



Northern Dioceses' Environment Group

**Gazing on the Face of Christ:
Developing a Contemplative Approach to our
Actions**

A talk given by Sister Joan Kerley, FMSJ

As part of the NDEG Zoom Meeting on

17 November 2025



Christian Contemplative Practice, in which she proposes that photographers receive photographs by contemplating the world around them.

When I met with the NDEG about doing a presentation on a contemplative approach to our work of actively promoting the ideas expressed by Pope Francis' in his Encyclical Laudato Si, we brainstormed ideas. As we talked the idea of gazing came to mind from two sources:

1. A contemplative method based on St. Clare of Assisi's idea of gazing on the Lord, expressed in the Fourth Letter of Clare to Agnes. and
2. Christine Valters Paintner's book, Eyes of the Heart: Photography as a

What do others see as they gaze on us, busy with our activities?

What do we see as we gaze on them?

Do we see the face of Christ, even in those who have opposing views or seek to discredit us?

Do they see Christ's face in us?

How often do our actions reflect the reality that we, and they, are made in God's image and that Christ dwells deeply within all of us?

This reflection is an invitation to consider how to develop a contemplative attitude that will sustain us and ground us in our activism. Although the word "activist" is often popularly associated with marches and protests, we are using it in a more inclusive way to mean any type of activity that we are engaged in to promote the ideals of *Laudato Si*.

There are different ways of seeing.

When Christine Valters Paintner in her book, Eyes of the Heart, challenges photographers to use photography as a meditative practice, she cautions that to do so one needs to see differently. She quotes (cf p.21) the theologian and Franciscan Richard Rohr's book The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See. Rohr describes what he calls three different eyes of vision:

1. The **first eye** is our actual physical vision in which we use our eyes to see the world;
2. The **second eye** is a vision that "*comes with knowledge as we begin to explain other aspects of the world through learning about them. This brings together imagination, intuition, and reason.*" (p. 21)
3. The **third eye** Rohr describes as "*tasting, where we remain in 'awe before an underlying mystery, coherence, and spaciousness' that connects us with everything else.*" The third eye is "unitive not dualistic." He continues: "*The third eye of seeing builds on these first two but ventures deeper. 'It happens*

whenever, by some wondrous coincidence, our heart space, our mind space, and our body awareness are all simultaneously open and non-resistant. I like to call it presence.” He says it is a moment of deep inner connection and pulls a person into profound joy or sadness but “at that point, you either want to write poetry, pray, or be utterly silent.” (p.21)

If we cultivated this third eye vision, what would be different about our activities? Would we be more curious about those who oppose us and why they believe what they do? Would that curiosity lead to a more fruitful conversation between us that might provoke change for the better?



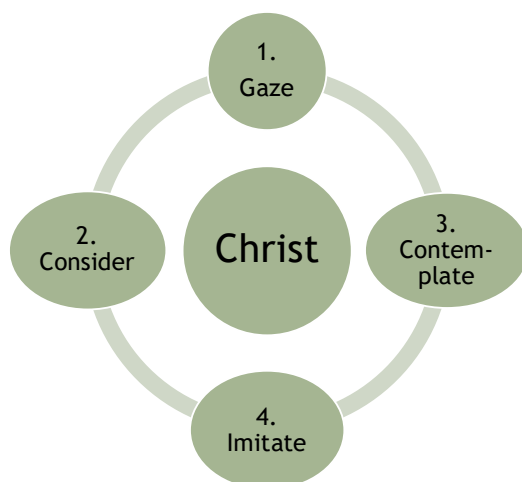
Ilia Delio, OSF in her book, Franciscan Prayer writes that Clare, in The Fourth Letter of Clare to Agnes of Prague, advises Agnes to gaze at the Crucified Christ as in a mirror and see her own reflection there. She challenges her to see the humility of God reflected in the poverty of the manger, the sufferings he endured for the redemption of the world, and Christ’s charity and love for us as he suffered on the cross. Then, Clare

advises Agnes:” *let yourself be inflamed more strongly with the fervour of charity!*” Surely as Christians, we, too, look at the Crucified Christ as the One who shows us how to embrace the sufferings of the world in a spirit of love, forgiveness and compassion.

What do we see when we gaze upon the cross?

