

Second-semester longings

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [March 8, 2011](#) issue



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It has been a tough first week of classes. On Monday, the temperature never rose above ten degrees. Last night a foot of heavy snow fell on top of the nearly two feet already on the ground.

I wasn't sure how many people I would find at our first weekly Eucharist of the term. Driving was impossible, even if one mustered the will to dig out one's car for the third time in three weeks. I walked over to the divinity school past piles of snow higher than my head.

But a hardy group of students, staff and faculty were milling around in the chapel, listening to the choir of two practice (one of the two had trekked to school in snowshoes). When celebrant Francis Clooney, a Jesuit member of our faculty, took his place at the altar, we organized ourselves into a congregation and stood to pray.

It was hard to hear the readings over the roaring of the snowblowers outside. But when one of our students stood to lead us in singing, her lovely voice soared above

the racket. She taught us to sing the response for the psalm appointed for the day. This morning, it seemed as if the psalm had been chosen especially for the beginning of a new semester. "Lord," we sang together between the verses, "we long to see your face."

The first week of every semester is full of longing. Students visit seminars and lectures (during the horribly named "shopping period") hoping to find the books, the teachers, the community of students that will help them see God's face in their studies—or show them a clearer vision of their vocation, or help them illuminate the invisible filaments that connect their studies to the world and its struggles.

I remember that longing and still feel it today, as a teacher. I still look at the stack of books for a class, or at books I've read over and over again, and hope I will catch a glimpse of God and what God is asking from me in their pages.

One of my students told me how put off she had been by all the theoretical texts she had been asked to read when she first came to divinity school. The language seemed obscure, the perspectives did not account for what she thought was most important about religion, and the authors seemed to be having arguments with strangers.

It was only when she decided to approach these texts the way she approaches scripture that she began to benefit from, enjoy and feel challenged by her reading. This is not to say that she read Clifford Geertz or Talal Asad as scripture, but she brought the same reading practices to their books that she brought to scripture: she read them slowly, savored the sound of their sentences, and noticed the ways in which one bit of text spoke to another. She sharpened her attention to the many ways these texts communicated the desires out of which they were written. She began to listen to them not as antagonists from whose pages she had to wrestle meaning, or as the esoteric products of specialists speaking to other specialists, but as humans. She began to hear the very human questions they were asking, questions like hers: What is at stake when we talk about religion? Who are we? What matters, and why? From there she began to imagine the ways in which everything she was reading and thinking about bore upon the ministry to which she is called.

Now that student wants to share what she has learned about reading with youth in secondary schools. She wonders what difference it would make to invite kids into the practice of reading with as much concern for their spiritual formation as for their test

scores. I hope she'll have the opportunity to find out.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine imagines the firmament that God places between earth and heaven, according to the first chapter of Genesis, as scripture "stretched over us like a skin." He imagines the stars in the firmament as those who read scripture, holding on to it with both hands, trying to see through its veil. Scripture both draws us near to God and obscures God's face. Only the angels who live above the firmament, Augustine writes, read the face of God unencumbered.

Here below, we seek God's face in books and conversations that both help draw us near to what we long for and hold it at a distance. In a few weeks, deadlines, grades, the struggle to find the time to read slowly and attentively and the pressure to get things done will make it hard to remember the longing with which we began this semester. There was a snowy day, though, when we lifted our voices together and sang, "Lord, we long to see your face." Even when we seem to have forgotten, that prayer still sounds inside of us.