

**REFLECTION ON FR JOHN WALLIS
MEMORIAL MASS AT ST FRANCIS XAVIER CHURCH
PRARAN, 31ST AUGUST**

Maria Kavanagh MSS

To what or whom dare I compare John Wallis?
To whom can I liken him?
What images would speak something of him?

This man, this priest of God
This man too big for words
However beautiful, strong and gracious they may be.
I hope now to sketch some pictures of him
On the vast canvas of the sky.
After all, John was a big picture person
Big maps were for him.
Possessed of a disarming ordinariness,
Which was surely dipped in a divine spring
He was indeed a highways and byways person
A tree planted near running waters
A stretcher of minds and hearts
Always looking beyond, peering (as he often did)
into the great unknown
A risker of ideas.

John cared about people, especially those who were different
Living on the edges of life, eking out an existence as best they could.
I believe he caught a glimpse of the prophetic in them
As he reflected and pondered the amazing ways of God

He was gifted too with a great sense of the common good,
Of being able to get to the heart of things
A sifter of the unnecessary
He had a great clarifying saying for such situations
"Of course, it's ridiculous, quite ridiculous."
It was, I thought, a neat way of putting things in perspective,
Of getting to the core of the matter.
Mostly one could only agree,
The whole thing was ridiculous, quite ridiculous.
Often this intervention of his would clear the way for movement
Unravelling the threads of hidden possibilities
Capable too of generating new and fresh ways of being in the world.
Such possibilities excited him.

During his long life a cloak of gentleness gathered about him,
Yet he was ever ready to challenge, to stir,
Yet equally to affirm, encourage and trust
That the Spirit was at work in everyone, everything, everywhere –
A man with a big heart.

I, personally, and I'm sure the whole group
Of Missionary Sisters of Service
(whom he founded in 1944 in Tasmania)
Will forever be grateful that he was a kingdom dreamer,
A dream that attracted each of us to enter its mystery
A dream that changed my life dramatically
And the life of each of us, forever.

One of his enduring passions (and he had quite a few)
Were the documents of Vatican II.
We were not only introduced to the documents.
But lured inside them, walked all around them, in them,
Climbed up and down and through them.
His enthusiasm for the documents knew no bounds.
He wanted everyone to see and feel and taste
What he saw and felt and tasted.

Sacred Scripture was his constant companion and way of life
For him a storybook of the breathtaking love God has for the universe
And everyone and everything in it.
"There are no favourites with God"
A statement he would repeat again and again and again.

We have honoured this love he had
For both Sacred Scripture and the Vatican Documents
By having them carried in the entrance procession
And placed in front of the Eucharistic Table
Alongside his stole – a symbol of his priesthood.

He loved, too, to spend time with nature in the bush
Where he found great nourishment for body and soul
A tangible reminder of this is the décor of native flowers and gum leaves.
You may notice there are no vases – he felt they were too confining.
He loved wide, open spaces
Which allowed not only himself but everyone and everything
The freedom to sing their own song and make their own music.

John of the Cross has a beautiful poem which I feel captures something
Of John's wonder in the presence of nature:

*“My Beloved is in the mountains
And lovely wooded valleys
Strange islands
Resounding rivers
The whistling of love-stirring breezes
The tranquil night at the time of the rising dawn
Silent music, sounding solitude
The supper that refreshes and deepens love.”*

John began bushwalking in his sixties
And even managed to break his leg
On a bushwalk on his 70th birthday.
He took up nature photography in his eighties.
He was never one to sit about,
And if he did, it was always with a book in hand
A voracious reading of almost anything and everything
Always curious to know what was going on.

He was all this and so very much more,
A man, a priest
Who knew the emptiness and pain of the dark night
The struggle to come to terms
With the absence of God in his life.
Yet through the many and varied daily ups and downs,
He clung to faith in the darkness
And waited on God.
He was one of us, like us in every way
But with perhaps that extra burst of determination
(Some would call it stubbornness)
That come what may, his heart and his feet
Were firmly set towards God and the things of God.
“Always begin with God”
Was another of his mantra-like sayings
Mantra-like because he repeated them over and over and over.

Most of all,
John was a deeply spiritual and prayerful person
His inner being became more and more stilled
As the years went by
His only guide, I believe, was the God-light
That burned in his mind and heart.
Like St Augustine, he could say:

*“God, I tasted you and now I hunger and thirst for you
You touched me and I am enflamed with your love.”*

At the end of the Gospel writings of St John, the Evangelist,
It is written:
"There was much else that Jesus did;
If it were written down in detail,
I do not suppose the world itself would hold all the books
That would be written.
So it is with John Wallis.

To bring all these unfinished thoughts and reflections
To some kind of ending,
These words of Mark van Doren,
Written on the death of Thomas Merton,
Seem to make a fitting conclusion:

*"The best bottle of the best wine
Tipped over all at once and spilled
Catch it, save it, but nobody could
Nothing left but the fragrance."*

On behalf of everyone here
And all the people whom John met and ministered to
On his journeyings,
"Thank you, John, for the fragrance of your life,
For all you have been and will be.
May you be wrapped forever
In the universal love of our Astonishing God.