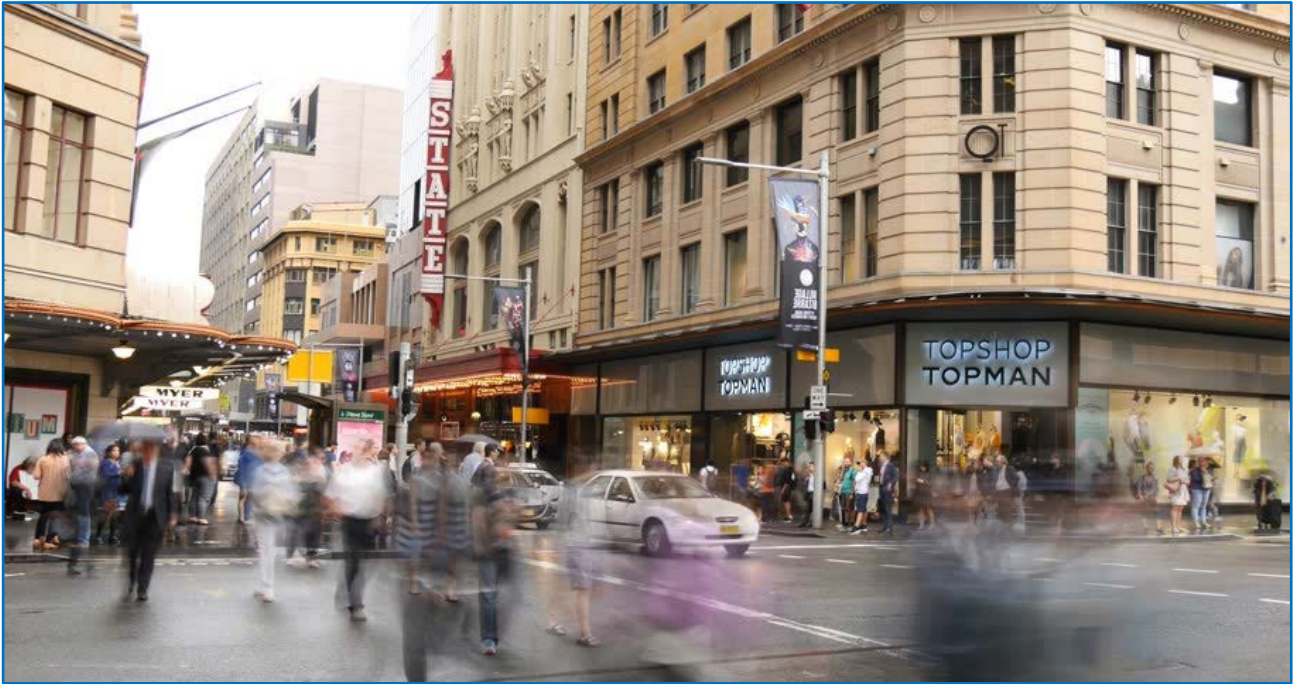


A New Year of Contemplatively Seeing

Welcome to 2018 and another year of contemplative prayer and awareness as we further create a strong network of contemplative 'see-ers' and 'be-ers' for the greater life of our struggling world. In this reflection I share with you an experience that was for me most grounding in contemplative seeing, as we seek to do each day or whenever we are able.



In the course of a formation program in spiritual direction in which I was involved, the group was invited to engage in a full day street retreat in the central part of the city.

I was not looking forward to spending five hours in the city as my energy is quickly depleted by the busyness, noise and anonymity I experience. I feel diminished by it, a small speck in the sea of humanity who inhabits this place. Hence I rarely go there other than to keep an appointment or complete a set task, and afterwards, to find the nearest green, life-giving space in which to breathe deeply! On the walk to the church, I prayed for openness to the experiences this day would bring.

We gathered in a small church, which has faithfully stood in this place for more than one hundred years, but which is now overshadowed by towering modern office buildings and apartments. At the front of the church there was a large billboard welcoming refugees, and the door of the church was opened wide as if to put this message into action.



We began with a time of reflection centred on an invitation to hold the city in prayer as we moved around the streets during the day. There was no agenda, no timetable, no tasks to be completed, no map, no use of technology, no companionship of each other, no clearly defined purpose. Rather, it was to be a solitary experience, holding silence lightly throughout the day, almost like being invisible in our lack of seeking active engagement or interaction in the life of the city, meandering, slowing down, laying aside the need to know where we were going, in contradiction to the purposeful manner in which the city dwellers and workers were going about their day. It invited 'walk(ing) in the world as if it were all a liminal space. You do not know what will happen this next moment, you do not know what will cross your path, you do not know what you will experience or encounter.' ⁱ It called for letting go of judgement and expectations, simply noticing, *seeing*, rather than *looking*.



I was reminded that Thomas Merton once reprimanded a fellow photographer, Ron Seitz, for the speed with which he approached things, and encouraged him to stop *looking* and start *seeing*:

*Because looking means that you already have something in mind for your eye to find; you've set out in search of your desired object and have closed off everything else presenting itself along the way. But seeing is being open and receptive to what comes to the eye; your vision total and not targeted.*ⁱⁱ

In our exercise that day, the lack of structure created freedom, amidst a heightened awareness, and alertness through the senses, to a city that continued its life unaware that it was being held so gently and actively in prayer. It enabled me to notice the smallest of details and yet the majesty of architecture, as well as the flowing ribbon of people who, almost as one, crossed the road at a major intersection. Again I was reminded of Merton's experience of seeing people in the streets of Louisville, and his resulting *deep and mute sense of compassion...I seemed to have lost an eye for merely exterior detail and to have discovered, instead, a deep sense of respect and love.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Esther de Waal calls this *the sacramental quality of the particular, whether in a person or thing, and Merton knew that we have a responsibility to see it, to cherish and to reverence it.*^{iv}

This intense experience of contemplative seeing in the context of the street retreat continues in regular spiritual practices like Visio Divina, which Paintner describes as *a way of seeing the world with the eyes of the heart, which is the place of openness, rather than with the mind, which is often the place of planning*^v, in beginning each day in silence, and in contemplative walking.

Such practices, mediated by silence, heighten my awareness of my connectedness with all created things. Contemplative prayer, such as the greeting, 'Namaste', recognises that I am honouring *the place in you in which the whole universe dwells*. David Whyte expresses this poetically: *Out of the quiet emerges the sheer incarnational presence of the world, a presence that seems to demand a moving internal symmetry in the one breathing and listening equal to its own breathing, listening elemental powers.*^{vi}



As we begin a new CEN year of daily faithful contemplative seeing and holding of our world together, let us join with Pope Francis to pray with both attention and intention: *Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognise that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.*^{vii}

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ⁱ Christine Valters Paintner. *The Soul of a Pilgrim, Eight Practices for the Journey Within*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Sorin Books, 2015 121-122.

ⁱⁱ(Ron Seitz, *Song for Nobody, a Memory Vision of Thomas Merton*. Ligouri, Missouri: Triumph Books, 1993, pp 133-4

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 91-92

^{iv} Esther de Waal, *Lost in Wonder, Rediscovering the Spiritual Art of Attentiveness*. Norwich: Canterbury Press.2003. 65

^v Paintner, p 2015. 28),

^{vi} David Whyte, *Consolations, The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*. Washington: Many Rivers Press, 2016. 215

^{vii} Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, n 246