



## The Doctrine of 'Divine Indwelling' in Elizabeth of the Trinity and Caryll Houselander

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### Abstract

The present article examines the perspectives of two understudied, female spiritual writers, Elizabeth of the Trinity and Caryll Houselander, on the doctrine of 'divine indwelling'. After a brief discussion of classical elaborations of this doctrine, the paper gives an account of Elizabeth's and Houselander's respective Trinitarian and Incarnational readings of God's indwelling of the human soul. This discussion shows that a given interpretation and experience of the divine indwelling is inevitably shaped by – and shapes – the particularity of one's concrete life context, as well as the doctrinal prism through which it is approached. It furthermore demonstrates that such different accounts nonetheless converge on key, and at times surprising issues, such as the reciprocal nature of divine indwelling, and its interdependency on the separation between God and the human being.

### Keywords

Divine Indwelling, Elizabeth of the Trinity, Caryll Houselander, Trinity, Incarnation, Spiritual Practice

Even, or perhaps especially, to the theologian, the spiritual significance of Christian doctrines is not always obvious.<sup>1</sup> Although central to the universal call to holiness, the traditional Christian teaching on God's presence in the human soul,<sup>2</sup> for instance, is difficult to grasp concretely. The vast amount of reflection on *how* God indwells the

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Bradford Manderfield for his insightful comments on a first draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. *Mystici Corporis Christi* [Encyclical On the Mystical Body of Christ], 29 June 1943, sec. 78–80, accessed 16 June 2014, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius12/P12MYSTI.HTM>, and *Divinum Illud Munus* [Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on the Holy Spirit], 1896–1897, *passim*, accessed 16 June 2014, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/)

soul does not yet explain the *implications* of this indwelling for the Christian's daily life. This article seeks to unite traditional and contemporary theological concerns by probing more deeply into how the doctrine of divine indwelling might inform—and in turn be shaped by—the Christian's everyday spiritual practice.

It does so in reference to the understudied spiritual writings of Elizabeth of the Trinity and Caryll Houselander, both of whose spiritualities centre on God's presence in the soul. As will become apparent, Elizabeth and Houselander recognize that the spiritual significance of the doctrine of divine indwelling becomes apparent only where God's presence in the soul is contemplated imaginatively and related to other doctrines, in particular the Trinity and the Incarnation. This allows these two preconiliar women to bring theological reflection on the doctrine of divine indwelling on the one hand and spiritual praxis on the other to bear on one another in a manner that throws new light on the concrete meaning of God's presence in the human soul.

The article sets out with a brief discussion of classical elaborations of the doctrine of divine indwelling. This is followed by a presentation and close analysis of Elizabeth's and Houselander's respective Trinitarian and Incarnational readings of God's indwelling of the human soul, which I examine with regard both to their distinctiveness and to their significant commonalities.

## I Divine Indwelling

The doctrine of 'divine indwelling', which grounds the Christian promise of an intimate love relationship between God and the human being, originates in Scripture. According to John, Jesus assures us that 'whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him'" (John 14:21, 23).<sup>3</sup> This notion of the Trinity or, more typically, the Holy Spirit dwelling in the believer is reiterated in Paul's reminder 'don't you know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?' (1 Cor 3.16) and has traditionally been seen to be echoed in the baptismal formula, 'in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit', (Mt 28:19), as well as in Paul's greeting in 2 Cor 13:13, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all'.<sup>4</sup>

leo\_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\_l-xiii\_enc\_09051897\_divinum-illud-munus\_en.html 1897).

<sup>3</sup> All Biblical quotations are from the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE).

<sup>4</sup> Highlighted by M. John Farrelly, O.S.B., *The Trinity. Rediscovering the Central Christian Mystery* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 271.

As is well known, these passages have generated a considerable amount of reflection. The more mystically oriented Greek fathers, in particular, develop a host of images for the divine indwelling, including that of 'a seal which marks us with the image of God, restoring this image in the soul when it has been effaced by sin' (Cyril of Alexandria), and that of a 'fire which penetrates us through and through, as natural fire heats metal to its very depths and imparts to it its own properties – brilliancy, heat, radiancy – without changing its nature' (Basil the Great).<sup>5</sup> In the West, there is a pronounced concern with the manner and conditions of the divine presence in the soul. Augustine establishes, for instance, that 'God dwells in a soul only on condition He is embraced and possessed by that soul'.<sup>6</sup> While, for Augustine, such an embrace and possession of God ultimately includes knowledge of God, it is first of all founded on the 'grace and charity' exchanged, for instance, in baptism.<sup>7</sup>

