

CARYLL HOUSELANDER

Divine Eccentric and Prophet of Vatican II

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IN HER DAY, Caryll Houselander (1901–1954) was one of the best-selling Catholic authors writing in English. Her publisher, Maisie Ward, of the prestigious publishing house of Sheed and Ward, said that ‘her books sold like novels’.¹ While she was enormously successful in the 1940s and early 1950s, after her death, and with the decline of Catholic publishing after the Second Vatican Council, most of Houselander’s books fell out of print, except for her classic work of Marian devotion, *The Reed of God*.² Happily, in recent years there has begun to be a revival of interest in Houselander’s work and the beginnings of more serious scholarly study of a writer, the organic density of whose thought will no doubt make such study fruitful. A Houselander anthology has recently appeared in the Modern Spiritual Masters series from Orbis Books, edited by a well-known historian of Christian spirituality, Wendy M. Wright of Creighton University.³ Likewise, some time ago the Canadian medieval scholar Margot H. King announced her intention to publish a major critical biography of Houselander.⁴

Houselander is in many respects a deceptive writer: on the surface, her intense lyricism, sometimes verging on sugary late-Victorian sentimentality, combined with a very English kind of candour—almost, but not quite, vulgarity—can blind the reader to the fact that her writings contain a robust theology of the incarnation, which incorporates a christology, a sacramental theology, an ecclesiology and an ascetical theology, all woven together so tightly that it is difficult to extract one element in isolation from the others. Houselander’s theology, moreover, draws on a sophisticated stream of influences in the Christian spiritual tradition, including Francis of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, Francis de Sales and Teresa of Lisieux.

¹ Maisie Ward, *Caryll Houselander: That Divine Eccentric* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), 4.

² Caryll Houselander, *The Reed of God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1944).

³ *Caryll Houselander: Essential Writings*, edited by Wendy M. Wright (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005). See 217, note 8 for additional useful bibliography.

⁴ See <http://www.peregrina.com/caryll/caryll.html>.



Caryll Houselander

My purpose here is to highlight one aspect of Houselander's theology: her understanding of the Catholic doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. As I will show, Houselander came out of a religiously diverse background, traversed a period of expansive religious exploration in her late teens and twenties, and continued to socialise, converse and correspond with persons of all faiths even after her fervent reconversion to Catholicism in the mid 1920s. I argue that this experience shaped her view of the Mystical Body, enabling her to envision the salvation of non-Catholics in a manner that significantly anticipated some of the

statements on this subject articulated by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s and a prominent theologian of the years that followed.

Before addressing Houselander's appropriation of the doctrine of the Mystical Body specifically, I shall outline those aspects of her biography and religious evolution that I believe had a significant influence on that appropriation. Caryll Houselander was born in 1901 in Bath, in England, the second daughter of upper middle-class parents.⁵ Her mother was a hearty sportswoman who once played mixed doubles at Wimbledon; her father, from whom Houselander inherited a good deal of her eccentricity, was devoted to hunting. It is reported that Mrs Houselander spent the majority of her honeymoon playing tennis, perhaps a harbinger of marital trouble to come. Houselander's father was a convinced atheist in later life; at the time of her birth, her mother was nominally an Anglican, and had Houselander baptized as soon as she was born. But religion never seems to have been a significant factor in Houselander's family in early childhood. She had a much-loved governess who was a 'simple and devout Protestant', and when it came time for her to go to school, Houselander

⁵ The classic source for Houselander's life remains Maisie Ward's biography. Much of the material in this section is taken from *Caryll Houselander*, 14–18. Houselander gives an account of her spiritual evolution, with some biographical elements, in *A Rocking-Horse Catholic* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955).

was sent to a Jewish kindergarten, about which she later commented: 'personally, I was very happy there'.⁶

