THE REED OF GOD

Lignum habet spem:
si praecisum fuerit, rursum virescit,
et rami euis pullulant.

Job 14:7

Wood hath hope,
If it be cut, it groweth green again,
and the boughs thereof sprout.

THE REED OF GOD

CARYLL HOUSELANDER

A New Edition of a Spiritual Classic

Christian Classics  *Notre Dame, IN*

Founded in 1865, Ave Maria Press is a ministry of the Indiana Province of Holy Cross.

www.christian-classics.com

ISBN-10 0-87061-240-9 ISBN-13 978-0-87061-240-4

Cover and text design by John Carson

Photos on pp. 5 and 191 courtesy of the University of Notre Dame Photo Archive

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Printed and bound in the United States of America.

To David and Archie

"Rhetoric's many followers were mute as fish when they saw Thee, O Mother of God; for they dared not ask: How canst thou bear a child and yet remain a Virgin? But we marvel at this mystery, and with faith cry:

Hail, vessel of the wisdom of God; hail, treasury of his foreknowledge.

Hail, thou that showest philosophers fools: hail, thou that provest logicians illogical.

Hail, for the subtle disputants are confounded; hail, for the writers of the myths are withered.

Hail, thou who didst break the webs of the Athenians; hail, thou who didst fill the nets of the fishermen.

Hail, thou who drawest us from the depths of ignorance; hail, thou who enlightenest many with knowledge.

Hail, raft for those who desire to be saved; hail, haven for those who swim on the waves of the world.

Hail, thou bride unwedded."

— The Akathist Hymn

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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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December 2005

INTRODUCTION

WHEN I was a small child someone for whom I had a great respect told me never to do anything that Our Lady would not do; for, she said, if I did, the angels in heaven would blush.

For a short time this advice "took" in me like an inoculation, causing a positive paralysis of piety.

It was clear to me that all those things which spelt joy to me were from henceforward taboo—blacking my face with burnt cork, turning somersaults between props against the garden wall, putting two bull's-eyes into my mouth at the same time—all that was over! But even if I faced a blank future shackled with respectability, it was still impossible to imagine Our Lady doing anything that I would do, for the very simple reason that I simply could not imagine her doing a nything at all.

The inoculation of piety wore off quickly, and so completely that when the sunset warmed the sky over our tangled garden with a pink glow, I thought that it must be the faint reflection of the rosy blush that suffused all heaven!

This would not be worth recording but for one thing, namely, that the wrong conception of Our Lady which I had is one that a great many other people have, too; a very great

many people still think of Our Lady as someone who would never do anything that we do.

To many she is the Madonna of the Christmas card, immobile, seated forever in the immaculately clean stable of golden straw and shining snow. She is not real; nothing about her is real, not even the stable in which Love was born.

There are two things to-day which make it difficult for many people to love Our Lady.

First that she is pure and virgin. There is nothing so little appreciated by the world to-day as purity, nothing so misunderstood as virginity.

In many minds virginity is associated only with negative qualities, with impotence—impotence of body and mind, emotional and spiritual impotence.

Unfortunately, there are not only wise virgins in this world but unwise ones, foolish virgins; and the foolish virgins make more noise in the world than the wise, giving a false impression of virginity by their loveless and joyless attitude to life. They cause us to turn with a sigh of relief to the page in the Missal which announces the splendid feast of a holy woman who was neither a virgin nor a martyr.

These foolish virgins, like their prototypes, have no oil in their lamps. And no one can give them this oil, for it is the potency of life, the will and the capacity to love.

We no longer think of virginity as the first-fruits laid upon the fire of sacrifice, but rather as a windfall of green apples, which are hard and sour because the sun has never penetrated them and warmed them at the core.

Virginity is really the whole offering of soul and body to be consumed in the fire of love and changed into the flame of its glory.

The virginity of Our Lady is the wholeness of Love through which our own humanity has become the bride of the Spirit of Life.

It is this very fact which refutes the other mistaken idea about Our Lady, namely, that she is not human.

When we are attracted to a particular saint it is usually the little human details which attract us. These touches bridge the immense gap between heroic virtue and our weakness. We love most those saints who before they were great saints were great sinners.

But even those who were saints from the cradle are brought closer to us by recorded trifles of their humanness. How dear to us St. Catherine of Siena is, because she loved her garden, because she made up little verses and gilded tiny oranges to humour a difficult pope. How close she comes to us in her friendships: in the motley company of poets, politicians, soldiers, priests, and brigands—men who idolised her; and not only men, for St. Catherine was not only the most dynamic woman in history but also the best friend to other women that ever lived. Such things almost make us forget that she was fiercely ascetic, that for years she was fed only on the Blessed Sacrament, and that she was an ecstatic: her agony for the world's sin is hidden under the beautiful cloak of her love for sinners.

Of Our Lady such things are not recorded. We complain that so little is recorded of her personality, so few of her

words, so few deeds, that we can form no picture of her, and there is nothing that we can lay hold of to imitate.

But it is Our Lady—and no other saint—whom we can really imitate.

All the canonised saints had special vocations, and special gifts for their fulfilment: presumption for me to think of imitating St. Catherine or St. Paul or St. Joan if I have not their unique character and intellect—which indeed I have not.

Each saint has his special work: one person's work. But Our Lady had to include in her vocation, in her life's work, the essential thing that was to be hidden in every other vocation, in every life.

She is not only human; she is humanity.

The one thing that she did and does is the one thing that we all have to do, namely, to bear Christ into the world.

Christ must be born from every soul, formed in every life. If we had a picture of Our Lady's personality we might be dazzled into thinking that only one sort of person could form Christ in himself, and we should miss the meaning of our own being.

Nothing but things essential for us are revealed to us about the Mother of God: the fact that she was wed to the Holy Spirit and bore Christ into the world.

Our crowning joy is that she did this as a lay person and through the ordinary daily life that we all live; through natural love made supernatural, as the water at Cana was, at her request, turned into wine.

In the world as it is, torn with agonies and dissensions, we need some direction for our souls which is never away

from us; which, without enslaving us or narrowing our vision, enters into every detail of our life. Everyone longs for some such inward rule, a universal rule as big as the immeasurable law of love, yet as little as the narrowness of our daily routine. It must be so truly part of us all that it makes us all one, and yet to each one the secret of his own life with God.

To this need, the imitation of Our Lady is the answer; in contemplating her we find intimacy with God, the law which is the lovely yoke of the one irresistible love.