


Sister Wendy Beckett became a household name in the early '90s when she started providing art history on public-television programs. In reality, though, she's far from a TV star. She spends her days in solitude and contemplation in a small trailer on the wooded grounds of a Carmelite cloister.





A Portrait of Sister Wendy Beckett

This hermit has charmed TV audiences worldwide with her art commentary. Now, she shares her own story.

BY ALICIA VON STAMWITZ

SISTER WENDY BECKETT is an unlikely television star. She's a bespectacled, 82-year-old hermit with a slight speech impediment, painful arthritis, and a weak heart. Were it not for her voluminous habit, no one would notice her in a crowd. But this woman is more, much more, than what first meets the eye. Like the religious icons she treasures, she will lead you on astonishing journeys if you let her.

For the past two decades, the South African-born nun has taken millions of public-television viewers on memorable journeys through art history. Her inaugural program in 1992 for the BBC, *Sister Wendy's Odyssey*, was an instant hit; more programs followed, including *Sister Wendy's Story of Painting*, which first aired in the United States in 1997. Reviewers hailed the five-part series, noting Sister Wendy's astonishing grasp of Western art. Audiences were enchanted by her enthusiasm, her wit, and her colorful commentaries.

Although some were surprised by her success as a television host, those who knew Sister Wendy's background were not. As a schoolgirl, she was a standout student with a knack for

theater. The School Sisters of Notre Dame, whom she joined at age 16, sent her to Oxford to study English literature. There, she was awarded a Congratulatory First in English Literature—the highest possible honor—and was offered a faculty position by the president of her finals board: J. R. R. Tolkien. After taking final vows, Sister Wendy returned to South Africa where she taught for 16 years: first English and Latin in a convent school in Cape Town, followed by a lectureship at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

In 1970, after several bouts of ill health, her religious superiors permitted her to follow her heart's desire: to live out her days in solitude and contemplation. She moved into a simple trailer on the wooded grounds of the Carmelite cloister at Quidenham in Norfolk, England. She is not technically a Carmelite nun—she is a “consecrated virgin” living under the protection of the community—but the Carmelites look after her by providing one meal a day and helping with correspondence and other practical matters. At first, Sister Wendy earned her keep by translating medieval Latin manuscripts. In the 1980s, she began studying art

SISTER WENDY BECKETT © STARSTOCK/PHOTOSHOT; COMPOSITE OF PAINTING OF THE ANNUNCIATION BY CARAVAGGIO AND PICTURE FRAME © ALEXSEY BAKALEEV/FOOTUA

Author Alicia von Stamwitz traveled to Norfolk, England, to talk with Sister Wendy. Here the two of them are seen on the grounds of the Carmelite Cloister at Quidenham, where Sister Wendy lives.



and writing essays for British magazines. It was her writing, explains Sister Wendy, that prompted an observant young researcher to suggest her name to the BBC. The rest, as they say, is history.

These days, Sister Wendy spends the majority of each day in prayer, beginning at 1 a.m., “when the world is silent and the owls pray with me.” Shortly before 8 a.m., she walks or rides her electric scooter to the community chapel for daily Eucharist. Despite her fame, few know Sister Wendy’s spiritual story. That’s the way she wanted it—until now.

“I’ve come out of the closet,” she said recently. “I’m unashamedly Catholic. And that’s what I’m talking about now.” Our interview with Sister Wendy took place on a Friday morning immediately after the 8 a.m. Mass, in the parlor of the Quidenham Carmelite monastery.

Q. Tell us about your decision to begin speaking about your faith more openly.

A. When I started doing the television programs, I wanted to show people who knew nothing about God that if they responded to beauty, they were responding to God. But I didn’t want to use words that would make them feel that this was *only* for religious. I didn’t use Christian paintings, and I didn’t

use religious language, so as not to alienate atheists who would’ve said, “Oh, this is not for me.” I thought that if people haven’t got the joy of knowing our blessed Lord, maybe they can get somewhere into his brightness by looking at art.

Now I feel I no longer have to speak anonymously. I don’t have to hide in the closet and speak as though I am just a disembodied voice. I’m speaking now as a Catholic nun explicitly about the things that are my world, my real life. I’m talking only about religious art and religious topics, and I’m speaking primarily to Catholics and to Christians who accept the sacraments.

