

White Monks: A Life in Shadows

by Francesca Phillips



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #105

Commentary

Photography is the ultimate tool for capturing the moment. However, that is also the dilemma for all of us who are photographers: *Every moment* is one that *can be* potentially captured with our camera. The great challenge of being a photographer is determining which moments are worthy of being captured and then doing so. I assume it's obvious that that is a two-step process—recognizing the moment, and then successfully manipulating all the variables of the photographic process to capture that special moment effectively. In this commentary, let's focus on the more difficult of the two steps—recognizing the moment.

Although this is not always the case, I've often found that “recognizing the moment” is a consequence of recognizing the potential (often unconscious) metaphors that can be encapsulated in an image. Consider this image of these elderly Christian monks. Is it too far of a stretch to note the parallel between these four individuals in the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? Is there a metaphor encapsulated in the photograph in the form of the four solid, vertical architectural columns directly behind these four monks? It's almost as though these architectural structures are conduits for ascension.

But there are two additional components that Francesca Phillips includes in her photograph that I think add the extra special touch. To the left of these architectural columns is some sort of guide-wire reaching toward the illuminated window.

It's just a wire, and it's just a window, but aren't they also metaphors for some sort of guidance to the heavens? Is that guide-wire something that is been handed down from God, or perhaps left by previous ascendants?

And then to the right of the architectural columns, is it going too far to see in those organ pipes a metaphorical choir of angels?

Metaphors abound, often working on a subconscious level. For anyone who takes a moment to look at this image more carefully, it's difficult not to see all these elements as something more than the architectural details they obviously are on a less esoteric plane.

It goes without saying that any commentary on this image would be incomplete if we didn't address the fact that all four of these monks are sitting in wheelchairs. Intellectually, I assume they do so because of some physical ailment. Metaphorically, however, we can easily see this as a symbol of the fallen world of Christian faith. Perhaps that is why we need a guide rope to help us ascend.

Without the metaphors, we have four guys in chairs waiting for some unknown purpose. With the



metaphorical interpretations, we see so much more and are rewarded with a much richer image.

This image was one of 58 that Phillips submitted to *LensWork*. Reviewing her portfolio, it's obvious that she wandered this monastery looking for poignant moments to photograph. The question about what

qualifies a moment to be poignant is easily understood in this image, but this search for metaphors is the element that distinguishes her entire portfolio. Each and every image can be similarly interpreted as a metaphor for the Christian spiritual life. That is either a function of incredibly sensitive editing, or incredibly sensitive photographic—or both..