In Thomas Aquinas, we find a characteristically technical exposition of *how* God dwells in the soul. Thomas distinguishes between God's 'common' existence in all created things 'as the cause existing in the effects which participate in His goodness' and God's 'special' presence in the rational creature whereby he 'dwell[s] therein as in His own temple'.<sup>8</sup> Thomas likens this divine indwelling to that of the 'object known [...] in the knower' and that of 'the beloved in the lover'.<sup>9</sup> The cause of this presence, so Thomas explicates, is the mission, to the soul, of the Son, who was made flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14) and of the Spirit, who was poured into our hearts (Acts 10:45) – a mission whose effect is sanctifying grace. This can be received only by the rational creature, who can know God by faith and love God by charity. Thus, while God is *commonly* present in all things regardless of their actions, he *dwells* only in the rational creature, or the creature capable of actively receiving sanctifying grace. God's indwelling is thus tied to human action.

As these brief summaries indicate, we find in the fathers and doctors of the Church a wealth of rich and nuanced reflection on how we can picture God's dwelling in the soul, and what exactly this consists in. In what follows, I do not so much seek to challenge or develop these important enquiries into the *nature* of the divine indwelling, and related themes such as the path towards holiness or

<sup>5</sup> Barthélemy Froget (trans. Sydney A. Raemers), *The indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the souls of the just according to the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas*. New York: The Paulist Press, 1921, 48f.

<sup>6</sup> Froget, *The indwelling of the Holy Spirit*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Froget, *The indwelling of the Holy Spirit*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, S.T. Ia, q. 43, a. 3 (tr. of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Sec. and Rev. Ed., 1920, online edition at [www.newadvent.org](http://www.newadvent.org)).

<sup>9</sup> Aquinas, S.T. Ia, q. 43, a. 3.

sanctification, the experience of an ecstatic mystical union or the notion of divine-human friendship. Instead, I wish to consider the extent to which concrete depictions and applications of God's presence in the soul emerge from, and in turn inform, spiritual Christian praxis. I do so by analyzing how two women of different temperaments, contexts, and doctrinal emphases, Elizabeth of the Trinity and Caryll Houselander, focus in on the divine indwelling as the central point of their spiritual life and thought. This will bring to light both interesting differences and notable overlaps between their interpretations of the divine indwelling of the soul.

## II 'Divine indwelling' in the spiritual life

In many ways, Elizabeth of the Trinity (1880–1906), a French Discalced Carmelite, and Caryll Houselander, an English single lay-woman (1901–1954) represent different ends of a spectrum of Roman Catholic spirituality. Entering the Carmel of Dijon in 1901, four years after the death of her fellow Carmelite, Thérèse of Lisieux, Elizabeth belonged to an era and strand of society not unfamiliar with, and to some extent reviving, the strict discipline and ascetic rigour of traditional monasticism. Her full and physically demanding day began at 4.45am and ended no sooner than 10.50pm. Letter-writing was strictly limited and visitors were allowed only rarely, briefly and under supervision (30 minutes every month for blood relatives, 30 minutes every three months for all others). Even at the height of her illness, Elizabeth did not leave Carmel and, throughout her life in Carmel, was separated both from the Blessed Sacrament and from her visitors by a double 'grille' of iron and wood, as well as a thin black veil.<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth's life was very much a hidden life, entailing cursory contact only with close relations, fellow nuns and a few priests.

Caryll Houselander was an eccentric artist and mystic who drank and smoked. She ministered to large numbers of mentally ill people, and in every way lived very much *in* the world. Her writing largely took place in the urban context of London during and after World War II. Though doubtlessly a contemplative in her own right, Houselander's starting point lies in the rather more material challenges of office and household work, of wartime loss and of the concrete difficulties arising in the context of human relations. Where Elizabeth, like her Carmelite sister Thérèse of Lisieux, writes with a

<sup>10</sup> For details on her routine, visitor regulations and the use of the grille see Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Letters from Carmel*. Complete Works of Elizabeth of the Trinity, Vol. 2 (tr. Anne Englund Nash) (Washington D.C.: ICS, 1995), 371–374.

Romantic sweetness,<sup>11</sup> Houselander, who is unafraid to admit to and confront her own and others' suffering, adopts a feisty and unadorned style that nonetheless retains a beauty and gentleness of its own.

While both women's spirituality centres on the indwelling of God in the human soul, their different contexts arguably correspond with the different doctrinal lenses through which they interpret this mystical presence. In keeping with her chosen religious name, Elizabeth approaches the God dwelling within her primarily as 'the Three', or in terms of the highly spiritual and abstract notion of the Trinity. Houselander, on the other hand, focuses in on the Incarnation and develops a spirituality of Christ living in and through our humanity. It is to Elizabeth's thought that we now first turn.

