

# Launch of *Dear Mother Dear Father Letters Home from John Corcoran Wallis 1927-1949*

Yarra Theological Union, 2 October 2019

- Missionary Sisters of Service
- Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to have been invited to launch *Dear Mother Dear Father Letters Home from John Corcoran Wallis 1927-1949*. In so doing, I am also pleased to be able to pay tribute to Bernadette Wallis, whose vision, scholarship and dedication have come to fruition in this fine volume. I hope that my remarks this evening will capture why, on a number of counts, this is a significant publication.

Let me highlight initially that the publication of this book is timely. In the first instance, this is the case because 2019 marks 75 years of the Missionary Sisters of Service, the congregation founded by Fr John Wallis, which has become his most significant legacy to the Australian Church. The publication of these unique letters is a fitting addition to the 75 year anniversary celebrations.

Secondly, the Missionary Sisters of Service have recently established Highways and Byways: A Community of Service, a new expression of their charism to take the MSS legacy purposefully into the future. It is critical that those who animate the Highways and Byways mission are able to get to know the man who envisioned this charism. This book also makes a critical contribution in this regard, to getting to know John Wallis.

As Bernadette emphasises in the introduction:

*History ... is a gift from which to understand and attempt to make sense of our past and our present, often to make resolutions or decisions, even unconsciously, moving into a hope-filled future [p. ix].*

Importantly, this volume makes available letters of Fr John Wallis covering a period of 22 years of his younger life. They offer a window into another era of the Australian Church and, in particular, into a man who would make a unique contribution through the founding of the Missionary Sisters of Service. The publication of letters has particular value – thus, Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman wrote to his sister in 1863:

*... the true life of a man is in his letters ... Not only for the interest of a biography, but for arriving at the inside of things, the publication of letters is the true method. Biographers varnish, they assign motives, they conjecture feeling ... but contemporary letters are facts [Newman to his Sister, Mrs John Mozley, 18 May 1863].*

In ten chapters, *Dear Mother Dear Father* assembles 100 letters into sections marking significant stages of John Wallis' life up to his late thirties, including:

- Entering St Columba's Seminary in Springwood at 16 years of age
- Progressing to St Patrick's Seminary in Manly
- His Ordination Year
- His early years of ministry in Tasmania
- Testing his vocation as a Columban missionary
- Returning to Tasmania, and

- Founding the Missionary Sisters of Service (or the Home Missionary Sisters of Our Lady as they were called initially).

Bernadette provides a brief introduction to each of the ten chapters as well as setting both the family and historical context prior to reproducing each letter. She writes: “My hope was to find [in each letter] a gem or gems that energised the life of the young” John Wallis [p. xiv]. Readers will discover that those gems are present in abundance.

At the conclusion to each chapter, Bernadette has invited a pertinent Church figure to write a reflection on the preceding letters – in his foreword to *Dear Mother Dear Father*, Professor Frank Brennan SJ AO describes the latter, these reflections, as “a brilliant flourish” on Bernadette’s part. Thus, this volume includes significant reflections by Austin Cooper OMI, Edmund Campion, Adrian Doyle, David Ranson and Corrie van den Bosch, amongst others.

Let me briefly quote some of this commentary as a means of profiling this fine volume:

For example, Edmund Campion observes in Chapter 3:

*The letters are a rare window into the spiritual life of Catholics in this period. [1920s, 1930s and 1940s] But it should also be noted that [John Wallis’s] letters are remarkable in the way he shared with his family ... his deepest thoughts on religion and his vocation [p. 110].*

Graeme Howard writes in Chapter 5:

*These letters give us an amazing insight into the lived experience of this young pastoral priest; they portray his faithfulness, his vulnerability, his love of his family and his tremendous commitment to follow his call to be priest, to serve and love God and his people [p. 198].*

Adrian Doyle says in Chapter 9:

*My first impression from the letters was the depth of the relationship between John and his “dearest mother”. He was most open in relating to her all the challenges of his ministry ... One can only imagine the concerns, which would have arisen in the heart of his mother when she became aware of some of the difficulties her son faced ... I note a very deep sense of urgency in the description of his ministry, with a focus on instruction classes, numerous funerals, and a deep concern for those who lived in remote places. Clearly Bruny Island features strongly in his concerns ... [p. 314].*

It was, of course, a challenge to John Wallis on Bruny Island, in relation to the Church’s ministry to remote communities, that ultimately led to the establishment of the Missionary Sisters of Service.

