



CLASSIC WISDOM COLLECTION

Christ in Our Midst

WISDOM FROM

Caryll Houselander

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Wisdom from Caryl Houselander

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BOOKS & MEDIA
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To my uncle Mark Delano Hill



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Foreword

I'm staring at the pattern on the rug and I distinctly see the forehead, hairline, cheeks, chin, eyes, brows, and the hint of a mouth. It's not someone I recognize, just a face. Fortunately it isn't Jesus, Mary, or Mother Teresa, so I won't cut out the section to sell online, nor will I turn the living room into a shrine. It is just a face, or the facsimile of a face, as illusive as the shapes seen in clouds on a lazy summer's day. One look away and the image vanishes.

So, why a face? Why not hands, feet, or even the back of a head? I suspect it is because people are fascinated by faces, which can reveal or conceal so much.

Faces connect us and also identify us. One evening I was having dinner with my cousins, all of them daughters of the same aunt and uncle. The question came up: "Which

of us do you think looks most like our mother?” The two of them who strongly resemble their father were not in contention, but the other four were in the running. I immediately blurted out one name only to see other faces fall. Later that evening, it occurred to me that one of the others was almost a spitting image of her mother. And really, all four of them carried a striking resemblance to her, varied but true.

It is these variations that make families so interesting. How many combinations and interpretations result from the faces of one man and one woman? It’s genetic magic. In a sense, Caryll Houselander worked a similar marvel in the many and compelling ways she presented the face of Christ, the one face we all long for. As a weaver of words and a deeply mystic soul, Caryll saw the face of Christ everywhere: as he is in the Church, as he hides in the needy or speaks through the poor, as he suffers in the sinner, as he serves, searches, and stands up in the midst of everyday life, as he lives in each one of us. Every book, every article she wrote aimed at making us aware of this wonderful truth: a definite family resemblance is found among believers.

My first encounter with the writings of Caryll Houselander was a hurried, last-minute scan of *The Reed of God*, which had been assigned summer reading. I didn’t get much out of it. I didn’t pay attention to any of her writings until years later. In a visit to my Uncle Mark, a

self-professed “Houselander groupie,” I discovered something I had overlooked so long ago. My uncle summarized the message of his kindred spirit. He sent me home with several of her books, which I then read eagerly. I found that in everything she wrote her intention was to show us how much we all look like Christ and are part of the great mystery known as his Mystical Body. Her life’s work was to help us understand the implications of this mystery.



Frances Caryll Houselander was, by her own admission, a very detached child. This was due in great part to her tumultuous childhood. She was born on September 29, 1901, in Bath, England, the second daughter of Gertrude Provis and Wilmott Houselander.¹ Caryll was six years old when Gertrude suddenly awoke to religion and was baptized Catholic together with her daughters. Unfortunately, long prayers and external devotions were overemphasized while the family’s foundation disintegrated. Nothing of the trouble was discussed with the children. Caryll’s imagination and nervous sensitivity propelled her to find refuge in a world of her own making, full of poetic images and tall tales.

With the breakup of the family, the Houselander girls were thrust into the unfamiliar life of boarding school,

where Caryll withdrew further. She was frequently ill and her formal schooling suffered. With time, however, she warmed to her surroundings and developed an attachment to the French nuns who ran the school.

During these early years Caryll had her first mystical experience. She happened upon a religious sister, a Bavarian, truly a misfit in wartime England, who was weeping. Out of respect Caryll turned away, but turning back she was stunned, and exclaimed, "I would not cry, if I was wearing the crown of thorns like you are."²

Years later on a trip to the market, Caryll experienced the whole sky illumined by a dazzling icon of the face of Christ the King crucified. And her final great vision took place on the London subway, where she was suddenly confronted by Christ visible in each passenger. She was quick to say these were not things she actually saw, but things present to her soul. Prior to this last vision, Caryll, an art student, had entered into the idealistic world of protests and freethinking. She had been offended by the pettiness and lack of charity among believers and opted out of the formal practice of her faith. She had been in and out of love and even had an affair with a famous English spy.³ However, as she began to note the presence of Christ in each person, she was drawn back to the Church. Then, instead of rebelling against the evils and injustices she witnessed on the streets of London, Caryll involved herself in

relieving them, one person at a time. She created the Loaves & Fishes, a society whose members engaged in secret acts of charity toward the poor. Writing, illustrating, and woodcarving barely provided for her support. However, her life grew more settled when she became acquainted with a young divorcee, Iris Wyndham, who invited Caryll to live with her, thus saving Caryll from likely destitution.

