

The Evelyn Underhill Newsletter



Volume 11, No. 1

November 2001

Insights That Endure

by Dana Greene

Evelyn Underhill died in June 1941, 60 years ago this year. Her death came when Britain was locked in a battle for its life. A year before her death she left Kensington, a place she had lived her entire life, for the somewhat safer suburb of Hampstead. It was a confusing time for any believer, but particularly for the Christian pacifist. In 1939, Underhill joined a tiny group of English pacifists, most of whom were members of the historic peace churches. She took her stand humbly but resolutely, believing that the pacifist position was a vocational one, but that it followed from the Christian admonition to love one's enemies. For a woman who was a committed British patriot, and one who witnessed the Blitz, pacifism was a difficult position. Again and again, she warned against self-righteousness for the pacifist cause.

In the year before her death, with the bombing of Britain in full operation, she wrote about the "dark hour of Armageddon" and "the need to adhere to God and to help others steady their lives." She urged all Christians to pray for the enemy. In letters she wrote about the futility of "casting out Satan by Satan," and she said that in the midst of suffering and bewilderment, one must try to live in charity and in hope that the horror and destruction might purify life. In "Meditation on Peace," she reiterated the original Christian message.

"Christians are bound to the belief that all creation is dear to the Creator, and is the object of His

*The spiritual life
is not taught,
but caught; one
gets it through
contagion.*

—Evelyn Underhill

cherishing care, the violent as well as the peaceful, the dictators as well as their victims, the Blimps as well as the pacifists, the government as well as the Opposition, the sinners as well as the saints. All are children of the Eternal Perfect. Some inhabitants of this crowded nursery are naughty, some stupid, some wayward, some are beginning to get good, God loves, not merely tolerates, these wayward, violent, half-grown spirits, and seeks without ceasing to draw them into His love. We, then, are called to renounce hostile attitudes and hostile thoughts towards even our most disconcerting fellow sinners; to feel as great a pity for those who go wrong as for their victims, to show an equal generosity to the just and the unjust. This is the only peace-propaganda which has creative quality, and is therefore sure of ultimate success. All else is scratching on the surface, more likely to irritate than to heal."

I write at a time when our national tragedy forces one to reflection on the meaning of the Christian life. Again, I am affirmed in my conviction that Evelyn Underhill continues to provide words of solace and challenge for every Christian.

Who Are We?

The Evelyn Underhill Association (EUA) promotes the study of the works of Evelyn Underhill and supports research and writing about her ideas. Days of Quiet and Reflection are held, and we are a resource through this newsletter and correspondence. Officers are: Dana Greene, president; Kathleen Staudt, vice president; Carole Crumley, secretary; and Milo Coerper, treasurer. Newsletter editor is Lois Sibley.

Membership is open to all and is free. Donations to help defray costs are appreciated and may be sent to: The Evelyn Underhill Association, c/o Milo Coerper, 7315 Brookville Rd., Chevy Chase, MD 20815. Changes of address should be sent to Lois Sibley, 2245 Pleasant Ave, Glenside, PA 19038.

Alive and Well in Cyberspace

Evelyn Underhill is in cyberspace at www.evelynunderhill.org. Each month more than three hundred people log on to this EUA resource. Here one will find articles about Evelyn Underhill, Underhill bibliography, and information about the association and Underhill events. One can purchase books by and about Underhill in the association bookstore. If you would like a fuller listing of her works, check amazon.com, which has 87 entries under her name. Surprising as it may seem, the worldwide web is a major resource for spiritual seekers. Global interconnectivity makes Evelyn Underhill accessible in any part of our world.

Discovering Sorella Maria

by A.M. Allchin

Arriving one Saturday afternoon in September at the Community of Bose in North Italy, an ecumenical monastic community, I was surprised to find myself talking in a rapid, insistent way about Evelyn Underhill to the monk who was welcoming me. My host was puzzled since, though he spoke excellent English, he had clearly never heard of Evelyn Underhill and was anxious to explain all kinds of practical things like the layout of the community buildings, and to show me where I would be staying. I pulled myself up short, saying, "We can talk about Evelyn Underhill some other time," and began to listen to what the brother had to tell me.

