The fifteenth- and sixteenth-century rise in the mass-production of demotic devotional objects that were easy and relatively cheap to reproduce is a phenomenon specific to north-western Europe. It was above all, though, in the urbanised Netherlands that there was a great demand for such cheap religious products on the part of the laity, pilgrims, lower clergy, monks and nuns. The use of religious scenes for the practice of individual spirituality first became popular among monastics in the thirteenth century. Its origins can be traced to such mystical works as the *Meditationes vitae Christi* by Pseudo-Bonaventure, and the *Revelationes* of St Bridget of Sweden. They contain emotive and detailed descriptions of the life of Christ that gave the reader an opportunity to display *compassio*, the internalisation and intense sharing in Christ’s suffering. In addition to these writings, the monastics also started using *Andachtsbilder* as aids to meditation and stimuli for the senses and the soul. They made the suffering of Christ and other holy figures tangible and fired the imagination. The nobility and the urban elite soon adopted the use of these devotional scenes, but it was the rise and influence of the late medieval *Devotio moderna* movement that led to their wide dissemination and popularity in the Low Countries in the fifteenth century. This spiritual movement originated in the second half of the fourteenth century in the IJssel Valley of the northern Netherlands. Under the leadership of Geert Grote (1340-1384), it militated against the moral decline in the medieval religious houses and churches, and founded a strictly ascetic monastic order, the Windesheim Congregation, which spread its ideals and reformist zeal. In a short space of time, that congregation had spawned a network of dozens of brother and sister houses that propagated the ideas of Grote and his follower Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380-1472) from other parts of the Netherlands and the German Rhineland. One important aspect of the doctrine was the weight attached to personal piety and identification with Christ.

The dissemination of devotional tracts, manuscripts and printed prayer books in the vernacular made wider segments of the urban population aware of the private practice of faith. The ownership and use of religious books was no longer the exclusive preserve of the nobility and the clergy but expanded to lettered lay people like craftsmen and merchants, and the books could be found in bedchambers, kitchens and workshops. The invention of the printing press and the growing demand for religious books in the vernacular led to an increase in output and dissemination in the decades leading up to the Reformation.