MODERN SPIRITUAL MASTERS SERIES

Caryll Houselander

Essential Writings

Selected with Commentary by

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Maryknoll, New York 10545

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Published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 10545-0308.

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Houselander, Caryll.
[Selections. 2005]
Caryll Houselander : essential writings / selected with commentary by
Wendy M. Wright.
p. cm. – (Modern spiritual masters series)
Includes bibliographical references (p.).
ISBN-13: 978-1-57075-603-0 (pbk.)
1. Christian life – Catholic authors. I. Wright, Wendy M. II. Title.
III. Series.
BX2350.3.H68 2005
248.4′82 – dc22

2005009194

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The "Christing of the World"

He has made us "other Christs."[3]

In 1901, October 29 to be precise, Gertrude Provis of London gave birth to the second of two daughters she would bear Willmot Houselander. The scrawny girl, Frances Caryll, was not expected to live and so was provisionally baptized, a more formal than spiritually motivated occurrence, for the family was not at the time religiously inclined. Religion came into the household and Caryll's life suddenly when the sporty, hail-and-well-met Gertrude (who was said to have spent her honeymoon on the tennis court), apparently inspired by the piety of Catholic acquaintances in Brighton, entered the Catholic Church with her daughters in tow. Caryll was six at the time. The youngster's formal religious initiation was sporadic but in her girlhood she had the warm example of the Catholic household of the family physician, Dr. Paley. The doctor was descended from the noted Frederick Apthorp Paley who had become a Catholic at the time of the Oxford movement and whose conversion had cost him his position. His heirs claimed their religious inheritance with devotion. She was also tutored informally by family friend George Spencer Bower, or Smokey, an agnostic barrister

who schooled her in literature, the arts, and what he saw as the magnificent intellectual system of Catholicism.

At the age of nine her parents divorced and, as was customary in such cases at the time, the dislocated offspring, Caryll and her sister, Ruth, were sent to a boarding school. The Convent of the Holy Child at Olton became the first formal environment in which the Catholic faith, which was to so define Caryll's adult identity, became truly formative. The formation she received was very French: the distinctive "little way" exemplified by Thérèse of Lisieux was passed on by the sisters. In later years Caryll would recall that, at the time, she found the refectory reading of Thérèse's autobiography "sickening" in its piety, but her mature devotion to the saint was genuine. Shy, often sickly, and not much drawn to the company of other children, Caryll remembered befriending the Reverend Mother and a lay sister at the school. Her shyness did not, however, prevent her from drinking deeply of the atmosphere of the place and the spiritual sensibilities it evoked in her. In her later years two of her poetic "Rhythms" — "The Parish First Communions" and "Soeur Marie Emilie" — would capture the tactile, sensual, ritual life and recall the nurturing figures to whom she clung at Olton.

The Parish First Communions

In the church
there is a smell of flowers.
There are white veils,
and the banners
and the vestments are white.

Why are there tears
in the eyes of the grown-up people?

Have we forgotten the fragrance of Christ's first coming?
or the stainless hearts of our little sons and daughters?

Or is it that we remember
that we too were young
and once had a secret with Him?

I am back again in the French convent
and the austere, lovely morning,
thrilled with the mute mystery
of the day of First Communions —
the touch of cold water,
the curtains around the beds,
and the clean bare boards,
of the floor of the dormitory.

I know that sin is something
to be resisted strongly,
with all my heart.
I have the knowledge of innocence,
Learned by watching the flame
In the pale-faced nun
Who taught me
The lesson of sacrifice.

She smells of lemon soap and linen.
Her smile is an inward smile,
and her eyes of radiance
teach the innocent heart,
beating with austere joy,
that sin is a terrible thing,
redeemed by a passion of love.

There is a smell of flowers
filling the cloister.
We are moving slowly in ranks.
We are wearing long white veils
and bride's dresses, down to our feet.

The thin, melodious singing
is the singing of angels
in the green paradise
of children in love.

And afterwards there is breakfast,
the breakfast for feasts,
with roses on the table
and the crimson May outside,
and a bird whose singing
fills my heart.

I think that my heart would break
for joy of that bird singing
right inside it,
were it not that the nun
restrains it with recollection —
and we must have perfect manners
and sit so straight at table.

There is a smell of coffee
and warm new rolls,
and each of us will have a banana
because of the feast.

I am back again
in the French convent
and the austere lovely morning,
thrilled with the mute mystery
of the day of the First Communions.[4]

Soeur Marie Emilie

Soeur Marie Emilie
is little and very old:
her eyes are onyx
and her cheeks vermilion,
her apron wide and kind
and cobalt blue.

