

# Book Reviews

## **Remembering the Forgotten Merton**

William J Meegan

Forward by Christopher Pramuk

Wipf & Stock

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In his foreword to this touching book, Christopher Pramuk refers to the 'smaller line' of history, made up of the more hidden and less celebrated persons and events, and, in *Remembering the Forgotten Merton*, Bill Meegan invites us to discover the life, experiences, and spirituality of John Paul, Thomas Merton's younger brother: 'A life that began singing in a crib was to end praying in a dinghy' (ix).

Meegan's detailed and thorough research on John Paul involved not only looking again at Thomas Merton's writings, but finding information from censuses, church, school and military records, ship passenger lists, and federal draft and World War II data. His dogged motivation and pursuit of what happened to John Paul was in part motivated by Meegan's own experiences as a younger brother, and this provides an energy and liveliness to the research. Meegan also brings in his professional experience as a clinical psychologist, and special interest in forgiveness and family dynamics. Meegan suggests that John Paul illustrates a life that was ordinary – until his heroic end – with 'unrealized challenges and hopes and failed aspirations ... There is a little bit of him in each of us' (xiii).

In his opening chapters, Meegan gives us a useful table listing the family and friends of John Paul, and tracks the family background and early way of life. For both brothers their childhoods were marked by loss – the early death of their mother Ruth, when John Paul was still under

three years old, and the later death of Owen their father, when John Paul was nearly twelve. John Paul was raised by his grandparents in the US, while Thomas went abroad initially with his father, and then to boarding schools in England. Meegan notes the lack of relationship between John Paul and his father characterised by repeated absences, and inevitable feelings of abandonment. Contact between the brothers was maintained by travel to Europe every two years, the first trip taking place when John Paul was seven years old. Meegan details well the uneasiness of the visits, and the almost inevitable general level of family dysfunction. As he grew up, John Paul appears to have found his way of coping with trauma by 'becoming a jokester and making his friends laugh' (55).

It is the chapters on adolescence and adulthood where Meegan's research comes into its own, with details of the schools attended and university courses that John Paul took, and his repeated difficulties as a student. As Meegan puts it, with his elderly grandparents: 'John Paul was left to find his way through adolescence and into adulthood on his own' (68). When 21 years old John Paul was able to access money left to him by his grandfather, free to spend as he wanted: 'He did just that, purchasing cameras, cars, fancy razors, fishing tackle, microscopes, movie cameras, radios, and rifles' (69). He travelled to Mexico for nine months, returning to stay with his 'adopted' family the Miscalls: 'They thought of him as family, and he loved them as family' (72). Trying to find something that would give meaning, John Paul decided to focus on entering the military and joining the war in Europe.

Meegan explains John Paul's motivation as in part to do with wanting relationship and connection with other men – what had been denied him by his father and brother. He also wanted to 'be part of the action' (75). In his chapter on 'Transformation', Meegan outlines the development of John Paul's spirituality culminating in his conversion to Catholicism (he had been baptised an Episcopalian), instruction from his elder brother, Catholic baptism, and taking communion at the Abbey of Gethsemani with Thomas before heading off to the war in Europe.

Meegan's meticulous research details John Paul's marriage in early 1943 to Margaret Evans, fifty-four days before John Paul's sacrificial death in a bombing mission. The painful details of John Paul's last hours recorded in a letter includes his serious injuries and: 'Most of the time he had left was spent in prayer' (114). In trying to save another crew member, 'he acted in a manner true to his identity as God created him ... he sacrificed himself to give another man a chance to return to his family. There is no greater love' (122-3). As Meegan concludes, John Paul was an

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