Q. Were there any key moments in your spiritual journey?

A. There weren’t any internal key moments, I think, except perhaps when I was a very small child. I must’ve been about 4 when I became aware of the constant presence of God and of what God wasn’t. He was all love and care, and I knew I had nothing ever to fear because God was *there*. So you could call that a key moment. I woke up to the fact that we’re not our own; we’re living in God’s world.

Perhaps another key moment was when I was 7 and I made my first holy Communion. I had gotten it into my head—or perhaps Sis-

ter had told us—that Jesus would speak to us. I was all agog to hear Jesus speak. I can remember as though it were yesterday, coming back from the altar rail intent to hear Jesus speak. And after a little bit it dawned upon me when there was only silence, *That's how he speaks! He speaks in silence!* And that's also been something that has held me in God's light all my life: the knowledge that we don't need anything except just to open ourselves and to let him speak in silence.

But apart from that I was then just waiting until I finished school so I could be a nun.

Q. You entered the School Sisters of Notre Dame?

A. Yes. It is a very fine order, and they taught me how to be a nun. I was a teaching nun for 23 years [16 in South Africa], and then I began to realize I needed more time for prayer than the teaching order provided. I needed hours of just being alone on my knees, hours that the sacrifice of the teaching order doesn't provide. So I had to wait until the order said they saw what I meant and that they would sponsor me going to lead a contemplative life.

I've been here 42 years now. I never dreamt anything could be as blissful. I've had all my longings fulfilled. Just to be a nun was enough, really. And if God had said, "I want you to go on struggling as a teacher," then I would have accepted that, if that's what he wanted; because, after all, that is happiness—to do what God wants.

Q. Have you ever felt uncertain or wondered whether you really are doing what God wants?

A. No. I've always had a doubt that I'm not doing what God wants *very well*, but I think God reveals his will through what happens in every stage of our lives. If I had known in advance that the demands of television would've meant there'd be weeks away, I would've been very reluctant to do it. But I didn't realize it; I thought it was going to be a very simple day or two thing. I've no doubt that that has been God's will, too, and it's all been blessed. It is tedious and very much what I would not choose, but it became obvious that this is what I was meant to do because people were getting such help from it. I've just finished another program for the BBC called *Novena*.

Q. Hadn't you tried to retire 10 years ago?

A. Yes! Well, I thought I wasn't strong enough to go on, but it seems that if they look after me

and I can use a wheelchair, I can stagger through. If there's an apostolic need, I can't say I don't want to help. It would be so selfish. I don't think I would feel at peace in solitude if I said, "I don't want to do these films or write these books." I think the sacrifice is called for; it's a necessity. Every life has to have sacrifice, and that's mine.

Q. I think one benefit is that people who otherwise would never cross paths with a nun feel at ease with you and listen to you.

A. That is true. There's nothing frightening about me. Even my teeth have been a blessing, you see. I mean, one of the sisters here, the former prioress, is just beautiful—she has those beautiful bones, and she's slender. She *looks* holy, whereas I just look like an old frump. It's fine!

Q. Of course, your television fans don't really know you. Do you pay attention to how you're described in the press?

A. I try not to pay attention to what the press says, really, as it is often very humiliating. I don't watch my programs, you know. Don't want to watch them. And I'm very bad at talking about myself. I remember when I was a novice, the novice mistress said, "Now, I want you to think about what is your best quality and what is your worst quality." I was absolutely stymied. When I try to look at myself, I just see our blessed Lord. I can't get past that to isolate me.

As for an outsider view, Blessed Pope John Paul II apparently said that he liked very much what I did because it showed people how happy one is as a Catholic. That in itself is good, you see, if a relatively plain, dull, elderly woman can be filled with such happiness.

I think I'd like people to say, "She tries her best to show the beauty of the Lord." It never occurred to me that people would notice *me*. I remember my shock after I'd made my first series and somebody said to me, "You're so delightful. And the art is good, too." And I thought, *Gracious heavens!*—you know? Am I getting in the way? But there's no other way to do it. To be true to the art, I can't think of myself or be very self-conscious. I just have got to forget about myself and think about what I'm trying to say.

Q. Your commentary on art has been called learned, funny, and occasionally "shockingly" earthy.

A. I know. I got a shock when I realized that

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Click here to learn more about Sister Wendy Beckett.

people were shocked! As Catholics, we revere the body because God made it. We've none of this prudishness that I've discovered is rampant in the world; that certain topics are a "no-no" just because they have to do with the human body. That's not our blessed Lord. He speaks very frankly in the Scriptures.

