

# VISIO DIVINA

## BACKGROUND

Each week through Advent, we will be providing an image you can use to learn about the practice of *visio divina*. This approach to prayer dates back to the very early days of the church as an aid to worship. The catacombs were filled with images and symbols of the faith. For centuries, in cultures where very few people could read, images were considered a legitimate means of sharing and reflecting on the Gospel. In essence, it is about looking at a work of art, or a scene from nature, or even nature itself, and asking God to reveal himself through that visual imagery.

It is vitally important to remember: this is not a way to “worship a graven image.” In Exodus 35:21, God, through Moses, selected Bezalel—and others—and “filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs” to bring beauty to the construction of the Tabernacle. (In case you were wondering, Bezalel was the first person, perhaps since Adam and Eve, that Scripture describes as being “filled with the Spirit of God.” An artist!) We have no difficulty with the idea that the Holy Spirit might use music to help us experience the presence of God. The visual arts are also gifts from God for our benefit.

*Visio divina*, especially if one is using an image from nature, is certainly not “nature worship.” In Psalm 19:1 we read, “The heavens declare the glory of God ...” We truly can learn about God from what we see in the natural world. In fact, Romans 1:20, makes it even more clear: “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made ...”

Below are six steps to the practice of *visio divina*. Following each step is a series of prompts that may help to guide you in your observation, contemplation, and prayer. You may also find the prompts useful should you decide to journal your experience—a practice that many people find very helpful. Rest assured that it is not necessary to answer every question each time you engage in this practice. Always let the Holy Spirit be your guide—and your teacher—as you sit with any kind of art created by anyone who God has created in his own image.

For this Advent season, the team has chosen images done by Norman Rockwell (1894-1978). Nearly everyone is familiar with his work and his distinct, near photo-realistic

style. He was a man of his times and an astute observer of American culture. His paintings and illustrations, which numbered over 4,000, included 323 covers for *The Saturday Evening Post*. The *Post* was one of the primary chroniclers of Americana while it was published. Rockwell’s point of view was more that of an affectionate observer than an editorial critic, although he did not turn a blind eye to social issues including civil rights and poverty. In 2024, looking at his work may evoke feelings of nostalgia, but perhaps we should not look at them as a record of an unrealistically idyllic past that we might long to recover. Instead, we can see an idealized way of life that was never as pure as it looks and consider the ways our own era may look to future observers.

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## 1. PREPARATION

Find a quiet space. Take several deep breaths as you quiet yourself. Ask God to open your heart to his presence.

### PROMPTS

- How am I feeling as I enter this time of prayer?
- What distractions do I need to release to the Holy Spirit?
- What do I hope to receive from this time with God?

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## 2. FIRST LOOK

Observe the image silently, uncritically. Take in the whole image without analyzing. Let your eyes rest on the entire piece. Notice colors, shapes, figures, composition.

### PROMPTS

- What is my first reaction to the whole image?
  - Is my eye drawn to any specific part or parts of the image? Which parts?
  - Where do my eyes naturally rest?
  - Am I responding physically to any aspect of the image (faster or slower pulse, excitement or displeasure, etc.)
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# VISIO DIVINA

## 3. MEDITATE

Focus prayerfully on particular aspects that draw your attention, asking God to teach you in this moment. Ask yourself what emotions or thoughts arise. Consider what God might be saying through these elements.

### PROMPTS

- What symbols or elements seem meaningful to me?
- Which figure or part of the image draws me most strongly? Why?
- What memories or experiences does this image evoke?
- If I were in this image, where would I place myself?
- What tensions or contrasts do I notice?
- What might this image be saying about God's nature?
- How does this image connect to scripture I know?
- Do I sense God is saying anything to me through the image or the Scripture?

## 4. PRAY

Enter into a dialogue with God about what you see. Share with him your feelings, questions, and insights. Listen for God's response in your heart. Connect the image and this exercise to your life and faith journey.

### PROMPTS

- What would I like to say to God about what I see?
- What questions arise in my heart?
- How is God present through this image for me today?
- What invitation might God be extending through this image?
- What aspects of my life relate to this image?

## 5. CONTEMPLATE

Take your time and rest quietly in God's presence. For the moment, let go of words and analysis. Simply sit with the insights received and allow them to deepen your relationship with God.

