Two Apostles of Loneliness
Caryll Houselander and Catherine Doherty
on the Mystical Body of Christ

They met only once, briefly, after prayer on a gray afternoon in London:

She was a very small woman with huge big spectacles through which she could hardly see. I first met her, not knowing who she was, in the chapel of the Grail in England. This person was praying and I was interested in the little person. Anyhow, there was an air about her that I couldn’t understand—I was drawn to her. So we had tea together, the eternal good English tea, at 4pm and then I found out that she was Caryll. That didn’t tell me anything for I hadn’t read any of her books. She was very, very shy, and Yvonne, who was in charge of the Grail at the time inkled that she was a writer. But it didn’t penetrate until I got home and first read *This War is the Passion*. After that I collected everything that she wrote.¹

It must have been quite a meeting: Doherty, who scribbled those words in the front of one of Houselander’s books, was a former noblewoman, but she was a self-proclaimed recluse; Doherty was a baroness larger than life with a penchant for the properly placed explicative. Houselander was relatively more restrained and rather
Houselander and Doherty on the Mystical Body of Christ

 frail; Doherty was forced to flee many lands, while Houselander rarely left her comfortable London surroundings. Doherty spoke with a thick Russian accent, Houselander with the poshest of English. Yet, as different as they may have appeared socially, internally they shared the same solitude: neither enjoyed secure intimacy with another, neither was able to delight in lifelong companionship, neither enjoyed the comforts of life-long marriage and the wonder of raising her own family. Both were quintessential pilgrims of the twentieth century.

For never has a human soul escaped the pains of loneliness. The solitude of Adam echoes throughout every human gaze and in every human act, each of us stretching outward for completion and wholeness. Such solitude compels us to spend our lives searching for a savior who can finally rescue us from our restlessness. Although inevitable and inescapable, there was something about the past century that rendered social divisions all the more urgent, more widespread, more institutionalized. From blistering battles to cold dictatorships, from the loosening of basic human virtues to the strangling of simple human joys, the twentieth century beheld new types of political and intellectual systems that fostered human alienation.

In economics, the institutionalization of Marxist theories of alienation resulted in totalitarian regimes. In philosophy, radical existentialism argued that there could be no real knowledge of the other; each of us is rather doomed and destined to remain locked within our own limitations. L’enfer c’est les autres—“Hell is other people.” Thinkers such as Sartre and Camus highlighted our inherent estrangement from one another as the unique essence of the human person. Theology moved from doctrinal precision to liberative praxis, scrambling to show that God is squarely on the side of those in a particular economic class, social situation, or gender. Was it not in such turbulence that the Christian West received one of its great life stories, The Long Loneliness?

In response, however, these years consequently produced some of the most significant reflections on solitude and solidarity as well. Where political ideologies inevitably failed, spiritual remedies
mercifully arose. Take, for example, Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical, *Mystici Corporis*. At the height of the Great War stood a pope amid “the cities, towns and fertile fields strewn with massive ruins and defiled with the blood of brothers” (§4), calling the world to find comfort in how Jesus Christ “never ceases to look down with especial love on his spotless spouse so sorely tried in her earthly exile; and when he sees her in danger, saves her from the tempestuous sea” (§39). Out of these tempests of Nazism, Fascism, and atheism arose another Christian leader, Blessed John Paul II. He brought “the bloodiest century” to a close with his Wednesday addresses on the solitude of the human heart and its inherent invitation for interpersonal presence, reminding the entire world about the true *sobornost* [spiritual community] for which we have all been created.²

The purpose of this article is to see how two women spent their lives addressing the new ennui of the twentieth century as well as its only real remedy, the Mystical Body of Christ. Out of their own loneliness arose insights and writings that continue to offer invaluable lessons into the human condition as well as into the beauty and grace of Christ’s way of salvaging the restless heart. After a brief biographical sketch of both Houselander and Doherty, each woman’s understanding of human loneliness is examined. Second, we take up their theology of the lonely Christ who has himself become solitude for all those seeking salvation. Finally, we look at the remedy against the crippling effects of loneliness offered by each, the Mystical Body emerging as the only true antidote to the otherwise alienated soul.

