

white contemplative spaces, where I do much of my own scholarly work. That narrative appears any time contemplation is deployed as an excuse to do nothing – to sit back and remain silent in the face of injustice. Mikulich quotes Merton: “To forget or ignore one’s implication in the sin and injustice of the world, continues Merton, ‘does not absolve the monk (or any contemplative) from responsibility in events in which his very silence and ‘not knowing’ may constitute a form of complicity’” (27).³ I have experienced this myself, and I now recognize it as a lack of courage that is rooted in denial and privilege. “That the church hesitates to proclaim that Black lives matter only seems to reveal a certain lack of courage and affirm a blind attachment to a status quo that leaves sinful assumptions of white innocence unacknowledged and unaddressed,” Mikulich writes (xxxv). Many white contemplative spaces operate on the same false narrative, and it is one on which countless systems of oppression have been built, and which we as white people benefit from and participate in – knowingly or unknowingly.

While in many ways the book is written primarily for a white *Catholic* audience, the book remains an important contribution to the exploration of what it means to be anti-racist and the work that requires. In full agreement with Mikulich, I believe white people of faith find ourselves at “a historical crossroads where we can no longer evade the legacy of modernity/coloniality and its cornerstones of patriarchy and anti-Black white supremacy” (81). As a white Merton scholar, as a queer cisgender woman of faith, as a human, I welcome this strong rebuke as I continue the daily work and journey of unlearning white supremacy.

Cassidy S. Hall

BECKETT, Sister Wendy and Robert Ellsberg, *Dearest Sister Wendy: A Surprising Story of Faith and Friendship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2022), pp. 371. ISBN: 978-1-62698-475-2 (paper) \$28.00.

Dearest Sister Wendy chronicles the correspondence between two deep thinkers and lively conversationalists. One is Sister Wendy Beckett, “the art nun” who hosted the 1990s BBC series *Sister Wendy’s Odyssey* in which – in full traditional habit – she expounded in often surprising terms on some of history’s most significant artworks. The other is long-time Orbis Books publisher and editor-in-chief Robert Ellsberg, who has edited Dorothy Day’s letters and diaries and authored multiple books on the saints and the spiritual life.

This book appealed to me immediately on two levels. In 2021, I co-authored *How to Be*, a book of my own correspondence over a period of

3. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) xiii.

years on matters both practical and spiritual with Brother Paul Quenon of the Abbey of Gethsemani. Letters have long intrigued me and my dialogue with Brother Paul attempted to show that old-fashioned letter-writing isn't a completely lost art. *Dearest Sister Wendy* is ample evidence of that. Additionally, I had the opportunity to profile Sister Wendy for the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* in 1994 as one of the paper's London correspondents. Sister Wendy was one of the most reticent interviewees I have ever encountered. In fact, I learned more about her from her kindly mailman who delivered fan letters to the caravan where she lived at the time on the grounds of a Carmelite monastery in the English village of Quidenham.

It is a credit to Ellsberg's genuine affection for Sister Wendy that he persuaded her to open up on such subjects as the nature of sin, God's mercy, and the importance of silence and solitude to her prayer life. Readers are left with the impression that Beckett truly was a mystic in the tradition of the fourteenth-century visionary Julian of Norwich, one of her heroines.

Ellsberg's own extensive reading of theology, philosophy, literature and art, and his many encounters with great spiritual teachers of our time, make him a most worthy respondent to Beckett's musings. One of the more lively threads in their correspondence involves their divergent views on Thomas Merton. Ellsberg credits Merton with opening "the world of contemplation" to countless seekers, himself included. Beckett's assessment of Merton as a monk is far from charitable. "I have never met a real contemplative who found Merton useful," she writes. "That he should write about prayer and yet in his journals show such a fragmented and in fact obtuse relationship with God, is a never-ending puzzle" (25).

In another letter, she refers to Merton as "him who is not to be named" (60). She views the complex elements of Merton's personality as unjustifiable contradictions. "Just remember, though, dearest Robert, that whenever you quote him somebody who knows his work will remember that in a page or two he will have gone back completely on what he says," she writes (48). Many of Merton's most faithful readers would find this one of his most endearing qualities, infusing him with a certain "realness" with which they could identify.

Ellsberg, in turn, notes that when Merton faced perhaps the greatest crisis in his monastic vocation – his brief love affair with a nurse who had befriended him when he was her patient – he ended the affair, rededicated himself to his Trappist vocation, and left a frank chronicle of the episode in his journals. "I think it is remarkable that he did not burn all his diaries, because on some level he wanted to be honest; he ultimately knew the difference between his true self and the mask," Ellsberg writes (150).