### PROMPTS

- Is any truth or wisdom emerging in me?
- What gift am I receiving through this image?

- How is God's love being revealed?
- What remains mysterious or unclear?
- Is there a new (for me) insight about God, myself, or others being formed?

## 6. ACTION

Once you have completed the steps above, consider how this experience is calling you to respond. Think about ways to embody the insights you have gained. Plan concrete steps to live out what you've learned.

### PROMPTS

- How might this image influence my daily life?
- What specific action is God calling me toward?
- Who needs to hear what I've learned?
- How can I embody the truth I've discovered?
- What practice might help me remember this insight?

## HERE ARE A FEW RELATED PRACTICES THAT YOU MIGHT FIND HELPFUL:

- Write a dialogue between yourself and a figure in the image.
- Describe the image from God's perspective.
- List words or phrases that capture your experience.
- Draw your own response to the image.
- Write a prayer or a poem inspired by your meditation.
- Take a story from Scripture and write yourself into it, either as a character in the story or as an interested observer of the scene.

Remember, you are writing for yourself and for God, not for your 8th grade English teacher. You don't have to answer each prompt. You may even be prompted to journal without using these prompts entirely. That's okay. Simply use this as a means to help you experience and hear from God.

# VISIO DIVINA

## 1. PREPARATION

Find a quiet space. Take several deep breaths as you quiet yourself. Ask God to open your heart to his presence.

### PROMPTS

- How am I feeling as I enter this time of prayer?

**EXAMPLE:** *I am generally rested, having been to church this morning. Looking forward to spending some Sabbath time with the Lord in this practice.*

- What distractions do I need to release to the Holy Spirit?

**EXAMPLE:** *I want to be in this moment, not focusing on my Monday thru Friday to-do list.*

## 2. FIRST LOOK

Observe the image silently, uncritically. Take in the whole image without analyzing. Let your eyes rest on the entire piece. Notice colors, shapes, figures, composition.

### PROMPTS

- What is my first reaction to the whole image?

**EXAMPLE:** *This looks like a very happy scene. A “typical” American Thanksgiving celebration.*

- Is my eye drawn to any specific part or parts of the image? Which parts?

**EXAMPLE:** *Although the composition seems to direct the eye to the roasted turkey as a kind of centerpiece, my gaze moves immediately to “Grandma and Grandpa,” then the turkey, then the people around the table on the edge of the painting. If I think of the composition as a triangle, the triangle comes to a point at Grandma’s right shoulder, and Grandpa seems to float a bit behind her.*

- Am I responding physically to any aspect of the image (faster or slower pulse, excitement or displeasure, etc.)

**EXAMPLE:** *My first reaction is positive, feeling very nostalgic for similar scenes around my grandparents’ dinner table. Perhaps a little hungry and excited as I imagine the aromas of the food and anticipate all the flavors of my favorite foods from turkey to pumpkin pie at the end.*



“FREEDOM FROM WANT” by Norman Rockwell for the Saturday Evening Post. (Via Wikimedia Commons, in the public domain.)

# VISIO DIVINA

## 3. MEDITATE

Focus prayerfully on particular aspects that draw your attention, asking God to teach you in this moment. Ask yourself what emotions or thoughts arise. Consider what God might be saying through these elements.

### PROMPTS

- What symbols or elements seem meaningful to me?

**EXAMPLE:** *The entire scene, even without an overloaded table, speaks to me of abundance, even super-abundance, perhaps affluence. This would seem to be a modestly well-off, white American family from the 1940s celebrating with gratitude for the blessings of life and liberty. The fruit, a traditional symbol of fertility, is echoed by the number of people around the table. The “good China,” the silver cutlery, silverware, silver salt-and-pepper shakers, and the silver serving bowl speak of a kind of affluence, but not necessarily extravagance. I notice they are only having water to drink—no wine, not even iced tea which would have been the case in my family.*

- Which figure or part of the image draws me most strongly? Why?

**EXAMPLE:** *The standing figure of Grandpa, the family patriarch, draws me in. I wonder if he will be saying Grace in a moment before everyone eats.*

- What memories or experiences does this image evoke?