Catherine Kolyschkine was born in 1896 to a pious mother and an internationally industrious father. At an innocent age she married her first cousin (1912), Baron Boris de Hueck; with the onslaught of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the two were forced out of their beloved Russia. Through Finland into England and then finally to Canada, Catherine soon found out that she could not rely at all on her angry, often intoxicated, and womanizing husband. After painfully entrusting her only child, George, to their nurse’s care, she left in 1924, traveling to New York City in search of work.³ In 1930
she divorced and bounced around towns and even countries, finally settling at Friendship House in Chicago. There she had reignited a friendship from her New York days with America’s “highest paid reporter,” Eddie Doherty, who worked for Liberty magazine and took an instant liking to Catherine. He was divorced and (in Catherine’s own estimation) dapper and their intimacy caused great rifts throughout Friendship House, made up of members who for the most part embraced celibacy as the best means to working well with the lonely of the streets.\(^4\) Eddie and Catherine married in 1943; three years later it was clear that they could not stay with their community in Chicago and thus moved their apostolate very far north to Combermere, Ontario, where Madonna House was born.

Such a sojourn deepened Doherty’s awareness of loneliness, made so real in her being rejected by those with whom she sought to work. In her inability to find human communion, she sought the Lord ever more ardently. In all of her trials, rejected in Toronto, Harlem, and then in Chicago, Catherine admitted that she was losing heart. Taking her struggles to one she simply names “a holy Capuchin,” she hears:

> “Catherine, you are getting there. First, you were rejected by the outsiders; now you have been rejected by your own. This is the test that God gives to foundresses.” I turned to him, tears running down my face, and blurted out “Oh, what a terrible thing! Who gives one that sort of thing?” Calmly, he told me, “God does, Catherine.” There was another woman who could have cried out just as I did, “From the depths I call to you, Yahweh: Lord, hear my cry” (Ps 130:1–2). That was Dorothy Day. What that woman suffered in the way of rejection is beyond any ability of mine to put into words. She was rejected by nearly everybody. But she learned the secret of rejection before I did. She was serene and peaceful under the blows of that rejection.\(^5\)

Even after she met Eddie and moved to Combermere, this rejection never really abated. After twenty-five years of marriage,
Eddie sought and received permission to be ordained in the Melkite rite, causing once again that separation in Catherine’s soul to which she was all too accustomed. In fact, as she once confessed to some members of Madonna House, this was the loneliest day of her life: to a Russian woman, a priest is elevated to the angels, now aloof and untouchable, unable to interact intimately and without pious reserve. Yet again, Doherty’s communion was severed, not willing to attend one of Eddie’s Masses for a very long time. Six years later, in 1975, “Father Eddie” died. Doherty spent her later years in Combermere in extended times of prayer and acting as the wise matriarch to a rapidly growing community. She passed peacefully there in 1985 at the age of 89 years, with her cause for canonization opened not too long thereafter.

In 1901, Caryll Houselander was born in Bath, England, to parents whose marriage was terribly bitter and shaky. A sickly child, Houselander spent her early years being shuffled between different boarding schools; when she was six, her mother converted to Catholicism and brought the withdrawn little girl along into the Church (thus the name of her cleverly entitled autobiography, A Rocking-Horse Catholic, as opposed to a “cradle” Catholic). Her parents would divorce three years later. Once when Houselander slipped into Mass as a teen, she was asked to pay sixpence for the use of the pew and she rightly left in disgust, vowing never to return. She suffered from panic attacks and having fallen in love only once, she had her heart broken by the World War II “ace of spies,” Sidney Reilly (after whom Ian Fleming based his James Bond novels). She went on to spend her adult life humanly alone without the closeness of her own family, as the “divine eccentric,” a nickname given to her by her friend and publisher, Maisie Ward.

In her late teens and early twenties, Houselander experienced mystical visions in which she saw either Christ himself embracing the world, or others around her conversing and interacting as Christ. She recounts three such visions, one including seeing Christ as a Bavarian nun; the second came on the day the Russian Tzar, Nicholas
II (July 17, 1918), was assassinated, and Houselander confesses to seeing Christ “lifted above the world in our drab street, lifted up and filling the sky . . . Christ Himself, with His head bowed down by the crown, brooding over the world.” Yet it was the third vision that was no longer Christ in one select soul or hovering over all souls but now it was Christ in each and every person:

I was in an underground train . . . Quite suddenly I saw with my mind, but as vividly as a wonderful picture, Christ in them all. But I saw more than that; not only was Christ in every one of them, living in them, dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them—but because He was in them, and because they were here, the whole world was here too, here in this underground train; not only the world as it was at that moment, not only all the people in the countries of the world, but all those people who had lived in the past, and all those yet to come.  

