

## Evelyn Underhill and the Virgin Mary

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*Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941) was a guiding light in Anglican spirituality in the twentieth century, and her best-known works, *Mysticism* (1911) and *Worship* (1936) are still read and studied today. A prolific writer—theologian, poet, novelist—she is frequently anthologized. Her early life and writings—those undertaken before she became an actively-committed member of the Church of England in the 1920s—are, with the exception of *Mysticism*, less well-known. This article examines the early works that treat the Virgin Mary, and explain how that subject may have influenced the pacifism she later embraced. A feminist reading of those early works also suggests biographical links to her “care for souls,” or spiritual direction, and to her own family. The dutiful child of somewhat remote and distant parents, herself in a childless marriage, Underhill’s spiritual nurture by way of Mary helps explain both her spiritual growth and her role as a spiritual director to others.*

Evelyn Underhill’s success as a prolific British writer on mysticism, spiritual formation, worship, and religion in the first three decades of the twentieth century has occasioned much discussion about how a woman of her time, class, education, and upbringing could have made her mark in a field which, throughout the preceding centuries, had been dominated by professional male theologians. She was largely self-educated, with a brief three years away as a teenager at a

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middle-class boarding school in Folkestone and two years of courses in botany and history at what was then Kings College for Women in London, and was baptized and confirmed by conventional but not especially religious parents in the Church of England. Underhill might more predictably have been headed toward an upper-middle class lady's life in Edwardian England, complete with servants, house, and a solicitor husband with a social circle, presiding over a tea table, a brood of children, and the charity bazaars for which her mother had trained her. Yet at her life's end not only was she an experienced and well-known spiritual director; she had also served as religious editor of the respectable *Spectator*, had published more than thirty-nine books and innumerable articles and poems, had helped to spearhead the revival of religious retreats in the Established Church, and had developed intellectual and friendly relationships with a range of theologians and scholars. According to Michael Ramsey, Underhill had done "more than anyone else to keep the spiritual life alive in Anglicanism in the bewildering years between the wars."<sup>1</sup> To this opinion of the redoubtable former Archbishop of Canterbury, a present-day theologian, Todd Johnson, has added that Underhill had helped to form "a theological synthesis using the Spirit that is more at home in our age than her own," which reflected "the mind of a woman years ahead of her time."<sup>2</sup>

But that promise was not evident in her young life. At boarding school she dutifully attended church and spoke lightheartedly in letters to her mother about the "wakies," the sermons by the Reverend Russell Wakefield, vicar at Sandgate and later Bishop of Birmingham. By the end of the century, now in her twenties, she had developed an interest in the Roman Catholic Church, owing to her many visits to Italy as well as her close friendship with Ethel Ross Barker, a Girton-educated intellectual who also felt the pull of Roman Catholicism. Together they attended retreats at a Franciscan convent in Southampton and made friends with the Mother Superior, but while Barker finally was converted, Underhill remained behind, ostensibly because she could not accept the tenets of *Pascendi Gregorii*, Pius X's papal encyclical condemning Modernism in the church. That Roman Catholicism

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Ramsey, foreword to Christopher Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill: An Introduction to Her Life and Writings* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Todd Johnson, "The Three Faces of Evelyn Underhill," in the *Evelyn Underhill Newsletter* 7 [1997]: 3.

was the magnet for her engagement in religious orthodoxy is made clear in her novels and in many of her early letters from Italy, where she made nearly annual visits with her mother after 1898. They reflect a lively young woman's voracious appetite for new scenes and places, a hunger fed by her exposure there to medieval and Renaissance Italian art and a warm-blooded spirituality that must have seemed far removed from the decorous Anglican practices of her girlhood.