Delio outlines 4 steps in this process of Franciscan prayer: gaze, consider, contemplate and imitate. She writes: “*The gaze on the crucified Spouse is to lead to imitation of the Spouse. We become what we love and who we love shapes what we become... Thus we must become “vessels of God’s compassionate love for others.”*” (p.68)

Four Steps of Franciscan prayer



Let us consider these steps one by one:

Gaze:

The object of our gazing is the Crucified Christ who in his poverty became Incarnate and showed us God's compassion. For both Francis and Clare this poverty is the vehicle which enables community to be built because it "is the basis of true relationship and true relationship begins with God." (p.77) However, gazing is different than simply looking at something. To gaze is to be drawn deeply into an object. Delio writes: "The gaze on the Crucified Christ is an embrace, a desire to allow the otherness of God's love into our lives. Therefore it can never be an immediate vision; rather, it is a daily encounter with a God of humble love who is hidden in fragile humanity. Gazing is not simply physical sight like other physical senses that help situate oneself in an environment. Rather, gazing is of the heart by which the heart 'opens its arms', so to speak, to allow the Spirit of God's love to enter. Gazing requires a space within the heart to receive what we see and to 'embrace' what we see.." (p.78)



Pause for a moment and think of one thing that caught your attention today: was it a colleague or family member?

A beautiful scene?

A beggar on the street?

A news report?

Gaze at it in your mind's eye.

Does our gaze lead us to see "the God of humble love who is hidden in fragile humanity"?

Consider:



As we gaze at the Crucifix, we are invited to consider God's willingness to "bend down" to us in love and what our response to that love will be. Delio writes: "Prayer is about God and our relationship to God." (p.55) As we look at the cross, we see a God who loves us, not a judge, nor one who condemns but, from a Franciscan viewpoint, a God who comes to us in love to embrace our humanity and to show us how to embrace it as well.

One of our considerations, then, might be: How does our image of God affect how we live our lives? When we engage with people in our activities is our gaze a nonjudgemental one, one that embraces them with Love or does that depend on whether or not the people share your values?

We are also called to meditate on the compassion of God who embraces all the world's suffering. How do we respond to, and embrace, the world's suffering? Francis met the compassionate God in the cross of San Damiano, a wounded and glorified Christ on the Cross, a God *"bent over in love in the wounds of the crucified Christ"* (p.62) Because of this experience, Francis was transformed. His experience led him to begin the community, to go out to where the people were to spread the Gospel message, to dialogue with those who were both different and perceived enemies like the Sultan and to learn from them. Ultimately, as he was wounded himself with the wounds of the Stigmata, Francis articulates the unity of all creation as Brothers and Sisters, united in the common bond of being created by God in God's image. Delio writes that *"Francis discovered his own woundedness in the woundedness of the Crucified Christ and this enabled him to go out to the poor and the sick. "Only in relation to the other did his weaknesses become strengths, for it was in naming his weaknesses that Francis matured in authentic human love."* (p. 63) He discovered his true self as a relational self. When you consider the woundedness of the world around you, does that also lead you to consider how your own woundedness could be a source of healing for others and for the earth on which we live?

Contemplate



Contemplation is a lifelong journey of love as we "gaze" on the crucified Christ and are invited into the depths of his heart. For Clare, this contemplation is a daily discipline which enables us to discover our own self-identity. She writes: *"To accept God in the Crucified is to accept God in our own lives and this means to accept who we are."* (p.127) This acceptance includes both our giftedness and talents and our brokenness, our woundedness, our sins and regrets.

Our gaze on the cross and our experience of God's infinite love and compassion leads us into relationship with God, with ourselves, with others, particularly those who suffer, and with the world. Delio writes: *"The crucified Christ, who is the image of God, is the image in which we are created and thus the basis of our*

identity. If we gaze long enough, that is, if gazing becomes a way of life then it will lead to a new level of self-knowledge. We will come to a new understanding of ourselves." (p.128) I would add that if we gaze long enough, we will also begin to have a new understanding of others.

Imitate:

Contemplation leads to imitation. Delio suggests that Franciscans don't ask: What would Jesus do?