These visions provided Houselander with her profound awareness of the Mystical Body, winning her back to the Church and fostering a particularly unique spirituality of becoming “unconscious Christs” in the world.

To help make ends meet, she took on various writing jobs (mainly for the Grail and the Sacred Heart Messenger, as well as illustrating for the Children’s Messenger); she painted religious art and sold her wood carvings. In 1928 she became a Third Order Franciscan, dedicating more and more of her time to the writing of spiritual books. Houselander’s hopes for influencing other Christian believers were realized when Frank Sheed and Maisie Ward stumbled upon her Grail essays using World War II as a metaphor for the ongoing passion of Christ; they asked Houselander to rework her articles into her first monograph, This War Is the Passion. Thereafter her success never waned but, too, the deep internal solitude and (what she called) her “virginal emptiness” of never having her own lover, her own children, her own family, never faded. After a prolonged bout with breast
cancer Houselander passed away in 1954, dying as she had lived: graciously and gently, always open to meet Christ wherever he chose to meet her.

The theological insights of Houselander and Doherty converge where each of these women realized that (1) loneliness is an ineludable reality but also that (2) human loneliness was a call from Christ to assuage his own loneliness, (3) inviting all to enter evermore deeply into his own Body on earth. It is to each of these three points I now turn.

**The Reality of Loneliness**

Both Houselander and Doherty understood that not all loneliness is the product of Adam’s fall. Each distinguished between a solitude divinely implanted, and another type brought about by a divided heart, a self-imposed loneliness desired by every sinner. Each saw how this latter loneliness effects an internal fragmentation within the soul that only intensifies its isolation— isolation from God, others, and even from one’s own self. Houselander argued that this type of loneliness was particularly piquant in frantically paced modern societies:

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; and these sometimes further overlaid with exhausting pleasures which are an attempt, and always a futile attempt, to forget how pointless such people’s lives are. Those who complain in these circumstances of the emptiness of their lives are usually afraid to allow space or silence or pause in their lives . . . They have no sense of being related to any abiding beauty, to any indestructible life: they are afraid to be alone with their unrelated hearts.⁸
In line with the classical tradition, Houselander situates spiritual restlessness within the vice of acedia, that “noonday demon” that arises only to effect sorrow in a soul afraid to listen to God or to others, unable to rest in prayer or be attentive truly to another person. Such spiritual torpor is marked not by inactivity but, ironically, by hyperactivity: the soul too stressed, too filled with diversions to take eternity seriously, a life filled with trivialities intent on keeping mortality and thoughts of ultimate purposefulness away.

Writing to a dear friend and busy mother, a Mrs. Boardman, Houselander challenged her to notice how she lives “every moment of the day at top speed, too fast, crowding too much emotion, anxiety, even good will, into every moment . . . You will find the relief of merely accepting, instead of struggling, wonderful.” The loneliness that incessant activity and self-imposed distractions bring is not the loneliness of Christ, it is the estrangement of the world, and Mrs. Boardman, Houselander continues, must learn to be more intentional each day about fostering silence, stillness, and a soul more sensitive to God’s presence around and within her.

Houselander’s most profound reflections on loneliness reach us through the heart of Mary. In the background one hears Houselander’s own story of moving into the flat of a friend, a single mother by the name of Iris Wyndham, so as to assist in the upbringing of her daughter, Iris. This singular taste of motherhood was thus one still outside of the innate mother-child experience, but it was strong enough to shape much of Houselander’s writing thereafter, now realizing deeply how, “There is no emptiness like the emptiness of the house from which a child has gone astray.” This Marian solitude is an invitation from God, recognized by its propulsion outward toward meaningful and loving communion not simply for one’s biological relations but for every soul placed in one’s life. This begins as the loneliness of the mother who watches her own children grow up; it is the loneliness of Mary as she, knowing her son’s face, “must have searched for it in the face of another boy, and the boy would have wondered who this woman was and why she leaned down and searched his face; he could not have guessed that the day would come...
when the Mother of God would really find her son in every boy and every boy would be able to give Christ back to her.\footnote{11}