She comforts
generations and generations
of children who are "new"
at the convent school.
When they are eight
they are already up to her shoulder:
they grow up and go into the world;
she remains
forever,
already incredibly old
but, incredibly, never older.

Generations of children
sit in turn by her side
and help her to shell the peas;
her dry and twisted fingers crackle,
snapping the green pods.
Generations of children
sit in turn by her side,
helping to stone the plums
that will be made into jam,
for the greater glory of God.

She has affinity with the hens:
when a hen dies
she sits down on a bench and cries.

She is the only grown-up whose tears,
are not frightening tears;
children can weep,
without shame at her side.
She is simple as flax.

She collects the eggs.
They are warm and smooth
and softly colored—
ivory, ochre
and brown and rose;
they fit the palm of her hand.
Her eyes kindle upon them;
the children, watching gravely,
understand
her dumb, untroubled love.

We have grown up
and gone away
"into the world"
and grown cold
in the service of God.
But we would love Him
even less than we do
if we had never known
Soeur Marie Emilie
with the green peas and the plums
and the hens and the beautiful eggs
and her apron as wide and kind
as skies on a summer day,
and as clean and blue.[5]

The accuracy of Caryll's nostalgic memories of Olton and other early places and events was questioned after her death by her sister, Ruth.[6] Despite this, the memories, as Caryll recalled

them, form the basis of her adult identity. Olton was run by an order of French nuns, and when World War I broke out, sentiments against the Germans, fueled by past conflicts, ran high in the convent. On the grounds lived one lay sister from Bavaria, Mary Benedicta. This friendless sister, ostracized because of her origins, did not speak English and attended to the menial chores around the grounds. An encounter with her became the occasion for the first of Caryll's three youthful mystical visions that, in her hindsight perception, opened her to the spiritual "seeing" that was distinctively hers. In her autobiography Houselander recalled the brief — perhaps half a minute — but life-altering experience.

. . . with two exceptions the community consisted of French and Belgian women. The exceptions were the young English nun and one lay sister who was Bavarian. To us, Bavarian meant German. She had always, I think, been rather a lonely woman.

She spoke hardly any English at all, and deplorable French. She had no such affinity with animals as Soeur Marie Emilie had, no charm or talent like another of the lay sisters who was a beautiful woman with a beautiful singing voice; and she had, of course, no friends or relations with whom she could make any contact now, and no letters. Even among the children she had no real contacts. She understood what they said, but they could not understand what she said, either in German or French, and she had so little English — and, unhappily, no charm. What her loneliness must have been when the war had broken out, I cannot imagine.

One day I was passing the boot-room, the little room where our shoes were kept; the door was open, and the Bavarian nun was sitting alone, cleaning shoes. I can see her now as if it were yesterday — a tall, gaunt woman with brilliantly red cheeks and eyes so dark that they looked black: there she was, wearing her large, cobalt-blue apron, with a child's pair of shoes on her lap.

I stopped and went in, intending to help her to polish the shoes. It was only when I had come quite close to her that I saw that she was weeping; tears were running down her rosy cheeks and falling onto the blue apron and the child's shoes. Abashed, I dropped my eyes and stood in front of her, speechless with embarrassment, completely tongue-tied. I saw her large, toil-worn hands come down onto her lap and fold on the little shoes, and even those hands, red and chapped, with blunted nails, were folded in a way that expressed inconsolable grief.

We were both quite silent, I stare down at her beautiful hands, afraid to look up, not knowing what to say; she weeping soundlessly.

At last, with an effort, I raised my head, and then — I saw — the nun was crowned with the crown of thorns.

I shall not attempt to explain this. I am simply telling the thing as I saw it.

That bowed head was weighed under the crown of thorns.

I stood for — I suppose — a few seconds, dumbfounded, and then, finding my tongue, I said to her, "I would not cry, if I was wearing the crown of thorns like you are."

She looked at me as if she were startled, and asked, "What you mean?"