They ask:

How does Jesus live in me? (p.147)

She writes: *“The logic of Franciscan imitatio Christi is God’s self-emptying love which is incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. To say that Jesus is the theophany or manifestation of God means that in the form of Jesus’ life, God has been fully revealed. Jesus Christ is the image of God because Christ is the ‘Word’ or the perfect self-expression of the Father.*



UK Laudato Si Animators’ Gathering at the Laudato Si Centre, Salford to pray and reflect together.

Therefore, it is Christ who is the perfect image of the invisible God. (Col. 1:15)” (p. 147)

Delio’s suggested question, How does Jesus live in me?, is a question that can guide us in our actions. However, it is a question that is answered only by cultivating a practice of daily prayer, meditation and contemplation that will ground us in whatever we do to promote the ideals of Laudato Si.

How can we do that?

There are several suggestions, one of which may appeal to you.

1. **Praying with Scripture:** Spend some time each day by using one of the many online presentations like Pray as You Go.
2. **Use the Jesuit prayer, the Examen:** This prayer is a wonderful way to learn how to notice the presence of God in all your activities. There are many explanations about how to do this prayer online. Basically it involves 5 steps:
 - a. 1. Ask God for light. I want to look at my day with God’s eyes, not merely my own.
 - b. 2. Give thanks: the day I have just lived is a gift from God. Be grateful for it.
 - c. 3. Review the day. I carefully look back on the day just completed, being guided by the Holy Spirit.
 - d. 4. Face your shortcomings. I face up to what is wrong—in my life and in me.

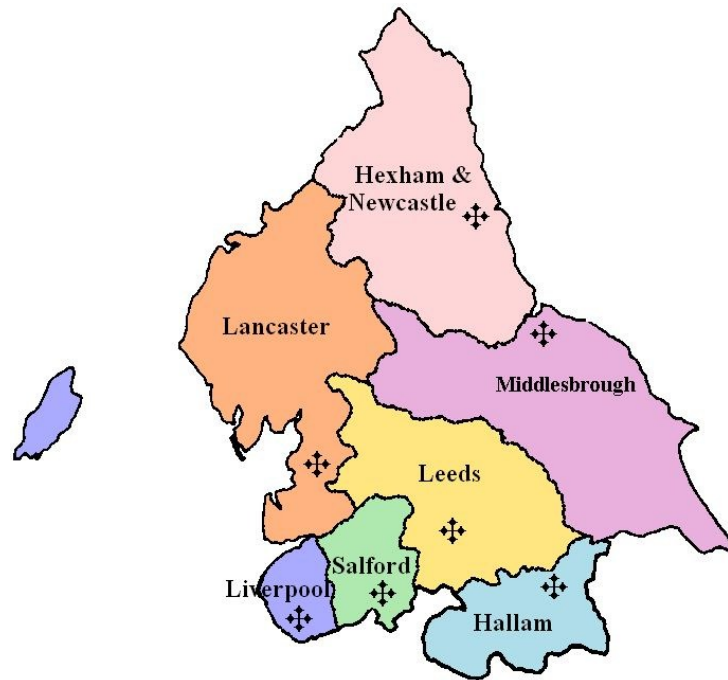


- e. 5 Look toward the day to come. I ask where I need God in the day to come.
- 3. **Use a mantra.** Choose a simple word for God and simply repeat it in line with your breath. It could be a word like love or peace or it could also be the “Jesus prayer”: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”
- 4. **Gaze at a crucifix, a picture, a scene in nature, a candle.** Receive what God reveals to you in your gaze.
- 5. **Go for a contemplative walk.**
- 6. **Eucharistic Adoration**

Our goal, I believe, is to be an image of Christ in our world today, to use his teaching as a basis of our activities and to encourage others to walk with us in our work of promoting justice and peace. I hope that the concept of gazing will help us to do this with a greater awareness of the love and compassion of Christ that we bring as we work together to address the cry of the earth and the cry of its most vulnerable people.



Northern Dioceses' Environment Group



The purpose of the Northern Dioceses' Environment Group is to promote awareness, share best practice and celebrate all the work going on in our region at both parish and diocesan levels. The group developed from a loose association of people active and worshipping in the north of England who wanted to share understanding and local resources in the global context of Pope Francis' encyclical Laudato Si.

We hold regular Zoom meetings and at least one in-person meeting annually.
Anyone is welcome to join our meetings.

Join our mailing list to find out more.

Simply email

Climate.ndeg@gmail.com