Like Houselander, Doherty also realized that the human heart was capable of two types of loneliness, one compelling us outward toward fruitful communion, and the other imploding us back into a self-perpetuating misery: one comes from hell and the other from heaven. When one is silent enough to discern the loneliness that comes to us from Christ, the believer is brought to be with Jesus in Gethsemane where “the rim of another mystery” is experienced, “the mystery of Christ’s blood falling on a stone and his cry in the night to his Father. You are next to him. You are part of that mystery of his loneliness, and because you are part of it, your heart begins to burn with a love that you cannot contain.”\footnote{12}

Doherty speaks more didactically and authoritatively than Houselander and when guiding her interlocutors about the nature of loneliness, she is especially instructive:

There are two kinds of loneliness—one is human loneliness and the other is divine loneliness. “My heart will not rest until it rest in Thee” (St. Augustine). That is divine loneliness. That is the loneliness of the person to whom Christ says, “Follow me.” There is another loneliness that is human. It is painful, tears you apart, sometimes blurring the loneliness that Christ sends us. It is a terrible thing, and we must do something about it. It is here that tenderness, gentleness, and understanding help us to live in both lonelinesses, but especially the human—the ordinary one. Gentleness and tenderness assuage loneliness and make it possible to disappear . . . Tenderness is the ability to be present, extending the warmth of my heart to your heart.\footnote{13}

Mortal loneliness for Doherty is realized by a chilly isolation leaving her unable to be attentive to another, a type of spiritual autism where shared attention with and toward another is impossible.\footnote{14} This is why Doherty’s writings recommend we pray for the grace to be present to those God puts into our lives, learning
that our truest “I” will be found only in tender and other-centered communion.

To further such tenderness, Doherty frequently invited others to *poustinia*, the Russian word for desert. In the space and silence of a sparsely furnished cabin, devoting oneself to prayer and fasting, Catherine knew that only here could one truly listen to God, the place where God invites others “to share his loneliness because this was to be the vocation of many. Many people don’t realize that their loneliness is an invitation to share the loneliness of God.” Those who refuse to run away from such an invitation are the *poustiniki*, men and women who allow themselves to be emptied so as to be able to enter into a new relationship with God and others. This new capacity for interpersonal presence refuses to remain at the level of superficiality and pleasantries, but now at the “level of loneliness” where each of us thirsts to know we are loved. This new way of being present to others and thus sharing in their solitude is ultimately to realize the loneliness of Christ where solitude is not only shared, it is sanctified.

*The Loneliness of Christ*

Houselander and Doherty lived and prayed deeply enough out of Jesus’s own heart to realize his own loneliness, and the “lonely Christ” is an image that appears constantly through their decades of writing, constituting a leitmotif wherein Christ thirsts for each of us and longs to satiate his own loneliness with ours.

For Houselander, the Passion of Good Friday is where this thirst is most apparent: “It is never easy to meditate on the Passion... The mind becomes bleak, and we begin to suffer with Him—and that is what real meditation on the Passion always becomes, suffering with Him.” As is almost always the case with Houselander’s mysticism, Jesus never stands apart from one desirous of him, but rather becomes that one. That is, meditating deeply on Calvary, one thus realizes that,
It is actually Christ suffering in us. We are united to Him, we are one, and it is when His Passion becomes real to us, through experience and love, that we grow aware of His presence in us. . . . We cannot shed a tear, but that tear has already blinded the eyes of Christ. We cannot be without tears, but that constriction of the heart has constricted His Heart. He has known all and every kind of fear that we know, and there is no possible loneliness, no agony of separation, but it is Christ’s; indeed, not one of us can die, but it is Christ dying.  

This appropriation of (what Houselander calls) the “Christ-life” is what opens heavenly realities to Christians even now. Heaven is not a place or some future reality for Houselander, it is the internalization of the Christ-life even now, thus enabling the Lord to live your life as you live his in the world.

This theology of the “great exchange” is the essence of Houselander’s theology. That is, Christ “exchanges” his humanity for our divinity by hiding himself in the very concrete circumstances of his life, both enabling and attracting our love,

Therefore Christ wants to be accessible: He wants to be disarmed of his glory so that the inglorious can come to him without fear. . . . There could not be a more ingenious way than the one he has devised, his way of hiding himself in us, revealing his presence in our necessities, so that we can only find him by obeying his commandment: “Little children, love one another!” He hides and can be found, not only in a child, but in your child; not only in a friend, but in your friend; not only in a servant, but in your servant: could there be easier access to him than your child, your friend, your servant?  

