

Sr. Wendy: New, most explicitly Catholic works

Simon Caldwell Catholic News Service | Aug. 2, 2011



One of Sister Wendy Beckett's latest books, "The Iconic Jesus." (CNS photo/courtesy of St. Pauls Bookshop)

MANCHESTER, England (CNS) -- After decades of studying iconic paintings and hundreds of works of fine art, British art historian and author Sr. Wendy Beckett said her two recently published books are her most explicitly Catholic works to date.

Beckett, 81, a Carmelite, has simultaneously published "The Iconic Jesus," a study of icons of Christ's life, death and resurrection, and "The Art of the Saints," which reflects on the religious significance of the images of 16 saints.

In a telephone interview with Catholic News Service July 28, Beckett said the books are important personally because they mark the point when she speaks unashamedly as a Catholic.

"When I began writing many years ago, it was simply about art itself because I didn't want the people who never looked at art and thought it was beyond them to be deprived of such a wonderful gift given us by our artist brothers and sisters," she said. "And I never used religious language (so as) not to put off the atheists and the non-Christians.

"But I knew that if they really looked at art they would see it drew them to something greater than themselves, something beyond, something other, and that something is God," she explained. "They would be looking at God anonymously."

After decades of studying and writing about art, Beckett said she has "come out of the closet and now I can feel I can write about God in his own name."

"That is what I have done with these books. I write as a Catholic," she said.

"The Art of the Saints," published by the United Kingdom-based Redemptorist Publications, is a collection of meditations on religious art written for weekly Mass.

The book includes pictures and stories about such figures as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Thomas Aquinas and St.

Benedict of Nursia, the father of Western monasticism and patron saint of Europe. She also focuses on lesser known saints such as St. Dorothy.

"I have picked out a painting of a saint, or good photograph, and story to show people through the work of art something of the wonder and inspiration that saint offers us," Beckett said.

"The Iconic Jesus," published by the Society of St. Paul, features 42 icons of Jesus, each of which was "painted as an act of prayer," she said.

Beckett contended that reading icons is also an act of prayer.

"You cannot possibly really speak about the mystery of Jesus. It's too deep. You can just try to point people in his direction and that's what I tried to do," she said.

Beckett particular focused on early icons because she found they say much about the early church "in its poetry and freshness trying to make visible the love of their blessed Lord."

"The early church had such a delicate enthusiasm that has perhaps been lost in our world where everything is handed to us on a plate," Beckett said.

Both books were launched together at St Pauls Bookshop, next to Westminster Cathedral, in London in mid-July.

Beckett said she was surprised to see Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster, and his predecessor, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, turn up unexpectedly to the event in "full regalia."

"They had been to a garden party for the queen and they both came over the road for the book launch," she said. "I was very honored.

"I had never spoken to either of them before, but the archbishop gave a little talk and said the good point of my books is that I don't push people but try to lead them gently to the glory of God, (that) there is no hectoring," she said.

Nichols then described Beckett as "hot property" because she was in such demand by religious publishers.

Beckett entered religious life at the age of 16 and taught for 20 years before retiring to a contemplative life as a hermit in Norfolk, England.

But she became known around the world in the early 1990s after she agreed to present a series on art for the British Broadcasting Corp.

She is writing a new book titled "Treasures of the Bible" and is also working on film for the BBC about Gospel paintings.

"I don't know how much longer I can go on," she said. "I suppose they will be my swan songs, but you never know."