



HOLY SEEING

A Visual Invitation to Prayer

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INTRODUCTION

We know through archaeology that images preceded written language. Early humans imaged what they saw and experienced through carved figures and human interactions. Often these images had a spiritual connotation, generally drawn from nature itself. In fact, St. Bonaventure spoke of creation as God's "little book". We read in Paul's letter to the Romans:

Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. (1:20)

The drawings represented in this book were created when I was in a quiet, reflective place. Often I was on retreat; some I wrote when I was living in a hermitage or hiking the mountains in British Columbia. A few were drawn in an urban area with a contemplative eye. They are deeply personal, and the releasing of them for publication took some inner wrestling.

However, as a Capuchin Franciscan, I believe in my heart in the gift of praying with our five senses. St. Bonaventure, a Franciscan Doctor of the Church from the thirteenth century, wrote a masterful treatise entitled *The Soul's Journey into God*. Put simply, St. Bonaventure invites us to enter into the mystery of God in creation through our five senses. This is the heart of the matter of Visio Divina. He introduces Chapter Two of his spiritual treatise with these words:

*Concerning the mirror of things
perceived through nature,
we can see God
not only through them as through his vestiges
[footprints],*

Since the early church, Christians have used visual images – whether that be art or architecture – as an invitation to enter into a sacred place of prayer. This visual invitation has come to be known as Visio Divina, which literally means "holy seeing". It invites us to enter into art or creation with the inner eye of our soul. In Psalm 19, the psalmist invites us to praise the glory of God as Creator:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. (1-2)*

*but also in them
as he is in them
by his essence, power, and presence.
[Here] we are led to contemplate God
in all creatures
which enters our minds through our bodily
senses.¹*

I have gone deeply into these words of St. Bonaventure: that we live in the Mystery of God in creation. To destroy any part of God's creation is to mar the image of God.

At the start of Advent 2019, Pope Francis travelled to the town of Greccio in Italy to visit the site where St. Francis of Assisi, in 1223, recreated the Bethlehem crib. Here, Pope Francis published his Advent Apostolic Letter entitled *Enchanting Image*. St. Francis was the first to visualize that moment of the Incarnation in the cave of Bethlehem. Pope Francis writes that St. Francis, in creating the first Nativity scene, "carried out a great work of evangelization" by visualizing the great moment when our

¹ Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, trans. Ewert Cousins (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 69.

VISIO DIVINA AS A METHOD OF PRAYER

In the thirteenth century, a saintly Franciscan nun, St. Clare of Assisi, articulated a simple four-movement method of praying before an object that has caught our inner spirit and moves us to a deeper place of the Divine within us. For St. Clare, the focus of her prayer was the San Damiano Cross. The four movements were the four promptings of interior grace as she prayed before the cross. Later awareness led people to realize that these four movements could happen with any image of creation as an in-breaking of God's 'word' to us in prayer. This has come to be known as Visio Divina – holy or divine seeing.

attraction to this image. What is it in this image that has caught my heart, my deeper consideration?

3. The third moment is the inner movement of silence; we are just resting and letting the image we are contemplating expand in us. Often in this silence we will feel a peacefulness that, amid the noise of life, we long for.

God took on human flesh. The Pope adds that the visual imaging of the crib reminds us, through our eyes, of "God's tender love".²

Pope Francis' letter is essentially at the heart of this book, *Holy Seeing*. An early biographer of St. Francis, Thomas of Celano, wrote of the effect of this Holy Seeing on the people present: "all those present there experienced a new and indescribable joy in the presence of the Christmas scene."³ Through our eyes, our souls can be moved to a deeper place of Holy Seeing where we can encounter the Divine in creation.

So, I offer you this small book as a springboard for entering into prayer with the gift of your senses. As

These are the four movements of Visio Divina that Clare articulated:

1. The first moment is to gaze on the image with the deeper eye of our soul. Gazing holds us silent and still. It is an entering into the object that you have before you; allowing your eyes and the inner emotions to linger, letting whatever attracts you to rise from within yourself.
2. The second moment of the Visio follows naturally from our gazing. It is to consider the 'why?' of my
4. In this fourth moment we realize that something has changed; something has moved within us. Are you able to name what this change is? Deeper awareness of creation, of God's presence in all things? What has caught your heart? What are your memories of similar moments?

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Elizabeth Browning so rightly pens:

*And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes⁴*

On the following page I have presented a short methodology of praying Visio Divina, which is essentially praying with our senses. I invite you to begin wherever your heart draws you – with whatever image evokes a desire to pray with the inner eye of your soul.

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² Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *Admirabile Signum*, December 1, 2019.

³ *Francis of Assisi, Vol. 1, The Saint. Early Documents*. Ed. Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., J.A. Wayne Hellman, O.F.M. Conv. and William Short O.F.M. (New York: New City Press, 1999), 285.

⁴ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Anona Leigh," Book Seven, *Collected Poems* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2015).



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Live rooted in Silence

LIVE ROOTED IN LOVE

*I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.*

*A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;*

*A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;*

*A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;*

*Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.*

*Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.*

Joyce Kilmer⁹

A few years ago, I made a thirty-day retreat following the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. On the property of the retreat centre were many large trees. My meditation involved reflecting on my roots: in my family, my ethnic background, my friends, my faith journey, my religious community, and my rooting in God.

