

THE EVELYN UNDERHILL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

EVELYN UNDERHILL AND VATICAN II: A COMPARISON OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH OF HER TIME AND OURS

Grace Adolphsen Brame

When people study history there are always several questions which seem important to be considered. How do the times affect individuals, and how do individuals affect their times? Secondly, what are the birth pangs of outstanding events in history, and how does that pain actually contribute to the positive or negative results? Lastly, are the events unifying or divisive? All these questions may be asked about individuals, or of groups, or of a society.

Evelyn Underhill, born in 1875 during the reign of Pius IX, is a fascinating bridge between the Protestant and Catholic approaches to worship and theology in that she was essentially a Vatican II person, a breath of fresh air, in her own time. Raised by parents who were Anglican in name, but thoroughly disinterested in the church, her birth followed five years after the first Vatican Council of 1869 and 1870. Although her life then was not touched by Catholicism, what happened in the Catholic Church from that time until 1907 deeply affected the course of her life. She, in turn, affected the spiritual life of people inside and out of both the Protestant and Catholic churches.

Pope Pius IX is best known for three events: defining the Immaculate conception of Mary as freedom from original sin, publishing the "Syllabus of Errors" denouncing liberal tendencies in the Roman church, and calling the First Vatican Council which is remembered today for its pronouncement of papal infallibility in matters of faith and morals.

Leo XIII followed Pius and, at first, brought a warmer, more conciliatory tone to the papacy. His greatest efforts were in fostering rapprochement and dialogue between the church, culture, and society. He invited the Orthodox and Protestant churches to return to Rome and, in *Rerum Novarum* proclaimed social justice and the rights of workers. But towards the end of his life in 1903, with concern over liberal tendencies in scholarship and biblical studies, he set up a permanent Biblical Commission, established new norms for censorship, and created a new Index of forbidden books.

By the time of Evelyn Underhill's conversion to Catholicism in 1906 and her marriage in 1907, Pius X had ascended the papal throne. Liberalism had been growing in society for years; at that time, from the Pope's point of view, it was threatening the church. Protestant scholarship had become increasingly liberal. Among most Protestant scholars, literal interpretation of the Bible was out; a critical, historical, and comparative study of scripture was in. The stage was set for the Pope's three official pronouncements made in 1907 against the "heresy of heresies" which he chose to call "modernism." His actions brought into the Roman and Protestant relationship, and into Underhill's own life, a parting of the ways.

Evelyn Underhill had come to the Catholic Church through its art and its "mysteries": its sacraments (particularly the eucharist) and its sacramental view of life, its awareness of the eternal touching time and of the transcendent and extraordinary found in the "homely" and ordinary. Her spirit, as Dana Greene points out, was that of an artist, but it is obvious that her mind, even in her teen-age years, probed, questioned, and evaluated. She drank in the thought of philosophers, psychologists, and theologians of her day and studied the thinkers of the past.

When Pius X condemned the dangers he perceived in individual religious experience and the liberal, critical approach in current biblical scholarship, Evelyn Underhill was cut adrift from what was to be the home of her soul: the Catholic Church to which she had given her heart as a result of her first retreat. She could not, in all conscience, join the church she loved without evading the theological position which it had come to espouse. Her problem, in short, was that she considered herself a modernist. She could not be untrue to her convictions. How sad that the year was 1907 rather than 1965!

With the coming of Vatican II (1962 through 1965), the rebirth which came to the Catholic Church changed other churches and ecumenicity as well. The council recognized the church as "the people of God." Laity began to study the scriptures avidly and to interpret them as speaking directly and personally to them. John XXIII had invoked the infilling of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of deliberations; and the liturgical renewal, begun in the years before the council convened, was fulfilled in the charismatic movement which followed.

The oath against the practice of modernism which was required of all priest and theologians was finally removed from use. Catholic scholars of scripture openly adopted historical criticism. The long-held view regarding "the one, holy catholic church" was softened, and a hand of fellowship was extended to the Protestant community; dialogues, still continuing today, were begun between them.

With congregational hymn singing and a dialogue mass in the vernacular, other walls were broken down between Catholics and Protestants who now could appreciate each other's worship. The eucharist, formerly held in such esteem by Protestants that it was not frequently received, came to be seen with new eyes as the heart of Christian worship. Thus many Protestant churches followed the Catholic in bringing the altar, now become the thanksgiving table of the family of God, into the midst of the congregation. The eucharist was celebrated often, if not regularly.