At around the age of six, Houselander moved with her family from Bath to Brighton and, mysteriously, her mother was inspired to have her two children received into the Roman Catholic Church. I say 'mysteriously', because Houselander's mother does not seem to have converted to Catholicism herself at this time. Scholars agree that Gertrude Houselander was encouraged to take this step by two persons: a Dr Paley, the family doctor, who was the son of an Oxford Movement convert,⁷ and a friend named George Spencer Bower, whom Houselander always refers to as 'Smokey'. Bower was a keen-witted and highly literate lawyer; he was himself agnostic, but through reading and investigation had become convinced that 'if Jesus Christ was really God, and if he founded a Church, it was absolutely certain that this Church was none other than the Roman Catholic Church'.⁸ Houselander spent a great deal of time in her childhood in Smokey's company; married to the daughter of an actor, he took her to the theatre, read her the plays of Shakespeare, conducted all sorts of discussions with her as an equal in a relationship that was intellectually stimulating and emotionally supportive. Significantly, in later years Houselander said of her beloved Smokey:

I think the fact that I owe my own faith to an agnostic, and learned to love it very largely from him in early childhood, has given me a respect, even reverence for the spiritual experience of people outside of the Church, and I am always ready to be grateful for the grace of their good example.⁹

Later in Houselander's childhood, her mother did convert to Catholicism herself, and encouraged her daughters to adopt a highly ritualised devotional practice which, even as a child, Houselander found dissatisfying because of its lack of intellectual theological grounding.¹⁰ The most traumatic experience of Houselander's childhood was her parents' decision to separate when Houselander was nine years old. In

⁶ Houselander, *Rocking-Horse Catholic*, 33, 28.

⁷ Ward does not specify, but this was probably Frederick Apthorp Paley, who lived from 1815 to 1888.

⁸ Houselander, *Rocking-Horse Catholic*, 25.

⁹ M. Angeline, 'Contemporary Catholic Authors: Caryll Houselander, Weaver of the Spiritual', *Catholic Library World*, 16 (May 1945), 270.

¹⁰ Houselander, *Rocking-Horse Catholic*, 97: 'If religion was something for the heart only, a matter merely of personal feeling and devotion, I would have nothing to complain of, but for me it had always been of absolute necessity to have an instructed *mind*: without that, religion could not be a thing of the will, which it must be if it is to endure'.

the wake of her parents' separation, she was sent to a Catholic convent school, the Convent of Our Lady of Compassion at Olton, Warwickshire, run by French religious. Houselander spent approximately five years there, and much preferred it to the other convent school where she was sent at fifteen after a year-long illness. This latter school was at St Leonards-on-Sea, in Sussex, run by an order of English nuns, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. In between her stays at these two schools, Houselander attended two different Protestant schools, one a large council school in (to which her mother by that time had moved), and the other a tiny seaside boarding school. Both, she says 'gave me a distaste for the Protestant religion ... not because I found anything wrong in it at the time or ever thought about it, but because it produced (or so I thought) an atmosphere of deadly boredom'. She admits that in the first council school she refused to play with any of the children except the Jewish ones.¹¹

Houselander's education was frequently disrupted by the delicate health and illness that had plagued her since childhood. It came to a definitive end when she was about sixteen. At this time, her mother, suffering the downward mobility that was, then and now, the fate of many single mothers, was living in London in rented lodgings. She was running a kind of boarding house, and needed Houselander's help. She also needed her daughter to act as a sort of chaperone, since one of Mrs Houselander's guests was a priest who had left his order and was gradually declining from a combination of physical and mental illness. Many in the family's circle were scandalized by the arrangement, and Caryll's presence was sought to diffuse the air of impropriety that hung over the household. It was in this period that Houselander began to question, and finally abandon, the practice of Catholicism, a choice that was driven by a sense that she and her family were being shunned by their fellow Catholics out of snobbery and misguided prudery. Their poverty was a factor, too, and aggravated a view Houselander had had since her time in the St Leonards convent that too many English Catholics were concerned with wealth and social status.

