

Chapters 76-79

Introduction

In the last Julian Class it was noted that the concluding chapters of Julian's *Revelations* feel discontinuous, more like a handful of thoughts appended to a finished manuscript than the treatment of a single theme or the description of a particular experience. While this is to some extent true, it appears on a closer reading that Chapters 72 through 79 can be understood as a single discussion about sin from a direct, pastoral perspective and in the light of what Julian has learned in the *Revelations*. Chapters 76 through 79 in particular form a single, coherent reflection on what we do in the spiritual life with sin. That we will continue to sin all our lives is an inescapable fact for Julian. What we do with our inevitable sins, how sins are part of our salvation in humility, and how we avoid what could be called 'second-order sins' that arise from the experience of ourselves as sinful — such as despair — these are the issues in the front of Julian's mind. Taking the various facets of Julian's discussion of sin more or less as they arise in these four chapters, we can comment on their direct and clear applicability to monastic life as we work through the text.

Heedful of Sin

Julian begins Chapter 76 with the reminder that, even with all that we have learned of divine love and the soul's essential union with God, we still must hate sin. She says,

I am also well aware that the soul that truly accepts the teaching of the Holy Spirit, hates sin more for its vileness and horribleness than it does all the pain that is in hell. For the soul that beholds the good nature of our Lord Jesus, hates not hell, but sin, as I see it. [LOL 76]

This is a thought which Julian repeats several times in the *Revelations*, chiefly in Chapters 41 and 6e. We have it, she says both from our nature and from grace to hate sin, and it is our very love of Jesus that encourages us to do so. Moreover, echoing St. Paul's exclamation in Romans 6 against those who take his doctrine of grace to mean that we should sin more so that grace may abound more, Julian says in Chapter 79,

...if we are moved to be more heedless of our living or the keeping of our hearts because we have know-ledge of this plenteous love, then we need greatly to beware, for this inclination, if it comes, is untrue, and we ought greatly to hate it, for none of it has any similarity to God's will. [LOL 79]

In the course of the *Revelations* Julian has shown us the marvel of God's homely, constant, and humble love for us. Julian has also shown us that the essence of the soul is eternally one-ed to God in bliss regardless of the moral character of our historical existence. Yet we have it from both nature and grace to continue to be heedful of sin and to hate it, precisely because sin prevents our participation in that divine love that is already one-ed to us in our soul's essence. While not separating us from God in any absolute way, nor making God offended or angry, sin makes us blind (and angry!) and prevents us from rejoicing in God's joy and bliss in our salvation. As such, it hinders both our desire and God's desire to be fully in bliss. "And therefore," Julian says, "it is God's will that we recognize sin, and pray diligently and labor willingly, and seek teaching humbly, so that we do not fall blindly into sin; and if we fall, that we rise quickly." [LOL 76]

In this regard, Julian would expect us, as religious living in her spirit and wisdom, to be ever heedful of sin, hating it and railing against it, as Julian would say, until the day we die. Part of this heedfulness of sin is found in following her admonition, just quoted, to 'pray diligently and labor willingly, and seek teaching humbly, so that we do not fall blindly into sin.' Part of our monastic lives is thus prayer, labor, and learning about ourselves, about the human condition, about spiritual and psychological issues, so that we can more clearly recognize sin and avoid it. Obviously, Julian herself has told us about sloth and doubtful despair as being two sins which we might easily fall into, the latter being misunderstood as humility. But apart from reading Julian's *Revelations*, there is an almost endless array of spiritual and theological writers whom we can study to make ourselves more keenly aware of the nature of sin. John of the Cross comes easily to mind, with his subtle diagnosis of spiritual diseases present in the supposedly virtuous sou. A more modern treatment would be Margaret Funk's book *Thoughts Matter*, which is itself dependent on the ancient teaching of John Cassian and Evagrius Ponticus. Beyond spiritual or theological writers, the serious study of literature, philosophy, any of the arts, and especially psychology may be of help. The possibilities are

endless; each monk or nun is going to weave his or her own path through the possibilities. But it may be hazarded that such study and labor, prayer and learning about ourselves and the nature of sin, will always begin with Scripture, will include the great writers of the monastic and contemplative traditions, and will return periodically to Julian. Some of us may be more theological, others more psychological, but where we all begin is with Scripture and Julian.

Not Gloating on Another's Sins

While we are to be heedful of our own tendencies towards sin and thus solicitous of the things of God, Julian is quick to add that the same does not apply with our relationships to other Christians, other members of our community. We are not to be heedful of other's sins.