### *The Divine Indwelling of the Trinity*

Elizabeth, who has also been called 'the saint of the divine indwelling',<sup>12</sup> became attuned to God's presence in the human soul at her first holy communion. She then not only experienced God's presence in the concrete form of the body and blood of Christ but was also told, by a nun, that her name, Elizabeth, means 'house of God'. From this day on, Elizabeth's spiritual life was characterised by the realization that 'I have found my Heaven on earth, since Heaven is God, and God is [in] my soul'.<sup>13</sup> As Elizabeth portrays it, the spiritual life consists in contemplating and living this interior heaven, such that the soul may be 'wholly filled, wholly invaded by the Three'.<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth strongly relies on St John of the Cross' notion that God seeks not merely to pass through the soul, but to 'penetrate[] ever more deeply the substance of the soul it deifies and renders, so to speak, completely divine'.<sup>15</sup> This requires that one 'live in "communion" with Him', a 'Friend, a Confidant'.<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth's life of prayer, which she recommends also to others, thus centres on continually contemplating and 'think[ing] about this God who dwells within' the

<sup>11</sup> Her writings include primarily three retreats, written shortly before her early death at the age of 26, and a large number of letters to friends, family and acquaintances.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Gregory Ross, O.C.D., 'The Saint of the Divine Indwelling', accessed 16 June 2014, [www.helpfellowship.org/Blessed\\_Elizabeth\\_of\\_the\\_Trinity.htm](http://www.helpfellowship.org/Blessed_Elizabeth_of_the_Trinity.htm).

<sup>13</sup> Letter 122 to Madame de Sourdon in Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Letters from Carmel*. 50. All letters will henceforth be abbreviated as 'L'. Page numbers always refer to the edited collection of Elizabeth's *Letters from Carmel* (tr. Anne Nash).

<sup>14</sup> L 116, 49 and L 107 to Mother Marie of Jesus, 37.

<sup>15</sup> L 121 to Sister Agnès of Jesus-Mary, editor's note 4, citing the *Spiritual Canticle*, p. 50

<sup>16</sup> L 265 to her mother, 252.

soul such that she may 'never leave [Him] there alone but be wholly present'.<sup>17</sup>

Elizabeth makes a point of stating that this God who dwells within is 'the Trinity' or 'the Three': 'It is the whole Trinity who dwells in the soul that loves them in truth, that is, by keeping their word!'; and because 'at every moment of the day and night the three Divine Persons are living within you [...] there is a wholly adorable intimacy when you realize that; you are never alone again!'.<sup>18</sup> Drawing on the epistles of John, in particular, Elizabeth stresses that we are destined 'to have "fellowship" with the Holy Trinity', and that the Trinity itself desires this insofar as 'the Trinity so loves to contemplate its beauty in a soul'.<sup>19</sup> It is precisely this 'devotion for the Three', and her call to 'live within with [*sic*] Them in the heaven of your soul', which Elizabeth considers to be her testament to posterity.<sup>20</sup>

Elizabeth, who lacked any theological training, does not herself unpack the particular significance the Trinitarian nature of God has either for her vocation or for her experience of the divine indwelling. I now wish to suggest that one aspect of this significance, at least, consists in the manner in which the Trinitarian nature of God illuminates the seemingly paradoxical relationship between the Carmelite's hidden life behind the 'grille' on the one hand and her strong experience of union with God and her fellow human beings on the other.

By entering Carmel, Elizabeth has, in one sense, placed a greater distance between herself and the Blessed Sacrament as well as between herself and her mother, sister and friends. Whereas she could previously enter the sanctuary of a church and thus come very near the Blessed Sacrament (e.g. when decorating the altar with flowers),<sup>21</sup> she is now separated from the Sacrament by the grille.<sup>22</sup> As already noted, her encounters with her loved ones are now limited to rare and brief occasions and, again, take place through the grille and in the presence of a fellow nun. Elizabeth's countless letters and reassurances of her love for, and spiritual presence to, those she left

<sup>17</sup> L 249 to Madame Angles, 230, and Elizabeth quoted in editor's notes in Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Letters from Carmel*, 175.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth of the Trinity, *I Have Found God*. Complete Works of Elizabeth of the Trinity, Vol. 1 (tr. Aletheia Kane OCD) (Washington D.C.: ICS, 1984), 154; L 273 to her mother, 271.

<sup>19</sup> L 273 to her mother, 271; L 131 to Canon Angles, 60.