So, Houselander left the Church, and eventually her mother's house, and for the next several years drifted through London living the bohemian life. She attended two different art schools and attempted to support herself in a series of ill-paying and increasingly improbable jobs, including maid, day-care worker, interior decorator, nightclub love-letter composer,

¹¹ Houselander, *Rocking-Horse Catholic*, 78, 79.

and sound-effects provider for a struggling theatre group.¹² She befriended prostitutes, and eventually came to have a love affair of sorts with the spy Sidney Reilly.¹³

In this same period, Houselander embarked upon a wide-ranging spiritual journey. She consulted ministers from several Protestant denominations, beginning with the Church of England. Of that phase of her journey, she says, 'I began with the High Church, and descended gradually to Evangelical, to Low Church, and to Non-conformist'.¹⁴ She consulted Methodist chaplains and Salvation Army captains.¹⁵ Then, she says, 'when I had gone as far as I could in exploring the possible openings in Christianity, I turned to the Buddhists and the Jews', questioning a fellow art student who was Burmese, attending a local synagogue and taking instruction with a rabbi.¹⁶ At one point, moved by the beauty of its iconography and liturgy, Houselander decided that she really wanted to join the Russian Orthodox Church; significantly, she reports that it was her beloved friend Smokey who talked her out of it, arguing, she says, on the side of the West and the papacy. Though the chronology of this period of her life is unclear, Houselander eventually returned to the practice of Catholicism by 1925, partly through the influence of the Catholic Evidence Guild, a group in London whose members gave open-air speeches defending Catholicism. She mentions Frank Sheed as an especially good speaker; he would eventually become her publisher.¹⁷

After her return to the faith, Houselander's life seemed to stabilise. She worked in the 1920s and 1930s as an ecclesiastical decorator, painting and doing wood carving for churches. Under the influence of a Jesuit spiritual adviser, she began to read widely in Catholic literature and scripture, activity that would bear fruit in her later writings.¹⁸ In the late

¹² Ward, *Caryll Houselander*, 63–64; Houselander, *Rocking-Horse Catholic*, 127–133.

¹³ Ward, *Caryll Houselander*, 77–78; Houselander, *Rocking-Horse Catholic*, 67–76.

¹⁴ Houselander, *Rocking-Horse Catholic*, 122.

¹⁵ Ward, *Caryll Houselander*, 131, notes that Houselander later commended that the Salvation Army included both men and women in its activities. She approved of cooperation between the sexes in apostolic work. Still, she criticized the Army's stress on personal feelings of guilt as a requirement of salvation. See Caryll Houselander, *Guilt* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1951), 23.

¹⁶ Houselander, *Rocking-Horse Catholic*, 123.

¹⁷ Houselander, *Rocking-Horse Catholic*, 126, 132–133.

¹⁸ Houselander, *Essential Writings*, 40, notes that, after her return to the faith, Houselander's first spiritual director was Fr Roy Steurt, a specialist in Carmelite spirituality. Shortly thereafter, Maisie Ward, *Caryll Houselander*, 107, says that Houselander took another Jesuit spiritual director, Fr Geoffrey Bliss, who encouraged her in her writing. Some years later, Sheed and Ward published a book by Bliss with illustrations by Houselander: *A Retreat with Saint Ignatius: In Pictures for Children* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1936). This book was republished as *My Path to Heaven: A Young Person's Guide to the Faith* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 1997).

1920s, she was invited to submit stories and writings for various Catholic publications for children and adults; and it was through these publications that Houselander eventually came to the attention of Maisie Ward and Frank Sheed, who invited her to adapt some of her articles into a book, which was published in 1941 entitled *This War Is the Passion*.¹⁹

Thereafter Houselander published several books with Sheed and Ward, though she continued to write articles for various Catholic periodicals too. She also worked as an art therapist with disturbed children after the war. Through these years, Houselander conducted an extensive correspondence with letter-writers on both sides of the Atlantic, and maintained a wide-ranging acquaintance with persons of many different religious persuasions, often drawn to her by her books. She also continued to read widely in world religions, which explains why one can find in her writings references to the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, the Hindu writer Vivekananda, the Buddha and even the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten!²⁰

