

Handout #7: Kenosis & Literature

The way we imagine a person to be can limit the way that person can be to us. Preconceived notions and our pre-judgments (prejudices) can limit our perception of the reality before us. Consider, in the story ***The Shack***, by William Paul Young, this conversation between Mack and Jesus, as they lay out at night on a lakeside dock, gazing up at the stars...

"Incredible!" whispered Jesus, his head near Mack's in the darkness. "I never get tired of this."

"Even though *you* created it?" Mack asked.

"I created it as the Word, before the Word became flesh. So even though I created this, I see it now as a human. And I must say, it is impressive!" (p. 109)

One surprising thing this little vignette brings out is that Jesus sees the world, still, through human eyes. Or, to put it another way, when Jesus was raised from the dead and exalted on high, he was not divested of his humanity. Jesus is still, and will be for all time, fully human. This is surely worth further meditation. When Jesus ascended on high and returned to the Father, things did not, for him, return to "normal" as it was before the Incarnation. Jesus returns to the Father not as Logos, but as the Christ, fully human and fully divine. And in Jesus, the divine does not overpower or override the human.

There is also a passage in ***The Shack*** which speaks of how God, in the Incarnation, chose to embrace and experience the limitations of being human, all out of love for a lost and wounded creation. Papa explains to Mack: **"...there are some advantages to being God. By nature I am completely unlimited, without bounds. I have always known fullness. I live in a state of perpetual satisfaction as my normal state of existence. ... When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human. We also chose to embrace all the limitations that this entailed. Even though we have always been present in this created universe, we now became flesh and blood. It would be like this bird, whose nature it is to fly, choosing only to walk and remain grounded. He doesn't stop being the bird, but it does alter his experience of life significantly. ..."**

There is another revealing conversation which deals with respecting a relationship through the self-limitation of power: Sarayu (the figure for the Holy Spirit in this story) speaks **Relationships are never about power, and one way to avoid the will to power is to choose to limit oneself--to serve. Humans often do this-- in touching the infirm and sick, in serving the ones whose minds have left to wander, in relating to the poor, in loving the very old and the very young, or even in caring for the other who has assumed a position of power over them."** (pp. 106-107)

***A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church*, by Bishop Rembert G. Weakland, OSB:**

People who are concerned about me ask how I feel at this moment. The best nouns to describe those feelings would be remorse, contrition, shame, and emptiness. This final word reminds me of an insight from St. Theresa of Lisieux. She once wrote that she wanted to go to God empty-handed. I think I know now personally what she meant by that phrase. I have learned how frail my own human nature is, how in need of God's loving embrace I am. Empty-handed for me now means a willingness to accept my humanity totally, just as Christ accepted that same human nature out of love. But for me it also means to be fully receptive to whatever God wants to place in those hands, to be ready with empty hands to receive new life.

But I am also aware much self-pity and pride remain. I must leave that pride behind. Each day I will try to leave room for God to enter into my life more and more. Ultimately I understand that the humanity God so loved and sought to redeem, including my own humanity, will be transformed by his loving embrace and grace."

***In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*, by Neil White**

I wanted to tell this gentle man that I was honored to be his friend; that his disfigured hand was a symbol-- like a unique, broken, beautiful sculpture-- that embodied something important for me that I didn't fully understand. I wanted him to know that taking Communion with him, watching Father Reynolds place the wafer in the remnants of his palm, was a privilege and would alter, forever, how I felt about the sacrament.

...

Reflection Questions:

- ❖ The disfigured hand of a man who suffered from Hansen's Disease receiving communion became a symbol that embodied something important... What do the hands of Jesus, still bearing the marks of crucifixion, say to me?
- ❖ In whose face have I lately seen the beauty of God reflected?
- ❖ How do I go empty-handed to the Lord. What am I clinging too, which I need to let go of, in order to be empty-handed?
- ❖ In commenting upon *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*, John Grishom observes that "**redemption can be taught by society's most dreaded outcasts**". Who are the outcasts around me, and what do they have to say to me about God's out-pouring love?
- ❖ How do I imagine God? What role does gender play in these imaginings?
- ❖ What other stories or books speak to me of emptying out, of self-sacrificing love, of God's power manifest through weakness and vulnerability?

Handout #8: Kenosis & *The Reed of God*

As we have seen earlier, Kenosis entails being poured out or emptied (limiting self) in sacrificial service to the Other. Caryll begins her contemplation on Mary by considering the quality of Mary's emptiness before the Lord. As she explains:

That virginal quality which, for want of a better word, I call emptiness is the beginning of this contemplation.

It is not a formless emptiness, a void without meaning; on the contrary it has a shape, a form given to it by the purpose for which it is intended.

It is the emptiness like the hollow in the reed, the narrow riftless emptiness, which can have only one destiny: to receive the piper's breath and to utter the song that is in his heart.

It is the emptiness like the hollow in the cup, shaped to receive water or wine.

It is the emptiness like that of the bird's nest, built in a round warm ring to receive the little bird.¹ (p. 21)

The question which most people will ask is "Can someone whose life is already cluttered up with trivial things go back to this virginal emptiness?"