In the book’s epilogue, quoting Goethe, Stancea Vichie mss, Congregational Leader, highlights that “Letters are among the most significant memorial a person can leave behind ...”. These letters, she writes, show that “John was continually ‘*about the Master’s business*’” [p. 386]. In a similar vein, David Ranson sees in Fr Wallis, as recorded in Chapter 10:

*an understanding of priesthood that will be echoed 80 years later in Pope Francis’ metaphor of mercy as the key to priestly life [he says, it is] understood as passionate involvement with those who find themselves on the margins [p. 383].*

Significantly, John Wallis' formation, formally undertaken in the Sydney seminaries and afterwards through retreats and devotions, was "nurtured so completely by his mother" [p. 235]. This reality, captured eloquently by Bobby Court in her Chapter 6 reflection, shines out of many of the letters and his mother as a spiritual director is a critical insight to be gleaned from the correspondence.

I could go on but that is for each of you to do when you read this book and follow the development of John's vocation and then his priestly ministry, letter by letter. Importantly and fortunately, the letters also encompass the visionary founding of the Missionary Sisters of Service by the 33-year-old Father Wallis.

The importance and quality of the book are reflected in its publication by Coventry Press and I acknowledge the foresight of the publisher, Hugh McGinlay. It is a handsome volume, enriched by photographs, an extensive index, informative footnotes, a timeline of events, and the great love which went into its preparation.

From the 100 letters, I thought that I should quote from one in order to give you a flavour of John Wallis' correspondence – by which one? I decided on a letter from the first week of October 1932, eighty-seven years ago this week. Thus, the twenty-two-year-old John Wallis wrote to his mother shortly before his ordination as follows:

*I may not have many years in God's service but I hope to make the best of them ... The more I think of the work ahead the more I realise that after all I am but the instrument in God's hand: I can water or sow but God must work by his grace in the souls of men [and women]: He must give the increase. Now how is this increase to come but by prayer and sacrifice ... So now dear Mother I am going to rely very, very much on your prayers ... We are all called to be saints – to grow daily in the love of God, of charity, the spirit of prayer and patience. [pp. 127-128]*

On a lighter note, *Dear Mother Dear Father* might have been given the 'sticky' title of the *Mystery of the Westward Ho! Assorted Toffees Treasure Chest* [p. xv]. The letters, stored in a decorative tin of this description, came to light in 2014 in the Missionary Sisters of Service archives in Hobart. The correspondence had been placed there in 1966 by John Wallis' brother, Fr Brian Wallis, who had requested that the letters be kept secret until after his brother's death. As his mother's executor, had he gathered up the letters and placed them in the Westward Ho! Assorted Toffees tin or had Emma, John and Brian's mother, already chosen this secure storage to preserve them, prior to her death in 1955? We can be grateful to Emma, Brian and Carmel Hall mss, Missionary Sisters of Service archivist, that they were preserved. We can be especially grateful to Bernadette Wallis, Fr John's and Fr Brian's niece, that they have now been professionally published. Like Fr John himself, this book is a special gift to the Australian Church – thank you, Bernadette.

I am now very pleased to declare launched Bernadette Wallis' *Dear Mother Dear Father Letters Home from John Corcoran Wallis 1927-1949*. I am confident that this new work will enrich its readers and inspire those seeking to take forward "on the highways and byways" the spirit of John Wallis and the charism of the Missionary Sisters of Service.

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