Visio Divina

A Slower Way to See God



Rembrandt van Rijn, The Return of the Prodigal Son (c. 1668)

Visio divina means "holy seeing"—praying with a sacred image the way lectio prays with a text. For most of the church's history—long before the printing press, when most believers could not read—this was how ordinary Christians met God: through icons, frescoes, and stained glass that made the biblical stories visible. A sacred image slows us down, drawing us past information into wonder—a door to the God who meets us in beauty. Use the four movements on the back to pray with the painting on the front, or with any image that draws you toward God.

Prepare. Begin with the painting on the front—Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*. Find a quiet place, take a few slow breaths, and ask God to open the eyes of your heart. (In time, pray this same way with any icon or image that draws you toward God.)

1. ***See (Visio).*** Look slowly. Let your eyes travel over the whole image without hurrying—the figures, the light, the shadows, the different characters. Then let your gaze rest wherever you are drawn.

2. ***Reflect (Meditatio).*** Stay with what caught your eye. Why this figure, this gesture, this fall of light? Notice what it stirs in you—a memory, a feeling, a longing, a resistance. Let the image read you. With this painting, ask: Where am I in the scene—the returning son, the watching older brother, or the father who does the embracing? What is God showing me, and what is his invitation?

3. ***Pray (Oratio).*** Now speak honestly to God about what you have seen and received. Say back to him whatever the image has stirred—gratitude, longing, confession, or need. Let it become a real conversation.

4. ***Contemplate (Contemplatio).*** Finally, stop looking and simply rest in his love for you. Let go of studying and analyzing, and abide in the presence of the Father to whom the image points. Receive his love as a gift.

Peter Scazzero

To go deeper: Henri Nouwen,
The Return of the Prodigal Son