

Sister Wendy

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Dear Sister Wendy,

I have been reading about you in this morning's Toronto newspaper. I spotted a photograph of your attractive feminine face, emerging from a dark background of wood and the black fabric of your religious habit, very much like an oil portrait by a Flemish or Dutch master of the past. The caption over the photograph reads; Sister Wendy - a nun and more. After reading the article I thought how much I will look forward to seeing this BBC art series of programs scheduled for Public Broadcasting here in North America this coming autumn. I then reread the text and developed the thought of writing this letter to you, for reasons still not totally clear to me, but having something to do with your victory over very formidable odds in your life which may have played a major role in the formation of this successful television programming. Before I begin let me congratulate you, on both your religious vocation and your more recent television avocation. I also was born in the early 1930s and have enjoyed the work of artists wherever and whenever I have come across them in life; in Windsor, Detroit, Toronto, Montreal, Chicago, and more recently in Rome, Venice, Florence, Padua, Assisi and several small hill towns and larger cities in Umbria and Tuscany. I became involved, for fourteen years, in the liturgical life of the Catholic Church in 1972, as a publisher and soon after registered in a Survey of Art History course here at the University of Windsor. This exposure forever made me into an observer of much of what good art has to offer.

Well, now on to art and to what it has to say to people today. Canada presently has one of Edvard Munch's oil paintings of his nightmarish image of fear "The Scream," on display at a Toronto Gallery. This painting is now the subject of a great deal of newspaper and magazine articles and television coverage; it seems Munch's image has caught the imagination of the whole world. It has hit upon a very sensitive nerve of human existence, and is now showing up on tee shirts, coffee mugs, television commercials, and a host of souvenir items on sale at the Gallery gift shop.

Success stories like Munch's "The Scream" always reinforce my belief that art is the penultimate proof of the existence of a Supreme Creator; proof that all people require at one time or another. It certifies that fact that humans are the creation of a Deity, rather than the creation of some biological accident waiting for the right swamp to

become its incubator. Art marks humanity's forehead with a symbol of his creator giving man an image of creation. By this miraculous anointing man becomes a creator, rather than just existing as a complex, vast network of molecules and living pulses. We both know that art has been with man since the beginning, as proven by the primitive drawings found in the caves of Altamira, Spain and Lascaux, France. Even the intellectual scholarly arguments of the most gifted theologians fall short of providing this kind of acute evidence to the faithful and to unbelievers. Art alone is the prime witness in this human drama. Without the work of artists to illuminate man's progress from past ages to his present condition, I fear the case could be lost. Art comes in many shapes and forms and makes use of nearly all the materials found on earth, in a mysterious and sublime way. The leaps of imagination needed to create something from nothing which can then hopefully be described as art are remarkable feats of vision, learning, craftsmanship, and endurance. Beauty and majesty are not easily or quickly produced.

The article's author, Mr. Fred Barbash writes of you, "The woman, who is 67 and looks it," may be in need of an optical checkup. He continues his observation that "her teeth are too big for her mouth and her glasses too large for her face." I see only the facial photograph of a woman religious named Sister Wendy Beckett, which for me has much visual appeal. He also wrote that you have suffered through several illnesses and from a self confessed disappointment with a "silly decision made in life" when you entered the religious teaching order of Sisters of Notre Dame, not being fully aware that you were to be a teacher for the remainder of your life. We have all made these same errors, at one time or another. That was years ago. Today you are a celebrity "The Art Nun" in England and soon to be in North America, according to the plans of the producers of your Art series. This is precisely the reason for my letter to you; your victory over some of life's normal human difficulties, and your ascendancy into fame and a small income, which I am sure will help the economic life of your community of Sisters. I hope that you are aware that others will create small fortunes for themselves selling and marketing this programming, which would not be successful if it were not for your "vibrant, child-like wonder" about art and artists. I am sure that at the moment there are several dozen of these documentary art programs in the storage rooms of television producers around the world, dealing with this "mysterious medium" as you describe art. It goes without saying that you, Sister Wendy Beckett, make the difference here - it is all to your credit!

The victory I wish to compare with yours is that of Calaf, the Unknown Prince in Giacomo Puccini's last opera Turandot. At the opening of the third act of Turandot, Calaf sings an aria *Nessun dorma*, (no one is to sleep), which is the result of a royal command that no one is to sleep tonight in Peking until the name of the Unknown Prince is made known to the beautiful but cold-hearted Princess Turandot, before the arrival of dawn. Calaf, has successfully answered the three riddles Turandot has conceived and has set out, allowing only the man who can answer the riddles, to approach her as a suitor; others have tried, all have failed and were beheaded. Calaf has won and has given Turandot until dawn to learn his name, if she wishes to be released from her promise of marriage, to the victor, in this deadly game of hers.

Turandot had its premier at LaScala Opera Theatre in Milan, April 25, 1926, seventeen months after Puccini's death in Brussels where he went to receive treatment for throat cancer. *Nessun Dorma* has remained an operatic gem enjoyed only by opera aficionados. When Luciano Pavarotti, Italy's great tenor and communicator began to include this aria in the program of his ultra successful world wide concert tours in opera houses, open air city parks and vast athletic stadiums, he wisely gave *Nessun Dorma* the finale position in these concerts. It was given this same prominent position in the first Three Tenor Concert held in Rome's ancient Baths of Caracalla ruins, before a vast international audience of thousands then gathered in Rome, for that cities hosting of the 1990 World Cup of Football. The concert, televised to millions of people around the world that night, was conceived as a celebration of Italy's love for opera and football. As the first strains of Puccini's music for *Nessun Dorma* began to fill the air of the warm summer night the audience rose to its feet as one body cheering, smiling, applauding before the tenor intones the opening phrase of *Nessun dorma! Tu pure, o Principessa, nella tua fredda stanza guardi le stelle...* (no one is allowed to sleep this night, even you oh Princess, in your cold room looking at the stars). When Pavarotti, or any other tenor at any other concert, reaches the magnificent soaring euphonious cry of *All'alba vincerò*, (at dawn I will have my victory) Calaf's personal *vincerò* become the collective *vinceremo*; the audience also becomes victorious. Old and young, rich and poor, all standing soaking in the greatness, of Puccini's music, many not really knowing what the words mean or why they are being sung, but know that they are being transported into an exquisite state of joy and happiness by the strength and artistry of the music, now filling the night air around them.

