



## FOREWORD



*“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”*

(John 12:32)

**T**he text from John’s gospel, cited above, could almost stand as a shorthand description of how Frances Caryll Houselander (1901–1954) understood the meaning of Jesus Christ: the one who, lifted up on the cross, not only draws all to himself but binds together all in his mystical body of which he is the head.

*This War Is the Passion*, published in 1941, was Caryll Houselander’s first book. It became, unexpectedly, a best-seller both in Houselander’s native England and in the United States. Originally a series of articles published in the *Grail* Magazine, the writer and Catholic publisher, Maisie Ward (who would later write Houselander’s biography) ran across those articles and encouraged her to make them into a book. Houselander wrote during Britain’s

precarious days in its war with the axis powers of Germany. The book is redolent of those siege circumstances suffered, beginning in 1939, by the British people: rationing, dislocations of populations, the constant fear of bombing, shortages of everything from decent food to medicines, mobilization of the young, transferals of young children outside of London to the countryside and so on.

The particular angle of her book was this: how does one see the terrors of war through the lens of Jesus Christ? Notice that I said “Jesus Christ” and not something abstract like “faith” because Houselander was a visionary believer in Christ who saw everything through the nourishment she found in the Gospels and the strength of her intense life of prayer centered on the liturgy. In fact, she numbered among the discomforts of life during war the difficulty of getting to daily Mass.

Houselander’s life could not be justly described as a happy one. Born in 1901, her parents divorced, and she was raised by a mother who could only charitably be called “difficult.” Raised as a Catholic after the conversion of her mother, she broke with the church in her adolescent years only to recover her faith, not through some intellectual path, but through three intense visionary experiences of Christ himself. The most famous of these revelatory epiphanies was a luminous living experience of Christ in every person surrounding her while she was traveling on the London underground. That experience convinced her that Christ was to be found in every person and not in the saints alone. It is almost as if she intuited the doctrinal

underpinnings of the mystical body of Christ by sheer personal experience.

Her life in the 1920s was a critical one; she had returned to the practice of her faith in 1925, but in the same decade she had a passionate love affair with the famous British spy Sidney Riley (the inspiration for the fictional character James Bond) who abruptly broke off the relationship to marry another woman. Houselander herself was never to marry, and the breakup itself was a shattering event in her life.

She did not start out as a writer but as a skilled illustrator, wood carver, and designer, contributing mainly to popular Catholic magazines. *This War Is the Passion* marked the breakthrough for her becoming a notable writer, and from its publication until her painful death from breast cancer in 1954, she published a whole series of books that made her one of the more well-known figures in the pantheon of Catholic spiritual writers before Vatican II. In the post Vatican II period, her reputation all but disappeared, and it has only been in the past few years that she has been rediscovered and appreciated.

Like many first books, this one points in two quite different directions: one back to her earlier religious experiences and the other as an indicator of what would be the subject of books that would fill out her ideas only casually mentioned in this work. Since her life was largely shaped by her sense of Christ's presence, that sense gives shape to her book as a whole. Her plea was a simple one: The exigencies brought about by war allow everyone to

cross the borders of class and occupation, giving people the opportunity to pitch in as helpers of national service. However, such work is also a moment to make Christ real. If one, for example, volunteers at a hospital it is crucial, she writes, not to think of wards full of “cancers” but “Christ.” Again, she notes that the poor are often forgotten in the demands of defense. But, she writes, “If we forget our poor now we might as well surrender at once to those who tread the Christ-bloom of the world into the mud.”

This lens, which is Christ, is the constant in the way Houselander “sees” in this work. At the same time, some of her foundational themes about Christ here would receive further attention in later work. One example: There is a wonderful meditation on the Way of the Cross in this book—a favorite subject to which she would return later in her life with the posthumous publication of the illustrated *The Stations of the Cross* (1955) with her beautiful wood engravings and her *The Way of the Cross* (1955).