Underhill's final decision to remain an Anglican does not negate the fact that early in her life she held a surprisingly intimate view, one by no means typical of many Anglicans then or now, of the protective motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary. That view, I believe, contributed to her basic Christian formation. There may well be deeply rooted personal reasons for her growing interest in, and acknowledgment of, the place of Mary in spiritual devotion. In addition, that relationship was a linchpin in her early formation as a Christian spiritual director in what she called her "care for souls." Biographical speculation about childrearing comes up not only with her lifelong love of cats over children, but her seeming indifference to traditional expectations of a woman of her class and her apparent aloofness to children.<sup>3</sup> Her interpretation of motherhood, since her own mother appears to have been somewhat remote and she herself was childless, would come to fruition in her mature understanding of sacrifice that characterized her later years. Indeed, the question of Underhill's attraction to the Virgin remains profoundly theological and is bound up in her ideas of the Incarnation, of Christian sacrifice, and, I would submit, her later embrace of pacifism at the end of her life.

Despite her wide travels and her early interest in Roman Catholicism, Underhill's fealty to Mary remains surprising for a woman of her nationality, class, and time. Her childhood friend and future husband Hubert Stuart-Moore, who was to pursue a career as a solicitor specializing in maritime law, confessed discomfort with her religious interest and worries about her possible conversion. We do not know whether Hubert's views were finally responsible for quenching her early attraction to Rome, but those views certainly reflected a longstanding suspicion among Anglicans about what was disparagingly termed

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<sup>3</sup> In correspondence to a friend during the bombing of World War II, she wrote of being asked to teach "'religious knowledge' to a class of 30 boys & girls 11 to 14! Quite an experiment for me—I know nix about teaching children!" See *The Making of a Mystic: New and Selected Letters of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Carol Poston (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 331.

“Mariolatry.” John Henry Newman remained uncomfortable with the more Italianate forms of Marian devotion even after his intellectual acceptance of her place in the doctrine of the Incarnation, and confessed his discomfort as late as his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864): “Such devotional manifestations in honour of our Lady had been my great *crux* as regards Catholicism; I say frankly, I do not enter into them even now; I trust I do not love her the less, because I cannot enter into them. They may be fully explained and defended; but sentiment and taste do not run with logic: they are suitable for Italy, but they are not suitable for England.”<sup>4</sup> A sense of remoteness from the Vatican hierarchy was likewise evident among certain English families (the “Old Catholics”) whose loyalty to Rome had persisted throughout the period of the Elizabethan settlement but who also exhibited a characteristic English suspicion of all things Italian, a suspicion aggravated by the rise of the Ultramontane party in the Roman Church and the declaration of papal infallibility at the Vatican Council of 1870. Finally, English middle- and upper-middle class anti-Catholicism had been fueled at mid-century by Irish immigration, particularly into the Midlands. The converts were not as numerous as some had feared in the wake of Newman’s much-publicized defection, but English distrust of Rome, if inflated, was by no means fully assuaged in all quarters.

The seminal idea of sacrifice, that quality of surrender and charity that underlies the mystical life, was to penetrate all of Underhill’s theological works, beginning in the first decade of her writing career. After her highly successful first novel, *The Grey World* (1904), the theme of sacrifice is particularly evident in three works: *The Miracles of Our Lady Saint Mary* (1906); a second novel, *The Lost Word* (1907); and *The Spiral Way* (1912), which follows closely upon her first major (and still enduring) work, *Mysticism* (1911). This decade was also marked by her marriage to Hubert in 1907. This remarkably fertile period comes at a time when Underhill had not settled her religious commitments and was not affiliated with any church or institution. She was dealing intellectually and creatively with a complex of ideas that remained fresh and urgent for the rest of her life, as will be evident when we turn briefly to *Worship* (1936), *The Mystery of Sacrifice* (1937), and several late essays on pacifism.

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<sup>4</sup> John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua, Being a History of His Religious Opinions*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 176–177.