When other men's sins come to mind, the soul that wishes to be in repose shall flee from that as from the pain of hell, searching in God for remedy for help against it, for the beholding of other men's sins makes, as it were, a thick mist before the eye of the soul, and we cannot for the time see the fairness of God. [LOL 76]

Unless we can behold another's sins, suffering the three wounds of compassion, penitence, and longing with and for that person, we are to flee, Julian says, from that sight. We are not to obsess or focus on another's sins. How essential this is for a vibrant and loving community life! From his experience of being a spiritual director to large convents as well as a leader in his own houses, John of the Cross develops this same idea clearly and powerfully. In his *Precautions* for those entering the religious life. With wide experience of communities and deep spiritual wisdom to back him up, John writes:

The third precaution is very necessary so you may know how to guard yourself in the community against all harm that may arise in regard to the religious. Many, by not observing it, not only have lost the peace and good of their souls but have fallen and ordinarily continue to fall into many evils and sins. It is that you very carefully guard yourself against thinking about what happens in the community, and even more against speaking of it, of anything in the past or present concerning a particular religious: nothing about his or her character or conduct or deeds no matter how serious any of this seems. Do not say anything under the color of zeal or of correcting a wrong, unless at the proper time to whomever by right you ought to tell. Never be scandalized or astonished at anything you happen to see or learn of, endeavoring to preserve your soul in forgetfulness of all that.

For, should you desire to pay heed to things, many will seem wrong, even were you to live among angels, because of your not understanding the substance of them...You are thus to understand God's will: that even were you to live among devils you should not turn the head of your thoughts to their affairs, but forget these things entirely and strive to keep your soul occupied purely and entirely in God, and not let the thought of this thing or that hinder you from so doing.

...If you are not cautious in this manner, no matter how good your intention and zeal, the devil will catch you in one way or another. And you are already fully captive when you allow yourself distractions of this sort. [*Precautions*, #3.]

It is, in short, never good for a religious to mull over the sins of another, let alone obsess about them, since it distracts the religious from his own interior vocation and enmeshes him or her in a web of spiritual rivalry and condemnation. Murmuring about other people in the community, even in oneself, let alone to others (often guests), condemning others or being locked in anger against them, is toxic to a contemplative vocation. As Julian says, it makes a thick mist before the eyes of the soul. As we may come to know with time, such angry beholding of another's sins or fallings is often self-loathing projected on to the other. It can also be a strange form of envy, being angrily jealous of the other person for doing what you want to do but can't give yourself permission to do. A person ensnared by the obsessive beholding of another's sins is usually also trapped in a kind of spiritual rivalry with that person, a competitiveness. Pulled in by the gravitational force of mimetic rivalry, we thus begin to obsess more and more about the other persons, their sins, their lack of religious authenticity, their misbehavior, and slowly forget about our vocation to be one with God in prayer. The other person whom we condemn so righteously has become, functionally and paradoxically, the god at the center of our universe.

Not Being Gloomy about our Sin but Fleeing to our Lord

Fleeing from the beholding of others' sins is thus part of our most basic, everyday, spiritual practice as Julian religious, but so is fleeing from our own sins to Jesus. This is the third point about sin which Julian takes up in these chapters, though elsewhere in the *Revelations* she has given the same counsel. In an unusually charming passage, Julians says that she received an understanding of two opposites:

...the one is the most wisdom that any creature can do in this life; the other is the most folly. The wisdom is for a creature to act following the will and advice of his highest supreme Friend. This blessed Friend is Jesus; and it is His will and His advice that we bind ourselves with Him and fix ourselves intimately to Him ever more, in whatever state we are. For whether we are filthy or pure, we are always the same in His love. For well or for woe, He wills that we never flee from Him. However, because of our changeability within ourselves we fall frequently into sin. Then we have this by the guidance of our Enemy, through our own folly and blindness; for they say thus: "Thou art well aware that thou art a wretch, a sinner, and also untrue; for thou keepest not thy covenant; thou dost promise our Lord frequently that thou wilt do better, and immediately afterwards, thou fallest into the same — especially into sloth, into the wasting of time" (for that is the beginning of sin, as I see it, and especially to the creatures who have given themselves to serve our Lord with inner contemplation of His blessed goodness.) And this makes us fearful to appear before our gracious Lord.