In 1944, for example, in the wake of the publication of *This War Is the Passion*, she was invited by the Anglican bishop of Southampton to speak at Oxford.²¹ In one letter she talks about entertaining a large group of converted Jews at tea;²² in another she speaks about reading a book entitled *Why I Am a Jew*, which she deems ‘wonderful’.²³ At least three times in her published works, Houselander mentions Charles de Foucauld, a nineteenth-century missionary to Muslim Arabs,²⁴ saying in one passage that de Foucauld, who travelled through Morocco as a poor Jew, saw in that country ‘men about him who, though not Christian, were profoundly aware of the majesty of God’.²⁵ In another letter, she reports:

A very interesting and unusually nice Mohammedan, who has become very interested in Catholicism through reading *Guilt*, called on Saturday. He wanted a full and exhaustive exposition of the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity from me—a thing I find taxes every ounce of mental concentration at the best of times.²⁶

¹⁹ Caryll Houselander, *This War Is the Passion* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1941).

²⁰ Caryll Houselander, *The Passion of the Infant Christ* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1949), 116; Houselander, *Passion of the Infant Christ*, 116; Houselander, *This War Is the Passion*, 123; Houselander, *Guilt*, 90.

²¹ Ward, *Caryll Houselander*, 193.

²² Ward, *Caryll Houselander*, 207. In the passage where Ward reports this incident, she also notes that Houselander once told a friend, ‘I’m trying to work the Jews into the Mystical Body’.

²³ *The Letters of Caryll Houselander: Her Spiritual Legacy*, edited by Maisie Ward (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 87.

²⁴ *Letters of Caryll Houselander*, 165; Houselander, *The Reed of God*, 43.

²⁵ Houselander, *Guilt*, 271.

²⁶ *Letters of Caryll Houselander*, 222.

All these references suggest that Houselander welcomed a religiously diverse audience with her writings, and drew recognition from them too. Unfortunately, her lifelong ailments and chronic overwork eventually overwhelmed Houselander and, after a period of declining health, she died from breast cancer in 1954.

From her writings, it is clear that Houselander had an ecumenical outlook and interreligious sensitivity unusual for her time. The numerous references in her writings make it clear that she was sensitive to religious difference, but highly tolerant and eager to see what was good in people of all religious backgrounds. I am convinced that part of this sensibility arose from Houselander's own experience of downward mobility and class prejudice in the English society of the early twentieth century. The resentment and indignation she felt towards those who look down on the less fortunate, on outsiders, emerge most forcefully in her sometimes cutting remarks about the established Church of England.²⁷ Yet these remarks are not necessarily any more bitter than those she makes in her autobiography about the status-consciousness of upper-class English Catholics.²⁸ In both cases what galls her is the use of Christian identity to justify social exclusion.

Eager to see what was good in people of all religious backgrounds

But aside from this psychological dimension, Houselander objected to religious intolerance for deep-seated theological reasons, notably her understanding of the Mystical Body of Christ. This doctrine, of course, has deep roots in the biblical tradition in, for example, the Pauline teaching that all those baptized into Christ's death become members of his Body, an organic unity promoted by Christians' shared participation in the Eucharist. Such teaching was reinforced early in Houselander's publishing career, when Pius XII issued the encyclical *Mystici corporis* in 1943.²⁹ This document reinforced the traditional teaching that the Mystical

²⁷ For example, Houselander, *Guilt*, 19: 'Never, at any time in its fluctuating history, has Protestantism been the religion that sinners need. When it reached its peak in Victorian England, it had become ... a religion of the virtuous and the respectable ... It was the respectability of the country houses, smooth green lawns, garden fêtes, croquet, soothing and soporific hymns and equally soothing and soporific port, depending not a little on ample material resources, and giving, to those who enjoyed them, a quite special twist to the psalm which declares that "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want".'