This image of a large tree with powerful roots became an important focus of my meditation. Deep emotions surfaced in me, often bringing me to tears. St. Paul's beautiful prayer to the Ephesians caught my heart:

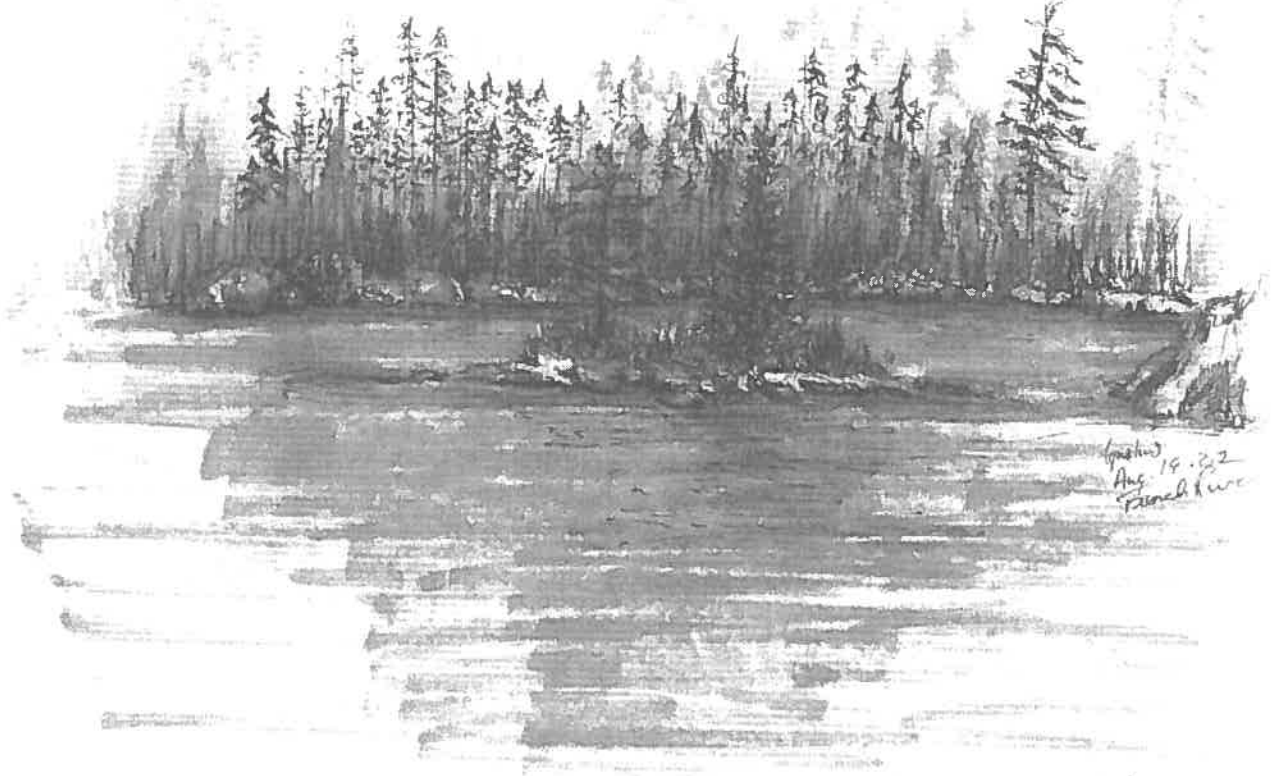
... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. (3:17)

Joyce Kilmer's poem has stayed with me since high school: "only God can make a tree"; only in God can I be rooted and grounded in love.

Meditate on the rootedness in your life. What are the roots that have shaped and sustained you in your life's journey?

Allow yourself to feel the gratitude of being rooted and grounded in (God's) love.

⁹ Joyce Kilmer, "Trees," Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/12744/trees>



COME AND REST AWHILE

The apostles gathered around Jesus ...

He said to them,

*"Come away to a deserted place
all by yourselves
and rest a while."*

Mark 6:30

One of my favourite places to go is up to French River to rest a while with the Lord. This image is one where I was lost in the beauty of God's creation. One of the early biographers of St. Francis wrote that in beauty, St. Francis saw Beauty itself. Archeologists agree that the first 'language' was creation. Nature is God's handwriting and his gift of sabbath time. It is a time to rest surrounded by and immersed in the sacredness of the Great Artist himself. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus invites us, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (11:28-29). Let yourself enter into this sacred 'book' of God or a restful place that your memory evokes in you.

Using the holy gift of memory, call to mind a time when you felt absorbed in the beauty of creation.

Pay attention to the senses that are evoked in you. Consider how you were with God in that moment and how God is with you now.



ABIDE IN MY LOVE

*Abide in me as I abide in you.
Just as the branch cannot bear fruit
by itself unless it abides
in the vine,
neither can you
unless you abide in me.
I am the vine, you are the branches.*

John 15:4-5

This olive tree caught the eye of my heart. It is in our friary garden in Jerusalem. What caught my reflection was its braided trunk, as if it began as branches and through time wove itself into a trunk. The top branches have been carefully pruned. This became for me a visual image of the parable "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ... Every branch that bears fruit he prunes" (John 15:1-2). I reflected on the pruning in my own life that strengthens and deepens my relationship with God. I thought about the times in my life when I was pruned of my pride, my desire to control, my insensitivity to others.

This beautiful parable of Jesus is about the intimate attention of God with us. God is constantly with us, trimming away anything that hinders our abiding in him.

What does God need to prune in your life?

How do you take time to abide in God's love?