Of course he can; if a bird's nest has been filled with broken glass and rubbish, it can be emptied. (p. 23)

Notice that we have here again the kenotic verb... *emptied*. It refers to being freed of the clutter and forming again the spaces in which God's grace and gift may enter in and fill up. Our task is on the side of kenosis... emptying and pouring out, God is the one who fills up and raises up. As Caryll Houselander notes:

Our own effort will consist in sifting and sorting out everything that is not essential and that fills up space and silence in us and in discovering what sort of shape this emptiness in us, is. From this we shall learn what sort of purpose God has for us. In what way are we to fulfill the work of giving Christ life in us?

Are we reed pipes? Is He waiting to live lyrically through us?

Are we chalices? Does He ask to be sacrificed in us?

Are we nests? Does He desire of us a warm, sweet abiding in domestic life at home? (p. 24) Dag Hammarskjöld, a former Secretary General of the United Nations, has also used the image of *chalice* in ways that reverberate well with what Caryll Houselander points out to us. Namely, **Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our being to receive, to carry, and give back. It must be held out empty - for the past must only be reflected in its polish, its shape, its capacity.**

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from *The Reed of God*, by Caryll Houselander, © 2006, Ave Maria Press.

This task of being emptied or emptying ourselves so as to create the space in which the Lord may pour out the wine of compassion for a thirsting world is, as Dag Hammarskjöld mentions, a daily task. Caryl Houselander would certainly concur. And it is not only a daily task, but it is done in the context of our ordinary duties and engagements.

There has been, even within our own formation backgrounds, the practice of speaking of developing the spiritual life... as if it is a life separate from our regular, daily life. Ms. Houselander takes such an attitude or assumption to task: **There are many people in the world who cultivate a curious state which they call "the spiritual life." They often complain that they have very little time to devote to the "spiritual life." The only time they do not regard as wasted is the time they can devote to pious exercises: praying, reading, meditations, and visiting the church.**

All the time spent in earning a living, cleaning the home, caring for the children, making and mending clothes, cooking, and all the other manifold duties and responsibilities, is regarded as wasted.

Yet it is really through ordinary human life and the things of every hour of every day that union with God comes about. (p. 26)

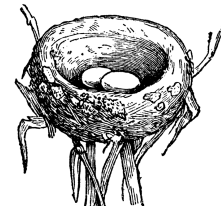
It is a great mistake to suppose that those who have inherited the material for their life from suffering generations, and who have poor health and a timid approach or some vice or weakness, have not been designed and planned by God as much as others who seem luckier in the world's eyes. (p. 27)

Each one of us----... is the material which Christ Himself, through all generations that have gone to our making, has fashioned for His purpose.

That which seems to us to be to a crumbling point, a lack, a thorn in the flesh, is destined for God's glory as surely as the rotting bones of Lazarus, as surely as the radiance of Mary of Nazareth.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- Where do I see the face of Christ around me today?
- What kind of emptiness do I experience at this time? Is it purposeful, or meaningless? What shape does it take? (Reed, cup or nest... or...?)
- How has God shaped me to be the person I am today? What is my Blessed History; by what whittling, hammering and weaving has God used my past to fashion me as I am today?
- How are the items, events and people of my daily life sacramental... an encounter with my God?



Talk # 7-- Kenosis and Literature

This morning I would like to take things a little lighter, and look at Kenosis as it is reflected in literature. There is much in literature which reflects this process of kenosis that we have been reflecting upon, and this morning we have neither the time nor I the competence to do a thorough nor exhaustive review of this theme, but I would like to share with you some brief reflections based upon three books of fairly recent origin, and one parable which, I am sure, will be new to you.

[SLIDE 2] The first book I would like to look at is *The Shack*, by William Paul Young. If you are not familiar with this book, then let me introduce it by sharing a few notes taken from the back cover of the book.

William Paul Young was born a Canadian and raised, as a very young child, by his missionary parents among the Dani tribe, a technologically stone-age tribe in the highlands of what was then New Guinea. He suffered great loss as a child and young adult, and now enjoys the "wastefulness of grace" with his family (wife and six children) in the Pacific Northwest.

As for the story itself, here is the brief synopsis given on the back cover:

["Makenzie Allen Philip's youngest daughter, Missy, has been abducted during a family vacation and evidence that she may have been brutally murdered is found in an abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness. Four years later, in the midst of his Great Sadness, Mack receives a suspicious note, apparently from God, inviting him back to that shack for a weekend.]

[SLIDE 3] Against his better judgment he arrives at the shack on a wintry afternoon and walks back into his darkest nightmare. What he finds there will change Mack's world forever.

[In a world where religion seems to grow increasingly irrelevant THE SHACK wrestles with the timeless question: *Where is God in a world so filled with unspeakable pain?* The answers Mack gets will astound you and perhaps transform you as much as it did him. ..."]

One thing which this book does for us is that it, [SLIDE 4] "mixes metaphors" as it were, in order to shake us loose from some of our preconceived notions of God, by which we limit the way we allow God to appear to us. Sometimes in order to receive God as she is coming to us today, we have to let go of our comfort zones or usual ways of looking at God. This is what Mackenzie had to do when Papa appeared to him as a buxom black woman who loved to cook. He had to let go, pour out, and empty himself of his cherished notion that God is a powerful masculine figure who is transcendent and awe-some. While God can appear that way, it isn't the only way God is revealed to us.

This is why all throughout the Gospels, especially that of Mark, Jesus tells his disciples who recognize him as Messiah not to tell anyone... not because he wasn't the Messiah, but because he knew that the popular notion of what a messiah is like would blind the people from seeing who the Messiah truly is, a suffering servant.