Then it is our Enemy who will set us back with his false fear concerning our sinfulness because of the pain with which he threatens us. It is his intention to make us so gloomy and so weary in this that we would forget the fair, blessed beholding of our everlasting Friend. [LOL 76]

We are always to cling to Jesus, choosing him for our heaven in well and woe, in suffering and joy, when we are pure and when we have hurt ourselves and others badly by sin. Always, we are to cling to Jesus, like the child who runs to his mother when he has hurt himself. As Julian stresses here as elsewhere, the greatest danger of our sin is not perhaps the sin itself, or the pain it causes in us, but our tendency, once we have sinned, to be overcome by despairing doubt of our Lord's love, to be trapped in shame and self-loathing so that we do not return to God. Not returning to God, rising by humble trust in Love, we sink only deeper into the second-order sin of despair. The great revelation of the constancy and unchangeability of God's love in Julian's *Revelations* is directed by Julian to bear on exactly this tendency in the spiritual life. Again and again, Julian tells us that the best we can do once we have sinned, hurting ourselves and others, is to return to God with the faith of a child in its mother (Cf. Jesus as Mother, Ch 63). Resisting all temptation to be gloomy and miserable about ourselves and our continuous falling into sin, we flee to Love. As Julian says:

This, then, is the remedy: that we be aware of our sinfulness and flee to our Lord, for ever the more quickly we do so, the more advantageous it is for us to be near Him. [LOL 77]

If we flee to our Lord, we shall be comforted; if we touch Him we shall be made pure; if we cleave to Him we shall be secure and safe from all manner of peril. [LOL 77]

When we are fallen because of frailty or blindness, then our gracious Lord inspires us, stirs us, and calls us; and then He wills that we see our wretchedness and humbly let it be acknowledged. But He does not wish us to remain thus, nor does He will that we busy ourselves greatly about accusing ourselves, nor does He will that we be full of misery about ourselves; for He wills that we quickly attend to Him; for He stands all alone and waits for us constantly, sorrowing and mourning until we come, and hastens to take us to Himself; for we are His joy and His delight, and He is our cure and our life. [LOL 79]

Clearly Julian is presenting us here with a discipline which should have pride of place in our community. While we are to recognize our sin, and indeed allow our pride and presumption to be broken by that sight, we are not to remain 'gloomy and miserable' in ourselves. This is not our vocation; we are not called even in part to a morbid picking-over of the soul's own failings. Our vocation as contemplatives is prayer, adoration, self-forgetfulness before the miracle of Love's choice to dwell with us. It is humility and transformation in love, not a neurotic obsession with one's own sin, that backwardly prideful belief that one has undone the universe or annulled the power of the Cross

by sin. Rather, we discover that the perpetual and life-long process of fleeing to God, with our sins held in our hands, is the means of a great humbling of ourselves and consequent growth in love and peace.

Felix Culpa: Growth in Love from Sin

While the total comprehension of why God has allowed evil to flourish is denied us, Julian says, until the Great Day, part of the mystery of God's wise and loving allowance of sin is revealed in precisely this awareness of how we grow in humility and love, in knowledge of our weakness and of God's homely care for us, only through the experience of sin and repentance. This is true especially for those given to contemplative experience.

... this I was taught that although we are nobly lifted up into contemplation by the particular gift of our Lord, yet it is necessary for us along with that to have knowledge and awareness of our sin and our weakness. Without this knowledge we cannot have true humility, and without this humility we cannot be saved. [LOL 78]

As contemplatives we may be prone to profound experiences of inner rest or inner illumination. Such experiences, while consoling and enlivening, are not enough. We also have to fall, see our fallings, and return to Love in order to grow more deeply united with God. As Julian says more clearly in another part of the *Revelations*,

...He permits some of us to fall more severely and more grievously than ever we did before, as it seems to us. And then we believe (we who are not all-wise) that all was naught that we had begun. But it is not so, because it is necessary for us to fall, and it is necessary for us to see it. For if we fell not, we would not know how weak and how miserable we are by ourselves — nor also would we so thoroughly know the amazing love of our Creator. For we shall see truly in heaven without end that we have grievously sinned in this life, and, notwithstanding this, we shall see that we were never lessened in His love, nor were we ever of less value in His sight. By means of the test of this falling, we shall gain a high, wondrous knowledge of love in God without end. For strong and wondrous is that love which cannot nor will not, be broken because of trespass. And this is one understanding of our benefits from falling.

Another is the lowliness and humility that we shall gain by the sight of our falling, for thereby we shall be highly raised in heaven and we might never have come to this raising without that humility. And therefore it is necessary for us to see our fall, for if we see it not, though we fall, it would not benefit us. [LOL 61]

Grace and Mercy Showing us our Sin

By God's mercy and grace, sin is thus made a part of our growth in knowledge of God's love and communion with God in a common, loving humility. With such a dramatic version of the old idea of *felix culpa*, Julian is quick to tell us how our falls only make our Enemy suffer more while they bring us to greater bliss. [LOL 77] For this reason, Julian says, we come to know of our sins, clearly seeing and accepting them, only through the direct ministry of God to us, without whom we would remain forever lost in pain and blindness, in misdirected desire and growing wrath.

