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Barbara Sutton

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*, bsutton@csbsju.edu

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### Recommended Citation

Sutton, Barbara, D.Min. "Holy Seeing': From the Art of the Saint John's Bible." *Health Progress* 100, no. 3 (May, 2019): 16-20.

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# ‘Holy Seeing’

## From the Art of *The Saint John’s Bible*

BARBARA SUTTON, DMin

“**W**ould you like to see the Word of God dance on a page?” calligrapher Donald Jackson asked the monks of Saint John’s Abbey when he solicited their sponsorship for *The Saint John’s Bible* in 1998. With a discerning spirit, they commissioned the first handwritten illuminated edition of the Bible in 500 years.

The process of illuminating passages in this Bible used the monastic practice of *lectio divina*: a careful reading of the text, looking at each detail of word choice or phrasing and letting the inspiration sink in and become something new for the 21st century.

The practice of *visio divina* or “holy seeing” also serves as a method for praying with *The Saint John’s Bible*. Using six steps — listening, meditating, seeing, praying, contemplating and becoming Christ-like — I invite people to see the Scripture with the eye of their heart and to fix their sacred gaze on an illumination of the Bible. Formation programs, health care centers, campus ministries, retreat centers, religious communities, parishes and interfaith communities as well as individuals seek out *visio divina* for their own spiritual practice.

Drawing from the beauty of the Bible text and its images, the practice holds the possibility to stir the memory, to contemplate the messages of the Scriptures and to stimulate our spiritual senses, drawing us closer to the Paschal mystery. It is a particular kind of looking, a steady, intense or absorbed form of seeing and pondering with the eyes of faith. Participants ruminate on the passages from various angles. The pondering becomes prayer when the reflection arises in a mind that is open to God.

*Visio divina* is a prayer process that has unexpected outcomes, such as bringing a corrective



Resurrection

healing or affirmation that is stirring in one’s life or in society. The decision to include the faces of women in *The Saint John’s Bible* was for the very sake of healing. The faces of biblical women often



are omitted from the Sunday lectionary, and by illuminating their faces *The Saint John's Bible* is able to bring us face to face with these holy women. The stories of "holy seeing" are many. One young woman prayed with the Resurrection illumination and came to know Mary Magdalene as the first to go and tell the good news of the Resurrection. The woman exclaimed, "Is that true? Is Mary of Magdala the first disciple?" While it is seemingly a catechetical moment, it was also a healing moment for this young woman. She decided, "Then I am going to read the Bible."

Sacred art does not just nurture only the patient, but the patient's family and friends, doctors and care teams, and all who walk the hospital halls and play important roles during key moments in a person's healing journey. The people who work the night shift at Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center in Boise, Idaho, had their hearts awakened when they were able to see themselves and their work in a new light during the Christmas season. They were the first shift at the hospital to be presented the Christmas story illuminated in *The Saint John's Bible* as it traveled throughout the hospital on a moveable cart. The night workers, like the shepherds who kept watch in the night in Bethlehem, were first to see and reflect the light of Christ in their faces.

Pope Francis told an audience in 2016 that beauty, under the care of artists, has the ability to transform even the everyday lives of men and women.<sup>1</sup> *Visio divina* as a contemplative prayer practice holds the possibility of healing one's self and relationships. For example, research indicates it holds the possibility for one to be kinder, more sensitive, more open to others and less self-centered. As one begins the discipline of developing a sacred gaze and holy seeing, he or she may be less prone to violent reactions in the face of unpleasant situations. They gain perspective and become more open to how others see the world. *Visio divina* evokes a greater awareness that God lives in us and in those other people we meet on the margins. It can, as Pope Francis said, "shine beauty especially where darkness or gray dominates everyday life ... simple actions, small sparks of beauty and love" shown to the environment in which people live can bring healing and provide an alternative to indifference and cynicism.<sup>2</sup>

*Visio divina* creates sanctuary space for people to express and interpret their own spiritual journeys toward healing. *The Saint John's Bible's* illumination for *Creation*, which used collage to rep-

resent the seven days of creation, invokes a spiritual framework for busy people who are overly committed. The seventh day, the Sabbath, is a panel filled with shades of gold, which was chosen to represent the divine mystery of God. The *visio divina* process allows us to know ourselves better. How many of us can lay claim to a Sabbath that is void of anything other than an immersion in the life of God? The response to this question



Birth of Christ

is typically a gesture like an eye roll or the shaking of a head, that I interpret as "no." In the "no," a transformative moment emerges, shifting the emphasis from the interior life of the artist to the interior life of the viewer. When contemplating this image with others and probing deeper, I can point to the seven panels that are hinged with gold boxes, moving from left to right, the number of boxes increases incrementally by one. Are our days hinged on God? Are we able to see the movement of God's life through our week? Or do we resist exploring these moments? Do we want more gold in our days? What is the cost for more golden moments in our lives?