<sup>20</sup> L 269 to her sister, 264. Cf. 1 Jn 4:16.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. L 137 to her aunt Francine Rolland, 67 where she notes that while she cleans the choir every day she does not 'have the consolation of coming quite close, *right* against the Tabernacle, like I did at Calipa', indeed that she does not 'even see the altar'.

<sup>22</sup> Even the rare 'opening' of the grille (e.g. during Adoration) refers merely to the lifting of the veil (and not the wooden and iron bars) and takes place only in complete darkness (editor's notes in Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Letters from Carmel*, 373).

behind<sup>23</sup> indicate that she was well aware of this spatial separation, and to some extent perhaps suffered from it.

At first glance, this separation indeed seems to undercut, rather than foster, intimacy with God and with one's fellow human beings. It is all the more striking, then, that Elizabeth persistently argues that the grilles of Carmel, of her 'prison of love', 'have not separated [...] [her and her loved ones] at all' and, if anything, have served to *enhance* her intimate union with God and with her beloved friends and relations.<sup>24</sup> When she mentions her increased spatial separation from the Blessed Sacrament, she immediately adds that 'still it is much better to be a Carmelite. I cherish this thick grille that hides my Beloved from me at the same time as it makes me the prisoner of His love!'.<sup>25</sup> On the occasion of the one-year anniversary of her entrance into Carmel, she writes to her mother that 'today more than ever they [their two souls] are but one'.<sup>26</sup> At the time of her sister's wedding, she suggests, again to her mother, that 'if, in reality, I were there with you, I would be less so, for you can really feel there is not distance for hearts, and that of your Elizabeth is always yours'.<sup>27</sup> Time and again, Elizabeth insists that 'in Him there is no distance or separation; I feel that so clearly since I have been in Carmel'.<sup>28</sup>

The silence enabled by the isolation of Carmel would seem to constitute one reason for Elizabeth's experience that the spatial separation from God (in the form of the Blessed Sacrament) and her family and friends has, in fact, increased her intimacy with God and others. The stillness of the convent allows her to 'always listen' and thus to perceive God's voice, and his unifying presence within her soul and the souls of her family and friends more acutely.<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth's confinement allows her to 'strip' herself from her 'self', or from the distractions that normally prevent the soul from becoming 'rooted' in Jesus Christ until 'the divine sap streams into it'.<sup>30</sup>

Yet the co-occurrence of union and separation in Elizabeth's spiritual experience seems to be related, also, to the Trinity 'which she so

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. L 178 to her mother, 124: 'and remember that I am there ... that my soul is quite close to yours ... It is so true, my dear little Mama'; L 94 to her mother, 25: 'I leave you without leaving you, for I carry you in my soul'; L 95 to her sister, 26: 'but you do know, don't you, that she [Elizabeth] is quite close to you, our souls are so united in the One who is all Love'; L 137 to her aunt Francine Rolland, 67.

<sup>24</sup> L 98 to Françoise de Sourdon, 29; L 139 to her aunt Mathilde Rolland, 70. See also L 103 to her mother, 34, L 105 to Françoise de Sourdon, 35, L 106 to Madame de Bobet, 36, L 109 to her sister, 39, L 146 to Madame de Sourdon, 79.

<sup>25</sup> L 137 to her aunt Francine Rolland, 67.

<sup>26</sup> L 130 to her mother, 58.

<sup>27</sup> L 141 to her mother, 72. See also L 143 to her mother, 74.

<sup>28</sup> L 146 to Madame de Sourdon, 79.

<sup>29</sup> L 133 to Germaine de Gemeaux, 62 (advertising the life of the Carmelite).

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth of the Trinity, *I Have Found God*, 157.



loves'. In order to see how this might be so, we must consider the nature of this separation more closely. The spatial separation (from the Blessed Sacrament and from family and friends) achieved by the grille arguably constitutes an enactment of two underlying kinds of ontological distance and separation between God and the human being: that of Creator and created, and that of the sinner and the Holy Spirit. In and through her confined existence, Elizabeth acknowledges and offers up this two-fold separation, so that God, who can draw good from bad (sin and the separation it caused), may sublimate it in analogy with the *differentiation* between the Trinitarian persons, until Elizabeth can genuinely say that the state of 'God in me and I in Him' entails 'no distance or separation' but merely difference.<sup>31</sup>

