

# The Pilgrim's Compass — Notes and Forethoughts

Ours is a wordy world. With text-messaging, phone calls, radio, TV, YouTube, Twitter, & Facebook — our lives are immersed in words written, received, spoken, & heard. During a recent day of air-travel I began to notice how I was surrounded by words. Monitors everywhere declaring arrivals & departures; TVs blaring the latest cable-news; my phone dutifully alerting me to push-notifications from a dozen different applications; and much more. It was hard to stay focused on anything or anyone with the constant interruption created by the onslaught of words.

It was not always so. In 1450 CE Gutenberg improved printing in Western Europe with metal moveable type. At the time the literacy rate in Europe is estimated to be less than 5%. By 1500 CE (just fifty years later) 40,000 titles had been published (roughly 2 million books created out of these titles). When Martin Luther initiated what would later be recognized as a Reformation of the church in 1517 he did so at a time when the rapid increase in literacy was reshaping how people came to faith. By the time he posted his *95 Theses* in Wittenburg, the literacy rate had already more than doubled to 10%. When John Calvin first published the *Institutes of Christian Religion* the literacy rate had doubled again to 20%, and by his death in 1564 it was roughly 30%. The particular stream of Christian faith from which my tradition grows is, not surprisingly, enamored with the *Word*. But for 1500 years prior to that, the Christian faith was a faith lived without the constant presence of a wordy religion. Prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, ours was a faith that trusted in what the believer could *see*.

Now, in a world wall-papered with inane & vapid words, the earnest person of faith must cultivate a deeper and more sympathetic way of encountering God in the words of scripture. Our approach has to let go of a posture that seeks to master the content of a text (and by extension its *subject* too), in favor of cultivating a practice of reading which allows the text to master us. Or to say it another way, to allow God, through the words of scripture, to master and shape us. One of the most successful approaches to this way of reading holy texts is *Lectio Divina* or “sacred reading.” It is a contemplative approach which honors the text’s ability to speak to us and both challenge and invite a change in us. To learn to read (or be read by) a text in this way requires practice, discipline, and time. Very few of us have engaged in a contemplative relationship with the texts of our educational endeavors - where mastery of content is king. So, to shift our posture and let the text have its way with us is typically a new and learned technique for us. BUT, *many* have had their faith deepened and their sense of God’s claim upon their life powerfully renewed and clarified through *Lectio Divina*.

In her book Eyes of the Heart: Photography as a Christian Contemplative Practice Christine Valters Paintner begins by making a similar observation about our “visually overstimulated world.” On a recent pilgrimage to the deserts of New Mexico, I encountered for the first time the stunning artistry of Georgia O’Keeffe. Her paintings of the landscapes around Ghost Ranch NM are truly master-works. While on pilgrimage to Ghost Ranch and its environs I also read a quote from O’Keeffe.

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“Nobody see a flower really; it is so small. We haven't time, and to see takes time—like to have a friend takes time.”

Paintner suggests that there is a parallel process to *Lectio Divina* which works for vision and she promotes it as she describes photography as a contemplative practice of Christian faith. She uses the Latin phrase *Visio Divina* to suggest a kind of sacred vision which allows us to “see” things beyond what our senses typically notice.

I am put in mind of the stunning photography of Thomas Merton who spent decades carefully photographing things as ordinary as windows, vines, and chairs — but with a Zen-like simplicity, and a careful attention to form and content. They were photographs which captured (as much as one *can* capture) that discipline of *Visio Divina*. To see some of Merton's photographs go to: <http://www.merton.org/hiddenwholeness/>

A few years ago I sat in St Margaret's Chapel in Edinburgh for about half an hour praying. During my thirty minutes of prayer, approximately 500 people stepped into that small enclosure, looked about for 2 to 3 seconds, often snapped a quick photo and stepped out. I have also been on a bus which arrived at the Parthenon and everyone leaped out to begin snapping pictures without even taking the time to wonder at the marvel on the hill above us. These photo-taking sessions are akin to the way many skim over their Bible readings — not expecting to have an encounter, and not desiring to be changed.

However, I have *also* been in places where it was clear that the persons behind the camera lens were engaged in the pursuit of the holy. They were trying to see and know something true and beautiful in a way not unlike my approach to God's word in scripture. So, as for me, I will be taking a camera on my journeys in search of God. It is just a tool. It can be mis-used, and it can be a distraction (just like the many books full of words which I am prone to carry). But it can also be an instrument of the Spirit which helps me begin to ask questions like:  
“what am I looking for?”  
and “what is it that I am seeing?”  
and “what is it that God is wanting to show me right now in this place?”