Christ has emptied himself of everything so as to be encountered in all things. His kenosis becomes our theosis: Houselander’s mysticism enables her to see how holiness is nothing other than finding Jesus in every soul, including one’s own. When this happens, there
is no longer any purely natural order or event, all is infused with the life of the waiting Christ.

Human loneliness therefore becomes the cry of Christ as he longs to redeem all before the Father. So, while Jesus must come “to the tremendous mystery of His death alone . . . from that moment until the end of time, no Christian man or woman or child will die alone. Each one will die Christ’s death, their hands in His hands; their feet folded upon His feet, the last beat of their hearts the beat of His heart; and because He has made their deaths His own, theirs too will have the power of His to save themselves and those whom they love.” Houselander never tires of stressing this transformation of the Christian into Christ, giving a modern idiom to the ancient doctrine of deification. What Jesus is by nature we receive by grace; who he is we too are to become and that is the entire purpose of the incarnation for Houselander, to win the heart by God’s “hiding” in every human we meet.

With her reflections on Christ’s loneliness, Doherty tends to begin not on Calvary, like Houselander, but with the pregnant Mary, and God now kenotically present within a woman. In his humanity, Jesus “has allowed you to penetrate the mystery of his own mystery of loneliness . . . Have you ever considered how lonely Christ was? What he felt as he entered the womb of a creature? A fantastic loneliness overcame a fetus. Can you, for one second, understand the immense, infinite, the absolutely incredible love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? This is the first of the mysteries.” Only true love can engender this type of primal loneliness, for it is here in the Virgin’s womb where we encounter unadulterated human nature as longing for communion, for relationship and connection.

This is at last for Doherty a sign of love, in that our loneliness is precisely where Jesus wishes to share his most rejected self with us: “We are rejected because God loves us, Mary loves us. Jesus and Mary love us so much that Jesus wants us to share in his passion, for his passion is his supreme rejection. If we enter into his passion, and are ready to be crucified with the nails of rejection, which hurt so
much, we will know the joy of Christ.” God himself has become lonely in order to be able to come to the lonely.

In a letter dated April 15, 1960, to a priest who had joined Madonna House just a few years earlier, Doherty highlights the importance of embracing such loneliness. She writes, “Dearly Beloved Father Emile, take loneliness. What we human beings call loneliness. What Christ experienced in Gethsemane, and probably from the first moment of his life.” Continuing, Doherty turns the reality of loneliness into a metaphorical sea of turbulence (echoing Mystici Corporis §39 above) upon which only the Messiah could tread:

At what moment did this brook become a tumultuous river, its joyous song changed into a dirge? At what moment did he suddenly realize—or was it sudden—that he would have to traverse an ocean of loneliness, unceasingly agitated by tempests and violent currents? Is it a wonder that he walked on the waters of a sea? He must have had practice walking on the raging waters of loneliness, its foaming waves and surging seas. He did not want to calm them for they were part and parcel of his passion, the very words he desired to address to our souls. For he was writing us a love letter. I think this letter can be read only by those who are willing to follow him in faith into the heart of an ocean of loneliness, profound and terrorizing, always raging . . . treading and walking upon the stormy, raging sea of Christ’s loneliness.

The “love letter” Christ writes with the events and encounters of each human life is addressed to each lonely heart crying out of the tempest of its desire to be known, to be held, to be loved.

Here Doherty reveals a great irony. The closer the creature draws to Christ, the lonelier he or she becomes. On earth no creature can satisfy the heart but no creature will be fully one with Christ before heaven. “What strange mystery is this, O Christ? The closer I approach your love, the lonelier I get. And loneliness complete seems to embrace me, severing ties with men, yet not binding me
to you. Tremendous Lover, is this a way to bring a soul into your courts? Where she can wash herself in tears and be bedecked in the heavy mantle of loneliness beyond that known on earth—so that she understands that loneliness is fire of desire for you, the desired one!” This is a paradox that Houselander knew as well, that “To give oneself to the world, to take all mankind to one’s heart, may be the loneliest of experiences.” This is the solitude of Christ implanted in each who images him: not the loneliness of the world or of sin leading to despair, but the gentle bidding outward to discover the love of Jesus in all whom God puts into one’s life.

By freely assuming human loneliness, Christ is purging his brothers and sisters from all creaturely attachment. His loneliness is thus didactic, showing us where we shall finally find rest and in whom we shall meet not only our truest selves but all our beloved as well. In Christ, then, “the land of loneliness is the land of joy. It is the land of union with God.” This union effects Christ’s Mystical Body where all loneliness is assumed to and thereby assuaged by the Son.