Settling into the room that was to be mine and having some time before the evening office, I was amused at my vehement desire to enquire about Evelyn Underhill. I knew of course why I wanted to speak about her; it was because I felt there must be someone here who could help me to find out who the Sorella Maria was, the Franciscan sister whom Evelyn had met in the hills near Assisi in 1925; it was evident that she had impressed Evelyn in a way that very few people had. I had never been able to find anything published about her in English, either in Britain or the United States, apart from the one article that Evelyn Underhill wrote for *The Spectator* in 1929, and the references to her in published letters. But in face of the remarkable and unexpected developments of the community's life at Bose, in relation both to Orthodoxy and the Reformation in the third millennium, my vehement concern about Evelyn's visit to the hermitage in Umbria 70 years ago seemed on reflection to be pretty marginal.

A couple of hours later, after Vespers and the evening meal, I found myself sitting with another of the brothers, the only member of the community whom I had met before when he was in Oxford in



1998. He was explaining to me the pattern of the community's worship during the coming week.

He continued, "Tuesday the fifth is the commemoration of Sorella Maria di Campello." "So is that," I said, "the Sister whom Evelyn Underhill met in 1925?" "Yes," he replied, in a matter of fact way, "she is quite an important figure for us, representing a strand in Italian Catholicism to which we feel great affinity. Her teaching and her vision are part of our heritage."

Riccardo began to explain to me something about this woman who in the 1920s had founded a little free community of sisters in a Franciscan hermitage at Campello. She was a person misunderstood and under ecclesiastical suspicion for the greater part of her life on account of the wideness, the simplicity, and the daring of her views both of religious life and of ecumenical encounter. For about 25 years the sisters were not allowed to have Mass at the hermitage, nor to have the Blessed Sacrament reserved there; only from 1950 onwards could Mass be said regularly in their little church. Sorella Maria, however, lived on into the next decade, dying in her eighties in 1961. She saw the coming of Pope John and of the Second Vatican Council. One of the first things that the new pope had done was to send his blessing and his approval to Sorella Maria and her companions. She died knowing that the things she had lived and struggled for were not rejected by the Church to which she belonged, and which she served with such devotion.

The ecumenicity and openness of Maria's community were troubling to the ecclesiastical authorities. But there was worse to come.

First and most serious was her personal friendship with the most notorious Catholic Modernist of the time, Ernesto Buonaiuti (1881-1946), who was not only excommunicated in 1921, but was declared *vitandus* in 1928, one whose company was to be avoided by the faithful. The second was her constant reliance on the support and friendship of an English resident in Siena, Amy Turton. This is the Miss Turton to whom Underhill refers in her letters about her visit to the hermitage. Miss Turton was an Anglican.

It was through Amy Turton that Evelyn Underhill was first brought in touch with Maria as early as 1919 or 1920. All three were intimately involved in those years in the formation of an almost "secret" network of friends called the "Spiritual Entente," a group joined together in prayer for unity, "with no meetings, no rules"; its members were to be seekers after the presence of God, people capable of prayer and loyal to their own church. Here is another part of the picture that needs to be filled in and which in time can perhaps be given in more detail. For Evelyn Underhill it was an extremely important contact at a decisive point in her life.

But if Amy Turton was a devout and practicing Anglo-Catholic, she was certainly in no sense a rigid or narrow-minded one. From her first meeting with Maria in 1919 she saw in the younger woman a spiritual vision and a power of leadership that impressed her greatly. She became herself an admirer and follower of Maria, attracted by the radical newness of her vision of Franciscan life. But she was not only a follower, she was also prepared at times to take the lead. It was through Amy Turton that the community acquired many contacts in the English-speaking world. It was through her that Evelyn Underhill was first put in touch with Maria.

Equally striking is the fact that both Sorella Maria and Evelyn Underhill, whom Amy Turton brought together, should now be publicly recognized and commemorated in the worship of the Church; Maria in the calendar of Bose, Underhill in

the calendars of the Church of England and the Episcopal Church in the United States. Neither Evelyn nor Maria had been given any official position in the Church in their own lifetimes; both have been recognized since their death as figures of prophetic power and significance.

