

[Review] *Eyes of the Heart: Photography as a Christian Contemplative Practice*, by Christine Valters Paintner



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Paintner, Christine Valters. *Eyes of the Heart: Photography as a Christian Contemplative Practice*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Sorin Books, 2013. 160pp. ISBN 978-1-933495-54-5.

If you expect to breeze through Christine Valters Paintner's *Eyes of the Heart*, give up now. Subtitled "Photography as a Christian Contemplative Practice," this 135-page book reads as fast as trees grow in winter. Though the language is simple and the writing straightforward, Paintner's key premise of photography as a contemplative practice demands an unhurried, thoughtful study. The reader is invited to work through a chapter at a time, returning to the book after days or weeks of photographic explorations guided by Paintner's patient prose. Over time, it seems that everything about the book, from the cadence of the sentences, to the organization of the sections, to the content therein, brings about a slow but enduring change in the reader. At least that's what happened to me.

This compact monograph is organized into eight chapters. The first two present the main approaches and techniques used throughout the book; the subsequent six are each dedicated to a specific aspect of photography, superimposed on spiritual practices. "There is a long mystical tradition of understanding that our five senses," Paintner begins, "have five parallel mystical senses that operate in the same way" (11). The goal of this part-theoretical treatise, part-activity guide, is to teach fledgling photographers to see with the mystical eye of the heart. Using a camera helps.

The first chapter reveals the importance of searching for the divine in the quotidian, of "receiving" rather than taking photographs, of lovingly accepting the world as it is. It is only from a posture of "openness and wonder that we truly see the movement of God in the world" (17). The second chapter describes what a contemplative walk with a camera looks like. Since all of the following chapters rely on walks with a camera, it is vital to master this skill early on.

In chapter 3 the author discusses light and shadow in photography, and the metaphorical light and shadow parts of our psyche, each important and valuable. Dedicated to a holistic approach to self-love, Paintner encourages readers to tenderly fold in the darker components of their soul rather than shunning them. Exploration of the interplay of light and dark through the lens enables her students to develop an appreciation for a similar complexity within a human being. Chapter 4 focuses on spiritual discernment, thinly veiled as the concept of *framing* in photography, while



chapter 5 highlights the actual and symbolic significance of color, which can “affect our mood and our spirit” (78).

It’s important to note here that each of the six central chapters follows the same outline. First the author presents food for thought, theological and philosophical ideas, and quotes by other contemplatives. Then there is a “Meditation” section, in which she talks the readers through a self-guided meditation. This is followed by several exercises in photography, where readers are invited to do a contemplative walk while focusing on aspects of their pictures described in the given chapter. At the end are several reflection questions.

Following this outline, chapter 6 delves into the idea of mystical mirrors and reflections. How do we reflect God’s radiance? What keeps the mirrors of our souls tarnished or dim, unable to fully reflect the vibrancy of God’s being? The photographer–mystic can ponder these questions while taking pictures of reflections in puddles, windows, someone’s sunglasses, eyeballs. The camera as a mirror reflects back to us our choices and preferences. As we study those choices, we “become aware of the ways we tend to narrowly focus on certain things, [and] we begin to expand our capacity to see” (96).

Chapters 7 and 8 bring the contemplative exploration to a gentle close by focusing on seeing the divine in oneself and all around. These chapters are especially useful for someone struggling with self-esteem and negativity, since they help the reader gain compassion and acceptance, inwardly through self-portraits and outwardly through landscape photography.

What kind of a book reads easily but takes a long time? This kind. Because *Eyes of the Heart* is designed as a guidebook for a series of classes, it is not dense theologically or linguistically. Though we could breeze through it, as a guidebook for a series of classes it asks us to *do stuff*, and we cannot help but comply. For instance, you are happily progressing along when suddenly the tone turns to a personal invitation to descend from the mind into the heart. Time passes unnoticed and you realize that you’ve been staring with loving acceptance at a water stain on the ceiling while the sun has set. Perfect for conference breakout sessions, revival meetings, meditation marathons, group spirituality studies, and solo time with God, this book is compellingly effective in slowing down the mind. The meditation and photographic exploration sections are written in a colloquial, familiar tone—you can almost hear Paintner speaking. Quite possibly, these sections are embellished transcripts of her presentations at retreats or contemplative workshops.

Individuals embarking on a personal study can benefit greatly from this book in the cultivation of their inner lives, but much less in the cultivation of their photography. As the author underscores, the camera here serves as a framing tool. It will help readers focus their attention and limit the volume of visual data, and it offers scaffolding for their meditation practice. I believe this book is 75% contemplation and 25% artistic exploration. To readers interested in more art, I recommend *The Artist’s Way* by Julia Cameron. Additionally, *The Artisan Soul*, by Erwin McManus, is a popularized artist’s treatise in the Christian tradition. To those interested more in contemplation, Kathleen Norris’s *The Cloister Walk* is a personal favorite of mine. And of course St. Benedict’s *The Rule of Saint Benedict* is a primary source text out of which the Benedictine tradition, as well as Paintner’s and Norris’s theological thinking, emerged.

As an artist and a student of contemplative practice, I have mixed feelings about Paintner's meditative prose. At times, it feels neither dense enough to be theologically useful nor light enough to be uplifting or entertaining. For instance, Paintner touches on some deep spiritual topics, but just as we are about to explore them together, the book's structure demands another meditation exercise, photo walk, and reflection—and then the chapter is finished. And at times it also feels as if the structure limits the depth to which Paintner herself would like to go. As a novice photographer, I am frustrated by the paucity of photography insight, recommendations, or skills taught. In the end, the book isn't quite one thing or another—an unsatisfactory in-between that needs some filling in. And yet, perhaps that is the point.

If this compact book is merely a guide, where most of the work is done “between the lines,” outside, with slowed, deliberate breathing and a camera in hand, then it cannot be expected to have all the answers. The author's foundational stance is open-hearted acceptance, without expectation or judgment, but with alert energy. Perhaps the merits of a guidebook that leads one through a series of meditative exercises can be truly assessed only once all of the exercises are completed.

Several times while writing this review, I've caught myself staring out my window, beholding the mess of uncut bushes, vines, moribund arugula. For the first time in memory, I realize that I am not grumbling at myself for letting the garden slip into decadent decay. There is relentless life bursting through natural death, the sun is shining, water is rushing up stems, chlorophyll is absorbing energy, caterpillars are benefiting; and God is pleased. Instinctively, I glance into my inner sanctuary, and there I find a similar situation. *Interesting*, I think. *So this is the way I am, metaphorical caterpillars, wasting arugula, and all.* I glance over at Paintner's little book, peeking from beneath table clutter. *Interesting*, I think again.