

A Graced Exchange

Review of
Dearest Sister Wendy . . .
A Surprising Story of Faith and Friendship
 By Sister Wendy Beckett and Robert Ellsberg
 Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2022
 xx + 311 pp. / \$28.00 paper

Reviewed by **Donna Kristoff, OSU**

Who knew that the humble email could be elevated to the level of spiritual discernment in the hands of two uniquely different and extraordinary persons: Sister Wendy Beckett, the British consecrated virgin/hermit who became the famous “art nun” on BBC television in the 1990s, and Robert Ellsberg, the American writer, social critic, lecturer, retreat director, editor-in-chief and publisher of Orbis Books. With the able assistance of Sister Lesley Lockwood, OCD, of Quidenham Carmelite Monastery, Sister Wendy’s spoken letters were quickly transformed into emails sent to Ellsberg. Commencing in 2016 and lasting until Sister Wendy’s death in December 2018, these two dedicated and talented writers committed themselves to a nearly daily exchange which then became this book, *Dearest Sister Wendy . . .* through Ellsberg’s skillful editing of a correspondence that originally ran to some 350,000 words. The book is a joy to read because every detail is carefully planned. Supplemental information found in Sister Leslie’s Foreword (ix-xii) and Ellsberg’s Introduction (xiii-xx), Prologue (1-6) and Epilogue (297-300), as well as a Biographical Glossary (301-304) and copious notes and photos, give additional insights for an enriched appreciation of the letters, arranged in three sections, corresponding to the years 2016, 2017 and 2018: “The Art of Seeing” (7-120), “The Art of Loving” (121-240) and “The Art of Letting Go” (241-96). Hence the reader can easily chart the writers’ progression from polite discourse, to friendly engagement, to warm, intimate dialogue, to deeper levels of personal revelation and ultimately, to spiritual communion.

Initially Ellsberg had not planned to include his letters as part of the publication; but he soon realized that Sister Wendy and he shared a surprising exchange of gifts and his part was an essential aspect of the story of a friendship. This proved to be a wise decision. The energy within the flow of their thoughts, memories and experiences is kept alive and augmented with each email playing off the other like a jazz riff. There are no tedious monologues directed to an anonymous reader. Everyone is invited into Wendy’s and Robert’s worlds as guests – witnesses of an exceptional relationship intended to be shared.

Donna Kristoff, OSU, a member of the Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland, is an artist and graphic designer who has frequently contributed her talents to the International Thomas Merton Society, which she also served as a board member and as the longtime coordinator of the Cleveland ITMS Chapter. She met Sister Wendy Beckett in September 2001 when she served as her driver for three weeks during Sister Wendy’s tour of American museums for her BBC series, and also provided her with reading materials during that time, including a number of works by Thomas Merton.

Their conversations span a vast array of topics and people as they draw from the treasure trove of their lives steeped in seeking God in the substance of daily life. Among these are Daniel Ellsberg, Pope Francis, the church, and traditional and unofficial members of the universal Communion of Saints. Included are childhood memories, families, dreams, art and books, suffering, social justice, prominent figures such as Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen. A thread running throughout the letters is the probing question about “vocation,” God’s will, faith, commitment and prayer.

Dorothy Day stands out as the icon of genuine holiness for both Robert and Sr. Wendy. Ellsberg dropped out of Harvard to spend five years at the New York Catholic Worker, editing the newspaper and imbibing Dorothy’s charismatic wisdom in the last years of her life, and later editing volumes of her letters and journals, an anthology of her writings and two sets of her newspaper columns from the 1960s and ’70s. Of particular interest to readers of *The Merton Seasonal* is the ongoing, complicated discussion of the character and writings of Thomas Merton, which Ellsberg sees as a key element not only in the correspondence but in Sister Wendy’s own evolving spiritual development. He writes in his introduction:

She had a natural charm and an interest in people, but she was anything but an extrovert, and she had developed careful strategies for maintaining boundaries and discouraging trespassers.

And yet, in the course of our correspondence I could detect something changing; evidently there was a deeper story below the surface of our back and forth. This was reflected curiously in a subtle drama played out in her obsession with the famous Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton. I later perceived this clearly only after several readings of our correspondence. Sister Wendy was constantly reading and rereading Merton’s books, admiring his genius as a writer, but always accusing him of a kind of falseness in his pretense of living a contemplative life. I generally pushed back, arguing that Merton represented a kind of spiritual bridge between different conceptions of the religious life, and that his ongoing search and effort to go deeper into the heart of his vocation, even when it seemed he was leaving something behind, was part of his significance and attraction to other spiritual seekers. At times this became a subject of disagreement between us. Yet she would not drop the subject.

Then, toward the end of our second year of correspondence, a light went on. She determined that she had completely misjudged Merton, and that this reflected her own narrowness and rigidity. Her epiphany seemed almost to parallel an incident in Merton’s own life, a famous experience he described after some years in the monastery when he felt himself suddenly awakening “from a dream of separateness,” from a kind of self-isolation and “spurious holiness,” that allowed him to enter into a more compassionate relationship with the world and his fellow humans. (xviii-xix).

He includes a similar note in the context of her comments in letters of October 2017:

Sister Wendy’s new assessment of Thomas Merton was no simple matter of changing her mind. It seemed to reflect a deeper reevaluation of her own long-

standing judgments and categories, an opening out of her own “narrow and selfish mind.” Was it possible that in her own way she was recapitulating Merton’s famous insight “at the corner of 4th and Walnut,” which he described as “waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious isolation and supposed holiness”? As she approached the end of her life, it seemed as if Sister Wendy was continuing to grow in self-knowledge, in solidarity with humanity, and trust in the mercy of God. (228)

Ellsberg comments, “Readers can judge whether I am reading too much into this” (xix), and he has provided abundant material for reaching such a judgment. (Ellsberg will be addressing this topic in a workshop on June 24, 2023 entitled “‘It’s the Direction that Matters’: How Sister Wendy Beckett Changed Her Mind about Merton” at the ITMS Eighteenth General Meeting at St. Mary’s College, Notre Dame, IN.)

By the end of the book, this reviewer had discerned repeated patterns of reading, reflection, prayer and contemplation traditionally found in the monastic practice known as *Lectio Divina*. One method uses a four-step process: reading (usually Scripture), meditation, prayer and contemplation. In this graced exchange, Sister Wendy and Robert each used the text of their own lives to reveal God’s loving presence in the unfolding fabric of every human life.