Certainly at the human level, there is much that separates Evelyn Underhill from Sorella Maria. Evelyn with her comfortable Kensington home, with her almost compulsive activity as a writer, with her pioneering ministry as a retreat conductor and a spiritual director in the last 15 years of her life; Maria, with her small, precarious community of sisters, inhabiting an historic place of Benedictine and Franciscan prayer, a place of intense natural beauty but with no regular drinking water and no electric light, living without the Eucharist for many years and under the disapproval of the local church. There was indeed much that separated them; yet they had met and immediately seen in one another the reality of their commitment to the one Christ and the gift of the one Spirit. They had a profound sense of the unity of all Christians in Christ as something already given to them. It seems to be the starting point from which they began. From there they looked out into the whole of humanity. Both were deeply attracted towards India; Evelyn in the years of her collaboration with Rabindranath Tagore, Maria in her long and faithful correspondence with Gandhi. Both in different ways were deeply affected by the message and the person of St. Francis, above all in their sense of the sacramental quality of all human relationships and the whole of creation. For those who have long known and valued the vision and teaching of Evelyn Underhill, to discover something more of the life of her Italian friend is to find Underhill's own position again and to see it in a new light.

Charles Williams in his edition of the letters, and Margaret Cropper in the first biography of Evelyn Underhill, both underline the importance of this friendship. Although

Evelyn and Maria met only once, in the autumn of 1925, as Margaret Cropper writes, "Like the single meeting between George Herbert and Nicholas Ferrar, this meeting led to a spiritual intimacy. Years later, I remember Evelyn telling me how she could write about her spiritual troubles to Maria and how the short and telling replies comforted and sustained her." The quality of those replies can be guessed at from the word that Maria gave to Evelyn on the occasion of their one meeting. Having spoken about Maria's delicate courtesy, her serene and widespread love, Evelyn Underhill mentions her profound sense of the pain and need of the world, and her 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 the peaceful surrounding, *"In tormento e travaglio servire i fratelli"* (in torment and travail to serve the brethren).

In Dana Greene's study of Evelyn Underhill's unpublished, private notebooks, *Fragments From An Inner Life*, the one work that gives us a direct insight into Underhill's own inner development, we can see how closely Maria was associated with Evelyn in prayer at decisive moments in her life, as for instance in the early 1920s when her public ministry of retreat conducting and lecturing was just beginning. Indeed, in this book Dana Greene suggests that Evelyn's decision to return to active membership of the Church of England in 1920 may have been directly connected with her joining the little prayer fellowship called the Spiritual Entente in that same year. Five years before they met, it seems clear that the two women were already intimately united in their prayer for one another and for the unity of all humanity and all creation in God.

As the days passed at Bose and as I had time to penetrate further into the writings about Maria, particularly the collection of letters and memories put together by Amy Turton in 1929, I began to see that my original thoughts about Evelyn Underhill and her relationship to

Sorella Maria had not been so irrelevant to my stay with the community after all. Clearly the vision of Sorella Maria has entered deeply into the life and prayer of the Community of Bose and has flowered in ways she would not have foreseen. That vision, which in her own lifetime was hidden in the hills of Umbria, is now the possession of many who perhaps have not heard her name. Certainly in the community she is a quiet, humble presence, not only through the annual commemoration of her memory every September 5, but in the use of her words and thoughts in the regular prayer of the community.

This article first appeared in a longer form in Fairacres Chronicle, Winter 2000, SLG Press, Oxford, England.

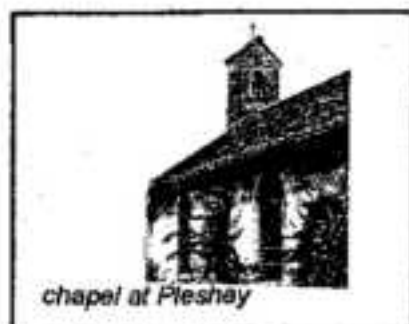
A.M. Alchin, Anglican priest and canon at Canterbury Cathedral, now lives in Wales. He is author of more than 25 books, and a great admirer of Evelyn Underhill.

Evelyn Underhill Commemorated

The 60th anniversary of the death of Evelyn Underhill was commemorated at the Washington National Cathedral, June 16, with a day of reflection and meditation. The day focused on Underhill's devotion to St. Francis of Assisi and the communion of saints.

Meditations were led by the Rev. Milo Coerper, priest, lawyer, and Benedictine oblate; Kathleen Staudt, poet, spiritual director, and teacher; Liz Ward, spiritual director and board member of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation; Christopher King, consultant in executive coaching; and Emily Chewning, writer-in-residence at Wesley Theological Seminary.