²⁸ As, for example, in *Rocking-Horse Catholic*, 87–90, regarding the prejudices of moneyed, horse-obsessed Catholic girls (and nuns!) Houselander met in one of the English convent schools she attended, and 104–109, about the snubs Houselander received from some of the same girls and family acquaintances during the period when her mother was offering shelter to an unbalanced old priest. See also the *Letters of Caryll Houselander*, 66, where Houselander laments: 'The fact is that there is a "caste" in the Church—the fashionable Old Catholic Family—and that's what one wants to break away from—not the Church'.

²⁹ See the text at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi_en.html.

Body was made up of baptized Catholics in full sacramental union with the Church of Rome,³⁰ and indeed chiefly in its clergy and vowed religious.³¹

Houselander sometimes speaks as if she is thinking along these traditional lines, as when she says in one letter that Christ lives ‘in the souls of every *baptized Christian*’, including those who have the baptism of desire and blood, or in *This War Is the Passion*: ‘[Christ] was the man abiding in all men, in a mysterious but true sense; when He took Himself to His death He took *all Christian men* (my italics)’.³² Houselander also suggests that the Mystical Body of Christ is coextensive with the Catholic Church in those passages of correspondence with prospective converts where it is clear that she desires the person’s conversion, revealing her conviction that the fullness of salvation lies in communion with the Roman Catholic Church.³³ But the logic of her more frequent christological statements leads her to suggest that in fact the boundaries of the Mystical Body of Christ are much more expansive, incorporating the entire human race.

For example, Houselander asserts in her book *The Comforting of Christ* (a post-war revision of her first book, *This War Is the Passion*):

When Christ took Mary’s blood it and made it His own flesh and blood, He took our humanity to Himself and enabled us to become one with Him. When He was lifted upon the cross, He lifted every sinner up in Himself.³⁴

In *Guilt*, the last of her books to be published in her lifetime, Houselander continues: ‘The key to human nature is Christ. He is the pattern in which man was originally made and by becoming one with him, man can be restored to that pattern and become whole.’³⁵ What does she mean by

³⁰ *Mystici corporis*, n. 22: ‘Actually only those are to be included as members of the Church who have been baptized and profess the true faith, and who have not been so unfortunate as to separate themselves from the unity of the Body, or been excluded by legitimate authority for grave faults committed’.

³¹ See, for example, n. 17: ‘That those who exercise sacred power in this Body are its chief members must be maintained uncompromisingly ... those members of the laity who collaborate with the ecclesiastical hierarchy in spreading the Kingdom of the Divine Redeemer occupy an honorable, if often a lowly, place in the Christian community ...’

³² *Letters of Caryl Houselander*, 9; Houselander, *This War Is the Passion*, 23 (my italics). See also Caryl Houselander, *The Comforting of Christ: Being a Peace-Time Edition Revised and Enlarged of ‘This War Is the Passion’* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1947), 186.

³³ For example, in her correspondence with ‘Mrs Boardman’, in *Letters of Caryl Houselander*, 134–196, a woman contemplating leaving the Anglican Church for the Roman Catholic Church. What is particularly interesting in this correspondence is Houselander’s insistence that, while the fullness of grace is given in the Roman Catholic Church, it is possible to receive grace through the sacraments of the Anglican Church. See also *Letters of Caryl Houselander*, 138, 141–143.

³⁴ Houselander, *The Comforting of Christ*, 180.

³⁵ Houselander, *Guilt*, 71.

these statements? She is saying that when Christ takes on human nature in the incarnation, he draws all human beings to himself; in her words, 'He has put on everyone's life'.³⁶ Christ therefore has, as Houselander puts it, an 'everywhereness' and 'everyoneness' that are a 'drag at the heart'. 'The whole human race is one with Him, not merely the people of London, of England, but all people everywhere'.³⁷

Because all human beings have Christ within, all have an innate knowledge of Christ, and are, consciously or not, searching for the Father who is revealed by Christ, and participate in Christ's ongoing work of redemption. Hence Houselander articulates a doctrine of what she calls 'unconscious Christs'—all human beings who, having been created in the image of Christ, equally share the desire to possess in full consciousness the Christ who is within them, often expressing himself in acts of loving service.³⁸ She clarifies in *The Reed of God*:

This equality of desire makes every man search, makes everyone (whether he knows it or not) seek, seek, seek, all his life, for the lost Child, whether he knows Him directly as Christ or as the goodness of his human love; as the peace of his home, the joy in his work, or just as the indefinable lightness of heart which descends upon him like Pentecost.³⁹

To summarise, for Houselander unconscious Christs or Christians are those who, in seeking and affirming goodness wherever they encounter it, are seeking and affirming, however unknowingly, the Christ within who is the source of that goodness.⁴⁰ Interestingly, Houselander illustrates

³⁶ Caryll Houselander, *The Flowering Tree* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1945), 12. This work is a collection of Houselander's poems, or 'rhythms', as she called them.

³⁷ Houselander, *This War Is the Passion*, 162; the whole passage reads: 'There is no expression of His love, no part of Him, that does not go on in the world now, because we are His Body on earth, and He cannot be broken up, He must be in us whole; and He is. We cannot begin to understand this without wanting to respond to such love and to comfort Christ in all mankind. His everywhereness and everyoneness is a drag at the heart. The whole human race is one with Him, not merely the people of London, of England, but all people everywhere.'

³⁸ *Letters of Caryll Houselander*, 5–6; Houselander, *This War Is the Passion*, 163–164.

³⁹ Houselander, *Reed of God*, 106–107; see also 81: 'Even in ignorance, man tends to fall in love with God. He responds to life as he sees it round him with gratitude that becomes love and love that takes shape. For being made in God's image and likeness, man too must look upon the secret of his heart, made visible by the work of his hands.'

⁴⁰ The phrase 'unconscious Christs' is Houselander's usual way of expressing the insight; one commentator has described the doctrine as one regarding 'unconscious *Christians*' (my italics). See Henry Murphy, 'The Indwelling Presence of Christ in Man: The Basis of the Spiritual Theology of F. Caryll Houselander' (PhD thesis, Catholic University of America, 1971), 182. It may be helpful to the reader to know of another master's thesis devoted to the work of Houselander: Jerome Young, 'Christ in Man: the Life and Principal Writings of Frances Caryll Houselander' (MA thesis, Mount Angel Seminary, 1988).

this ideal of the unconscious Christian several times in her fiction for both children and adults. We see one in a story called 'Bernard's Ark', where Houselander says of a kind-hearted African immigrant:

His heart was so tender he had to worship something, so he worshipped the stars at night and his treasures by day, and sometimes his old pipe because it comforted him, and likewise for the same reason, his pot of tea stewing on the stove.⁴¹

In another story, Houselander says of a local shopkeeper, born Catholic, but educated in Protestant schools and finally lapsed from any religious observance: 'But everyone agreed about Mr Oates that whatever his faults, he gave good measure for good food'.⁴² One sees the unconscious Christian in the character of Peter, the young Communist firebrand in Houselander's one published novel, *The Dry Wood*. Officially opposed to all forms of religious observance, he is nevertheless kind to all the children, poor and outcast of the London streets, 'in fact dyed through and through with the color of the Christianity that he denied'.⁴³

Lastly, one sees the unconscious Christian in the description of Solly Lee's grandmother, in the same work. Solly Lee is a Jewish merchant, converted to Anglicanism, in Houselander's damning view, for the purposes of social advancement. Of his grandmother Houselander writes, 'she blessed God many times a day', in rites that were 'domestic, sensuous and tenderly devout'.⁴⁴ What you see in these examples are persons who affirm goodness either through their moral strivings or their appreciation of God's presence within the material order, revealing a sacramental sensibility that Houselander contends can only be fulfilled in the practice of Catholicism.

Thus, through her doctrine of the unconscious Christ within all human beings and the characters in her fictional writing who illustrate what Houselander elsewhere describes as a 'natural Christianity',⁴⁵ she at one and the same time confirms the traditional teaching that the fullness of salvation is available in complete sacramental communion with the Roman Catholic Church, and asserts that salvation in Christ is possible outside the boundaries of the Church.⁴⁶ Beneath the

⁴¹ Caryll Houselander, *Inside the Ark and Other Stories* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 22.