While I was on staff at our novitiate, one of our young novices from Zambia told me that he really enjoyed reading **The Shack**, once he got beyond his resistance to think of God the Father as a motherly black woman who spoke with a southern accent and had not only wisdom but wit as well. Reading this book stretched him to realize that God is so much bigger than our imagination, and to imagine God as a buxom black woman is just as true as imagining God as an old white man with a long white beard.

[By always referring to God in terms of one sex, in what ways are we being blinded to the many ways God is coming to us today?]

The way we imagine a person to be can limit the way that person can be to us. Preconceived notions and our pre-judgments (prejudices) can limit our perception of the reality before us. Consider this conversation between Mack and Jesus, as they lay out at night on a lakeside dock, gazing up at the stars... [SLIDE 5]

"Incredible!" whispered Jesus, his head near Mack's in the darkness. "I never get tired of this."

"Even though *you* created it?" Mack asked.

"I created it as the Word, before the Word became flesh. So even though I created this, I see it now as a human. And I must say, it is impressive!" (p. 109)

Conversation between Jesus and Mackenzie on the dock continues...

"Jesus?"

"Yes Mackenzie?"

"I am surprised by one thing about you."

"Really? What?"

"I guess I expected you to be more... uh... well, humanly striking."

Jesus chuckled. **"Humanly striking? You mean handsome." Now he was laughing.**

"Well, I was trying to avoid that, but yes. Somehow I thought you'd be the ideal man, you know, athletic and overwhelmingly good looking."

"It's my nose, isn't it?"

Mack didn't know what to say.

Jesus laughed. **"I am Jewish, you know. My grandfather on my mother's side had a big nose; in fact, most of the men on my mom's side had big noses."**

"I just thought you'd be better looking."

"By whose standards? Anyway, once you really get to know me, it won't matter to you."

The words, though delivered kindly, stung. Stung what, exactly? Mack lay there a few seconds and realized that as much as he thought he knew Jesus, perhaps he didn't... not really. Maybe what he knew was an icon, an ideal, an image through which he tried to grasp a sense of spirituality, but not a real person.

"Why is that?" he finally asked. "You said if I really knew you it wouldn't matter what you looked like..."

"It is quite simple really. Being always transcends appearance-- that which only seems to be. Once you begin to know the being behind the very pretty or very ugly face, as determined by your bias, the surface appearances fade away until they simply no longer matter. ..." (pp. 111-112)

One surprising thing this little vignette brings out is that [Jesus sees the world, still, through human eyes.] Or, to put it another way, when Jesus was raised from the dead and exalted on high, he was not divested of his humanity. Jesus is still, and will be for all time, fully human. This is surely worth further meditation. When Jesus ascended on high and returned to the Father, things did not, for him, return to "normal" as it was before the Incarnation. Jesus returns to the Father not as Logos, but as the Christ, fully human and fully divine. And in Jesus, the divine does not overpower or override the human.

There is also a passage in **The Shack** which speaks of how God, in the Incarnation, chose to embrace and experience the limitations of being human, all out of love for a lost and wounded creation. Papa explains to Mack: **[SLIDE 6] "...there are some advantages to being God. By nature I am completely unlimited, without bounds. I have always known fullness. I live in a state of perpetual satisfaction as my normal state of existence. ... We created you to share in that. But then Adam chose to go it on his own, as we knew he would, and everything got messed up. But instead of scrapping the whole Creation we rolled up our sleeves and entered into the middle of the mess-- that's what we have done in Jesus. ...**

["When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human. We also chose to embrace all the limitations that this entailed. Even though we have always been present in this created universe, we now became flesh and blood.] [It would be like this bird, whose nature it is to fly, choosing only to walk and remain grounded. He doesn't stop being the bird, but it does alter his experience of life significantly. ...]

"Although by nature he is fully God, Jesus is fully human and lives as such. While never losing the innate ability to fly, he chooses moment-by-moment to

remain grounded. That is why his name is Immanuel, God with us, or God with you, to be more precise. (pp 98-99)

There is another revealing conversation in which Mack is describing his children to Papa, Jesus and Sarayu (the Holy Spirit figure in this Trinity), and it suddenly occurs to him that God, being God, would already know all about his children... yet they are listening as if they are hearing about them for the first time. So he says to them: **"Now here I am telling you about my kids and my friends and about [my wife] Nan, but you already know everything that I am telling you, don't you? You're acting like it's the first time you heard it."** Sarayu reached across the table and took his hand. **"Mackenzie, remember our conversation earlier about limitation? ... Remember that choosing to stay on the ground [reference to the Incarnation] is a choice to facilitate a relationship; to honor it. Mackenzie, you do this yourself. You don't play a game or color a picture with a child to show your superiority. Rather, you choose to limit yourself so as to facilitate and honor that relationship. You will even lose a competition to accomplish love. It is not about winning and losing, but about love and respect."**

"So when I am telling you about my children?"