**EXAMPLE:** *This reminds me very much of Thanksgiving at my grandparents in south Arkansas—except my grandfather would not likely have had a suit on. He might well have worn a tie, though.*

- What tensions or contrasts do I notice?

**EXAMPLE:** *Grandma and Grandpa put on a nice meal. Grandpa is dressed to the nines in his dark suit, white collar, striped dress shirt and maroon tie. Grandma is not so dressed up in fairly typical house-dress of the era and still wearing her apron, almost a symbol of subservience. Obviously she has been hard at work preparing the meal. As was so often the case during that time, neither Grandpa—nor any of the men—likely helped prepare the meal or cleaned up after.*

**EXAMPLE:** *Another bit of tension strikes me. The painting was done in 1943. The entire world was engaged in a war to end all wars. People in Europe were starving, and soldiers as well as civilians were sacrificing their lives for the cause. That seems like an awfully big turkey at a time when so many were living on rationed food. I also notice that, although America was considered a “Christian” nation at that point in time, there are no overtly Christian symbols present in the image—no cross or crucifix, no Warner Salliman portrait of Jesus.*

- What might this image be saying about God’s nature?

**EXAMPLE:** *God remains present with us, regardless of the situation that exists in the world. He provides. His abundance may not always be an abundance of food, but out of his abundance of love, we can choose to love those around us. Yet knowing this was painted during World War II and used to remind citizens of what our soldiers were fighting for, there is a kind of hopefulness present that seems to flow out of gratitude for what we have, and for that we can give thanks to God.*

- Do I sense God is saying anything to me through the image?

**EXAMPLE:** *I am first of all struck by how easily I can judge. The artist. The culture. The people in the painting. It is good to know the time and culture within which a work of art was formed, but I must be very careful not to judge it by my contemporary understanding.*

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## 4. PRAY

Enter into a dialogue with God about what you see. Share with him your feelings, questions, and insights. Listen for God's response in your heart. Connect the image and this exercise to your life and faith journey.

### PROMPTS

- What questions arise in my heart?

**EXAMPLE:** *I notice the whiteness of the painting. These are white people, in front of a white curtain, at a table with a white tablecloth, eating from white plates, celebrating a holiday taught to white people by indigenous people and experiencing abundance at a time when many people go hungry at home in the U.S. or are trapped in homes that have been ravaged by war. The scene is far from a depiction of reality of the world at the time.*

- What invitation might God be extending to me through this image?

**EXAMPLE:** *In addition to an invitation to reflect on my judgmentalism toward earlier eras, I think God is inviting me to reflect on my own privilege, to see where I have been taking for granted the gifts of God for my life. But that is not to say that I should not celebrate the life I have been given. I must allow a deep gratitude to grow in my heart as I remember the One who is the giver of all good things. And as that gratitude grows I must also diligently cooperate with God to accomplish his ends in my heart and in the lives of the others around me.*

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## 5. CONTEMPLATE

Take your time and rest quietly in God's presence. For the moment, Let go of words and analysis. Simply sit with the insights received and allow them to deepen your relationship with God.

### PROMPTS

- Is any truth or wisdom emerging in me?

**EXAMPLE:** *Even an image like this, perhaps wholly secular, can speak to us of God's love, provision, and our responsibility to love God and others in return.*

- What gift am I receiving through this image?

**EXAMPLE:** *A reminder to cultivate a heart of gratitude.*

- How is God's love being revealed?

**EXAMPLE:** *God's love is self-giving, ever self-sacrificing, and an unrestrained outpouring of grace into our lives even when we are unaware.*

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## 6. ACTION

Once you have completed the steps above, consider how this experience is calling you to respond. Think about ways to embody the insights you have gained. Plan concrete steps to live out what you've learned.

### PROMPTS

- How might this image influence my daily life?

**EXAMPLE:** *As a reminder to cultivate a heart of gratitude and a heart of self-sacrifice and giving.*

- Who needs to hear what I've learned?

**EXAMPLE:** *I do. Over and over and over.*

- How can I embody the truth I've discovered?

**EXAMPLE:** *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty pride, but in humility consider others more important than myself. I should look not only to my own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

- What practice might help me remember this insight?

**EXAMPLE:** *Memorize Philippians 2:3-4.*

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