Elizabeth's spirituality thus highlights the extent to which God's Trinitarian nature is in fact critical to the possibility of establishing an 'intimate heart-to-heart' relationship with God despite the human being's separation and distinctness from God.<sup>32</sup> In a variation on von Balthasar's reflections on Elizabeth of the Trinity,<sup>33</sup> we may say that God's Trinitarian nature effectively makes it possible, that it is precisely the human being's separation from God which facilitates his union with God. For, as von Balthasar put it, the Son of God 'divinises' the distance between God and His creature, 'mak[ing] it an expression of the inner-divine distance between the persons in the unity of being [Wesenseinheit]'; while the Holy Spirit '[...] raises the disappointing aspect of difference into the joy [das Beglückende] of the loving exchange by [...] letting it become a function of the highest unification'.<sup>34</sup>

It would seem, therefore, that Elizabeth willingly enters more deeply into her separation from the Blessed Sacrament and from the world precisely in order to cooperate in this process of divinisation, such that she may be incorporated into God's Trinitarian life. (As we will see shortly, this is analogous to Houselander's sense that a confrontation and acceptance of our humanity is key to our divinization). The Trinitarian nature of God allows her to experience separation as a graceful means towards unity and, thus, greater intimacy. For Elizabeth, this includes even – and especially – the separation of death. She thus asks her Prioress, Mother Germaine, whether, once she (Elizabeth) has passed, she may 'come to live in

<sup>31</sup> L 124 to Abbé Beaubis, 53.

<sup>32</sup> L 278 to Germaine de Gemeaux, 278.

<sup>33</sup> Confining himself more to the human being's distinctiveness as a creature (and not as a sinner), von Balthasar had written that 'precisely that which *distinguishes* the creature from God now becomes that wherein it may resemble Him: being *different* in unity' (von Balthasar, *Schwestern im Geist*, 452).

<sup>34</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Schwestern im Geist. Therese von Lisieux und Elisabeth von Dijon* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1970), 452.



[her Mother Prioress]': '[I] will keep you in communion with Love, believing in Love; it will be the sign of [my] indwelling in you. Oh, in what intimacy we are going to live . . .',<sup>35</sup>

In light of the above, we can say that Elizabeth's emphasis on the soul being indwelt by the *Trinity* illuminates her experience of (spatial) separation as a grace-filled tool, and vice versa. It is entirely appropriate, then, that Elizabeth speaks of God as Trinity particularly in relation to stressing her ongoing spiritual and emotional proximity to and union with others. In a letter to her sister, in which Elizabeth writes that 'your Sabeth [. . .] loves you much and feels her soul to be very close to yours', Elizabeth for instance speaks of a 'rendezvous' with her sister 'in the mystery of the Three'.<sup>36</sup> Later, again, she calls her sister to 'continue to live in communion with the Three through everything, that is the center where we meet'.<sup>37</sup> She sketches how the three persons of the Trinity enfold and unite individual souls and, in a letter to an unidentified correspondent, prays that 'the Three fuse our souls into the unity of one single faith and one single love'.<sup>38</sup> Underlying these statements is a sense that by fully allowing God's presence in her soul, Elizabeth's can love others with God's own love and, thus, in a way more divine than how she was previously able to love them.

Elizabeth is never disparaging of life in the world and does not seem to consider this counterproductive to the life of the spirit. Her many letters indeed betray a consistent and genuine interest in family life and its day-to-day worries, for instance. Nonetheless, her perspective on the divine indwelling of the soul remains the somewhat one-sidedly spiritualising perspective of a contemplative nun. For our contemporary taste, her depictions of the human being's union with God remain relatively abstract and, for the most part, brush over the more material aspects of human life. She considers union with God to be fostered primarily by contemplative, silent prayer.<sup>39</sup> In doing so, she is wholly in tune with the Christian tradition and offers a perspective much needed in today's loud world. Caryll Houselander's more modern message that intimate union with God can be approached also in and through our bodily life and work in the world nonetheless constitutes a fruitful complement to this.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth cited by Anne Hunt, 'Apostle of the Indwelling Trinity: Elizabeth of the Trinity OCD,' *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73 (1–2) (2008): 60–72, 68.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. L 119 to her sister, 48; also L 113 to her sister, where she also refers to the 'Mystery' of 'the Three' as 'our Center, our *Dwelling Place*' (emphasis added), 45.

<sup>37</sup> L 117 to her sister, 47.

<sup>38</sup> See e.g. L 269 to her sister, 264, L 115, 46.

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. L 133 to Germaine de Gemeaux, 62.

