

The Evelyn Underhill Newsletter



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November 1996

Annual Evelyn Underhill Day of Reflection

On Saturday, June 15, 1996, the fifty-fifth anniversary of the death of Evelyn Underhill in London, The Evelyn Underhill Association and the Washington Cathedral sponsored the sixth annual day of prayerful reflection, both to commemorate the life and work of this great woman and through prayer and discussion to grow in understanding of Christian life. This year the day focused on the meaning and purpose of the church. Underhill's long and difficult embracing of the church gives her words added importance:

So, because we believe in the holy and life-giving spirit who becomes articulate in the prophets, telling us their vision of God, we also believe, which is often far more difficult, the voice of the traditional Church. The Church witnesses with the world to the fact of God. All her symbolic veils do give us something of the radiance of the uncreated Light, and within her ancient phrases we hear the murmur of the one World. And more than this, we acknowledge that the total Christian society...has yet a quality, a personality, a power of its own. Its baptism...does something;...admits us to a new level of life, makes us the citizens of another patria, with a real and awful series of privileges and powers and responsibilities.

The Day of Reflection began with small group exploration led by

Fay Campbell, Joyce Glover, and Betty Walters. Milo Coerper, Dana Greene, and Kathleen Staudt made presentations on various aspects of Underhill's understanding of the church, and Mary Ellen Bork did readings from Underhill's writings. The day was dedicated to the memory of Sir William Wilkinson, executor of Underhill's literary estate, who died in April.



Our Purpose

The Evelyn Underhill Association promotes the study of the works of Evelyn Underhill and supports research and writing about her ideas. Days of Reflection are held, and the association is a resource through a newsletter and correspondence. Membership is open to all.

Association officers are; Dana Greene, president; Grace Brama, vice president; Carole Crumley, secretary; Milo Coerper, treasurer; and Lois Sibley, newsletter editor.

Donations to help defray costs are appreciated and may be sent to: Evelyn Underhill Association, c/o Milo Coerper, 7315 Brookville Rd., Chevy Chase, MD 20815.

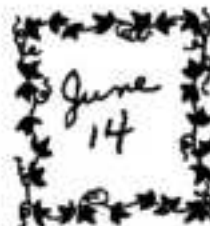
Note: On the 4th Saturday of each month, beginning October 16, the Center for Prayer and Pilgrimage at the Washington National Cathedral will be open for quiet prayer from 9-11 am. Enter north side, through security entrance. Go to Center near Resurrection Chapel. All are welcome.

Announcing:

- The 1997 Day of Reflection
- To be held on Saturday, June 14, 1997
- At the Washington National Cathedral

Theme: "The Form of a Faithful Life."

What did Evelyn Underhill see as central practice for leading a faithful life? What practices did she develop in her own life and what did she suggest for others? What were the sources of inspiration for the development of this life? Participants are asked to read *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill* in preparation for the Day of Reflection. Brochures will be available in May from the Special Events Office, Washington National Cathedral, Mount Saint Albans, Washington, DC 20016.



Teresian Wisdom in Selected Writings of Evelyn Underhill



by Mary Brian Durkin, O.P.

The following is excerpted from an article that first appeared in *Spiritual Life*, Spring 1995. It illustrates the extent to which Teresian wisdom permeates, supports, and enhances Underhill's ideas of how ordinary people, leading ordinary lives, can, by selfless prayer and sanctified work, become forces of good, channels of God's grace flowing out to improve God's world.

What is the spiritual life? Inspired by Teresa's analogy of the soul as an "interior castle," a spacious mansion with various floors, rooms, and apartments—many in poor condition—Underhill expands and adapts the simile to emphasize the Teresian principle that there should be no distinction between the spiritual and the practical life. Underhill pictures the soul, not as a lofty castle, diamond bright and imposing, but as a simple two-story house; the ground floor is the natural life, biologically conditioned with animal instincts and weaknesses; the upper floor is the supernatural life with its capacity to achieve union with God. Underhill employs this analogy in *The House of the Soul* and in subsequent writings and conferences throughout the 1930s; Teresa utilizes her analogy in her notable work *The Interior Castle*.

Underhill, utilizing the house imagery, warns that to lead a truly spiritual life it is impossible to live only on the second floor in a cozy "quiet room," where one can forget the downstairs where there are "black beetles in the kitchen and the stove doesn't burn very well." Upstairs and downstairs—the life of the spirit and the life of the senses—must be perfectly balanced, both consecrated to God's purposes. Charity, the fire of love of God, brings the two floors together but the fire needs careful tending. "It will only be developed and kept burning," Underhill warns, "in a life informed by prayer—faithful, steady, mortified, self-oblivious prayer, the humble aspiration of the spirit to its Source; the very object of prayer is to increase and maintain charity, the loving friendship of the soul with God" (*The House of the Soul*, p. 141).

To foster a genuine prayer life, Underhill insists that we must establish a simple but exacting rule for our devotional life, time free from strain and outside distractions, a regime of quiet solitude. "Make a simple rule and stick to it," she advised. She advocated a minimum of twenty minutes set aside daily for vocal or mental prayer, reading of Scripture or the lives and prayers of the saints, and sane self-discipline, by which she did not mean looking for crosses to bear, but prayerfully accepting the normal vicissitudes of daily life.