The Communion of the Mystical Body

Both Houselander and Doherty developed a tremendous theology of how Christ continues to live and hence suffer and rise in his Mystical Body. Each was blessed with mystical experiences and both translated these into writings aimed at reviving the twentieth-century Christian’s understanding that the faith was never reducible to propositions in the abstract but was always about people in communion.

Houselander especially resisted a merely moral or even doctrinal presentation of Christianity. The faith was not so much a religion as a relationship, and not even so much a relationship but a total and transformative union between Christ and Christian. This is where Houselander is at her best. Reflecting on John 1:5:5, “Without me you can do nothing,” she writes:

Of course we could but fail if we were merely trying to imitate Him. But that is not what is asked of us, and that is
not the meaning of Christianity. What we are asked to do is to be made one with Christ, to allow Him to abide in us, to make His home in us, and gradually, through the oneness that results from living one life, and through the miracles of His love, consummated again and again in Communion with Him, to become Christs, to live in Him as our Lady did. When we are changed into Him as the bread into the Host, then with His power we can follow His example.  

This passage is representative of Houselander’s favorite trope: Christ lives not above or aloof from us but in us, thereby forming countless Christs in the world. Human loneliness is redemptive because it is ultimately the Lord within the sanctified soul who suffers, Christ who is continuing his presence now through his Mystical Body. In this way we are all called to be “unconscious Christs,” a term found throughout Houselander’s letters and writings. We can hence go through our day rejoicing with the laughing Christ, mourning with the sorrowful Christ, serving the homeless Christ, and comforting the crucified Christ. This is why not one of us is alone, but all are now made one.

The unity of the Mystical Body, Houselander argues, effects the most intimate and unbreakable communion possible, transcending biological and natural unions because the “cause of this oneness is that all the members of Christ’s Mystical Body live with his life... closer than the natural relation of brothers to a brother or even of children to a parent. It is that of cells in a body to the person whose body it is. It is there closer than any natural relationship. . . . Each one of us is more closely related to every other member of the Church by this life of grace than to his own mother by the life of nature.”

For Houselander, this is essential: because Christ is fully human, he dwells in all humans, thereby incorporating us all into his own life before the Father and simultaneously presenting us now to all men and women on earth.

Doherty too shared this mystical understanding of how human loneliness is Christ’s way of bringing us into communion with himself
and with one another. “I pray that he may open you to his own beauty, and to realize that he needs you in his Mystical Body! I pray that you might begin to be Christ-centered, not self-centered.” Doherty’s theology of the Mystical Body is more explicitly ecclesial and Marian than Houselander’s, as Catherine argues that the Church is the only community where human loneliness is unable to consume the soul: “The Church is a prayer; the Church is a song; the Church is the tears of all mankind. . . . To leave the Church is to become lonely, so lonely . . . the tragic situation of a woman or man opening a door, closing it, going down a few steps, and entering into a loneliness for which there aren’t any words. For man without God is the loneliest person in the world.”

The only cure for loneliness and internal division for Doherty is for one to enter into the life of the Church. From her childhood, Doherty recalls, she saw Mary’s hand in every activity and encounter, knowing that “Maria” brought her son, Jesus, to play with Doherty through her own childhood friends and that even when she grew up and began to know the world’s rejections, she sensed how we had “entered the immense domain of Lady Pain,” a maturation Doherty likens to moving from the Joyful to the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary of one’s own life. Whereas Houselander received visions of Jesus living in and through those she met on the London Tube as well as outside in the bustling crowds, Doherty “saw the Church . . . shining in the rays of the noonday sun . . . I realized that the Church was the beautiful, shining Bride of Christ.” In the Church Doherty finally embraced her belovedness as the bride she always longed to be.

Such spousal union was not at first real to her, she confesses, because of the human sinfulness she witnessed throughout the Church. Yet, as she came to love as Christ loves, “loving a man in his sin” and not despite it (quoting Dostoevsky), she also began to see that the collection of sinful humans who present themselves for holy communion (herself included) is also at once the spotless Bride of Christ: “It has shaken my whole being. At these moments I understood why the Lord calls himself the bridegroom. I can’t explain it. But I
understood one glorious day that he was my bridegroom, and that I was part of his people, part of his flock, part of his Mystical Body. I understood the mystical notion of the nuptials of the Christian with his God. Because I entered into this mystery of love, I entered into the mystery of the church.”