*Indwelling in light of the Incarnation*

Caryll Houselander, too, places the 'divine indwelling' at the very heart of her spirituality. Yet, in keeping with the materiality of her life as a single laywoman in a world at war, Houselander approaches the divine indwelling less through the prism of the Trinity than through Mary and the mystery of the Incarnation: Houselander speaks of God's presence in the human soul first and foremost as the 'indwelling presence of *Christ*'.<sup>40</sup> With this theological emphasis,<sup>41</sup> she seeks to convey how union with God can be accomplished not only in contemplation but also in the seeming profanity and the greatest hardships of ordinary life. In her book *The Reed of God*, Houselander sets out with the observation that 'emptiness', in the sense of 'a void, meaningless, unhappy condition' 'is a very common complaint in our days'.<sup>42</sup> In a series of meditations on Mary, Houselander goes on to lay out what she considers to be the only viable response to such emptiness. This is the act of receiving Christ into oneself until one is filled with Christ – in short, the realization of God's presence in the soul.

As Houselander presents it, reflecting on the concreteness of Mary's union with God is a helpful tool towards confronting what it means to enter more deeply into God's presence in the soul. By saying 'yes' to God, Mary allowed God to satisfy His desire to 'nest' or 'to make His home' in her.<sup>43</sup> Mary, in turn, quite literally became what Elizabeth called a 'sanctuary' for God.<sup>44</sup>

On the one hand, the doctrine of divine indwelling thus refers to God's humble entry into Mary's human life. In asking Mary for 'human nature, our human nature', God – the One who is beyond suffering – asks for the capacity to die, to suffer, to be vulnerable, to experience indifference, betrayal, and pain: 'He who was wholly sufficient to Himself asked Mary to give Him a heart that might be broken'.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, God dwells in the human being not merely in the ecstasy of contemplative prayer but also, and in a sense especially, in the messiness of ordinary, day-to-day human work, suffering and love. Read through the lens of the Incarnation, the doctrine of divine indwelling also signifies, therefore, that God '*wants* to act and to suffer' through us, such 'that when we resent our circumstances or

<sup>40</sup> Emphasis added. See e.g. Houselander, *The Reed of God*, 150–151.

<sup>41</sup> Houselander's christocentrism does not of course amount to a denial of the fact that, when God acts 'ad extra', it is always all three Trinitarian persons who act.

<sup>42</sup> Houselander, *The Reed of God*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Houselander, *The Reed of God* 21, 123.

<sup>44</sup> L 116 to Cécile Lignon, 46.

<sup>45</sup> Houselander, *The Reed of God*, 73; Caryll Houselander, *This War is the Passion*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1945, 26.

try to spare ourselves what we should undergo, we are being like Peter when he tried to dissuade Our Lord from the Passion'.<sup>46</sup> God's presence in the human soul thus requires the human being to accept his or her humanity in its entirety, *for God's sake*. For – and this is, according to Houselander, the sacramentality of the Christian life – whatever the graced believer does, Christ Himself does, not merely with, but in him.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, God's presence in the soul also implies *our* entry into *God's* divine life. Again, Houselander powerfully conveys this through spelling out the concrete implications of Mary's relationship with Christ. In order 'to make His Body she [Mary] gave her Body': during Jesus' life in the womb, Mary's life and flesh directly passed into God Himself: 'she was His food and warmth and rest, His shelter from the world, His shade in the Sun'.<sup>48</sup> Mary had thus 'formed Christ of her own life, in herself; and now that she had brought Him forth, she lived in Him. Quite literally, her life was in Christ'.<sup>49</sup> Insofar as God has a human life this is, indeed, Mary's life.<sup>50</sup> It is in this sense, too, that Mary has become another Christ. The indwelling of God and Mary is mutual, then. Her life entered into God's, as God's life entered into hers. This mutual exchange of God's divinity and Mary's humanity unifies the Pauline affirmations that 'it is not I but Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:20) and that 'if anyone is *in* Christ, he is a new creation' (2 Cor 5:17, emphasis added).

It will have become apparent that Houselander echoes the long-standing Christian tradition, originating with the Church Fathers, of seeing Mary as a 'type' of the Church, which gives birth to *alteri Christi*. Mary has, as Houselander writes in a poem, 'laid her Child' 'in every cot' such that 'Christ comes to birth' in each of us.<sup>51</sup> As we saw, part of the originality of Houselander's thought consists in the extent to which she applies even the materiality of Mary's relationship with Christ to the contemporary believer. Even today, God comes to dwell in the soul of the believer *through* entering into and adopting his or her material life. Houselander's reading the divine

<sup>46</sup> Houselander, *The Reed of God*, 77; emphasis original.

<sup>47</sup> Houselander, *This War is the Passion* 29.

<sup>48</sup> Houselander, *The Reed of God*, 72.

<sup>49</sup> Houselander, *The Reed of God*, 75. It is this gift of Mary's, her body, which Houselander considers to be reciprocated to all of humanity in the crucifixion. For it is, as Houselander writes, 'when we give our body willingly to another as the means of deliberate self-donation, [that] our union with the other is complete', that '[w]e surrender our intimacy, the secret of ourselves . . .; and we cannot give it *without* our will, our thoughts, our minds, and our souls' (Houselander, *The Reed of God*, 99).