Although her ideas about the higher forms of contemplation mirror those of Teresa, Underhill in her spiritual direction work, particularly in letters to advisees and at retreat conferences, placed much greater emphasis on vocal and mental prayer. She discusses thoroughly the art of meditation, but even there she gave homage to Teresa, stating "Those who wish to see it described with the precision of genius, need only turn to St. Teresa's *Way of Perfection*" (*The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*, p. 93).

"Avoid narrow, limiting ideas of prayer," Underhill urged, "think of prayer as all of life in communion with God...It is the life of the soul, the life in which one breathes spiritual air, feeds on spiritual food, learns spiritual things and does spiritual work" (Grace Brame, *The Ways of the Spirit*, p. 135). She encourages the development of one's own personal style of prayer, following one's own attrait (inclination). You converse differently with different friends, she pointed out, and since prayer is conversation with God, it, too, should be personal, intimate. In letters to advisees, she counseled them to be

flexible in prayer: speaking, listening, thinking, sometimes just resting in communion with God. Here she mirrors Teresa's advice to her novices: "The soul can picture itself in the presence of Christ...It has no desires and needs" (St. Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, vol. I, ch. XI, p. 71).

No type of prayer is always easy or comforting, Underhill admits. Remember that Teresa said that when we are first learning the art of prayer, we have to draw the living water, that is, God's grace, out of the well by ourselves, an act requiring effort, courage, and discipline. In *The Life of the Spirit and the Life Today*, she repeats Teresa's warning: "Nothing, sisters, is learned without a little trouble, so do for the love of God, look upon any care which you take about this as well spent" (p. 107). Prayer depends on the will but there are times, Underhill concedes, when our best efforts seem more like "grinding out spiritual sawdust."

When prayers seem blank and deficient in love, tell God how sorry you are, she advises, and fall back on formal, vocal prayer. To an advisee suffering from aridity in prayer, Underhill urges: "Brighten up, seek other outlets, do some good works and think less of your soul." She advises another to expand her wholesome, natural, and intellectual interests: "Don't concentrate on the religious side of your life only. Get the necessary variety and refreshment without which religious intensity becomes stale....Religious fervor eludes us when we chase it, but creeps back unawares" (*Letters*, pp. 93, 132, 175).

Underhill frequently asserts in letters and lectures that spiritual reading is second only to prayer as

a support for the inner life and should be an essential element of one's daily regimen of prayer. She recommended a thoughtful reading of the classics and the lives of the saints. The saints are specialists, she liked to point out, but specialists in a career to which all Christians are called. Noting that Teresa told her novices to always have a book handy when they started to pray or meditate, Underhill repeats the saint's words: "The best way of knowing God is to frequent the company of his friends."

Just as Underhill's spiritual mentor—the eminent lay theologian, Baron von Hugel—urged her to become less theocentric and more Christ-centered, so did she urge retreatants to spend time reading about and meditating on the life of Christ, not only his Passion but his active ministry: healing, teaching, forgiving.

Underhill knew that it is easier to develop and preserve a spiritual outlook on life than it is to make everyday actions harmonize with that spiritual outlook. She makes clear that our soul's two-story house is not an isolated, individual dwelling fenced in on a small, devotional plot on a one-way street, but is a part of the City of God in the imperfect but Eternal World.

As our lives merge into the city and its currents, we must radiate God's love to the lovable and unlovable, an impossible task unless our lives, in Underhill's words, "are soaked through and through by a sense of God's reality and claim" (*The Spiritual Life*, p. 32), love deepened by adoration of our Creator and made visible by sanctified works.

All our efforts as ordinary people to achieve by ordinary means this extraordinary spiritual life must be accomplished, Underhill insists, not with grim determination and ferocious penance, but with enthusiasm and joyous faith. She reminds her readers that Teresa composed songs for her novices, even sang ditties about her own mystical experiences, played her little pipes and drums, and laughed at the "pussy cats," the conservative nuns who thought it better to pray than to

recreate and sing. Teresa's horror of solemnity, reflected in her terse comment, "Lord, deliver us from silly devotions," is echoed in Underhill's oft-repeated words: "You don't have to be peculiar in order to find God."

Underhill's teachings on the spiritual life reflect Teresa's own thoughts, when she writes: "Love for God consists in serving him with righteousness, fortitude of soul, and humility and love" (*Life*, ii). Underhill knew, admired, and adapted Teresa's psychological insights and sagacity, utilizing them time and again to enrich her own teaching.

Mary Brian Durkin, O.P. is a retired professor of English literature, Rosary College, IL, who serves as chaplain at Loyola University Medical Center, Chicago.



May they rest in Peace...

Sir William Wilkinson, who was for many years the literary executor of the estate of Evelyn Underhill, passed on earlier this year at the age of sixty-three. His mother was the god-daughter of Evelyn Underhill and his grandmother one of her close friends. Milo and Wendy Coerper recently visited Sir William's wife, Lady Kate Wilkinson, in London, after the death of her husband.