*The Miracles of Our Lady Saint Mary Brought Out of Divers Tongues and Newly Set Forth in English* is a collection of medieval legends, chiefly from Old English, French, and German, that Underhill paraphrased in contemporary English for a modern audience. In the months leading up to its publication in 1906 she was reading in the *Patrologia Latina*, and had reprinted another's translation of "an Ethiopian text" to give her readers a flavor of the Coptic Church. Underhill may have been aided in this remarkable task by J. A. Herbert, Keeper of Manuscripts in the British Museum, who seemed fascinated with her and her work, shared her interest in Roman Catholicism, and helped to secure texts from the manuscript archives for her.<sup>5</sup> The only contemporary Mary legend that she refers to as "treated by a writer of our time" was Maeterlinck's "Soeur Beatrice" and the late Victorian poet John Davidson's "Ballad of a Nun," an occasionally anthologized nineteenth-century narrative poem that tells the tale of a nun climbing the convent walls to follow the call of her sexuality; she does not include "The Nun Who Desired the World," the original of the story, assuming her readers would know it.

Underhill's selection of tales from the more than four hundred available to her bespeaks her interest in the subject, but it is in the introduction to the *Miracles* that she reveals a personal side. Her motivation for making this collection available to a contemporary audience is "to show something of the intimate charm of the medieval attitude towards the Virgin Mary. . . . Less awful than the Deity, more powerful than the Saints, one might speak with 'Madame Saint Mary' as woman to woman, . . . [and] might rely on her human sympathy in matters of the body, as well as on her mystical intercession in the affairs of the soul."<sup>6</sup> Phrases like "matters of the body" and "woman to woman" should be especially noted here, because this introduction was written in 1905 when Underhill was thirty years old, two years away from marriage, clearly sexually inexperienced and, as we have already said, apparently dutiful to but emotionally distant from her mother. At the time she wrote the introduction, however, she was in Asolo in 1905 on one of the several Italian journeys mother and daughter made together. She writes to her future husband, "I am trying to employ the wet weather by writing the introduction to the Mary legends, but find

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<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Miracles of Our Lady Saint Mary Brought Out of Divers Tongues and Newly Set Forth in English* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1906), xxv–xxvi.

<sup>6</sup> Underhill, *Miracles of Our Lady Saint Mary*, xxiii–xxiv.

it rather hard work out here.”<sup>7</sup> She is also picking up religious keepsakes for her own use, as shown in a following letter written from Bergamo, where she has found “a very fine old rosary” with amber beads and “a crucifix-jewel in filigree silver and blue enamel . . . [and a] little charm with ‘a Madonna & Child inside, I think in ivory.’”<sup>8</sup> In a tender aside, she is asking her very handy fiancé to repair it for her, since his hobby at the time was working in Arts and Crafts jewelry.

Underhill’s several long trips to Italy had no doubt familiarized her with the many artistic representations of the Virgin, including the Madonna della Misericordia, that genre of paintings, widespread from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, featuring Mary with her cloak shielding tiny human supplicants. She was writing her introduction to her Mary legends amidst a culture and a people who adored and expected protection from the Blessed Virgin. Not only was she imbibing the art, culture, and religion she found in Italy but also a kind of pervasive warmth that seemed to lighten and illuminate her very spirit so accustomed to British chill and fog.

Underhill’s humanization of Mary not only suggests deference to, or at least a certain caution about, a mostly English and Protestant audience, but also implies awareness of her own needs. In her collection, Mary is a medieval lady, a magician, and indeed a saint, but not yet a God-bearer. Underhill seems to be speaking less theologically than personally, as the prospective mother she was not in fact to be and as the daughter hungry for maternal attention, when she says:

As a mother evokes in her children at once the simplest, most intimate confidence and also the most exalted emotion: as they come to her, with no sense of incongruity, in their most trivial necessities no less than in the most sacred moments of their lives, so “Goddess Moder and oures” received from those who were in every sense her children, simple and familiar friendship, mystical adoration, and unflinching trust. To drag back this sentiment and its expression from the shadow-land to which it has retreated is, therefore, the aim of this book.<sup>9</sup>

What the *Miracles of Our Lady* leaves unsaid was to move more to the foreground in Underhill’s second novel, *The Lost Word*. After

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<sup>7</sup> Poston, ed., *New and Selected Letters*, 81.

<sup>8</sup> Poston, ed., *New and Selected Letters*, 82.