Often there are surprise moments in *visio divina* as the process releases emotions not sitting on the surface. It may call forth ancient tears. So it was for the first time a young woman fixed

her sacred gaze on the illumination *The Resurrection*, in which Mary of Magdala stands face to face with the resurrected Jesus, their sacred gazes fixed on one another. Mary dons a red garment, and Jesus is robed in shades of royal purple. In a *visio divina* process, the woman noticed Mary Magdalene was wearing red, and this recalled the woman's mother, who loved to wear red and looked beautiful in it. But, the young woman said, her father was a jealous man and refused to let her mother wear red because of its association with the color prostitutes wear. Because of this, the young woman was disturbed that Mary of Magdalene would be dressed in red. The young woman's encounter with the illumination reawakened memories of her relationship with her father. In a healing moment, she was able to shed her childhood assumptions and heal the memory imposed by her father. She chose a vibrant red Easter dress to celebrate the Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Praying with sacred art can transform a com-

munity as well as an individual. It can reveal to the church and to society what they most need to see. I witnessed this twice with the illumination *The Woman Caught in Adultery*. The first was at a Mother's Day retreat sponsored by the Visitation Sisters of Minneapolis. The second was with an alumni group of men who had studied for the priesthood.

A small group of women living in the neighborhood prayed *lectio* and *visio divina* with the image for the *Woman Caught in Adultery*. A young woman played the main character as the group acted out the scripture text. Later, her story emerged. She had recently given birth to her third child. Out of fear, and not knowing for certain the baby's father, she placed the baby for adoption the week before the retreat. Days following the retreat, I received a heartwarming call to tell me that she sought to regain custody of her baby and was successful. Through the retreat she was able to see her life differently. She knew for the first time that she was loved by God and the community of women gathered. She now believed in her ability to be a mother and to love this child. The community of women served as a window to the sacred healing power of the Gospel during the retreat and their care for this young, vulnerable mother transformed her life.

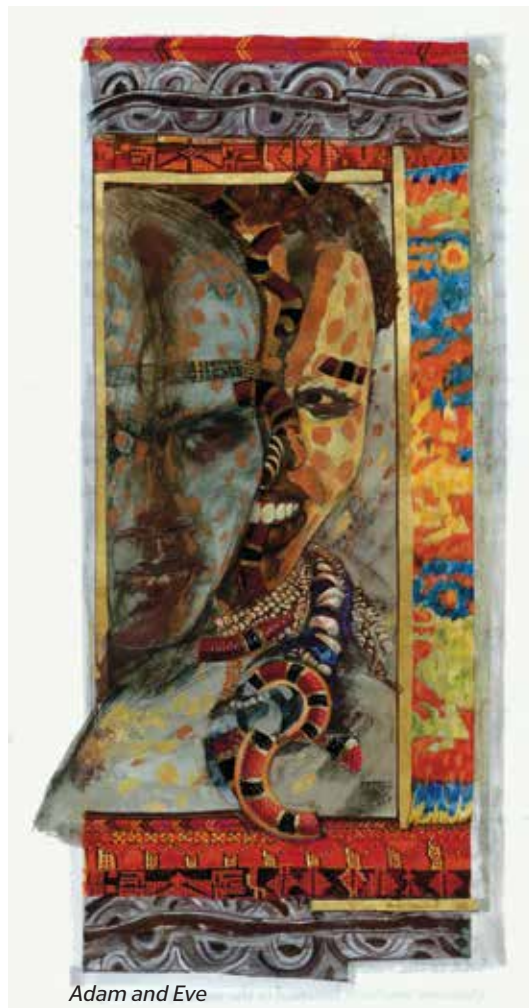
A year later, I had a second opportunity to use this illumination with an alumni group of men who had studied for the priesthood. While it is tempting to recycle an old reflection, I couldn't because *visio divina* provides an opportunity to see with new eyes, as it did for me and the men gathered. In my sacred gaze that time, I noticed my resistance to those men on their pedestals throwing stones at the woman, thinking, "how dare they?" I even felt a little smug when Jesus said, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." I visualized them leaving the scene, one by one. In my *lectio divina*, the phrase that stood out for me was "such women" when the scribes and Pharisees said to Jesus: "Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" These two words, "such women" made me feel the contempt and utter disregard the phrase conveys in this context because they isolate and objectify the woman. We have often heard or referenced "such women" in a negative light. For example, "such women" just want power, or "such women" want to be ordained deacons or priest. What did these words and this illumination mean for the clergy gathered? What did it mean for me?



*Woman Taken in Adultery*



My heart took a turn and was arrested with a profound image that I couldn't relinquish. What if the woman caught in adultery was the personification of Holy Mother Church? What if I was the man, asking the same question he asked of Jesus, "What do you say?" I began to think of how I can be so quick to judge Holy Mother Church at times. I set myself above her, casting a complaint or judgment on any number of modern-day offenses: misuse of power, abuse and sexism, lack of financial transparency and parish closings. It is so very hard at times to let go of the stones and walk away.