Check the Washington National Cathedral's website for June 2002 Quiet Day information, or write Special Events, Washington National Cathedral, Mt Saint Albans, Washington DC 20016.



chapel at Pleshey

Underhill Pilgrimage Now Set for 2003

Place, like person, can ignite in us longing for a deeper meaning. Place stimulates memory and opens up new psychic terrain. It can both unite us with the past, ground us in the present, and imaginatively direct us to a new understanding of the future.

In the spiritual development of Evelyn Underhill, the place that transformed her was Italy. Its natural and created beauty brought her to a deeper understanding of God's mystery. She wrote of "entering Italy" of the need of "a type of mind to go there to find itself." She spoke of Italy as being "medicinal" to the soul. As a young woman, she recorded her many trips to Florence, Siena, Assisi, Cortona, Perugia. These reflections were published posthumously as *The Shrines and Cities of France and Italy*.

It is these reflections that have become the basis for the Evelyn Underhill pilgrimage to Italy and England, a journey tracing her spiritual awakening and her dedication to service of her fellow Christians.

This pilgrimage, organized by Pilgrim's Guide, Donna Osthaus, will for the third time set out on this extraordinary journey, accompanied by the Rev. Lindsey Spendlove, assistant warden of the Pleshey Retreat House.

As in the 1998 and 2000 pilgrimages, participants will visit sites in Tuscany and Umbria, London and the retreat house at Pleshey. Dates are now set for June 2003. For further information contact the Pilgrim's Guide, pilgrims@dark.net or 703.644.1896, 7481 Huntington Blvd., #105, Springfield, VA 22153.

The Contemplative Life and Society

Although Evelyn Underhill is probably best known in the United States, efforts have been made in other parts of the English-speaking world, especially in England and Australia, to bring her life and work to notice.

Most recently, Regis College, University of Toronto, Canada, hosted a day-long symposium on Underhill on the 60th anniversary of her death in June 2001.

The symposium was organized by the Rev. Gerald Loweth and jointly sponsored by St. Clement's Anglican Church, Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church, Regis College, and the EUA.

The Rev. Loweth introduced Underhill's life and three papers were presented. Michael Stoeber, associate professor of spirituality at Regis College, gave a paper on "Evelyn Underhill on Magic, Sacrament, and Spiritual Transformation," which is forthcoming in *Worship*, 2002. Stephanie Ford, assistant professor of Christian spirituality at the Earham School of Religion, explored Underhill's pacifism; and Dana Greene, dean and CEO of Oxford College of Emory University, examined the elements shaping Underhill's spiritual life.

Tapes from the symposium can be secured from the Rev. Gerald Loweth, 76 Powell St., Richmond Hill, ONT L4C 4S4, CANADA.



Suzanne Schleck
Icon of Evelyn Underhill (2000)
Egg tempera and gold leaf on wood
11" x 14"

New and Noteworthy

Evelyn Underhill is remembered in an upper chapel in Canterbury Cathedral, England, and she now has a place on the facade of the Guilford Cathedral also. Half-statues honoring modern spiritual guides are in niches on one face of that cathedral. There, Evelyn Underhill has her rightful place among other Anglican worthies.

The Evelyn Underhill lecture on Christian spirituality was given by Joann Wolski Conn at Boston College in June. The lecture is sponsored by the Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry at the college.

The Soul's Delight: Selected Writings of Evelyn Underhill, edited by Keith Beasley-Topcliffe has been published by The Upper Room.

Articles about Evelyn Underhill can be found on the websites of *Spirituality Today* (www.spiritualitytoday.org) and *Christian Century* (www.christiancentury.org). See Grace Brame's "Evelyn Underhill and the Mastery of Time" (Winter 1990, *Spirituality Today*); Dana Greene's "Adhering to God: The Message of Evelyn Underhill for Our Times" (Spring 1987, *Spirituality Today*); Grace Brame's "Continuing Incarnation: Evelyn Underhill's Double Thread of Spirituality" (October 1990, *Christian Century*); and Robert Gail Woods's "The Future We Shan't See: Evelyn Underhill's Pacifism" (May 1979, *Christian Century*).

For those interested in Underhill manuscript materials in the King's College London Archives, see www.kcl.ac.uk.

An icon of Evelyn Underhill may be seen in the October issue of *Episcopal Life*, pp. 20-21. The icon was written by Suzanne Schleck and is part of an 18-artist icon exhibit from the Episcopal Church and Visual Arts (ECVA). Susan vonMedicus served as curator. For more go to www.ecva.org.