During the Second World War, Caryll joined several home defense activities, including watching for enemy bombers at night. When her writing became successful, she responded by giving more freely. Her fame also brought to her door numbers of people in search of advice. Some London psychologists entrusted difficult patients to her for counseling because they recognized her ability to love them back to life, a gift she attributed to the fact that she was neurotic herself. Although painfully shy in crowds, she was the delight of her close friends, always laughing and joyful, and an entertaining storyteller, actress, and mimic.

With all this, was Caryll perfect? Not if you consider her chain smoking, affection for a stiff drink, or penchant for the quick, cutting remark. She *was* perfect, however, in her effort to show Christ to the seeker through her own way of living the Gospel and the “Host-life,” that is, the gift of self for others.

After this short, but remarkably gifted and giving life, Caryll died of breast cancer on October 12, 1954.



Who was Caryll Houselander, really? I would like to say she was a prophet of our eternal connectedness. She wrote endlessly, haranguing and hurraing us with the realization that Christ wishes to live in us, to be one body with us.

Caryll exemplifies how daring Our Lord is in his dealings with a person when he wants cooperation. And just as Christ laid claim to Saint Paul's learning and zeal, with Caryll it was her insight and her style. Both Paul and Caryll were allowed to see Jesus, and both were then asked to give him to their contemporaries. Caryll generously dove into this mission, spending her physical and creative energies in showing us the beauty and nearness of Christ, his presence in the Church, in the world, in self, and in each person we encounter, whether saint or sinner. She used the reality of everyday life to illustrate the mystery of the life to come. She helped us examine the life of grace, which flows through our collective lives and binds us together.

We all know people who have separated themselves from the Body of Christ. They consider the Church irrelevant, and this is always painful to witness. As believers we

want to hold the family of faith together. Therefore, when someone asks where they can find Christ today, what do we say? Where do we point? Added to the ordinary trials of life, the Church may look unappealing, even appalling, so where are people to find God? Where will they see Christ? Caryll says the answer must begin with us, within us. “The only certain way of giving truth to others is by *showing* Christ to them in ourselves. People now are too tired and disintegrated to think, too unconcentrated to read serious books, too disillusioned to be moved by abstract theories, too unstable to listen to logical arguments, too much hurt to endure exhortation—*they must see!*”⁴

By her own admission Caryll Houselander was an oddity, an eccentric person who used all her natural and supernatural gifts to draw others toward their true destiny. She could be seen in the streets of London, her smiling face covered with a strange white paste, her eyes peering through her round glasses, her striking red hair bouncing with each step. She gave of herself totally and joyfully to all whom she encountered. Her life abounded in acts of kindness toward both friend and stranger. She never shied even from acting the fool to bring joy to a troubled soul. She would counsel us to be conduits of all the love and the pain, the doubt and the faith of our contemporaries. From her we can learn to put ourselves out there, quirks and all, as the loving, inviting face of Christ today.



I

The Choice

Suppose that God gave every man the choice between a world in which there was no suffering, but also no capacity for love, or a world in which suffering remains, but everyone has the power to love. Which do you think mankind would choose? Which would *you* choose? Quite certainly the power to love, even at the cost of suffering.

Now this is precisely what has happened. The thing which makes us able to love is free-will, and it is the same thing, free-will, which makes us able to sin. Without it there would be no sin and no love in the world.

— *The Mother of Christ*, 80



II

The Responsibility

The responsibility of all the love of all the ages of the world belongs to each one, through each one flows the whole torrent of life that is given from generation to generation by love: love, which through the miracle of the Incarnation is made tangible and audible in us, so that its music is heard in our voices—in the plighting of our troths, in our marriage vows, in our words of comfort and pity and joy, in our laughter, in the songs beside our cradles, in our choirs of adoration; love, which we transmit with our touch, with the work of our hands, with the labors and pains, the ecstasies and the embraces of our bodies, in the act of procreation, of giving birth, in nursing and serving,

and in closing the eyes and bathing the limbs of our dead; love, which holds the timelessness of God in a moment of time, which—with the sacramentals of our flesh and blood, our hands, our voices, our hearts, our minds—forgives, redeems, heals, generates, adores.