<sup>9</sup> Underhill, *Miracles of Our Lady Saint Mary*, xxiv–xxv.

an early tryst with neo-Platonism in which she saw mysticism as the “flight of the alone to the Alone,” she was beginning, as a young adult, to settle into a more sacramental faith in which Mary would take her rightful place. Her sacramentalism was warmed by her belief that the Incarnation was the most fundamental doctrine in Christianity, celebrated in the sacrament of the eucharist. As early as the summer of 1907, the year in which *The Lost Word* went to press, she was writing to a spiritual directee, “I think the *central* fact of the Mass is the Presence on the Altar. From this are deducible the other aspects of communion sacrifice and adoration. To limit the meaning of the Eucharist to any *one* of these things is to implicitly deny the Presence in its full signification.”<sup>10</sup> That conviction never went away and in fact was amplified later under the influence of Baron Friedrich von Hügel, a prominent Catholic layman and writer on mysticism, and later Underhill’s spiritual director until his death in 1925. By the end of her life, in her last major work, she was saying, “The Christian hope of the future is that this, the true meaning and message of the Incarnation, will come to be more deeply understood.”<sup>11</sup> The centrality of the Incarnation is closely joined by her other basic religious principle of sacrifice, the mystical self-surrender to God. Both would seem to have relevance to Mary Theotokos, Mary the God-bearer.

The principle of sacrifice was to be foregrounded in her second novel. Unlike the acclaim her first novel had received, *The Lost Word* was pronounced muddled, even indecipherable, by some critics. Ostensibly following a Freemason theme of ritualistic word and sacrifice, the novel tells the love story of Paul Vickery, son of a cathedral dean, who from childhood senses the “unseen” beauty of the Pattern World, an early mystical blending of what Underhill called “the real and the Real.” His passion for sacred architecture is realized after leaving Oxford when his wealthy and intellectually commonplace friend Hugh offers him the chance to build a cathedral for an idealistic community he is constructing for the workers in his textile factory. The novel moves forward with an artistic and aesthetic cast of characters and a budding and finally realized romance and future marriage with Catherine Alstone, a Shavian heroine possessed not only of “the Life Force” but an aesthetic ideal that she feels she must conquer and sacrifice. Paul’s passion for the medieval art of the cathedral, the

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<sup>10</sup> Poston, ed., *New and Selected Letters*, 106.

<sup>11</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Worship*, revised edition (Guildford: Eagle, 1991), 262.



masons who built them, and the guilds that united them, however, precede his passion for Catherine.

Paul's early plan for the great west front is unconventionally symbolic. He says that there are to be three doors, "the door of beauty in the middle, because that is the direct and perfect way of approach, and on each side the doors of strength and wisdom . . . . The Tree of Life grows about the door of beauty."<sup>12</sup> On the lintel above the door is to be a statue of Mary, "the Queen of Queens, the Perfect Beauty, that is the true door of the house of mystery and love." When his friend Hugh questions whether the bishop might object to having the Virgin Mary over the door, Paul exclaims, "Oh, hang bishops! Where do they come in? Don't you see, the point is to have it true and beautiful? Other people's intolerances don't count."<sup>13</sup> One senses Evelyn Underhill's own voice behind his exasperation.

Both aesthetic and bodily purity prevail among the guild workers at Paul's cathedral project, especially in a subplot involving Jimmy Redway, an ordained priest and an aesthete who denies himself any indulgence in "the Deity of British domestic sentiment," and Emma, a mason who sculpts and designs the gargoyles, the profane as well as the sacred, and likes to "savor it all . . . from High Mass to cock-fighting." Emma insists that William Blake was right, that the God who made the lamb also made the lion "because He is an all-beautiful God, not a bishop."<sup>14</sup> Catherine shares much the same intellectual views as Emma, but she is privileged by class, though she is restive and feels inauthentic, coddled as she is in her comfortable upper class home "day after day with hot lunches, and Empire frocks, and having cultured idiots to tea; but somewhere in the world real things are happening, vital, savage things. That's what I'm starving for . . . . I don't care whether it's painting a saint, or having a baby, or being converted, or what."<sup>15</sup>

Paul is encouraged in his quest for Beauty by yet another Arts and Crafts devotee, Mark Gwent, more the patron of Freemasonry than the cathedral, who tries to keep the vision of the Queen, from the Rosicrucian idea of the Rosa Mystica and Sedes Sapientiae, alive in the construction. It is Mark who sees Catherine as the image of

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<sup>12</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Lost Word* (London: Heinemann, 1907), 58.