[SLIDE 7] "We have limited ourselves out of respect for you. We are not bringing to mind, as it were, our knowledge of your children. As we are listening to you, it is as if this is the first time we have known about them, and we take great delight in seeing them through your eyes. ... Relationships are never about power, and one way to avoid the will to power is to choose to limit oneself--to serve. Humans often do this-- in touching the infirm and sick, in serving the ones whose minds have left to wander, in relating to the poor, in loving the very old and the very young, or even in caring for the other who has assumed a position of power over them." (pp. 106-107)

The power of Kenosis is found in self-limitation in favor of service to the other, it is not a power over someone, but a power which makes one sub-servant to others. It is, as Michael Gorman has said, *power-in-weakness*.

[SLIDE 8] *A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church*: On May 31st, 2002, Bishop Rembert G. Weakland, OSB entered his Cathedral in Milwaukee and help a public ceremony of confession and penance, in which he confessed and asked forgiveness for events that he had been a part of and which were then rocking the local church in scandal. Sometime later, after his public confession and also the acceptance from Rome of his resignation as bishop (he was, after all, over 75 years of age and so the request for resignation had been sent in prior to the outbreak in the media of the supposed abuse on his part), Archbishop Weakland wrote his memoirs, entitled ***A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church***. It is a brutally honest and open account of his formative years as a child and young seminarian, his entry into religious life and rise as an abbot and later archbishop, and his fall from grace in the eyes of Rome and the public... but never in the eyes of God. Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB says of this book, **["This is not the 'diary of a country priest', but the diary of an archbishop who never lost contact with the weaknesses--and the strengths-- in himself and the church he served. ... Read this book, it has a great deal to say about our own lives."]** I would concur. **[Fade out]**

When Archbishop Weakland was accused of abuse, it was a ploy by the accuser to extort money out of him. His accuser was a man with whom the archbishop had had an inappropriate relationship with, although the man was in his thirties at the time (not a child by any means, nor a vulnerable adult), and so the accusation of "date rape" was not only sensational, but false. When the archbishop notified Rome immediately about the accusation coming out against him in the local and national press, the papal nuncio's reply was "Of course you are going to deny it." This would make it a case of "he said/he said" and easier to deflect and defend against. But Archbishop Weakland's reply to the papal nuncio was "I will deny that any abuse took place, but will not say that nothing ever happened between us." Archbishop Weakland refused to vilify his accuser, but rather spoke the truth, knowing that it would ultimately set him free, but only at the cost of personal shame and suffering.

This was certainly a time of self-emptying for Archbishop Weakland, and he undertook this painful journey because of his care and love for his local church.

Here are some remarks he made during his public apology in the Cathedral of Milwaukee:

"I come before you today to apologize and beg forgiveness. I know-- and I am sure you do too-- that the church to be authentic must be a community that heals. But I also know-- and you do too-- that there is no healing unless it is based on truth. In my remarks, I will do my best. ...

I apologize to all the faithful of this archdiocese which I love so much, to all its people and clergy, for the scandal that has occurred because of my sinfulness.

Long ago I placed that sinfulness in God's loving and forgiving heart, but now and into the future I worry about those whose faith may be shaken by my acts.

[SLIDE 9] People who are concerned about me ask how I feel at this moment. The best nouns to describe those feelings would be remorse, contrition, shame, and emptiness. [This final word reminds me of an insight from St. Theresa of Lisieux. She once wrote that she wanted to go to God empty-handed. I think I know now personally what she meant by that phrase. I have learned how frail my own human nature is, how in need of God's loving embrace I am]. [Empty-handed for me now means a willingness to accept my humanity totally, just as Christ accepted that same human nature out of love. But for me it also means to be fully receptive to whatever God wants to place in those hands, to be ready with empty hands to receive new life].

[SLIDE 10] But I am also aware much self-pity and pride remain. I must leave that pride behind. Each day I will try to leave room for God to enter into my life more and more. Ultimately I understand that the humanity God so loved and sought to redeem, including my own humanity, will be transformed by his loving embrace and grace." (p. 5)

We come to the Lord with empty hands, to make room for God to fill us with new, risen life.

[SLIDE 11] [*In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*]: Neil White, a journalist and magazine publisher, wanted the best for those he loved-- nice cars, beautiful homes,

luxurious clothes. He loaned money to family and friends, gave generously to his church, and invested in his community-- but his bank account couldn't keep up. Soon White began moving money from one account to another to avoid bouncing checks. His world fell apart when the FBI discovered his scheme and a judge sentenced him to eighteen months in a federal prison.

But it was no ordinary prison. The beautiful, isolated colony in Carville, Louisiana, was also home to the last people in the continental United States disfigured by leprosy. Hidden away for decades, this small circle of outcasts had forged a tenacious, clandestine community, a fortress to repel the cruelty of the outside world. It is here, in a place rich with history, where the Mississippi River briefly flows north, amid an unlikely mix of leprosy patients, nuns, and criminals, that White's strange and compelling journey begins.

This is, as author John Grisham remarks, "**[a remarkable story of a young man's loss of everything he deemed important, his imprisonment in a place that would terrify anyone, and his ultimate discovery that redemption can be taught by society's most dreaded outcasts].**"

[SLIDE 12] Here is a passage from the end of this remarkable story, in which Neil White describes saying goodbye to two of his closest friends from the leprosarium, Harry, a man who lost most his fingers to Hansen's disease, and Ella, a woman who lost her legs, from the knees on down, to the disease.

