

Book Review

Spirituality in Photography: Taking pictures with deeper vision

Philip Richter

Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 2017

ISBN 978-0-2325-3293-7 (pbk) 120 pages

£9.99

In an interview in the *Church Times* in July 2017, Philip Richter was asked with whom he would like to spend time in a locked church. 'I'd choose Thomas Merton,' he replied. 'He discovered a passion for photography late in his tragically short life and used his camera as a tool for contemplation. His images reveal an eye for simplicity and wholeness.'¹

That liking for the attitude and oeuvre of Merton-the-photographer shines through in *Spirituality in Photography*, not simply in the dedication – Richter quotes Merton's famous imperative, '*stop looking and ... begin seeing!*'² – but also in Richter's desire and determination to help people 'slow down' and 'pay attention' with the aid of a camera to what is Real within the real. This is a book which sets out to do just what it says in the title – to enable people to take pictures with 'deeper vision', thus developing both their photographic skills and their spiritual lives – a book which, moreover, lives up to that promise.

Richter is an amateur photographer – in the sense of being someone 'in love' with their craft – who started taking photographs as a child with a Box Brownie. Like Merton with his Canon FX, he revelled in the black and white images which emerged from that Zen-like instrument. Continuation with this fascination, however, at first proved incompatible with income – Richter is a Methodist minister, currently serving as a Ministry Development Officer in the British Connexional Team – given the cost of photographic equipment and developing in those days. The more recent advent of digital photography and mobile phone cameras, however, enabled Richter to pick up his hobby once again, as it did for countless others; in the author's own words, it 'democratised the

medium'. Richter gradually built up his skills by means of courses, reading, camera clubs and practice, the resultant expertise being generously shared in each chapter in such a way as to encourage even unconfident novices (like the reviewer) to experiment.

Each chapter highlights a different aspect of photography, offering practical hints and tips, while at the same time drawing out potential connections with spirituality: 'perspective', 'framing', 'rules/Rule of Life', 'the ordinary and the everyday' and so on. Each also suggests 'a challenge' to be addressed over the course of a month: photographic and spiritual steps to attempt, in each case relating to the topic under consideration. Thus, in the chapter entitled 'From snaps to slow photography', the photographic task is to 'make your photos more slowly; limit yourself to a maximum of 36 a day', while the parallel personal challenge is: 'Consciously slow down your life. Refuse to be rushed. Discover the single thing that matters.' Following that, a double-page spread is provided in which readers may jot down notes about these developments – 'new discoveries about my photography; new discoveries about myself and my spirituality; things to explore more; what I will try differently in future' – and insert 'the photo that best expresses my journey of discovery in this chapter'.

As the foregoing demonstrates, Richter has provided a primer for those starting out on a journey of discovery about heaven in ordinary. He writes in an encouraging vein, commending photography as a way into the joys and disciplines of the spiritual life for those who, as he puts it, 'don't do religion' but are nevertheless interested in spiritual questions. The book operates well at that level; it is immensely accessible and down to earth, connecting with 'where people are'.

But such intentional directness and simplicity is neither slick nor superficial; Richter's practical guidance is founded upon the depths of his own methodical journey of spirituality and discipleship, in particular his sharing of Merton's appreciation of the holiness of all created things, not simply the typically beautiful but also the ordinary and quotidian. That sense, as Merton wrote to Sister A., of stopping to look at '*some real created thing and feel and appreciate its reality*', of letting '*the reality of what is real sink into you ... for through real things we can reach Him Who is infinitely real*'.³ Richter would concur with Merton's observation that '*as we go about the world, everything we meet and everything we see and hear and touch, far from defiling, purifies us and plants in us something more of contemplation and of heaven*'.⁴ Like Merton, Richter uses the camera as a tool for 'natural contemplation' (*theoria physike*), '*the intuition of divine*

things in and through the reflection of God in nature and in the symbols of revelation⁵ – and he urges his readers to do likewise.

One clear instance of this similarity in approach is evident in Richter's use of the word 'make', quoted above: 'Make your photos more slowly.' Richter is at pains not to objectify or appropriate that which is being photographed; he is never imperial or colonizing towards it – never 'predatory' is the way he puts it – as the more usual words 'take', 'shoot' or 'capture' imply. Rather, like Merton, he allows the thing to be itself, going out to the object and giving himself to it, 'allowing it to communicate its essence, allowing it to say what it will, reveal what it will, rather than trying to bring it into the confines of self, altering and changing it by the possession of it.'⁶

If the wisdom of this deceptively slight volume is absorbed slowly, and its advice acted upon – note that there are twelve chapters, the contents of each being commended for 'perhaps up to a month's exploration' – it has the potential to enable readers to slow down their lives, reframe their gaze and begin to be fully present 'to reality, to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things, to come alive to the splendour that is all around us in the creatures of God'.⁷ Thus it may help them, via the craft of photography, to embark upon the interior life, and inspire others to do likewise – just as Merton did in his photography.

Notes

1. Philip Richter interviewed by Terence Handley MacMath, *Church Times*, 14 July 2017.
2. Ron Seitz, *Song For Nobody: A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton* (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1995), p.133.
3. Thomas Merton, 'Letter to Sister A', 21 May 1953, in *The School of Charity – The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, Brother Patrick Hart, ed. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1990), p. 61.
4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire: Anthony Clarke Books, 1972), p.20.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, William H. Shannon ed. (London: SPCK, 2003), p.67.
6. John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness – The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), p.50.
7. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (London: Burns and Oates, 1955), p.28.

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