

Prayer of the month • October 2017

Be born in us, Incarnate Love.
Take our flesh and blood, and give us your humanity;
take our lives, and give us your vision;
take our minds, and give us your thought;
take our feet and set them in your path;
take our hands and fold them in your prayer;
take our hearts and give them your will to love.



Caryll Houselander, 1901–1954¹

The idea of the incarnate God being born in us is not new, but Caryll Houselander takes it further. She includes both the physical and the spiritual human aspects in a sequence of exchanges requested of the God of love. To be bearers of God's life is more than simply a decision. For a start it is more to do with God than with us. Secondly, it takes time – it is a process. What it leads to is transformation, a complete change to live the life of God even in this world. It is a profound and ambitious prayer, and one that invite us to use it regularly and repeatedly.

Frances Caryll Houselander was born on 29 September 1901, in Bath, the second of two daughters born to Wilmott Houselander and Gertrude Provis. She was a sickly child, and plagued by illness throughout her life. The title of her autobiography, *A Rocking-Horse-Catholic* (published posthumously in 1955), refers to the fact that she was not a cradle Catholic – her mother became a Catholic when Caryll was six. When she was nine, her parents separated permanently, and Caryll and her sister Ruth were sent to boarding school, where she seems to have had her first mystical experience. She reports that she saw a Bavarian nun sitting by herself, weeping and polishing shoes. After a period of silence she saw the nun's head being pressed down by a crown of thorns, which she was to interpret as Christ suffering in the nun. At that time there was much anti-German feeling because of the war. She had two other mystical experiences later and these convinced her that Christ is to be found in all people, even those who might be shunned by others. Houselander trained as a wood carver. She had some 'bohemian years' before returning to faith in 1925. She was a chain-smoker, liked gin, had a sharp tongue, attended Mass daily, and saw herself as having a religious vocation, engaged in what she called 'the Christing of the world'. She was a prolific writer, and was sought out by many spiritual pilgrims who were attracted by her writings and by her 'art therapy'. During the war doctors started sending traumatised children (and adults) to her for counselling and therapy. Although she had no formal training in this, she had a natural empathy for people in mental anguish, and a skill in helping them to recover. Houselander never married. During her last years she continued to write books, articles, and letters to her many correspondents, and to minister to the mentally distressed children sent to her. She died of breast cancer (the same disease that had killed her mother), after a long period of suffering, on 12 October 1954, at the age of 53. Her works continue to be republished in our own day.

Colin Lunt

¹*Lord, hear our prayer* / compiled by Thomas McNally and William G. Storey. – Notre Dame, Indiana : Ave Maria Press, 1978. – p.198