* never justify, faith *sine operibus* never vitalizes. To be sure, Nicholas does speak of the “merit of faith,”<sup>11</sup> thereby implying that faith partakes of Christ’s merit, not that our act of faith is a work entirely of our own that merits for us salvation. A man’s act of saving faith may be a virtue, as Nicholas says it is;<sup>12</sup> but it is an infused virtue, because faith is a gift of God.<sup>13</sup>

The Cusan sermons also theologize by telling their hearers that man has an innate light of reason<sup>14</sup> which naturally points to, and directs him toward, a knowledge of God. At times, Nicholas expresses this idea by stating that a knowledge of God is concreated in us.<sup>15</sup> Still, this concreated tendency to believe in God and to seek Him out can be resisted through free will, which is swayed (but not compelled) by the motions of sin. In a related way, Nicholas affirms that man has a natural knowledge of the moral virtues, for the natural moral law, imprinted (so to speak) on man’s soul and evident in the voice of conscience, discloses moral rightness and wrongness in basic respects.<sup>16</sup> For the natural moral law corresponds to the dictates of reason.

The sermons also display Nicholas’s attempts to find illustrations for the doctrine of the Trinity—a quest that is characteristic of his deliberations in the treatises. In Sermon CCLXXX (50) he ingeniously symbolizes the Trinity as the Known, the Knowledge, and the Knowing—much as in *De Visione Dei* 17 & 18 he uses the symbols,

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Loving Love, Lovable Love, and the Union of the two. Nonetheless, the sermons, with their abbreviated theological doctrines, need expansively to make clear the very point that Nicholas advances in *De Pace Fidei* VII (21): “As Creator, God is trine and one; as Infinite, He is neither trine nor one nor any of those things that can be spoken of.” Thus, the trinity in God “is not composite or plural or numerical but is most simple oneness” (*De Pace Fidei* VIII (23)).<sup>17</sup>

Nicholas does not hesitate to borrow from Meister Eckhart the theme of Christ’s being begotten in us.<sup>18</sup> And he takes over from Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Albertus Magnus the theme of God’s beauty.<sup>19</sup> But others such as the twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich have taken over thoughts from Cusanus—e.g., the notion of God as *esse ipsum*, as Being itself.<sup>20</sup> And Tillich has also appropriated the Cusan idea of learned ignorance—the idea that we must learn that we are ignorant of what God is like in and of Himself. Thus, Tillich tells us that God is knowable (only) symbolically, since Being itself can never be veridically described by means of finite conceptualizations.

In his sermons’ more traditional moments Nicholas displays the traditional doctrines of the Church. Thus, he repeatedly calls attention to the well-embedded eucharistic doctrine of transubstantiation.<sup>21</sup> At other times he takes up traditional motifs that can never be definitively settled, such as the issue of the relationship between faith and reason. In these cases he always has thoughts that are penetrating and that need to be fitted into his more systematic presentations in his treatises and dialogues.<sup>22</sup> Thus, he does not hesitate to call faith barren—barren of reasons. For reason could never have supported, say, the Virgin Mary’s faith that she would beget Him who was also Son of God. “Faith is barren, for it has no children, i.e., no reasons; and the more reasons it would have, the more diminished it would be.”<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, for us to focus simply on this one passage would be for us to misrepresent Nicholas’s fuller vision of the dynamic relationship between faith and reason. For Mary’s faith was not unreasonable, seeing that it was God, by way of the angel, whom she believed. And to believe God—as did Noah before the Flood and as did Abraham regarding the prospective loss of Isaac and as did Job regarding the actual loss of his children—is never unreasonable, though one must be certain that the voice which is heard is indeed the voice of God or His emissary. But even apart from special revelation it is reasonable to believe—declares Nicholas à la Anselm—that God is Something than

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which a greater cannot be conceived<sup>24</sup> and that the universe, unlike God, is not self-existent or self-caused.<sup>25</sup>

Here and there Nicholas comes up with a surprising thought in his sermons. For instance, one would not have expected him to mention Aristotle's virtue *eutrapelia* (wittiness).<sup>26</sup> Nicholas, while acknowledging this virtue, admonishes against jocular words that degenerate into evoking inappropriate laughter. And he reminds us that in the books of the New Testament Jesus is nowhere read to have laughed.<sup>27</sup> Nicholas's point is that a follower of Christ is to be serious-minded, sober-minded—not to be someone engaging in shady humor for the sake of a laugh and not to be someone who indulges in vulgarities. His point is definitely not that Christians should never laugh!

