

extraordinary person by simply being who he was; this poignant memoir captures this unique life.

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### **Dearest Sister Wendy . . .**

Sister Wendy Beckett & Robert Ellsberg

Orbis Books

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£19.21

This book is a record of the wide-ranging correspondence between two spiritual pilgrims, Sister Wendy Beckett, a consecrated hermit, and Robert Ellsberg, publisher and editor-in-chief of Orbis Books. From April 2016 they corresponded almost daily until Sr Wendy's death in December 2018.

In response to a question from Robert Ellsberg about Princess Diana, Sr Wendy wrote: "I have strong feelings about Princess Diana, but I am unwilling to share them with you. When I was talking and writing about art, I never spoke about anything about which I might be critical" (203).

So I am a little cautious of writing a truly "critical" review of this book. With that proviso, the style is very readable – both are clearly skilful writers, and enjoy wielding their craft. I found Ellsberg's preoccupation with his personal narrative a bit distracting – his eagerness to share his catalogue of eminent contacts and his fixation with his dream-world: "Mostly my dreams aren't disturbing – they are simply too interesting to me, so that I feel I have to hold onto them and bring them back with me to the surface of consciousness" (155). So I quietly smiled in solidarity with Sr Wendy's gentle, but pointed observation: "Whereas most people, I think, are very grateful to have met a few luminous others and even more so if these others have become part of the texture of their lives, you seem to have a richness that makes me smile with wonderment" (174). I enjoyed her shrewd wit.

I was disappointed not to warm towards Ellsberg, but I did admire his

skill in facilitating Sr Wendy to share some of her spirituality and “non-experiences” of God. At times it felt like he was in the role of interviewer (she seldom interrogates him) - an impression that was heightened by the unrelenting courtesy between them. So for a long while it didn't feel like the banter of familiar friends. But whatever his method, he did give Sr Wendy an opportunity to speak, for which I am truly grateful.

And speak she did. Readers will glean their own words of wisdom - there is much richness to explore. I was most struck by two recurrent themes.

The first: The Will of God. Sr Wendy lives out an implacable faithfulness to the “Will of God”. She describes, in response to some question from Ellsberg about her vocation story, how, as a young nun, she had little attraction to the teaching profession she was obliged to follow under obedience, and that she longed for a more contemplative existence. But for several years her superiors required her to stay in that unsuitable role which she did willingly, under obedience. “The wonderful thing is that God always gives us what we truly want. We may not know that we want it, we may feel we need something else, but He understands us far better than we understand ourselves and what we long for He will give us always” (158).

In many circumstances, and in our contemporary society, this apparent abnegation of personal responsibility might feel unwise. But as Sr Wendy explains herself, “there was a happiness in this because I was doing what God wanted and not what I would have chosen” (165). The self-awareness that Ellsberg manages to extricate from the conversation somehow straightens the level. It took a mental and physical breakdown before she was finally given permission to leave the order and pursue a more prayerful lifestyle. In answer to the question about the meaning she sought for in her life, Sr Wendy writes:

Of course the answer has always been that I want God and only Him. But the subsequent question is less easy to answer: how do I set about this? I remember the feeling of intense joy I felt years ago when I realized I didn't have to set about it. God was doing it. He was the one who wants. We just have to let ourselves be loved (199).

The second theme is related: the totality of God - a wordless, imageless experience - seems to preoccupy her throughout her life, but especially during these last few years, and as she approaches death. Ellsberg invites

her to explore this without fear or embarrassment - there is a sense of real joy from both of them as her dying becomes imminent. As Sr Wendy writes:

I was thinking today how nothing seems to matter except the total inner centrality of God. That's true life, as it were. Outside this inner depth are the other things in my life - reading about God and thinking about Him. But they're peripheral and I was feeling I really do not want to bother with words and thoughts anymore (207).

Two other characters - Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton - find themselves easy companions to the writers, lurking together in the crevices of the conversation and emerging unexpectedly and repeatedly, with the vigour of weeds, tantalising in their perspectives. They are each acknowledged in the fullness of their humanity, warts and all, and the exploration of their characters, pieced together throughout the whole of the book, is one of the “pearls” of this volume. Reflecting on their lives she sees that “it's the direction that matters, the desire, and not the spiritual achievements” (298). Sr Wendy tries to invite a third person to the dialogue - Elizabeth of the Trinity - and I was left with a deep sense of her resonance with the spirituality of this beatus.

The final theme is one of the Cross. It is a lifelong emblem for Sr Wendy: she describes her first religious vows as being nailed to the Cross with Jesus. The pains of her final illness are, for her, a means of uniting herself with the Cross. Ellsberg describes the suffering he experienced and witnessed in his failed marriage, his daughter's illness, and his father's impending demise. In all these he looks to God for solace and guidance.

Throughout their correspondence Sr Wendy always refers to God as He/Him. But at times she reveals a wider, more inclusive vision: “However, just as Jesus had to accommodate Himself to the ethos of the first century, so the twenty-first-century Church has to deal with those ages in which it has been unquestioned, taken for granted that God is male, and that really only man is a full human being” (276).

Ellsberg pays tribute to Sr Wendy at the end of the book with a quotation of Pope Francis (they are both great admirers). “I believe in the surprise of each day, in which will be manifest love, strength, betrayal, and sin, which will be always with me until that definitive encounter with that marvellous face which I do not know, which always escapes me, but I

wish to know and love” (294). This sense of God being a part of the interweavings and travails, of the minor and major incidents of life, nudging, encouraging, always holding safe in God’s providence, runs through both of their narratives. Although he tells his story in a very different way to Sr Wendy, in the last few pages my response to Ellsberg began to mellow a little and I became more relaxed in his narrative. In the words again of Pope Francis, “I believe in my life story” (293). It could have been said by either of them, and neither of them could have said it without talking about God.

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### **The Way of Thomas Merton: A prayer journey through Lent**

Robert Inchausti

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£8.85

Not being terribly familiar with Thomas Merton, I must admit that I found this book quite fascinating, and dear readers, it has sparked my curiosity enough to want to delve deeper into the world of Merton!

Inchausti is able to draw upon the works and words of Merton in a way that allows the reader a glimpse into the depths of who he was and so we are called to engage with life, spirituality, and ourselves perhaps more than we might have anticipated upon picking up the book.

Indeed, Inchausti suggests that should we not be familiar with Merton then we ought to expect to ‘be surprised, if not scandalized, by the story about to unfold here’(p.2).

With an introduction from the author and nineteen short chapters, this book is accessible to all who are seeking to explore themselves, their faith, and their spirituality during the season of Lent. I believe this book would work equally well for the individual looking to dig deeper during