<sup>13</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 58–59.

<sup>14</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 128–129.

<sup>15</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 104.



the statue that is to crown the center of the great west end of the cathedral. Paul, suddenly inspired, goes out into the street to find an urchin to pose with the Virgin/Catherine. Quickly successful in his search, he comes into the building, "Christopher-like," holding the child on his shoulder. At that point Catherine "stretched out her arms involuntarily, as if to snatch the baby away," for she "suffered torments at the sight of a child in the arms of the man whom she loved." Catherine becomes a mother, the virgin mother, as Paul puts the child in her arms and Mark "waited on the consummation of this sacramental act."<sup>16</sup> At that act, Paul sees Catherine as the true Queen of the Door: "He fancied that deep in her eyes one might find the Word of Power."<sup>17</sup>

Each attempts to sever bonds with the other. Catherine, convinced that she would destroy Paul's aesthetic idealism were he to become husband and father, rejects him, but her rejection chokes off his creativity and his productive work on the cathedral, and they each flee, Catherine to "confession" to the former priest Redway, whom she happens to meet at the back of a church where she has gone in her misery. She is in torment, and Redway advises her that suffering is inevitable: "It is the feeling that makes some women desire child-birth—the mystical satisfaction of voluntary pain."<sup>18</sup> But marriage there is to be, for each returns in misery to the now-empty cathedral and realize that their marriage is inevitable.

And birth there is to be, when on their honeymoon in Carcassonne, still miserable that she had ruined Paul's creativity, Catherine kneels at the foot of a Madonna, not a Queen of Heaven but a "very respectable Mother and Pattern of Womanhood" and cries out that she cannot sacrifice Paul. She "looked into the sad and steadfast face of God's Mother . . . no symbol, no portrait even, but rather into the grave and patient face of Life herself; intent on the eternal procession of seedtime and harvest, birth and death, her long maternal day of love and pain." The "all-enduring Mother" speaks to her: "My daughter, my little daughter, is it too hard for you?" and tells her that her own beloved son had gone to sacrifice and she "would have suffered hell so willingly to save Him. I had to bear that. . . . Are you so finely

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<sup>16</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 172.

<sup>17</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 174.

<sup>18</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 230.

built that you must be your own redeemer?"<sup>19</sup> Mary's mystical appearance and advice quietly converts Catherine to a life of sacrifice and love, come what may.

Also during their honeymoon, in the half-lit aisles of the medieval castellated town, they meet each other wandering, unable to sleep, and Paul shows Catherine an unintentionally humorous letter from Hugh who, back in his ideal workers' community, has undertaken to finish the cathedral to his own liking with some "practical business men" and other "jolly" and successful artists. Hugh apologizes that Paul's father, the dean, has come up to see the new cathedral, and confesses, "I am sure you will say I was right in deferring to his opinion. It would be a pity to make friction so early in the day, or oppose the *Mind of the Church*. He said of course he knew we meant it all right, but it seemed to him an error of judgment, in a *new* church, to have the Virgin Mary over the central door. In old buildings people made allowances, but he felt sure it would offend the bishop."<sup>20</sup>

The novel certainly contains a playful critique of "Low" Anglican views on the Virgin, but more important is the literary use of Mary not only as mother and God-bearer, Theotokos, but also as Catherine's guide, mentor, and protector and, we might surmise, the exemplar of a true mother to Underhill herself. It is Mary who speaks to her daughter to say that she, a mother, had to surrender her son as a sacrifice for the whole world. Genuine charity or love requires sacrifice.