"You packed?" Harry asked. I nodded. I stepped into the hallway, reached for Harry's hand, and held it in both of mine. [I wanted to tell this gentle man that I was honored to be his friend]; [that his disfigured hand was a symbol-- like a unique, broken, beautiful sculpture-- that embodied something important for me that I didn't fully understand. I wanted him to know that taking Communion with him, watching Father Reynolds place the wafer in the remnants of his palm, was a privilege and would alter, forever, how I felt about the sacrament. ... But I didn't say anything. As usual. Harry didn't say much either].

[SLIDE 13- name] Then I turned to Ella. She looked alive and vibrant. I couldn't possibly say anything adequate to this woman who had every right to be bitter

and resentful, but was more content than anyone I had ever encountered. She had come to exemplify for me what was good and pure and honest and right in all of us, an angel who'd lost her family as a girl, but made a home in a colony of outcasts. A woman whose words had directed me along a new path.

[Ella always seemed to know what I needed to hear. "Any words of wisdom?" I asked.]

[She didn't miss a beat. "Don't forget to go to church."]

[... at some point, after I settled in Oxford, I would take Ella's advice and find a church. Not just any church. A place like the church at Carville [prison]. Where the parishioners were broken and chipped and cracked. A place to go when I needed help. A place to ask forgiveness. A sacred place where people were not consumed with image or money].

Can we be such a church?

[SLIDE 14] A Parable...

There once was a Woodsman, who loved TREE. It was what he was created for. He loved the Beauty, the Strength, the Movement, the Majesty of all that was Tree. He loved to hear the Voice which Tree gave to the Wind. He loved to watch the dance of Tree before the Storm, and he loved to rest in the Shade of Tree beneath the Sun.

The Woodsman loved both Tree in its simplicity, as one tree, and Tree in its multitude... that is to say, Tree as Forest.

One day Woodsman set out in search of the PERFECT TREE, the Ultimate Forest. In his love of Tree he wanted nothing less than [the complete, the full, the perfect expression of all that Tree is. So he wandered and searched for a long time, and at last came to a great wall, behind which he could catch a glimpse of the treetops of a mighty and majestic forest. He had come to the Primal Forest in which stood the First and Perfect Tree].

In the Wall was a large wooden gate. **[fade out...]**

The gate was closed and would not yield to the Woodsman. [Beside the gate grew a scrubby little pine tree]. It looked sick. Woodsman hardly paid any notice to this little tree. “What a sorry expression of Tree this thing is!” he thought. “What I seek is Tree in its fullness... which lies beyond this wall.” And so Woodsman pounded and pleaded upon the Gate to open it. But the Gate remained closed.

Gradually Woodsman grew tired of this and he began to look around. He began to notice move carefully the scrubby little pine beside him. And slowly his proud heart began to change. He began to learn to like the little pine—at first only because it had a very faint resemblance to Tree... but then he began to like Little Pine just for who it was. Woodsman sat down beside the Little Scrubby Pine, with his back against the Wall, and he began to love the little pine for itself. He loved its crooked form and bent branches. He loved the sparseness of its needles and the roughness of its bark. He was touched by the humbleness of its spirit. “You are, in fact”, whispered the Woodsman to the little pine, amazed by his discovery, “a beautiful tree.”

Suddenly Woodsman heard a joyful sound. It was the sound of iron creaking and wood splitting. He turned to see the Gate burst asunder. He could now freely pass into the Primal Forest.

As Woodsman walked into the Forest, he heard the Voice of Tree in the Wind sigh and say: “[You cannot love me in my Greatness if you will not love me in my Littleness.]”

(And the King will say: “In so far as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.” Mt 25:40)

And isn't this the scandal of God? That to seek him in his Greatness we must find him in his Littleness? Where shall we not see the presence of God, for God is in Other. This has been the scandal of the Incarnation. The Divine became Human. The Timeless entered Time. His Light came into Darkness. The Sinless One became Sin.

To look directly at God's Brightness would be to go blind.

To look directly at the Divine Light is to see Holy Darkness.

And so we first seek the Uncreated Light by seeing its Reflection in the Created.

And even more so... We find the God of Light to be also present in Darkness.

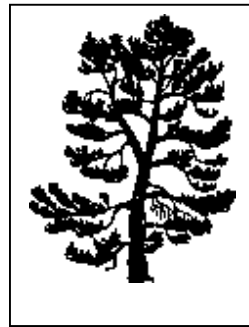
To draw near to Light we must pass through the Dark. (Nonsense!)

In the touch of our sinfulness-- and now I really speak whole-ly and Holy Nonsense-- we also find the Holy Touch!

This is the Scandal of God—

That to draw near to the Perfect Tree

We must love the Scrubby Pine.



Mark Dean, OMI [910910]

[SLIDE 15] Reflection Questions:

- ❖ [The disfigured hand of a man who suffered from Hansen's Disease receiving communion became a symbol that embodied something important... What do the hands of Jesus, still bearing the marks of crucifixion, say to me?
- ❖ [In whose face have I lately seen the beauty of God reflected?
- ❖ [How do I go empty-handed to the Lord. What am I clinging too, which I need to let go of, in order to be empty-handed?
- ❖ [In commenting upon *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*, John Grishom observes that "**redemption can be taught by society's most dreaded outcasts**". Who are the outcasts around me, and what do they have to say to me about God's out-pouring love?
- ❖ [How do I imagine God? What role does gender play in these imaginings?
- ❖ [What other stories or books speak to me of emptying out, of self-sacrificing love, of God's power manifest through weakness and vulnerability?