The real shock is that so many people regard God as cold and judgmental, and they don't see that God is father in the purest sense. This lack of awareness is not their fault, you know. St. Paul says, "How will they know unless somebody tells them?"

Q. Could you tell us about your own awareness of God and practice of prayer?

A. Well, I am on record as saying I spend seven hours a day in prayer, but in actual fact, I consider my whole time as prayer, because I think prayer is a *direction*. We don't stop praying when we get out of our prayer position. So I can't think of anything I wouldn't consider a prayer activity.

But strictly speaking—I don't like making these categories, I don't think they apply, really—when I pray I am sitting silently, look-

Q. You mention praying with icons. Is any saint particularly close when you pray?

A. I feel when you pray the whole Church prays with you, which, of course, includes the whole Church in heaven. But the saint who's been most encouraging to me is Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who, I think, is the absolute paradigm of what sanctity means. A simple life just given to God with nothing special about it. I've always read and loved Thérèse.

Q. What other spiritual reading or writers do you recommend?

A. Well, I've always been *against* spiritual reading. Not all spiritual reading—I'm a great believer in commentaries on the Scripture and inspiring lives of the saints—but I think books on prayer are very dangerous, because people can read them and think *that's* praying whereas prayer needs nothing.

So, I say, *don't* read books on prayer. Don't try to protect yourself against God by thinking you need to know how to do it or being afraid that you don't know how to do it. Anyone can do it. *God* does it. Simply be there and let God do it. Prayer is God's business, not our business. All he wants is to give himself to us. We just have to be there to receive him.

Q. What would be your hope for anyone reading this interview—the feeling he or she would come away with?

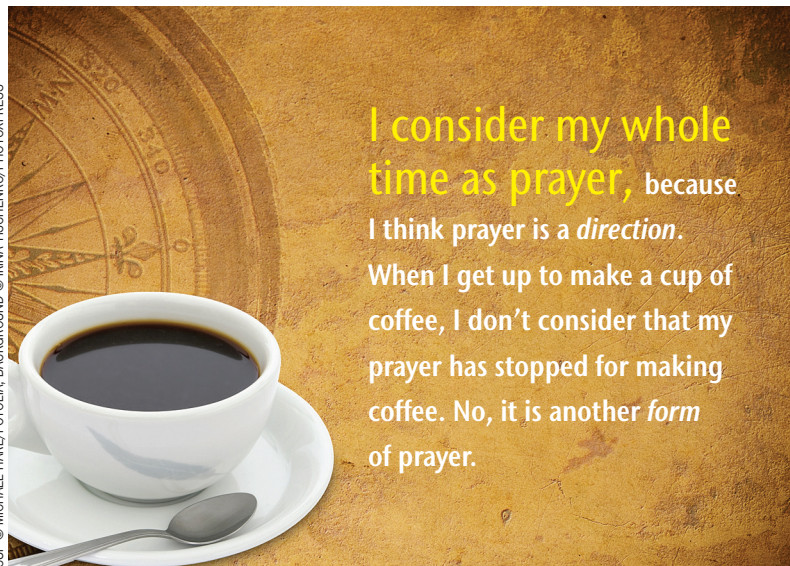
A. That God's *there* for you; that there's nothing to prevent you: just let God love you. You don't need any special virtues; he will draw you into those virtues. You've got to have your direction absolutely set on God, and it takes a long time for God to be your sole direction. But you can begin by having 10 minutes in which you just stay still and let God shine on you. Then it will lengthen, and then it will grow, so perhaps after 50 years you will be able to spend your whole day letting God shine on you.

And you shouldn't want to do too much all at once, you see, because we're weak. But God will give you what you want. If you want him, he will give himself to you. **A**

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Sister Wendy's new books—*Sister Wendy on the Art of Christmas*, *Sister Wendy on the Art of Mary*, and *Sister Wendy on the Art of Saints*—all are available at FranciscanMedia.org.

ing at nothing, but *aware* of the icons who are praying with me. I don't go through anything specifically, I don't have any specific image, but, as I say, when I get up to make a cup of coffee, I don't consider that my prayer has stopped for making coffee. No, it is another *form* of prayer. First it was an intense silence, and now it's a freer silence, but it's equally a way of opening myself to God.



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