<sup>50</sup> See Houselander, *This War is the Passion* 28.

<sup>51</sup> Houselander, 'The Reed' in Caryl Houselander, *The Flowering Tree*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1945, 65–68, p. 66.

indwelling through the prism of the Incarnation leads her to suggest that, 'through the bodies of men and women Christ toils and endures and rejoices and loves and dies; in them He is increased, set free, imprisoned, restrained, in them He is crucified and buried and rises from the dead'.<sup>52</sup> Christ 'mould[s] Himself to your shape, giving Himself to you, living your life' as well as having, as Houselander writes in a poem,

[...] put on  
the nature of man like a garment  
and worn it to his own shape

thus renewing our humanity in the

[...] shape  
of limitless love  
and warm from the touch  
of His life<sup>53</sup>

Like Elizabeth, Houselander stresses the extent to which Christ's life in us unites us with one another. Since it is always the *whole* Christ who is present in the soul, since Christ 'cannot be separated from Himself or severed or parted from Himself, *we are all one*'.<sup>54</sup> This is the link also to Elizabeth's sense of being united to those far away: the *totus Christus* includes Christ and His Body, the Church. Thus, after faithfully accepting that Christ dwells within ourselves, we must imagine Christ's presence in other people. Concerned, again, to counter a sanitized understanding of the divine indwelling, Houselander stresses the importance of imagining and discerning Christ in 'our own relations and our intimate friends', with whose faults we are deeply familiar, or in the ordinary worker who is far from 'picturesque'.<sup>55</sup>

We have seen, thus far, that, in comparison to Elizabeth's more abstract and spiritual approach, Houselander gives a decisively graphic and bodily situated account of the divine indwelling.<sup>56</sup> Yet this

<sup>52</sup> Houselander, *This War is the Passion* 29.

<sup>53</sup> Houselander, 'God Abides in Men' in Houselander, *The Flowering Tree*, 10–13, p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> Emphasis added. Houselander, *This War is the Passion* 30.

<sup>55</sup> Houselander, *The Reed of God*, 151.

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth does also speak of wanting to 'be another humanity for Him in which He can perpetuate His life of reparation, sacrifice, praise, and adoration', yet this statement lacks Houselander's emphasis on God wanting to inhabit precisely also the frailties of our condition (L 256 to Canon Angles, 239).

difference makes the overlaps with Elizabeth's perspective on the divine indwelling all the more significant.

Houselander for instance calls for an emptying of self that is aided by silence and that arguably corresponds precisely with what the Carmelite way of life seeks to achieve. Where Elizabeth had demanded that 'the soul [...] [be] "stripped" of self and "clothed" in Jesus Christ', Houselander offers that we can realize Christ's presence in us (and thus overcome the contemporary sense of an unhappy emptiness) only if we relinquish 'every distracting and destructive preoccupation' and thus acquire 'the purposeful emptiness of the virginal heart and mind' of Mary.<sup>57</sup> Notwithstanding her more worldly orientation, Houselander notes that this requires human beings 'to allow space or silence or pause in their lives'.<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth's suggestion that 'the soul thus "stripped" [...] has nothing more to fear from exterior encounters or from interior difficulties' is again echoed in Houselander's observation that the act of faith in Christ's presence in our soul 'brings peace: it silences the noise of distraction, the loud business of fear'.<sup>59</sup>

Both women arguably also share a similar awareness of the interdependency of union and separation. In stressing that God achieves our theosis in and through our *humanity*, Houselander points to the critical use God makes both of our creaturely and sinful separation from Him. Where Christ, as Houselander writes, 'gave Himself to human nature to be its supernatural life, as the seed gives its life to the dark hard earth', he sublimates our humanity into a vessel for the divine.<sup>60</sup> This implies that we can only become aware 'of the presence of the Divine Child in us' to the extent that we radically confront 'the humiliation of being ourselves'.<sup>61</sup> As Vincent Meconi has highlighted, Houselander, more explicitly than Elizabeth, acknowledges that the experience of the divine indwelling can thus come with a sense of loneliness which Christ himself experienced in the Passion, and which Houselander experienced not through the separation of the grille but through life as a single woman sharing in the isolation of the sick and the suffering, with whom she worked: union is inseparable from distinction or differentiation.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth, *I Have Found God*, 157, Houselander, *The Reed of God*, 151, 22.

<sup>58</sup> Houselander, *The Reed of God*, 22.