"I don't know," I said, and at the time did not, I sat down beside her, and together we polished the shoes.[7]

This first vision of the Crucified One superimposed on the person of the outcast Bavarian sister would be followed by others that would explore, in differing imagery, the foundational concept undergirding Houselander's mature spirituality: the "Christing of the world."[8] *For her — and here she is in a long line of Christian spiritual masters — the mystery of the Incarnation was not restricted to a one-time event. Through the birth of Jesus a divine salvific energy had been unleashed in the world. That saving activity continued to manifest itself. To be*

an authentic Christian one must become part of that unleashed energy; the Christ life must become one's own. Caryll would later write:

> Because of the Incarnation, our natural life is supernaturalized. Love has become incarnate: God has become human. Because of Christ's birth, a new stream of goodness is set flowing. Holiness has become the completion of nature: the fulfilling of the law.[9]

This idea of the "Christing of the world," although she gave it her own title and distinct nuance, belonged to a deep current flowing through the spirituality of Western Christianity since the Middle Ages. This tradition found performative expression in the Christocentric spirituality of Francis of Assisi and his followers, was given mystical intensity in the medieval topos of the "exchange of hearts" between Christ and his mystic spouses, took the less baroque but not less committed form of imitation of Christ's virtues proposed by the Imitation of Christ, *and was a hallmark of the Bérullian or French School of spirituality, which taught that Christians must inhabit the various "States" of Christ's life. The Christian life in this tradition was conceived as one of radical participation in the Christ event. The vision at Olton would be Caryll's inauguration into the sort of seeing that marks her as an exponent of this participative tradition.*

Complementarily, Houselander has been described as a mystic in the kataphatic vein, heir to the legacy of the medieval tradition of Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa of Avila, women whose writings she in fact admired and who likewise experienced intimacy with the divine in highly visual ways.[10] *For all of them, eternal truth was made most visible in temporal reality. Whether Caryll saw in the heightened "mystical" way as she did at Olton or whether she grasped the inner meaning of an event or situation less dramatically, her primary mode of perception was always visual. Stories, word pictures,*

drawings, sculptures, and wood carvings: these would communicate Caryll's spiritual sight. Her own retrospective account of the Olton "vision" specified the exact manner in which her "mystical" seeing occurred.[11]

. . . in the ordinary way I did not *see* anything at all; at least I did not see anything with my eyes. So far as my eyes were concerned, it was just the same nun, gaunt and rosy, with tears running down her cheeks, but — and this is difficult if not impossible to explain — I saw her *with my mind* wearing the crown of thorns, and saw this vividly in detail, in a way that is unforgettable, though in fact it was something suddenly *known*, rather than seen. But it was known not as one knows something through learning about it, but simply by *seeing* it. Perhaps I could say in the way a child learns something from looking at a picture, but in this case it is not a lifeless picture shut up in a book, but a picture that is alive and fills the world, that is even more vivid, more unforgettable, because it is seen with the mind, not with the eyes.[12]

Illness eventually forced Caryll to leave her French convent school in early adolescence, and for the next several years her education was erratic. Despite this, her intellectual curiosity, especially about things religious, never waned. Gratefully, she was able to maintain a correspondence with her friend Smokey, who always took her questions seriously, was never dogmatic in his responses, and respected her need for intellectual coherence in faith. For a time Caryll was in and out of Protestant boarding schools, stayed with the Paley family while ill, attended another convent school (which she didn't care for), and finally ended up with her mother, whose reduced financial circumstances had led her to open a boarding house, where her daughter apparently was given a lot of housework to do. With the exception of the Paley household, Caryll remembers never

feeling at home in these places and, partly out of loneliness and partly out of adolescent perversity, began to define herself as a "singular" personality. Meanwhile, her mother befriended and invited into the household a derelict, troubled priest, adding to Caryll's sense of familial alienation. Pious neighbors were scandalized, the household was shunned, and Caryll felt cut off from all but a few Catholics.[13] *Appalled that "good Catholics," pillars of parish life, could at the same time be so cruel and vindictive and "not yet Christians," she began to think that she should seek some other religious home. She recalls the final break coming one day when, exhausted and seeking solace in the Mass, she slipped in at the last minute to a church that still held to the custom of charging for seats. As all the free seats were taken and she was genuinely fatigued, she took the last remaining sixpenny seat.*

I had scarcely knelt down and hidden my face, which was scarlet, when the verger prodded me in the ribs with a collecting bag on the end of a long cane.

"I will go up to the altar of God," said the priest at the altar. "To God, the giver of youth and happiness."

"Sixpence," said the verger, and went on prodding.

"I haven't got sixpence," I whispered.

"All right then," said the verger, "you must go to the free seats."

"There isn't one," I said.

"Well then, sixpence."

I was scalded. There was a priest standing in the aisle watching the scene. When I sprang to my feet and pushed out of the sixpenny seats, he came forward and put his hand on my shoulder.

"You are not going, child?" he said. I shook him off.

"Yes, I am, and I will never come to Mass again."[14]