⁴² Houselander, *Inside the Ark*, 102–103.

⁴³ Caryll Houselander, *The Dry Wood* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1947), 113.

⁴⁴ Houselander, *Dry Wood*, 126.

⁴⁵ Houselander, *Reed of God*, 9.

⁴⁶ Caryll Houselander, *The Risen Christ* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 44–45. Houselander's conviction is evident here, even within a statement that acknowledges the graces given to those

particularities of Church and creed, there is a fundamental oneness in Christ that continues Christ's saving work even without the participants' knowledge.

Real Christianity, Houselander says, 'depends not upon what school of thought one grew up in, or what creed one believes in, but on one's capacity for love and for humility'.⁴⁷ The Mystical Body, therefore, includes not just the members of the Catholic Church, and certainly not just vowed religious, as *Mystici corporis* suggested, but the entire human race. 'The Church', Houselander says, 'is not only the Hierarchy, but all the people, sinner as much as saints, foolish and wise, the young, the mature, the old, little children, rich and poor, strong and weak. All of us.'⁴⁸ Elsewhere she asserts:

Our oneness in Christ, it reaches out even beyond the conscious acceptance of His law. That those who know His law must accept it is true To be a Catholic, who through God's mercy, has been taught this law, is to be in the love-poem of the uttered word of God. But from Christ's heart, which is the heart of His Church, light streams out; and sparks of it, of this Christ-light, the light of world, burn in souls that are unaware of the source of the radiance⁴⁹

This expansive and inclusive reading of the traditional Catholic doctrine of the Mystical Body in Houselander is also of a piece with the series of visions of 'Christ in man' that Houselander describes in her spiritual autobiography, *A Rocking-Horse Catholic*. In the first of the visions, she sees Christ in a distraught German lay sister at the French convent school she attended as a child; because of her nationality, the nun was ostracized by the community during the First World War.⁵⁰ In the second vision, she sees Christ in the face of the assassinated Tsar Nicholas of Russia.⁵¹ In the third, she sees Christ in all of the passengers on an

outside the Roman Catholic communion: 'Why we, who are members of Christ's body on earth, his Church, *are* so, is a great mystery; there cannot be a living Catholic who does not know a Protestant, or a pagan, or an agnostic who does not seem to him to be far worthier of our vocation, far better endowed for it by nature, and even by grace. But the fact remains that God has chosen us for the tremendous destiny of love, and if the wonder and joy of it is ours, so too is the responsibility of it. That responsibility is to prove to those who are still unaware of it that Christ has risen from the dead and that he is in the world now.'

⁴⁷ Ward, *Caryll Houselander*, 161.

⁴⁸ Caryll Houselander, 'The Risen Life', *The Tablet* (3 April 1946), 190, quoted in Murphy, 'The Indwelling Presence of Christ in Man', 151.

⁴⁹ Houselander, *Comforting of Christ*, 178–179.

⁵⁰ Houselander, *Rocking-Horse Catholic*, 72–74.

⁵¹ Houselander, *Rocking-Horse Catholic*, 110–116.



Jesus on the Tube, by Antonia Rolls

underground train in which she is travelling, a vision that continues for days as she walks through the crowded streets of London.⁵² Through the arc of this narrative, then, we see Houselander progressively extending her perception of Christ beyond the boundaries of Catholic membership from the nun to the Orthodox tsar, to everyone in one of the largest, most diverse cities in the world.⁵³

Although Houselander asserts that a greater understanding of the Mystical Body is a ‘very great and crying need’ for Catholics, it seems that this insight troubled her in the initial years after her return to the Church in 1925.⁵⁴ In a passage from a journal she kept at this time, Houselander is critical of fellow Catholics who condemned the modern world and, as she said, ‘set fierce limitations on the uses of the present’. She felt comfortable with those who saw good in modernity, who saw in modern progressive movements real options for creating a more just, equitable society. Yet she also admits,

⁵² Houselander, *Rocking-Horse Catholic*, 137–140.