[SLIDE 16...] L J C & MI

Talk #8- Kenosis and The Reed of God, by Caryll Houselander

[SLIDE 1] This afternoon, as we near the approach of the conclusion to our retreat, I would like to look at Kenosis through a Marian perspective, as suggested by Caryll Houselander in her classic book, *The Reed of God*. But first I would like to give a brief biographical sketch of Miss Houselander, as reported by Deborah Halter of Loyola University, New Orleans, for Caryll Houselander's life itself displays a kenotic or self-sacrificing compassion for others.

[SLIDE 2] Caryll Houselander was born in Bath, England on the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel, in 1901. (That is, September 29th, although several biographies mistakenly give the date October 29th.) Caryll was the second of two daughters born to Willmott and Gertrude Provis Houselander, an attractive and athletic couple. Willmott was a skilled huntsman; "Gert" had played center court at Wimbledon. But little Caryll was a sickly child who wasn't expected to survive a day. Her physical weakness (she was never healthy) immediately distanced her parents. But when she was 6, her mother's conversion to Catholicism led to Caryll's baptism, followed by "multitudinous prayers, devotions and pious practices" and a "persecution of piety" that caused her and her sister to spend their pocket money on "deplorable statues, flower vases, flowers, lamps and candles and candlesticks, as well as lace and linen cloths" for the home altars their mother insisted they construct. These altars, which may have sparked her interest in ecclesiastical art, became what she described as "positive riots of the worst that repository art can produce."

The day after Caryll's 9th birthday, her parents permanently separated. With their financial security gone, Caryll's mother opened a boarding house and later sent Caryll to the cloistered Convent of the Holy Child, where the girl was left even during holidays. At the school, the French and Belgian nuns taught the children how to make jams, knit woolen helmets, and hate Germans. Here, Caryll experienced her first mystical experience. One day, she noticed a Bavarian ("To us, Bavarian meant German") nun sitting alone, cleaning shoes and weeping. After a long silence, **[SLIDE 3]** Caryll saw a mental picture of the nun's head

weighed down by a crown of thorns. From this vision, she came to understand that Christ was suffering in this nun.

[SLIDE 4] On a rainy night in July 1918, Gert sent Caryll to buy potatoes from a street vendor. Along the way, Caryll saw a "[gigantic and living Russian icon"--she had never seen one before--in which she recognized Christ the King crucified, "lifted above the world in our drab street, lifted up and filling the sky ... with his head bowed down ... brooding over the world]."

Soon after, she learned of the assassination of Russian Tsar Nicholas II and saw from newspaper photos [that it was Nicholas' face she had seen on the suffering Christ].

[SLIDE 5] Her next vision occurred on a crowded subway train amid "all sorts of people jostled together, sitting and strap-hanging." [Suddenly, she saw Christ in each passenger--"living in them, dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them." In these passengers she saw the whole world. Later, as she walked among the crowds in the street, she saw Christ in every passerby. This vision lasted several days, convincing her that "oneness in Christ is the only cure for human loneliness.]" [Years later Archbishop Oscar Romero would echo a similar vision or insight, as he tells us, "**[SLIDE 6]** *Each time we look upon the poor, on the farmworkers who harvest the coffee, the sugarcane, or the cotton... remember, there is the face of Christ.*"]

These three visions--**[SLIDE 7]** of the nun, the [tsar] and the [commuters]--convinced Caryll that Christ is in all people, even the ones from which we turn away "because of the image we have formed of what sanctity ought to be.

[SLIDE 8] "If we look for Christ "only in the saints, we shall miss him," she wrote. "If we look for him in ourselves, in what we imagine to be the good in us, we shall begin in presumption and end in despair." If we reach out for Christ in other people, it cannot be "in the way that we think he should be, not in the way that we already understand, but in the way that he chooses to be, who is himself the Way."

[SLIDE 9] As with so many mystics, Houselander was a paradox. [She preached a social gospel, yet she was a virtual recluse]. [She felt overwhelming sympathy for the world, yet she had a razor-sharp tongue] and biting sense of humor. (When she worked in a wartime first aid station, a nurse asked, "Houselander, are you sterile?" Houselander quipped, "Not as far as I know.") [She swore, told off-color jokes, liked gin, and chain-smoked] And by all accounts, she was a difficult person. She was not patient, kind or gentle. She did not suffer fools gladly or even tactfully. [She wrote that most Catholic writers started with "the idea of preserving the good in people," but that she started with "the idea of everything being in ruins." She did not expect "to find people good, but I expect to find Christ wounded in them, and of course that is what I do find.]" And for human woundedness, she had an overwhelming, (some would say pathological,) empathy.

[Caryll became known for her empathetic response and connection to people suffering from emotional or mental anguish.] Halfway through [World War II], doctors had begun sending patients to Houselander for counseling and therapy. Badly educated, she nevertheless had an uncanny ability to rebuild trust and self-confidence. These people, like the infant Jesus, were unable to fend for themselves and needed "mothering." Never married, Houselander had no children of her own to mother, nor had she ever been properly mothered. She saw these children (and adults) of war as the infant Christ, for whom the only acceptable response was the gift of self. The infant Christ depended on each person to be as a mother, carrying him into the world, and this is what she worked hard to do. One eminent psychiatrist who referred troubled patients to her, Dr. Eric Strauss, said Houselander "loved them back to life." She was, he said, a "divine eccentric."