Beckett eventually moderates her judgment of Merton. She comes to see his flouting of the rules of enclosure as ultimately part of his struggle to balance his monastic calling with his public life as a writer and spiritual adviser. She concludes that Merton's many paradoxes include a kind of unity. She acknowledges that Merton was a monk *sui generis*, but adds, "I've often been grieved that Merton never seems contrite about his extraordinary breaches of the rule and his very flexible interpretation of the vows" (148).

Nonetheless, in one of her final commentaries, she approaches Merton's perceived flaws with more understanding: "I must say it is not an easy thing to be a genius, especially a genius in a religious order. I've never wanted to be an artist or a creator of any kind, though there is possibly laziness in that frame of mind as well as apprehension," she confides (225).

Ellsberg senses an even larger turning point in Beckett's assessment of Merton in an even later letter: "I'm beginning to feel that my categories have been too limited, that Merton overflows all normal regulations and is a complete one-off," she writes (226). She goes on, however, to lament what she sees as Merton's disregard for monastic obedience, especially in his frequent conflicts with Abbot James Fox and his sometimes harsh assessments of his fellow monks. Still, Beckett comes to view these contradictions as a part of Merton's vow of *conversatio morum*, the constant struggle to experience inner conversion. Of her earlier views of Merton, she acknowledges "what I should have seen long ago, that I am just too small and conventional a person to understand how the wrongness of much of his activity was a sort of off-flow from the rightness" (229).

Ellsberg intuits that Beckett's problem with Merton might stem from trying to balance her own profound desire for complete detachment in order to dedicate herself completely to God along with the public demands placed on her because of her writings and television appearances.

In her final letter to Ellsberg on Dec. 1, 2018, Beckett – who suffered from lung and heart disease – announces that she is close to death. Then she adds, "How embarrassing it will be and depressing if the Lord works a miracle, and I don't die after all!" (292). She died in Quidenham later that month, on the day after Christmas. She was 88.

The correspondence in *Dear Sister Wendy* reminds me of the kind of soul-connection that St. Aelred of Rievaulx writes of in his treatise *Spiritual Friendship*, and which I felt blessed to experience with my good friend Brother Paul Quenon in our own letters. Both sets of correspondence contain what St. Aelred called "the sacramental essence of friendship"¹ in which each person is the guardian of the other's soul.

1. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, ed. Marsh

Each can entrust to the other “all the secrets of [the] heart” (Aelred 45).
Judith Valente

GLENN, William D., *I Came Here Seeking a Person: A Vital Story of Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 2022), pp. vi, 229. ISBN 978-0-8091-5641-6 (paper) \$29.95.

William D. Glenn retired from a career as psychiatrist and therapist after having first sought to become a Jesuit priest earlier in his life. His life opened and he came out and went in a different direction. What a reader learns to appreciate through the book is how Glenn never, never, never lost touch with his soul’s yearning for the spiritual thread of his life and the life of the world he was living in. His search became even more earnest after he announced to family and friends as well as the Jesuit order that he was a gay man. Everything changed after that. Glenn says it took retirement and a necessary three years to write his memoir that reflects not just his personal story but an entire cultural awakening of a society – still in arduous processes – to the spiritual life of diverse others, especially those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and +.

Awakenings are difficult. Pope Francis recently sparked global attention in opening a synod of bishops at the Vatican, in October 2023, by suggesting the church can now begin to bless same-sex marriages; while some welcomed the change in tone, others assailed the pope for diluting Catholic tradition. It seems we have not yet plumbed the depths of the Mystery, nor will we. To say that the time is ripe for learning from the spiritual memoirs of queer people is to miss the vital story of grace cracking open a hard-hearted world to a deeper spirituality, a Mystery over which we can only delude ourselves with thinking we are in some kind of authority. As Pope Francis reportedly emphasized: “We cannot be judges who only deny, push back and exclude.”¹

Glenn’s book could help. His book weaves the story of one gay man’s spiritual journey in relation to a historical era of spiritual transformation. Eight decades are covered here, eight decades of finding and fighting lessons in spiritual growth, eight decades of mystical experiences, eight decades of seeking without being waylaid by dispiritedness.

The title of the book comes from a line from Merton’s novel *My*

Dutton (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian, 2010) 22 (subsequent reference will be cited as “Aelred” parenthetically in the text).

1. See <https://time.com/6320335/pope-francis-inclusion-lgbtq-religion>.