Donie Carmack Rieger, long-time lover of Underhill's work, died June 19 in McLean, Virginia. In her life and work Donie emulated the deep spirituality of Evelyn Underhill.

News and Notes:

Kevin Hogan, a physician practicing in Maryland and a doctoral student in religious studies at the Catholic University of America, has published "The Proximity of Doctrine: Underhill and Sayers on the Trinity" in *The Anglican Theological Review*, Spring 1996.

Mary Brian Durkin, O.P.'s "Teresian Wisdom in Selected Writings of Evelyn Underhill," was published in *Spiritual Life*, Spring 1995 and is excerpted in this issue.

Todd Eric Johnson's doctoral dissertation, "In Spirit and Truth: Pneumatology, Modernism and their Relation to Symbols and Sacraments in the Writings of Evelyn Underhill," has been approved by the Department of Theology, University of Notre Dame. In it, Johnson defines the theological movements in England and chronicles the development of EU's thought through three distinct phases. He compares her pneumatic thought at the end of her life to representative theologies of the Eucharist from the same period. He sees Underhill's work on the Holy Spirit as at least twenty years ahead of its time within Anglican thought. A summary of the dissertation will be presented at the November meeting of the American Academy of Religion, with Jürgen Moltmann as commentator.

The Virginia Theological Seminary Library in Alexandria, Virginia, has now cataloged the Evelyn Underhill Collection. Those interested should contact the archivist at the library.

St. Deniniol's Residential Library (Hawarden, Deeside, Clwyd, CH5 3DF, U.K.) has an excellent collection of Underhill's writings.

The Pilgrim's Guide is planning a pilgrimage to sites connected to Underhill's life. Contact Donna Ostahaus, The Pilgrim's Guide, 7481 Huntsman Blvd., Ste. 105, Springfield, VA 22153.

Spiritual Entente

A little known aspect of Evelyn Underhill's spiritual formation was that which occurred through her relationship with Sorella Maria, an Italian Franciscan.

Although greatly influenced by French spirituality and the English mystics, Underhill's writing also illustrates her profound love of Italy and the influence of the spirituality of Francis. It was in the art and architecture of Italy in the 1890s that she came to know the life of the spirit. The Italian Sorella Maria was also an important influence on her during the difficult period immediately after World War I. We know little of the relationship between Underhill and Sorella Maria except that the former experienced profound consolation from this nun.

Apparently it was through an English woman, a Miss Turton, that Underhill first became acquainted with what was called the Confraternity of the Spiritual Entente, a small band of women who were seekers after the presence of God. The Confraternity was founded by Sorella Maria, who at some point, after a private audience with the pope, was permitted to leave her convent to start this ecumenical group dedicated to prayer for Church unity. The six women members lived the Primitive Franciscan Rule, and each remained completely loyal to her own church, liv-

ing in such a way as to convince others that Christ could be known within that church.

In 1919, at the urging of Underhill, Lucy Menzies, Underhill's spiritual advisee, met with the Spiritual Entente while traveling in Italy. Although there are no extant letters between Underhill and Sorella Maria, Margaret Cropper, Underhill's first biographer, claims that Underhill confided much of her pain of darkness to the nun prior to the period when she sought out Baron von Hugel as her spiritual guide.

It was during this same time, that Underhill began her work on Jacopone da Todì, a second generation follower of Francis who also held to the Primitive Rule. She published *Jacopone da Todì: Poet and Mystic, 1228-1306*, in 1920. Writing this book was a crucial part of her development in a period of crisis in her own life. During the next decade, she published several reviews and articles on Franciscan topics.

Underhill visited Sorella Maria and the Confraternity of the Spiritual Entente in the Fall of 1924 at their Rifugio outside Assisi. Later she wrote about that encounter: "The head of the household and foundress, who is known as the Least sister, came down the lane to welcome me....Those who recognize her type will discover without surprise that her delicate courtesy, her serene and wide-spreading love conceal a Teresian inflexibility of purpose: a profound sense of the

pain and need of the world, and a passionate desire to help it. As we sat in the woods, I asked her to tell me something of her conception of the spiritual life. She replied, in words startlingly at variance with her peaceful surroundings, 'In tormento e travaglia servire i fratelli.'"

Sorella Maria and Evelyn Underhill were both part of an unorganized Confraternity, which worked in hiddenness and had no propaganda, no public reunions, no rule but that of a common loyalty and intention and a mutual reverence and love. Their intention was union of the Church, by showing union of all professing Christians in harmony and peace.

Although we know little of the ongoing relationship between Underhill and Sorella Maria, we do know that the latter appeared briefly in Underhill's life at a time when she decided to recommit herself again to the church. It seems likely that Sorella Maria made some contributions to that decision. Sorella Maria's dedication to the Franciscan themes of church unity and peace later became major themes in Underhill's own life and work.

(Those EUA associates, men and women, interested in becoming members of a Spiritual Entente dedicated to prayer for church unity and peace should write: Spiritual Entente, c/o Dana Greene, 1209 Tulane Dr., Alexandria, VA 22307.)

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