Another arresting Cusan thought is the following one, taken from Sermon CCLXVIII (50): God loves us as a father, whereas Christ loves us as a brother. For Christ took a human nature upon Himself so as to become a human being—a male human being, who is rightly spoken of as our brother, just as He is also rightly spoken of as our friend.<sup>28</sup>

## II

We must remember that Nicholas's sermons, as written, are really sermon-sketches. That is, Nicholas sketches certain ideas that he will emphasize in his homilies from the pulpit. These homilies were for the most part delivered in German to German-speaking congregations. So although all of the sermons except Sermon XXIV and Sermon LXXVI (written down not by Nicholas but by a hearer of the sermon as preached) were composed in Latin, and although a few were preached in Latin to priests in Rome and elsewhere, the great majority of them were preached in German. And in preaching, Nicholas would have felt free to extemporize, thereby adding spoken material to his written sketches. Thus, his preaching was not without its appealing qualities.<sup>29</sup> Why, then, did Nicholas write in Latin if he preached mainly in German when not preaching to an audience of clergy? Could it be that he wanted his sermons to be added to the corpus of his works? These could then be copied and disseminated around Europe to various monasteries, whose monks and priests could be expected to read Latin but not necessarily German. Thus, in Latin, the sermons would be more serviceable, more transmittable.

In translating Nicholas's sermons, a translator faces all of the customary translation problems plus the problem of figuring out

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Nicholas's meanings as expressed in his (too often) inelegant Latin, which Nicholas did not find the time to revise and restate. Sometimes a single Latin sentence would be more understandable had it been split by Nicholas into two or three distinct sentences. I have routinely restructured such sentences in English. Nonetheless, I have made no effort to paraphrase in English Nicholas's Latin lines so as to make them sound more pleasing. Rather, I have concentrated on identifying Nicholas's meanings and have attempted, consequently, to give close renderings. I leave it to individual readers to introduce their own paraphrases in their own words, should they care to do so.

The usual problems of Medieval Latin translation of Christian religious works have to do with ambiguous word-usage and with mistakes in the manuscripts. A translator cannot always be sure, for example, whether the words "*verbum dei*" refer to the Scriptures or to the Second Person of the Godhead. Similarly, it is not always evident whether "*sapientia*" refers to the wisdom that God infuses into human minds or whether it stands for Christ, the Wisdom of God.<sup>30</sup> Or does "*meritum*" mean *merit* or *reward* in a given passage in a given sermon where both senses are operative?<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in Sermons CCLXVIII and CCLXXXIX the verb "*comprehendere*" is used both with the sense of *to obtain* and with the sense of *to comprehend*, making it difficult always to judge by the context which meaning is the correct one in translation. Problems also arise in connection with the several meanings of "*ratio*" and "*spiritus*".

As for the manuscripts, the editors of the printed Latin texts have done a magnificent job of determining which of the variant readings to include in the body of the text. Only rarely is there a mistake, as occurs in Sermon CCLX at 24:10, where the reading from Ms. *V*<sub>2</sub> ("*contracta*") was selected instead of the reading from Mss. *D* and *L* ("*incontracta*"). Sometimes Nicholas himself (or the copyist) writes down the wrong word or fails to include a necessary word. Thus, in Sermon CCXC at 13:10 the manuscripts read "Tunc enim mundi sumus" but should read "Tunc enim non mundi sumus".

In conclusion, let us not overlook the fact that some of Nicholas's interpretations in the sermons are implausible. Such an implausible interpretation is found in Sermon CCLXXVIII (38), where Nicholas discusses Mary of Bethany's having anointed Jesus's head and feet with a fragrant ointment.<sup>32</sup> In the Gospels Judas is said to have protested that this costly ointment instead of having been "wasted" on Jesus

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could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Nicholas comments that Judas, as keeper of the purse, would secretly have kept back a portion of this money for himself. "He thought that he would have had, of the tenth-part, thirty pieces of silver; and he determined to betray Christ to the Jews for those thirty pieces." Such far-fetched interpretations by Nicholas are, to be sure, rare occurrences. On the whole, his interpretations in his written homilies are discerning and unshakable. They are calculated primarily to inform the mind, if only secondarily to move the heart.

