



FOREWORD

SOME years ago now, on December 30, 1991, *Time* magazine ran an essay on the perennial attraction of Mary for Roman Catholics. Noting that Vatican II had had a significant influence on official devotion to and interpretations of the figure of the Virgin Mother of God, the essayist spoke of the great variety of titles and images through which “the people” had made Mary the unofficial patron of widely diverse, if not openly antagonistic, Catholic groups. That phenomenon persists. Very conservative Catholics honor Mary through the title of co-redemptrix (under opprobrium since Vatican II) and social activist Catholics promote the images of Mary’s Magnificat as the basis of social revolution. Many Hispanic Catholics see in the Virgin of Guadalupe an image of their own “mixed” heritage, a blend of Spanish and indigenous culture. Some feminist Catholics find the traditional figure of Mary both regressive and demeaning to women, although a number of feminist theologians have begun to lay the groundwork for revising the tradition. In such a Marian environment, is there room or need for a reprint of Caryll Houselander’s *The Reed of God*?

Houselander was born in Bath, England, in 1901 and was baptized into the Catholic Church at about the age of seven

when her mother converted to Catholicism. This was the rationale, later, for her self-designation as a “rocking-horse [rather than a cradle] Catholic.” She had an emotionally difficult childhood; her parents divorced when she was nine. The girl’s mother, Gertie, was idiosyncratic and unsympathetic to Caryll’s sensitive nature. Caryll was exposed at an early age, and through her mother’s friends, to a particularly English variant of Catholicism, with an equal emphasis upon both the intellectual rigor of the Roman Catholic tradition and its aesthetic character. Her friend from childhood, Mr. Justice Bowers, though an agnostic himself, impressed the young Caryll with his affirmation that Catholicism “was the only religion in the world that includes all that is beautiful and good in every other, and all the poetry that is innate in the human race.” She records this influence in her spiritual autobiography, *Rocking-Horse Catholic*.

Caryll left school at sixteen, when England was still engaged in the First World War. She left the Church at about the same time, embarrassed that she lacked sixpence for the obligatory pew rent. There followed some years of intense creativity and somewhat bohemian behavior as Houselander went to art school, explored many religious traditions as an alternative to Catholicism, and got involved with a community of Russian émigrés in London. There, she met a flamboyant British secret agent named Sydney Reilly with whom she had an affair, off and on, for about two years. By 1925, she had returned to the Church. By the outbreak of World War II, having fully emerged from this

period of exploration and experimentation, she settled down to her life's work.

Caryll had connected with a Catholic community in London that was committed to the best pre-Vatican II Catholic humanism. It was an integration of the mystical, the intellectual (with a strong Thomistic flavor), and the artistic. This was the cultural world that produced writers like G. K. Chesterton in England, but also its continental counterparts in poet Anton Peguy and novelist Georges Bernanos. Frank Sheed and Maisie Ward were a part of this particular Catholic community, and their publishing house, Sheed & Ward, published Caryll's first books both in England and in the United States.

Houselander's work antedates the Second Vatican Council by almost twenty years and she herself had not received a formal theological or religious education. Yet nourished by this English Catholic community, her artistic sensibility, psychological insight, and contemplative spirit flourished. In *The Reed of God*, she gives flesh and spirit to solid theological affirmations about Mary; her portrait, designed for contemplation, is founded on the lengthy theological tradition but was enriched by her understanding of the complex human condition and her insight into the contemporary hunger for meaning.

Caryll Houselander's life shapes her understanding and in its salient details is familiar to us who live in the first decade of the twenty-first century. She was a single laywoman who struggled with poverty. She was rich in friends but identified always with the poor and the marginalized. She experienced a world fractured by war and ideological

conflict and sought to understand its roots in individual human emotions and choices. The Mary she presents for our contemplation is one that is at home in our world, as in Caryll's own. It also anticipates some of the theological principles for a renewed theology of Mary that flowed from Vatican II.

In her eminent work on Mary, *Truly Our Sister*, Elizabeth Johnson notes the four guidelines for Marian devotion that Pope Paul VI issued ten years after the council. He posits that a genuine and sound mariology should have, first of all, a solid biblical character. It should be marked by a liturgical sensitivity, rooted in Eucharistic worship, and attentive to the modulations of the liturgical seasons. It should, the pope also affirmed, be ecumenical, with its focus clearly on the Christological mysteries. Finally, the pope asks that a renewed devotion to Mary should, in Johnson's words, be "closely attuned to the human sciences that chart the changed psychological and sociological conditions in which modern persons, especially women, live . . ." (p. 133). Judged by these criteria, Houselander's *The Reed of God* more than holds its own.

Without the benefit of the historical critical method, Houselander's portrait of Mary rings with echoes of the biblical text. She stresses the historical reality of Mary, her peasant status, the problem of her pregnancy, and the anxiety and danger of the flight into Egypt. A particularly noteworthy example is the author's contemplation on the second chapter of Luke's gospel. In this anecdote, Mary and Joseph discover that their son is missing. In drawing out the human meaning of this text, Houselander draws deeply on the

experience of loss that is so pervasive in ordinary human life. Her interpretation of Mary is also liturgical in the deepest meaning of the word. For her, Mary's experience of the Word taking flesh in her womb is the first step toward Christ's giving of his flesh in the Eucharist. The various chapters of the book reflect not only the liturgical seasons—one chapter is entitled "Advent"—but also specific Marian feasts, such as the feast of the Annunciation. More deeply, Houselander applies various non-Marian biblical texts to her interpretation of Mary in exactly the same way that the liturgy does, connecting, for instance, Mary's search for Christ with the seeking of the lover in the Song of Songs 3:2.

Houselander's Reed of God is unremittingly Christocentric. She lays out for our contemplation not a woman of privilege, but a woman of grace so committed to Christ and his plan for redemption that her every thought and action is oriented to her son. For Houselander, this is a Mary to be emulated more than venerated. Or rather, she is venerated only because she models a loving and wholehearted surrender to grace. One might easily forget the title of the book and its avowed subject matter as laid out by the author in the introduction, so fully is Christ present in every chapter and, indeed, on almost every page. Finally, Houselander's treatment of Mary is richly anthropological, not in the scholarly sense that I think both Pope Paul and Elizabeth Johnson would require, but as one who has deeply experienced her own humanity. Every detail of the Christ-experience, as narrated by scripture and interpreted in liturgy, becomes the occasion for reflection on the everyday human experiences

of the ordinary lay Christian. The connection between these ordinary events and the great mystery of redemption that unfolds in scripture is the result not only of Houselander's acute observation of the psychological dynamics of human behavior but also, and even more powerfully, of her understanding of the way Christ's life and work continues in our own. All of Houselander's work—and *The Reed of God* in a very special way—reflects her deep personal appropriation of the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. Houselander meets the living, risen Christ in every human experience and invites her reader to do so too.

I was introduced to Houselander as a young adult Catholic and found my faith enlarged by her humanity and prayerful truth. I returned to her writings as an older theologian and attempted to share my understanding of her theological richness and profundity by editing an anthology of her works. Now, I hope that this reprint, one of her classical publications, will find a new audience.

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