The open sympathy she had for others, the vivid sense of Christ living in all people, was not simply literary adornment. She worked as a counselor and therapist (despite a total lack of formal training) for those children emotionally shattered by trauma and loss; a task she continued even after the war. The explanation of her success in these endeavors, a well-known psychologist remarked, was that she loved them into health. Her approach has been well described as a contemplative entering into the passion of Christ through compassion.

A recent commentator on Houselander's life and work has said that Maisie Wards' admiring biography of Houselander was flawed both because of her prudish inability to deal with her affair with Sidney Riley and, more importantly, because she pictured Houselander in far too solemn a fashion.<sup>1</sup> She managed to turn Houselander into a dour and solitary ascetic. In reality, Houselander was a chain smoker who would not turn down a pint in a pub. She disliked organized forms of Catholic piety, which explains why she broke with the Grail Movement with which she had early been associated. She had little use for the pacifism of the Catholic Workers. She was suspicious of all lay associations out of worry for their tendency to codify the spiritual life into "rules." She had a particular loathing for hothouse piety. In a pungent comment she once said that every Christian had an obligation "not merely to exist, not merely to pickle himself in piety like a gherkin in vinegar to be opened awaiting the Eternal Feast.... He must live, that is to say, to see himself as a part of the whole." In the same spirit she insisted that "Catholicism is something infinitely more than a vast penitentiary; it is the source of all the wonder and poetry and beauty of life and its feasts glorify God as much as its fasts."<sup>2</sup>

One does not see much of that lightheartedness in this work. She writes out of urgency triggered by war. She interweaves meditations on the Gospel of Christ as well as an insistence on practical things her readers might do, not to advance the "war effort," but to become more conformed to Christ. The conditions of war are the occasion

for a particular response in Christ. What one does not find in this book is “theory” either about life or the spiritual life; she has an instinctive resistance to such matters. In fact, she addresses such “experts” directly with her own approach to such theory. On the opening page of the second chapter of this book, she writes: “I speak to the virtuosa of the spiritual life, to the expert in spirituality with her networks and hieroglyphics and all the rest. Don’t be an expert on the spiritual life. Treat Christ as the real Person that he is, don’t fuss and worry about your soul.”

More than once Houselander will invoke the “poetry” inherent in Christ. As an artist herself, she understands that art is a form of making (*poesis*) and that making breaks out in beauty. While her writing is not affected, it does in places break out into urgent poetry directed to Christ. Almost always this poetry links Christ to everyone in the world—the “hidden” (mystical) Christ. A small example might suffice: “So it is that Christ is in us, acting and yet resting, his hands lifted and yet toiling, nailed to the cross and yet healing. His feet are nailed to the cross above life’s flowering meadows, and yet they are walking the common streets of all the cities in the world, the Shepherd’s feet following his wandering sheep.”

This first book of Houselander, one would hope, might tempt the reader to read others, thus contributing to a new flowering of interest in this passionate artist and spiritual writer. Many of her books are enhanced with her own works of art; the woodcuts remind many of the work of Eric Gill. She was once called a “divine eccentric”—a

sobriquet that became the subtitle of the Maisie Ward biography. That she had her eccentricities is clear but, unlike, say, her contemporary Simone Weil, she was far from a tragic figure. It would be closer to the mark to say that she was a paradoxical one. Frances Caryll Houselander was an obscure working artist who became a well-known author; a solitary figure who was passionate about the community of all in Christ; a worker with her hands who became a therapist via her heart; one who loved the church as community but resisted communities within that community.

May many readers be drawn to the thought and prayers of this unjustly forgotten, once celebrated member of the Catholic Literary Revival. In reaction to her death on October 12, 1954, another member of that august literary group, Monsignor Ronald Knox, wrote that “she seemed to see everyday for the first time, and the driest of doctrinal considerations shone out like a restored picture when she had finished with it.” Exactly.

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1. Wendy Wright. *Caryll Houselander: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005). This is an excellent introduction to Houselander’s life and work.
2. *Ibid.*