The last of the early works to reveal Underhill's view of the importance of Mary, *The Spiral Way*, immediately succeeded *Mysticism* in 1912 (and in fact she may have been working on it at the same time as her large and scholarly study). It is a short book, a meditation on the rosary published under the pseudonym John Cordelier, books that we might call "inspirational" or "guidepost" literature. The two books, the first proudly bearing her own name, the other a pseudonym, a male name taken from the Latin *cor* or "heart," suggest Underhill's two authorial voices: one rational and scholarly, the other personal and emotional. Later she was to disown the two Cordelier books, as in fact she did much of her early writing, including *The Mystic Way*. In a letter to the American Quaker Rufus Jones in 1915 she says, "There is, I need hardly tell you, much in my books which I should

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<sup>19</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 294.

<sup>20</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 298.

now modify or omit were I re-writing them.”<sup>21</sup> There is no denying, however, that at the time this book was written, the young Underhill identifies the Virgin Mother as the emblem and inspiration for the formation of the Christian life: if humans wish to move into the divine order, the Virgin Mother Mary is to be their guide.

Underhill’s seriousness about Mary’s sanctified model is corroborated at the time in a letter to Marjorie Robinson in 1911, the year of the publication of *Mysticism*. Underhill has sent the newly completed (but not yet published) Cordelier book to her friend, who has obviously responded in the typical Anglican fashion to its praise of Mary as part of the Way. Underhill says to her, “The phrase ‘we need Mary to lead us to Christ’ (he thought you’d hate that) means we need the experience of Mary to initiate us into the XT-life: i.e. we must live over the bit she lived over, if we are to actualize the Incarnation in ourselves.”<sup>22</sup>

The classic recitation of the “long” rosary involved three sets of mysteries—the Joyful, the Sorrowful, and the Glorious, each mystery involving the recitation of one “Our Father” and ten “Hail Mary”s. Underhill takes up the Joyful mysteries first, and the figure of Mary appears in each one inasmuch as she is featured as the mother of Christ. In her meditation on the first of the Joyful Mysteries, the Annunciation, she focuses on the centrality of Mary as moral guide if we are to get on the road to growth in our divinity. She says that “in us there is roadmaking to be done, the hard cutting of new paths. . . . And what shall be the curve that marks our progress—that ‘way,’ as the mystics call it, which is a journey and a transmutation in one?” If we are indeed to make that difficult transition into what she called Reality (with a capital R), “we need in fact the natural simplicity of Mary” to lead us there. Mary is “the incarnate genius of humanity” who leads us to “a wholeness, at once Divine and human . . . which runs through all creation, the universal and dynamic expression of the Mind of Christ.”<sup>23</sup>

In her celebration of the third of the Joyful Mysteries, the Visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth, Underhill meditates on the great prayer of the Magnificat. Mary goes “up into the hill country in a spirit of prayer, yet goes upon a simple human errand, love Divine

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<sup>21</sup> Poston, ed., *New and Selected Letters*, 214.

<sup>22</sup> Poston, ed., *New and Selected Letters*, 183.

<sup>23</sup> Evelyn Underhill (John Cordelier), *The Spiral Way, Being Meditations upon the Fifteen Mysteries of the Soul’s Ascent* (London: John M. Watkins, 1922), 12–18.

and human interwoven in her outlook from the first: and humanity, simple yet far-seeing, comes to meet her with a blessing on its lips." She utters the Magnificat, "a joy so lyrical in quality that it can only find expression in a song . . . . The music of the Magnificat springs out of the very heart of life."<sup>24</sup>

