

Sister Wendy delivers insight

Recently, I received a lovely book titled "Joy Lasts," written by the famed art critic Sister Wendy Beckett. It's my kind of book - 55 pages long with lots of pictures. The pictures, as you may imagine, are of the art work that she is commenting on.

At the heart of the book is a painting by El Greco, titled simply "Christ On The Cross." It was done between 1600 and 1610. Sister Wendy's analysis of this painting is nothing short of breathtaking. Allow me to quote just a few passages on three aspects of the painting.

Sister Wendy writes: "In his art, if not in his life, El Greco understood what Jesus meant when he uttered that final cry: Consummatum est. It is finished: it is done, it is accomplished. It was a transforming moment in my life when I, who had always found Holy Week and Good Friday almost unbearable, suddenly saw that, in fact, Jesus died in an ecstasy of joy. He had been sent by the Father to bring life into the world. He had done it, achieved what the Father intended. His agony, physically and emotionally, may not have been any less, but in his will Jesus knew the great liberation of having reached an almost impossible goal. All this, I see, mystically in El Greco."

An extraordinary analysis. I have given countless talks, read countless commentaries and heard countless reflections on the death of Jesus, but never did I associate ecstasy with Christ's death. What an insight! Jesus had indeed lived the impossible dream. He had done His Father's will. He had freed you and me from the power of sin and death. Would not such a moment be ecstatic?

Sister Wendy continues: "The intensity of the surrounding, enveloping darkness - the moral darkness of a race that could torture anyone to death, innocent or not - is just beginning to be pierced by the radiance Christ has brought us. The sharp and by no means comforting light shines on the scattered bones of other men that lie scorned beneath the cross. It spotlights the wealth and power of established authority as its representatives depart, the knights on horseback with flowing banner. ... "

As we all know, the moral darkness continues today. Terrible things are done every day by human beings to other human beings. The human Jesus stood helpless before the power of Rome. But, in his resurrection, Christ would show how helpless that power really was in the face of God's power. Caesar's world really is this world. But the power of truth, light and love have conquered that world. Everything we see in this world - the tallest buildings, the healthiest people, the greatest empires, will one day be no more. But truth and light and love will be here.

I quote Sister Wendy one last time on the solitude of the death of Jesus: "El Greco does not alleviate his sacrifice with grieving family and friends. No, Jesus dies, as we all die, alone with his God. He dies as we hope to die, looking upward, his determination set upon his father's will and its consummation. But the most marvelous touch, to me, is the depiction of the dying Jesus as already triumphant over death. He does not escape death; he passes through it and out of it."

What a powerful description of Christ's death and ours. I have been with many people who were dying. I hope some people who love me will be with me as I die. But ultimately, death is a journey we must make alone. Others can escort us to the gates of eternity, but we have to make the trip ourselves.

How wonderful to keep our eyes fixed on God. How wonderful to think that, despite our weaknesses and sins, we have done God's will. How wonderful not to escape death, but to pass through death. As St. Paul said so well: "Death where is your victory. Death where is your sting?"