Houselander died of breast cancer in 1954 at age 53. As if to prove the ephemeral nature of life, the author whose works were known worldwide only 50 years ago is now mostly forgotten. Her writings, however, chronicle a timeless attempt to redeem individual suffering through identification with the crucified Christ. In the body of Christ, "each one has something to give all the others ... and each owes it to all the others to be himself," to supply what the other lacks. To deny a person's

full humanity "is to mutilate the Body of Christ." ... [Taken from -- 'Neurotic' mystic saw Christ in all: Caryll Houselander was sharp-tongued recluse with overwhelming empathy for the suffering. National Catholic Reporter, Dec 12, 2003 by Deborah Halter COPYRIGHT 2008 Gale, Cengage Learning]

[SLIDE 10] Let us now look at **The Reed of God**, in which Caryll Houselander offers a contemplation on the gift of Mary's emptiness (or kenosis) to the Lord.

[SLIDE 11] As we have seen earlier, Kenosis entails being poured out or emptied (limiting self) in sacrificial service to the Other. Caryll begins her contemplation on Mary by considering the quality of Mary's emptiness before the Lord. As she explains:

[That virginal quality which, for want of a better word, I call emptiness is the beginning of this contemplation].

[It is not a formless emptiness, a void without meaning; on the contrary it has a shape, a form given to it by the purpose for which it is intended].

[SLIDE 12] It is the emptiness like the hollow in the reed, the narrow riftless emptiness, which can have only one destiny: to receive the piper's breath and to utter the song that is in his heart.

[SLIDE 13] It is the emptiness like the hollow in the cup, shaped to receive water or wine.

[SLIDE 14] It is the emptiness like that of the bird's nest, built in a round warm ring to receive the little bird. (p. 21)

Notice that this emptiness is not without purpose, nor is it always the same. It takes different shapes, so that it may serve in various ways. One form of emptiness allows the music or song of the artist to enter in. Another form of emptiness allows drink to the thirsty to be given. A third form of emptiness gives shelter to the fledgling bird. In kenosis, our being emptied, made nothing, also makes us open to being of service.

Caryll Houselander mentions that these three images of emptiness are not exhaustive of the various forms of virginity or emptiness, but she mentions these three because in Mary they are fulfilled and exemplified.

Yet not all emptiness is virginal... not all emptiness opens us up to new life being planted and grown. **[SLIDE 15]** Not all emptiness is purposeful.

[Emptiness is a very common complaint in our days, not the purposeful emptiness of the virginal heart and mind but a void, meaningless, unhappy condition.]

[Strangely enough, those who complain the loudest of the emptiness of their lives are usually people whose lives are overcrowded, filled with trivial details, plans, desires, ambitions, unsatisfied cravings for passing pleasures, doubts, anxieties and fears...] (p. 22)

[The question which most people will ask is "Can someone whose life is already cluttered up with trivial things go back to this virginal emptiness?]"

[Of course he can; if a bird's nest has been filled with broken glass and rubbish, it can be emptied]. (p. 23)

Notice that we have here again the kenotic verb... *emptied*. It refers to being freed of the clutter and forming again the spaces in which God's grace and gift may enter in and fill up. Our task is on the side of kenosis... emptying and pouring out, God is the one who fills up and raises up. As Caryll Houselander notes:

[SLIDE 16] Our own effort will consist in sifting and sorting out everything that is not essential and that fills up space and silence in us and in discovering what sort of shape this emptiness in us, is. From this we shall learn what sort of purpose God has for us. In what way are we to fulfill the work of giving Christ life in us?

[Are we reed pipes? Is He waiting to live lyrically through us?]

[Are we chalices? Does He ask to be sacrificed in us?]

[Are we nests? Does He desire of us a warm, sweet abiding in domestic life at home?] (p. 24)

This passage may seem to imply that we are one of these three forms of virginal emptiness... a reed pipe, a chalice or a nest. But in fact, like the Virgin Mary (who is the fulfillment of all these models, as mentioned earlier), **[our lives will, at different stages and in various circumstances, entail all three models]**.

[SLIDE 17] Dag Hammarskjöld, a former Secretary General of the United Nations, has also used the image of *chalice* in ways that reverberate well with what Caryll Houselander points out to us. Namely, **[Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our being to receive, to carry, and give back. It must be held out empty - for the past must only be reflected in its polish, its shape, its capacity]**.

This task of being emptied or emptying ourselves so as to create the space in which the Lord may pour out the wine of compassion for a thirsting world is, as Dag Hammarskjöld mentions, a daily task. Caryll Houselander would certainly concur. And it is not only a daily task, but it is done in the context of our ordinary duties and engagements.

There has been, even within our own formation backgrounds, that practice of speaking of developing the spiritual life... as if it is a life separate from our regular, daily life. **[SLIDE 18]** Ms. Houselander takes such an attitude or assumption to task:

[There are many people in the world who cultivate a curious state which they call "the spiritual life." They often complain that they have very little time to devote to the "spiritual life." The only time they do not regard as wasted is the time they can devote to pious exercises: praying, reading, meditations, and visiting the church].

[All the time spent in earning a living, cleaning the home, caring for the children, making and mending clothes, cooking, and all the other manifold duties and responsibilities, is regarded as wasted].