In the Nativity, the most celebrated of the Joyful Mysteries, Underhill likens all believers to Mary the mother, for "shelter we must give, and nourishment" in our maternal selves to grow the divine within us: we all are mothers, in a sense, to the Divine that grows and matures within us. "God has sprung up for us, out of the earth as it seems, from the very heart of humanity."<sup>25</sup> Even in the final of the Joyful Mysteries, "The Child Amongst the Doctors," she writes of the birth and childhood of Jesus as overseen by Mary who attends us as we grow, for when "we loose the hand of Life our Mother, and run to find knowledge amongst the doctors—knowledge of God and man: having yet to learn that the only Way of Illumination for immortal yet imprisoned spirit is the way of pain and growth and love." This is the way of pain and growth that every mother knows. It is "a part, too, of the education of the Heavenly Child within us, a schooling in humility."<sup>26</sup> Here she says resolutely that we need to embrace Nazareth, the growing up of the child, for "Not the head but the heart is the spirit's growing-point."<sup>27</sup> A reflection of her own "life among the doctors" and scholars of mysticism, this mystery reveals that Underhill herself has needed Mary to nourish the loving, protective side of her as she grows intellectually.

As Underhill embarks upon the Sorrowful Mysteries—the Agony in the Garden, the Scourging, the Crown of Thorns, the Bearing of the Cross, the Crucifixion—she speaks of surrender to suffering and resignation: "The ending of the joyful mysteries is the ending of the childhood of the soul."<sup>28</sup> She cites the saints, Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, and the Roman Missal, particularly the *Exsultet*, to identify Christ's suffering with what, in a sense, humans must also give themselves up to in death. Recalling Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth with each carrying a child in the womb, Underhill speaks of this mystery: "As the joyful mystery of the Visitation, so is

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<sup>24</sup> Underhill, *The Spiral Way*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Underhill, *The Spiral Way*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> Underhill, *The Spiral Way*, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Underhill, *The Spiral Way*, 64.

<sup>28</sup> Underhill, *The Spiral Way*, 69.

the mystery of this slow and bitter climb to death. It is a way of prayer: a mystical ascent to new and close communion with our Master, along the least promising of paths."<sup>29</sup> And even as she discourses upon the agony of the cross, Underhill speaks also of birth, citing the mystics who in "casting about for metaphors that shall hint at these strange adventures of the spirit, say that the soul endures upon the Cross not the pains of death but the travail of yet another birth—a difficult, slow birth, that . . . comes forth from the sheltering womb of nature, in which it has lain so warm, so safe, so blind."<sup>30</sup>

In the final mysteries of the rosary, the Glorious or Triumphant Mysteries (the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Coming of the Holy Spirit, the Assumption of Mary, and the Coronation), Mary's role in the spiritual life moves forward, not as only maternal when Jesus is a growing child; it is Pentecostal in that it continues after his death. In the third Glorious Mystery, the Coming of the Holy Spirit, Underhill sees Mary as a central figure: "Not for nothing did the old painters put our Lady in the very centre of the Pentecostal scene. The soul that has borne God shall spend God" in what she calls "that greater gift of flaming charity which is the only language of the heart."<sup>31</sup> Even in the great mysteries of the Assumption of the Virgin and the Coronation in heaven, Underhill focuses upon Mary as the consummate image of the spiritual life: "Mary [is] made a partaker of the Divine Nature. She is the firstfruits and completion of the Incarnation, the key to all cosmic meanings, an earnest of the perfect indwelling of humanity in God." Underhill, who was learning Italian at the time, here cites lines from Dante's *Paradiso* referring to Beatrice, a typology of Mary, to show that "the Spiral Way has reached its consummation."<sup>32</sup>

This last comment may illuminate an element of Underhill's personal life: if she experienced disappointment at not bearing a child, spiritual birth, or in Jesus' words being "born again," would offer divine compensation. Our inner child must figuratively die in our arms, as in the Pietà, before we set out on the mature spiritual path. Perhaps, too, Mother Church may have offered Herself in some way as a substitute for her mother and even suggested a spiritual rather than physical procreation. Already the asthma that was eventually to contribute to

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<sup>29</sup> Underhill, *The Spiral Way*, 107.

<sup>30</sup> Underhill, *The Spiral Way*, 120–121.

<sup>31</sup> Underhill, *The Spiral Way*, 153–154.

<sup>32</sup> Underhill, *The Spiral Way*, 165–167.

her death had begun to send her frequently to her sickbed. Even if Hubert was “protecting” her from the rigors of childbirth, Underhill was yet to bear “spiritual children” in her role as spiritual guide, teacher, and “caretaker of souls.”