<sup>59</sup> Houselander, *The Reed of God*, 149.

<sup>60</sup> Houselander, *This War is the Passion* 26.

<sup>61</sup> Houselander, *The Reed of God*, 151.

<sup>62</sup> David Vincent Meconi SJ, 'Two Apostles of Loneliness. Caryll Houselander and Catherine Doherty on the Mystical Body of Christ' in *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, Volume 17, Number 2, Spring 2014, pp. 58–76. Meconi quotes Houselander that 'To give oneself to the world, to take all mankind to one's heart, may be the loneliest of experiences' (112). Cf. Caryll Houselander, *Guilt*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1951.

### III A spiritual tool on the path towards holiness

Our discussion of Elizabeth of the Trinity and Caryll Houselander has demonstrated the extent to which our understanding of the mystery of 'divine indwelling' is informed both by our context of life and prayer and by the other doctrinal lenses which guide our Christian life. We noted that where Elizabeth's cloistered and Trinitarian perspective drew particular attention to the way in which our union with God may be aided by a potentially secluded and certainly constant spiritual life of prayer and contemplation, Houselander's more worldly and Incarnational outlook suggested that God seeks to achieve such union in and through the messiness of our material life in the world. We found that, notwithstanding these differences, their accounts resemble each other in important respects, such as the call for an emptying of self and a sense that our distance or separation from God plays a pivotal role in achieving union with God.

Our discussion will have underlined that the doctrine of divine indwelling stands in direct relation both to our concrete and material existence and to other doctrines such as that of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Our understanding and response to this doctrine is inevitably shaped, and fruitfully illuminated, by the doctrines we relate to it and by the concrete specificities of our own life. Our understanding of God's presence in the soul is, in turn, also bound to materially affect our life, as it certainly did in the case both of Elizabeth's decision to enter Carmel with its distinctive rules and practices, and of Houselander's concrete efforts to see and receive God in the seeming banality and ugliness of the war-torn people around her.

Finally, our analysis of Elizabeth's and Houselander's thought has suggested that the doctrine of divine indwelling constitutes not only a promise but also a fruitful spiritual tool. Prayerful contemplation of this mystery may shape an individual's life and advance his or her very union with God. With this, Elizabeth and Houselander arguably call into question the linearity of the traditional Christian premise that a life of *ascesis* geared towards acquiring the virtues precedes mystical union with God.<sup>63</sup> Without necessarily denying that most human beings will fail to adequately respond to God's desire to be united with them, they unravel the motivational potential of the

<sup>63</sup> A helpful discussion of this scheme and its history can be found in Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, accessed 16 June 2014, <http://www.christianperfection.info/ta4.php> (unpaginated). (Despite the lack of relevance of Garrigou-Lagrange in post-Conciliar Catholic theology, his thought in *The Three Ages of the Interior Life* was in fact vindicated in the Second Vatican Council's push for the 'universal call to holiness' (see e.g. Jordan Aumann, O.P., *Spiritual Theology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1980), 15, and Richard Peddicord, *The Sacred Monster of Thomism: An Introduction to the Life and Legacy of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P.* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2005), 178–210, esp.181).)

doctrine of divine indwelling itself.<sup>64</sup> By calling the ordinary believer to meditate on, and thus acquire a first taste of, God's mystical presence in the soul, both Elizabeth and Houselander seek to lure him into the ascetic life, which leads to the mystical life and in which one is stripped of self. Both women thereby offer an intriguing response to the valid concern that, without having experienced union with God, the ascetic life becomes unattractive, oppressive and, ultimately, unsustainable.

We can thus conclude by noting that, with their respective spiritualities of 'divine indwelling', these two women, both of whom lived and wrote before the second Vatican Council, thoroughly – and self-evidently – endorsed what that Council referred to as the 'universal call to holiness'.<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth of the Trinity's and Caryl Houselander's call that the human being respond to God's presence in his or her soul indeed amounts precisely to a universal call to holiness, or *theosis*. Both women thus draw our attention to at least one preconiliar kind of articulation of this call, as well as bringing out the contemporary and practical relevance of the doctrine of 'divine indwelling'.

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<sup>64</sup> In this respect, Elizabeth and Houselander helpfully restore 'the motives for practicing mortification and for exercising the virtues' which, in Garrigou-Lagrange's eyes, a post-Tridentine generation of theologians such as Scaramelli had disallowed (see Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, accessible at <http://www.christianperfection.info/tta4.php> (unpaginated).)

<sup>65</sup> Second Vatican Council, Lumen Gentium [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church], Vatican Website, 21 November 1964, sec. 40, 41, accessed 16 June 2014, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).



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