## NOTES

1. E.g., Sermons CCLX (3), CCLXII (2 4), CCLXIII (1 3).
2. Sermon CCLXV (3 & 1 7 & 2 2). Sermon CCLXXVII (2 8).
3. Sermon LXVII (1 4) and Sermon IX (11). Nicholas does follow Anselm in repeating Anselm's view that those believers who lived before Christ's birth and death were saved by faith in this future Messiah. They were not, however, born free of original guilt and were not such that they could not sin.
4. See, again, the early Sermon IX (11). See also Sermon VIII (2 7 & 1 3) and Sermon VI (1 5). Note that Nicholas does, however, in Sermon VI (1 3) cite with approval Anselm's view of Mary's purity. This approval though, does not extend to accepting Anselm's view that Mary was born with original sin.
5. John 19:26-27.
6. Anselm, Oratio 10 (*Oratio ad Sanctum Paulum*). See the Latin texts edited by F. S. Schmitt, Vol. III, p. 40.
7. See Nicholas's Sermon III (6 & 7). See my article "Nicholas of Cusa's Intellectual Relationship to Anselm of Canterbury," pp. 54-73 in Peter J. Casarella, editor, *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006).
8. Cusa, Sermon CCLXXII (2 5-2 7). See also Sermon CCLXXVIII (3 7).
9. *Cur Deus Homo* I, 7.
10. Sermon CCLXXX (1 8).
11. Sermon CCLXXXVI (3).
12. Sermon IV (5).
13. Sermon IV (2). See also Ephesians 2:8.
14. Sermon CCLXII (1 9).
15. Sermons CCLXXX (5 5) and CCLXXXII (1 5).
16. Sermon CCLXXII (2 2-2 4 & 2 9). Sermon CCLXXIII (9).
17. See also *De Docta Ignorantia* I, 26 (8 7).
18. Sermon CCLX (1 9 & 2 3 & 2 5).
19. See Sermons CCLXI (1 2) and CCLXXV (2 0 & 2 2). See also my "'*Non est quicquam expers pulchritudinis*': The Theme of Beauty in Nicholas of Cusa's Sermons," appearing on my webpage. The article also appears in Italian: "*Non est quicquam expers pulchritudinis*. Il tema della bellezza nei *Sermoni* di Nicola Cusano," pp. 63-74 in Cesare Catà, editor, *A caccia dell'infinito. L'umano e la ricerca del divino nell'opera di Nicola Cusano*. Rome: Aracne Editrice, 2010.
20. See Cusa's Sermon CCLXIV (1 2) as well as his *De Docta Ignorantia* I, 6 (1 6-1 7) & *De Possess* 14.
21. Sermons CCLXXII (8 & 3 5) and CCXC (1 9).
22. See pp. xi-xvi of my *Nicholas of Cusa's Didactic Sermons* (Loveland, CO: Banning Press, 2003). See also Sermons CCLXVII (2 2) and CCLXXV (3-7) and CCLXXXVI (3) and (the early sermon) Sermon IV
23. Sermon CCLXXV (3).
24. Sermon CCLXXV (1 3) and CCLXXVIII (4 4).
25. Sermon CLXXXVII (2).
26. Sermon CCLXXIII (1 3).



*Notes to the Introduction*

27. *Loc. cit.*
28. John 15:15.
29. Erich Meuthen in his *Acta Cusana* [Vol. I, Issue 3a (Meiner Verlag, 1996), entry # 1214] quotes the words from a chronicle as they apply to Nicholas's preaching in Nürnberg: "Darnoch am freitag und samstag predigt er aber daz schonst ding, daz ich je gehört hab."
30. I Corinthians 1:24.
31. Sermon CCLXXVIII (23).
32. Matthew 26:6-9. Mark 14:3-5. John 12:1-6.