Whatever was born in Evelyn Underhill’s soul by her early devotion to Mary as the emblem of the spiritual life, it spoke of a maternal and protective fervor that never went away but, I believe, was transmuted into even deeper spiritual levels. In the writings that follow, she continues to focus upon the qualities of sacrifice and self-surrender to the Spirit as well as on the deep-seated notion of the Incarnation as absolutely fundamental to the Christian life. Her last major work, *Worship*, on which she labored for nearly five years, sweeps majestically across Judeo-Christian divisions to describe the sacrificial center of the Abrahamic religions. In her chapter on “Catholic Worship: Western and Eastern,” Underhill again comes back to the guidance of Mary. Referring to the “intensely corporate spirit” of the Catholic church (under which designation Underhill, of course, classifies Anglicanism), she emphasizes the importance of the saints and places Mary at the head of the saints: “Especially the Blessed Virgin, as the human agent of Incarnation, must be for the Catholic devotion the ‘saint of saints,’ in whom the race aspires towards God, and abandons itself to his action. . . . The dubious ancestry of some aspects of Marian devotion . . . must not blind us to the deep spiritual truth which it enshrines.”<sup>33</sup>

In a late work, a slim and rich little volume called *The Mystery of Sacrifice: A Meditation on the Liturgy*, Underhill lays out the primacy of sacrifice for us incarnated creatures. She cites John of the Cross to the effect that each human soul is God’s own package, and she adds that “self-scrutiny at its best hardly gets beyond the paper and the string.”<sup>34</sup> Small and ordinary as it may be—“homely” being Underhill’s most frequent term for it—the gift of our sacrificed human nature is where we are most Christ-like, that “giving of the whole material of that earthly life which, through the obedience of Mary, He accepted.”<sup>35</sup> Just as *The Spiral Way* is the pattern, the emblem of the Way personified, so we present in communion, at the end of the eucharist, our human offering, for

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<sup>33</sup> Underhill, *Worship*, 192–193.

<sup>34</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystery of Sacrifice: A Meditation on the Liturgy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938), 21.

<sup>35</sup> Underhill, *The Mystery of Sacrifice*, 20.

without man's small offering, nothing would have been done. The loaves must be given, and at his own cost, before they can become the gathering-points of the supernatural care, blessed, broken and distributed, and so the Bread of Life given to the soul. "Why, that's a bit of my own baking!" said the woman in the old story, when the Holy Food was put into her hand.<sup>36</sup>

Mary's assent at the Annunciation is the pattern: "One movement supposes and completes the other, as the Nativity, God self-given in the flesh, requires the free oblation of the creature—the Blessed Virgin's self-offering to His hidden purpose. 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord! Be it unto me according to Thy word.'"<sup>37</sup>

Underhill's early devotion to Marian sacrifice comes to bloom later in her career as pacifism, that mandate for personal and radical self-sacrifice represented not just by Jesus on the cross but also Mary at the manger, Mary at the foot of the cross, Mary of the Pietà, and Mary at the Pentecost. Toward the end of her life, when bombs were landing regularly on Hampstead Heath near where she and Hubert had taken refuge, Underhill speaks of true Christian pacifism as being a lonely, though sacred, journey: unable as a Christian may be to "cast out Satan by Satan" by killing the enemy, "the true charter of Christian pacifism" is found "in the declaration of One who has conquered the rebel universe at its heart by letting violence do its worst, triumphing over principalities and powers by the costly application of sacrificial love."<sup>38</sup> In her final letter (Eastertide 1941) to the select few women of a prayer group she had established once the war had begun and she was a virtual shut-in, she warns that Christianity is not an easy journey. "It is a stern business. It is concerned with salvation through sacrifice."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Underhill, *The Mystery of Sacrifice*, 67–68.

<sup>37</sup> Underhill, *The Mystery of Sacrifice*, 42.

<sup>38</sup> *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, ed. Dana Greene (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1988), 207.

<sup>39</sup> Poston, ed., *New and Selected Letters*, 351.