I use this example of an art which has the mysterious ability to induce a state of euphoric happiness and joy in an audience, in order to suggest that Italian Opera, the one great art not to be found in any art history course or in any art publication, has achieved a position of primacy in man's history of producing works of art. It began in Venice,

when in 1637 the first public opera house was built, and may have ended its golden period with Puccini's death in Brussels in 1924. Italian Opera is not ethnic nor is it only Italian; it is universal. It has transcended all geographic borders of the world. It is safe to say that the music and dramas of Puccini are heard over radio, television or live theatre every hour of everyday, somewhere in the world. Italian Opera has come a long way since Monteverdi's production of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* was staged in 1642 in Venice. The genius and artistry of men like Rossini, Mozart, Verdi, Donizetti, Bellini, Ponchielli, Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and finally the total artistry of Puccini, have brought to the people of the world a collection of artistic works unequalled in any other realm of art.

Puccini died shortly after he wrote the music of Calaf's *Nessun Dorma* aria, and did not live to see or hear Turandot performed that evening in Milan, when Arturo Toscanini conducted its premier in April of 1926. But of course he had seen it, as he had seen every one of his twelve operas before their premiers, in his fertile, inventive mind; after all he is their creator and could see all of this before it existed. Imagine, Sister, having a mind able to construct all this music, orchestration, scenery and his unfailing sense of drama, while working late into the early hours of the morning, all alone, in a small piano composing study at his lakeside hunting lodge residence, while the rest of the world was asleep?

New technology now allows opera audiences to follow the story line of the opera as it unfolds on stage, by projecting translations of the Italian libretto, to the proscenium of the theatre stage. I am proud to tell you that this technology was first conceived and developed here in Canada, and is now being used in all opera theatres in North America and wherever else needed.

Possibly I have bored you with far too much detail in my desire to have you see the artistic abilities needed to create art such as Italian Opera, but I have looked at the many faces of art from the Palaeolithic age of man to today's art world, and remain certain that this explosion of talent, known as Italian Opera, which dates from Monteverdi's premier of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* in 1642 to the premier of Puccini's *Turandot* in Milan, April 25, 1926, has become one of the world's most enduring art mediums. Puccini's death in 1924 now appears to have brought down the final curtain of this golden era of art. Many have tried to carry the torch forward, but none have tasted the total victory that Puccini must have known before that dreadful day in Brussels, in 1926, when he died. Now to return to your world of art, television and your vocation; the Barbash article states that, "she makes one pass at a painting, gathers her thoughts - her "line" she calls it and thinks for a short time while the crew members prepare to shoot." I am reminded of a definition of "good taste" I first heard in 1959 made by my English professor, at the University of Windsor, Robert H. Flood, C.S.B. who, while discussing the plays of Henrik Ibsen, Bernard Shaw, Eugene O'Neil, and Arthur Miller, said that as far as he could tell "good taste" is the result of the habit of correct thinking. I am sure, that you, by your ability and confidence in making these seemingly snap judgments and comments regarding work you are seeing for the first time without the aid of notes, scripts or rehearsals, are a living example of his analysis of "taste", regarding judgments of the everyday things of life. Now, how to end? A simple goodbye may do; but I am reminded that each of the composer's named, thought that the endings of their opera dramas must be an important, memorable, logical and dramatic conclusion to their work, so as to be certain that their audience would leave the theatre with a sense of the frailty of human love and devotion, or in the case of the ending for the opera buffa *The Barber of Seville*, Rossini's wonderfully amusing opera, a rousing chorus of joy, laughter and general merriment all at the expense of the absurdity of human scheming. Most have chosen tragedy, although all have shown a fine hand at comedy; it is for their heartbreaking tragedies they are best remembered.

Who has ever attended a performance of *La Bohème* when Mimi dies so quietly and lamentably, or when the pitifully betrayed Cio-Cio-San of *Madama Butterfly* succumbs, in her shame, to the cultural act of *hari-kari* or the heroic death leap of Floria Tosca from the parapet of Rome's Castel Sant'Angelo, after her final cry of revenge against the villainous Chief of Police Baron Scarpia, whom she has just stabbed to death, "O Scarpia, avanti a Dio . . ." (O Scarpia, today in front of God we will both be judged for our sins), without being brought to some point of laceration, or at least without a shard of emotion caught in a dry throat. These are but a few of the great ending moments of Italian Opera. In all of these there is always a sense of victory for all concerned; for the original author, the librettists, the composers, the actor singers, the extras on stage, the chorus, the director, the scenery makers, the lighting people, the musicians, the conductor, and especially for the never ending, ever renewing international group of patrons around the world - the opera audience!

I look forward to seeing you in the flesh, as far as television can create this illusion, in a few short

months on American Public Broadcasting. In the meantime I wish you much good fortune with your important work, both votive and secular and if you are able to retain a few dollars from your publishing and television income, use these to see an opera or two. You will not soon forget the magic and the grandeur of it all. Truly one of mankind's great art forms, if not the greatest of them all.

Yours truly,
Rudolph S. Daldin
Windsor, Ontario, Canada