Here Doherty reveals a tension resolved only by a love that is the infinite love of Christ. Christ loves the Church as his bride for whom he has laid down his life, but also, Doherty knew that Christ loved her not simply as a member of a collective whole, as beautiful as that ecclesia may be, but she too is the bride, the unique and unmatched beloved in the eyes of Christ. It is here she spent her life exhorting Christians to realize their worth and dignity.

Doherty accordingly grew to realize that the Church is the sole locus of communion and only here is the union desired by every heart achievable through the sacraments that continue the enfleshed presence of God on earth: “I don’t know, but I think that along the road to God that started in baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, through a Christian life of contemplation, moving toward union with him, the land of loneliness is the last step before total union with God.” This is the union she sought her entire life and in her ecclesial fidelity and sacramental worship, Doherty offered her loneliness for the growth and the sanctity of all the Church, for all seeking wholeness.

Conclusion

Through their respective lonelinesses, Catherine Doherty and Caryll Houselander provided the Church with a theology of solitude that pointed to the divine loneliness of Christ. Each in her own way offers the incarnate Christ as the only one who can slake every human thirst. Each woman knew from experience that only in the healing humanity of Christ can every human ache be comforted. For only when we empty ourselves in Christ’s own kenosis, are we able to embrace our own loneliness in his. When this happens, that place of solitude and wonder within becomes the very field where God can begin to cultivate his own divine life within each of us.
The twentieth century found consolation in the Church’s revived theology of the Mystical Body. In a time when the isolating effects of international war and terrorism as well as domestic divisions and disappointments chill the human hope for ever-greater communion, two women emerge from the ruins to remind the world that Christians and Christ have now become one. Caryll Houselander and Catherine Doherty thus deserve to be voices once again in the ears and minds of all believers, women who knew loneliness deeply but, more important, knew the only true remedy personally. Perhaps the poetry and passion of their insights would have been sacrificed had either been a trained theologian or professional academic, as both shine brighter than any in their analysis and understanding of the nature and effects of human loneliness. Through their own prayer and life’s stories, then, they came not to set up diversions and distractions in the hope to avoid that primal restlessness, but instead through the fostering of deep friendships and communities, of deep prayer and sacramental worship, they became apostles of loneliness, sent into the world to assist the Mystical Body in bringing about other Christs throughout all of humanity.

Notes

1. Doherty scribbled this in the front of one of her (three) copies of Houselander’s *This War Is the Passion*, as evidenced in the Madonna House Archives, Combermere, Ontario (Archival Box no. 2012.004: “Other Authors Catherine Knew”); alluded to here is Yvonne Bosch van Drakestein, the baronness who set up the Grail Center on Sloane Street in London. I would like to thank the ladies of Madonna House as well as Fr. Bob Wild (the postulator for Doherty’s cause) who granted me access to Doherty’s archives for my collection of her writings, *Catherine de Hueck Doherty: Essential Writings*, ed. David Meconi, SJ (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 2009).

2. At least in his authoritative biography, George Weigel calls John Paul II’s theology of the body “a theological time bomb,” the teaching of which “has ramifications for all of theology” but whose full force will not be known fully until the centuries unfold; *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 342–43 and passim.

3. George de Hueck was born on July 17, 1921, but with Boris’s drunkenness and infidelity (at this time with a ballerina in Toronto, Claudia Kolenova), Doherty left
George in the capable care of his nurse and maid whom Boris and Doherty brought with them from Russia, Dunia Vassova (Meconi, op. cit., 29–30). See also the indispensable biography by Lorene Hanley Duquin, They Called Her the Baroness (New York: Alba House, 1995); for more on Doherty’s cause, see Robert Wild, Catherine Doherty, Servant of God (MHP, 2005).

4. Catherine is most candid on this romance in her Fragments of My Life (MHP, 1996), 167–72.


10. Reed of God, op. cit., 112.

11. The Reed of God, op. cit., 140.

12. In the Footprints of Loneliness, op. cit., 33.

13. In the Footprints of Loneliness, op. cit., 72–73.


16. This War Is the Passion, 38–39


24. Catherine Doherty, Soul of My Soul: Coming to the Heart of Prayer (MHP, 2006), 125.


28. Talk given on October 1, 1976; as in Meconi, op. cit., 121–22.


32. In the Footprints of Loneliness, op. cit., 98.