⁵³ The mystical unity with all human beings of which Houselander became aware with this vision resurfaces in her novel *The Dry Wood* in the reflections of the character Timothy Green, 96–107; and in the poem in *The Flowering Tree* entitled ‘The Blitz Train’, 114.

⁵⁴ *Letters of Caryl Houselander*, 58.

I do not trust myself to stand alone, I will not range myself among those who, though they clearly share my desires, do not share my faith in Christ. Consequently I am tortured. I desire supremely and above all to be in perfect harmony with the whole world.⁵⁵

What subsequent reflection enabled Houselander to do was to realise that, in fact, by virtue of human nature's creation in the image of Christ, all are already to varying degrees 'in perfect harmony with the whole world'. In coming to this recognition about the ubiquity of Christ in humanity, Houselander was able to give voice to an intuition that was hers from early childhood, that there is a fundamental unity in humankind and that human happiness depends on that unity. Touchingly, it emerges in the first poem she ever composed, at the age of four, during Christmas celebrations, where she wrote: 'Let's all be a jolly lot; let no one be forgot. For we can't be a jolly lot, if anyone is forgot.'⁵⁶

The tension Houselander experienced between her fidelity to Catholicism and her equally intense desire that 'no one be forgot' in the salvation of humankind was, in many respects, a product of her time: a moment in Catholicism when, at least in official pronouncements, the boundaries between the communities of the Catholic saved and the non-Catholic damned were rigidly defined. Yet it is clear that Houselander was articulating a vision of the Mystical Body for a lay audience that would later be developed in more sophisticated academic circles. As one commentator has noted, Houselander's doctrine of the unconscious Christ within all human beings has many affinities with the German theologian Karl Rahner's doctrine of anonymous Christians.⁵⁷ This doctrine, in turn, developed out of statements of the Second Vatican Council wherein the Council Fathers offer a significant re-envisioning of the traditional doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ.

In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, the Council Fathers assert that 'many elements of sanctification and truth are found outside' the visible structure of the Roman Catholic Church, a statement Houselander would certainly affirm with all her references to Lao Tzu, the Buddha and Akhenaten.⁵⁸ Likewise, she would support the

⁵⁵ Ward, *Caryll Houselander*, 109. The journal is now held in the archives of Notre Dame University.

⁵⁶ This appears in a brief autobiographical statement by Houselander in *Born Catholics*, edited by F. J. Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954), 251.

⁵⁷ Murphy, 'The Indwelling Presence of Christ in Man', 188. Rahner's first published essay on the topic of anonymous Christians appears in *Theological Investigations*, volume 6, translated by Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), 390–398. It was based on a book review broadcast in 1964.

⁵⁸ *Lumen gentium*, n. 8.

Council Fathers' claim that these elements are 'forces impelling toward catholic unity', since that is the dynamic she endorses in both her fiction and correspondence, in which conversion to full union with Rome is the hoped-for outcome of loving and respectful human encounter.⁵⁹ Likewise, Houselander would endorse what the Council Fathers say later in the document that all can be saved who, though ignorant of the gospel, 'sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience'.⁶⁰

Of course, Rahner's doctrine of anonymous Christians and the statements of the Second Vatican Council, as well as subsequent papal teaching about the possibility of salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church, have occasioned much discussion and some criticism from conservative and liberal perspectives alike in recent years. It is likely that, in view of these divergent responses, Houselander's expansive view of the Mystical Body would also meet with varying assessments by contemporary theologians. Nevertheless, it is clear that on these points, as on many others—such as the universal call to holiness—in her simple, decidedly non-academic prose, Houselander gave voice to insights about ecclesiology and salvation that would come to full formal recognition in the Church twenty years or more after she began publishing. Hence she is an important figure in the history of ecumenical and interreligious thought in the Roman Catholic tradition, and deserves to be studied as such.

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⁵⁹ *Lumen gentium*, n. 8.

⁶⁰ *Lumen gentium*, n. 16.