[Yet it is really through ordinary human life and the things of every hour of every day that union with God comes about]. (p. 26) **[Caryll Houselander]**

Thus, all the daily things of our life, all the ordinary, routine and "taken-for-granted" moments of our day, are sacramental. **[Slide 19]** As songwriter Carrie Newcomer lyrically expresses it:

[Holy is the dish and drain], [the soap and sink], and [the cup and plate] and [the warm wool socks], and [the cold white tile, showerheads and good dry towels] and [frying eggs sound like psalms, with bits of salt measured in my palm]. [It's all a part of a sacrament, as holy as a day is spent]... [--Carrie Newcomer]

When the angel Gabriel came to Mary to announce to her that she is the favored one of the Lord, whom God is asking to be mother to the Messiah, she was not asked to abandon her plans and ordinary occupations in order to follow God on a special path set apart from others. Rather, as Houselander explains, she was asked to give to God her humanity and **[[SLIDE 20]** all the ordinary aspects that it entails:

[The one thing [God] did ask of [Mary] was the gift of her humanity. ... And outwardly it would not differ from the life she would have led if she had not been chosen to be the Bride of the Spirit and the Mother of God at all]!

[...[God] asked for her ordinary life shared with Joseph]. ...

[Yes, it certainly seemed that God wanted to give the world the impressions that it is ordinary for Him to be born of a human creature].

[SLIDE 21] Well, that is a fact. God did mean it to be the ordinary thing, for it is His will that Christ shall be born in every human being's life and not, as a rule, through extraordinary things, but through the ordinary daily life and the human love that people give to one another. ...

[We are all asked if we will surrender what we are, our humanity, our flesh and blood, to the Holy Spirit and allow Christ to fill the emptiness formed by the particular shape of our life]. (p. 35)

[To surrender all that we are, as we are, to the Spirit of Love in order that our lives may bear Christ into the world-- that is what we shall be asked]. (p. 36)

Yet we may hesitate to offer and surrender (pour out and empty!) all that we are, because we feel it is not good enough, it is not suitable enough to bear the weight of divine outpouring. **[SLIDE 22]** And yet, who we are, what we are in this moment, has been formed and fashioned by God, throughout the ages leading up to this moment and our being who we are where we are. As Caryll Houselander notes:

...seldom do we think about the mystery of all the years and all the people and all the gathered memories, both of individuals and races, which have made us individually what we are.

[Our life has been given to us from generation to generation, existing in each age in the keeping of other human beings... To some these ages of experience and memory have handed down gifts of health and sound nerves and a buoyant attitude to life; to others gifts of mind, talents, sensitivity. Some are endowed with a natural Christianity; others inherit dark and terrible impulses and crumbling weakness, fears, and neuroses].

[It is a great mistake to suppose that those who have inherited the material for their life from suffering generations, and who have poor health and a timid approach or some vice or weakness, have not been designed and planned by God as much as others who seem luckier in the world's eyes]. (p. 27)

[Each one of us---... is the material which Christ Himself, through all generations that have gone to our making, has fashioned for His purpose].

[SLIDE 23] That which seems to us be to a crumbling point, a **[lack, a thorn in the flesh]**, is **[destined for God's glory as surely as the rotting bones of Lazarus]**, as **[surely as the radiance of Mary of Nazareth]**.

[SLIDE 24—“Shaped through suffering”]

...Think again of the three symbols I have used for the virginal emptiness of Mary. These are each made from material which must undergo some experience to be made ready for its purpose.

[The reed grows by the streams. It is the simplest of things, but it must be cut by the sharp knife, hollowed out, and the stops must be cut in it]; [it must be shaped and pierced before it can utter the shepherd's song.]...

[The chalice does not grow like the flower it resembles. It is made of gold; gold must be gathered from the water and the mud and hewn from the rock], [it must be beaten by countless little blows that give the chalice of sacrifice its fitting beauty].

[The twigs and fluff and leaves of the bird's nest are brought from all sorts of places]... [It is the shape of [the mother bird's] breast that molds the nest to its inviting roundness].

[SLIDE 25] ...These are but three examples. Each one can, when he has cleared out the rubble even for a day, look honestly at the material from which he is made, and ask the Holy Spirit to let It shows him the way Christ wills to show Himself in his life.

[Does He ask to be sung, to be uttered as the Word]?

[Does He ask to be sacrificed, to be lifted up and to draw all ... to Him]?

[Does he ask to be fostered, swaddled, cherished, the little unfledged bird in the human heart]?

[SLIDE 26] How much can we do ourselves at this stage of contemplation? Not very much, for now, as always, most of it is done by God....

[We can accept and seize upon the fact that what we are at this moment, young or old, strong or weak, mild or passionate, beautiful or ugly, clever or stupid, is planned to be like that. Whatever we are gives form to the emptiness in us which can only be filled by God and which God is even now waiting to fill. (p. 30)]

[SLIDE 27] REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- [Where do I see the face of Christ around me today?
- [What kind of emptiness do I experience at this time? Is it purposeful, or meaningless? What shape does it take? (Reed, cup or nest... or...?)
- [How has God shaped me to be the person I am today? What is my Blessed History; by what whittling, hammering and weaving has God used my past to fashion me as I am today?
- [How are the items, events and people of my daily life sacramental... an encounter with my God?

[SLIDE 28] L J C & M I