To attempt to repress Christ in ourselves is to attempt to hold back the river of life, to stop the bloodstream of the Son of God that is the lifestream of all mankind.

The man in whom Christ is not repressed is a channel through which the life and love of all humanity flows back to God. And as the bloodstream in a man's body is purified by the air he breathes, his supernatural life is purified by the breath of the Spirit that perpetually renews the life of Christ in man. It flows through the divine Mind and through the heart of mankind, continually purifying human nature of the poison that has infected it, perpetually renewing the life of the world.

— *Guilt*, 96–97



III

God in Us

What is Love? Many people think and some of them say so, that it is sexual passion. That certainly is a superb expression of love. But it is not the whole of love, and it is quite possible to have sexual passion without any love at all. In this regard, many people—with blasphemy that is pitiful because it is unconscious and because, too, they are speaking of the best they know—say “God is love,” meaning “God is license.”

There is a wistful belief that love has a power to make people something, to reform them, to make them noble. That is true of real love. But the purely natural love, with its alloy of self, does not make one anything, it merely

shows exactly what one is. Love is sometimes responsible for heroism, but it is sometimes responsible for crime too.

It is true that God is love—but it is a truth which can be more easily grasped if we say Love is God.

When God enters into our passions, joys, desires, sorrows, into our relationship with one another, our nature undergoes a transubstantiation. The Paraclete Who rests in the human heart changes the substance of our humanness to Christ, we are charged with the power of Christ's love. Love is God in us.

This power of love is the beginning of the world's healing, of human happiness. The world is made up of weak as well as strong people, of dull as well as intelligent people, of blind people as well as those who have vision, of naturally superficial as well as intense people. If all these and the millions more are to be as one, are to find happiness that is good and is a hallowing of God's Name, they must do it in the only way they can: through the interchange in daily life of the love of Christ.

In love the world has life. This is yet another reason why we need the revelation, the truth told by Christ. Love must be governed by law.

How chill that sentence must fall on many burning hearts who think law is a series of prohibitions; that the way to Heaven is like the way to Berlin in a pre-war German train, "Verboten" written large wherever we

look!¹ Something restricting and crushing love. On the contrary, God's law is a natural law, which simply concentrates the meaning and force of love and gives the love of every individual a lasting and abiding beauty. It is to life what the law of verse is to poetry. Without the rules of rhythm and sound and harmony, the pause, the stress, the silences, the words of a poem have no meaning. Let them fall apart and be mixed up and spoken at random, and what you have is something more like the raving of a lunatic than the expression of a lover. But gather them into the order and strength and discipline of poetry, and you have an expression of love which not only tells the splendor of one poet's heart, but one in which all the inarticulate of the world speak for ever.

Such concentration and power of love, safeguarded and made enduring by a musical law, can restore humanity to happiness.

If we accept Christ's words, the communion of love between all the people and ultimately all the peoples in the world is the interchange of Christ's love; it is, therefore, the continual giving and taking and increase of creative life. It is Christ giving Himself through us, the ultimate expression between us of the humility from which we started, which, knowing self as part of a whole and the whole as Christ, realizes the potency, the peace, that is in both the vastness and the littleness of all that we do and are.

There is no problem which love cannot solve, no wound which it cannot heal, no wrong which it cannot forgive, no passion which it cannot sanctify. There is no place where it cannot be practiced, no circumstances from which it cannot radiate, no living of it which does not answer the world's need and which is not a giving of life to all men.

The kiss of the bride and the bridegroom is Christ's kiss of peace to the world; the mother nursing her baby is a symbol of God holding the world to His heart. Love is Christ giving Himself through us, in our hands, in our words, in our tenderness, in our restraint, in all that we do, in all our communions with one another.

A young man setting his pace to an old man's footsteps is love; a swift thinker curbing his thoughts for a slow mind is love. The ascetic fasting that the world may be fed is love; the celibate offered to God that marriages be holy is love; the patience that cherishes the sick and the lonely is love; the sickness suffered sweetly for the world is love. The boy who is decent to the new boy at school is love; the toleration that makes home pleasant to the young is love; the charity that judges no sinner is love; the fortitude that compromises with no sin is love. It is the Christ giving between us all.

— *The Comforting of Christ*, 9–12