The teaching of the spiritual path, meditation and contemplation, and the writings of the saints and Christian mystics- part of the Catholic monasteries and seminaries through the history of the church- were brought to the general public with Vatican II. Evelyn Underhill's personal mission became that of a newly vital church.

Had Evelyn Underhill been present for all these happenings, what would she have done? The "Protestant side" of her nature had always affirmed each individual's need and right to study the scriptures and search them for their personal message. Her faith would not have existed without

the experience of both the corporate and personal revelation of God in nature, human beings, sacrament, art, and prayer. "The center of (her) creed" was the reality of the Holy Spirit, and the eucharist was the center of her worship. Her appreciation for the worship forms of Jews and Christians of Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant persuasion throughout their histories was documented in her book, **Worship**, now deemed a classic and still studied in seminaries. Her level-headed, but loving approach to the mass in its Anglican form found expression in her work for the Commission on the Prayer Book of 1929. Her concern for "peace and unity," the goal of John XXIII for Vatican II, was shown in her involvement in the first ecumenical efforts in England in the late 1920s, and in her passionate espousal of pacifism at cost to herself during the second World War.

Would Evelyn Underhill have been a Catholic today? She might well have been one in the late 1960s.

NOTEWORTHY PUBLICATIONS

Kevin Hogan published "The Experience of Reality: Evelyn Underhill and Religious Pluralism." **Anglican Theological Review**, LXXIV: 3.

Delroy Oberg edited **Given to God: Daily Readings with Evelyn Underhill**, London, DLT. Intro. by A. M. Allchin.

Brenda and Stuart Blanch edited **Heaven A Dance: An Evelyn Underhill Anthology**, London, SPCK.

Ways of the Spirit, edited by Grace Brame, is available in paperback from Crossroad.

Fragments from an Inner Life: The Notebooks of Evelyn Underhill, edited by Dana Greene, will be forthcoming from Morehouse in the Spring. Foreword by A. M. Allchin.

Worship (Eagle), **Practical Mysticism** (Eagle), and **The Letters of Evelyn Underhill** (DLT), are now available in England.

PAST

The Evelyn Underhill Day of Reflection was held at the College of Preachers on June 6, 1991. **The Spiritual Life** formed the basis for prayer, reading and sharing.

Dana Greene gave A Short Course on Evelyn Underhill June 8-11, 1991 at the Washington Cathedral. **Life as Prayer** and **Practical Mysticism** were as texts for the course.

Grace Brame gave presentations on Underhill at Anchor, The American Academy of Religion, Christ Episcopal Church, Woodbury, N. J., and for the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey.

PRESENT

Todd Johnson, a graduate student in the department of theology at the University of Notre Dame, is writing a doctoral dissertation on Underhill's application of pneumatological oblation to symbols and sacraments.

Annice Callahan, professor of theology at Regis College, Toronto, has a fellowship to St. John's College, Collegeville, MN., to write on the theology of Underhill.

Grace Brame is pursuing work on a book on the spiritual theology of Underhill.

FUTURE

The Evelyn Underhill Association will sponsor its annual day of reflection on **June 19, 1993** at the Deanery on the grounds of the Washington Cathedral. Details will be forthcoming, or call Special Events at the Cathedral 202-537-6200.

Grace Brame will present "Evelyn Underhill: Individual Intellectual Integrity and Personal Religious Experience " at General Theological Seminary, N. Y. in late Spring.

IN MEMORIAM

It is with regret we announce the death on Oct. 12, 1992 in London of Renée Tickell (née) Haymes) at age eighty-six. Renée was great friend of Evelyn Underhill and a distinguished writer and reviewer who helped many with their research on Underhill. Her intelligence and perceptiveness will be missed by all who knew her.

HELP !

We want and need to hear from you! What can we do individually and corporately to promote the work of Evelyn Underhill? Give us your ideas, dreams. Have you written anything on her? Articles, reviews of her books? Please send them to us, and pass this newsletter to your friends.

SUGGESTIONS NEEDED

Where in the U. S. should an archive for Evelyn Underhill materials be established? Ideas?

THE EVELYN UNDERHILL ASSOCIATION

The purpose of the Association are: to make known and promote the study of the works of Evelyn Underhill and to this end to conduct meetings, conferences and retreats and to distribute a newsletter; to support research and writing about Evelyn Underhill and her ideas in the areas of religion and spirituality; to promote and support fellowship among people interested in her works. Persons who wish to forward these purposes may become Associates. Although there are no dues for Associates, tax deductible contributions may be sent to EUA, 7315 Bookville Rd., Chevy Chase, Md. 20815.