Adam and Eve

Am I willing to get off my pedestal and lay down my stones and be a part of rebuilding the church? Some alumni wept, others bowed their heads in contrition. Have we failed to fully embrace the challenge of the Gospel — and struggle to fully receive and believe in the radicalness of the non-

condemnatory love Jesus has for each of us? For those of us who struggle to embrace our own particular darkness, our own particular brand of infidelity, I invited them, and myself to see the church in a new way and consider a journey of healing from shame and sadness to instead accept the invitation to cross the threshold of the door of mercy once again into the life of God. As Jesus gently confronted this woman and released her from condemnation, he challenged her as well. He does the same for us. He draws the curtain aside and asks us to walk in the light of his way. Those stones, thrown by men on high, could be used differently, to build safe sanctuaries or to bridge divides. We make decisions with our stone walls, choosing whether to build a wall of contempt, let the walls crumble and collapse, or to put the stones together and rebuild.

In the crucibles of our lives, *lectio* and *visio divina* prompt people to see their lives differently. And yet, the challenge for those who are often in need of healing is that this prayer form is not accessible. It requires the art of accompaniment by one who will illuminate the story of God for others. The art of accompaniment can show a person something that is not physically seen.

I accompany a woman with memory loss and her family. Jeanne lives in a long-term care center. Art and beauty engage her and have been a way for her to communicate and express herself. For example, a health care worker placed a chrysalis in a glass jar in her room, which she calls home. Metamorphosis happened before Jeanne's very eyes. Together on a spring day, Jeanne and her husband released the butterfly, which gently came back to land on their hands. The moment with the butterfly was transformative, a symbol of their enduring love. This moment required silence, words would stumble and fail.

Days later I introduced *The Saint John's Bible* illumination at the end of Mark's Gospel, which includes a milkweed plant with each process of metamorphosis for becoming a butterfly: the egg, the caterpillar, the chrysalis and the butterfly. The illumination depicts the abrupt ending of the Gospel, after the resurrection, when the disciples were told, "Do not be alarmed, you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." This illumination sparked a discussion with Jeanne of the many ways Jesus can change us, transform us. Jesus

can turn bitterness into peace, hatred into love, anger into joy, and sinners into saints. Jesus turns people who feel meaningless into people who know they matter. And Jesus turns death into new life. Something clicked for Jeanne simultaneously on every level. The rush of aesthetic pleasure was visible. With this encounter of beauty, love opened her eyes. It happened again and again for Jeanne as each grandbaby was born. Unable to visit the baby, Jeanne waited patiently until the new family was able to visit. Meanwhile we prayed with the illumination of *The Birth of Christ* and as a response Jeanne chose magazine images and made a soulful collage for the newborn and together we composed a poem. Each time she marveled at her own art and said, "I did that?" Through the act of contemplation and creating art, the windows into Jeanne's emotions and thoughts gave rise to her joy and accomplishment. She made art, holy cards that will tell the story in years to come of a grandmother's love for her grandchildren.

*The Saint John's Bible* reflects a contemporary multicultural society far removed from its medieval predecessors. The illuminations include imagery from other sources such as science, technology, Eastern religious traditions and Native American images. Many illuminations emphasize women, neglected people and those who are poor. At the heart is God's global message of hope and healing for all time, for all peoples, for all generations, and over all history. The painted faces of *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden* speak of humanity's desire to be alive. This illumination serves as a mirror, and Jackson, the calligrapher, writes "Adam and Eve are mirrors of us."<sup>3</sup> In a holy moment, I observed a hospital chaplain, an African-American woman, fix her gaze on Adam and Eve. She told me she had called her mother to tell



Milkweed and Butterfly

her, "we are in the Bible." She was dazzled and delighted. I knew in that moment the Scriptures were no longer depleted for her and had become a healing force.

It is when we see with our heart that we can find beauty in everything and see a word dance, even in death and sickness. Our spiritual senses illuminate the Gospel not only in the Bible alone, but in butterflies, grandmothers, Holy Mother Church, adulterous women, men on high, vibrant fabrics and in our silence.

**BARBARA SUTTON** is the director of ministerial formation and field education and on the faculty of Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary, Collegeville, Minn. She directs the Seeing the Word curriculum project for *The Saint John's Bible*.

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#### NOTES

1. Hannah Brockhaus, "Pope Francis: Through Beauty, Artists Make the World Better," *Catholic News Agency*, Dec. 7, 2016, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-through-beauty-artists-make-the-world-better-89502>.
2. Brockhaus, "Through Beauty."
3. Susan Sink, *The Art of The Saint John's Bible: The Complete Readers Guide* (Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2013), 10-11.

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