I saw that we cannot get this knowledge [of our sins] from ourselves, nor from any of our spiritual enemies, for they do not will us very much good (for if it were by their will, we should not see our sin until our ending day). [LOL 78]

This is one aspect of God's ministry of mercy that perhaps needs more attention in our spiritual lives. As Julian describes it:

Our Lord of His mercy shows us our sin and our weakness by the sweet gracious light of Himself, for our sin is so vile and so horrible that He of His courtesy will not show it to us except by the light of His grace and mercy...

Thus by this grace-filled knowledge we can see our sin beneficially without despair (for truly we need to see it) and by that sight we shall be made ashamed of ourselves, and our pride and presumption shall be broken down. [LOL 78]

Because we see, with Julian, that God is the ground of our being in love, that God as our Mother constantly protects us from all final harm and waits for us to return to him in love, and that, moreover, our awareness of sin is part of Love's ministry, we are able to accept the sight of our sinfulness without despair. In a passage recalling the infamous Chapter 28, where Julian insists that we need to be 'totally shattered' because of our 'pride and vicious affections' before we can be one-ed to Jesus, Julian says that it truly behooves us

...to see that by ourselves we are just nothing but sin and wretchedness. And thus by the sight of the less which our Lord shows us, the more which we do not see is diminished, for He of His courtesy adjusts the sight to us (for it is so vile and so horrible that we would not endure to see it as it is). And by this humble knowledge thus, through contrition and grace, we shall be broken away from all things that are not our Lord, and then shall our blessed Savior perfectly heal us and one us to Himself. [LOL 78]

Once again, we are given grounds, as Julian religious, to be not only profoundly optimistic in regard to ourselves, but profoundly honest and realistic.. In Julian's understanding, our growth in humility, indeed, in the spiritual life as a whole, is not something we perform in order to become closer to God. It is rather God doing God's work on those who have begun to open themselves to God in love. The spiritual life is the life of the Holy Spirit creating us as a community and re-creating each of us individually. Our optimism stems from our belief that Love enfolds all, animates all, and transforms all. Our honesty and realism stems from Love's ministry to us in showing us our sin, raising inner weaknesses and wounds to the clarity of conscious recognition. Love thus breaks down our ridiculous pride, vanity, and 'vicious' sensuality chiefly by showing us the truth of our sin. In seeing this truth, we do not despair but become more grateful to God for what God has done in redeeming us. In other words, we grow in humility and love. God becomes the center of our existence rather than ourselves.

The Penance we are in Constantly

The last major idea which Julian develops in these chapters —and touches on again in Chapter 81— is her idea of penance for as something passively received from God in the ordinary course of daily life. The desire to do penance, to express outwardly and visibly how much we yearn to change, is natural. When God shows us our sin 'by the sweet gracious light of Himself' our first response may be an eagerness not only to renounce the sin, but to distance ourselves from the sin as much as possible, to dis-identify with it. It is easy to imagine ourselves ashamed of our anger or lust or greed enough to want to take on some form of heroic penance as a way of saying 'I am not that sin. That sin is not me. I am a virtuous person and I am ashamed of that sin and I can prove it by heroically undertaking a painful penance.'

Julian's counsel here is wise and already embedded in the life and spirituality of the Order of Julian of Norwich. Ordinary human life, for Julian, inevitably involves suffering, sometimes because of our sin, sometimes not. Life itself, with its unspectacular but very significant litany of woes, thus is our highest penance, passively received from God and not invented by us. God says to Julian,

Accuse not thyself overly much, questioning if thy tribulation and thy woe is all because of thy sinfulness; for it is not my will that thou be gloomy or sorrowful undiscerningly; for I tell thee, whatsoever thou doest, thou shalt have woe. And therefore I will that thou wisely recognize thy penance which thou art in constantly, and that thou dost humbly accept it for thy penance, and thou shalt then truly understand that all thy living is beneficial penance. [LOL 71]

For it is the most honor to Him of anything that we can do that we live in our penance gladly and merrily because of His love, for He looks upon us so tenderly that He sees all our living here to be penance. The natural yearning in us for Him is a lasting penance in us, which penance He produces in us and mercifully He helps us to bear it. For this life is our natural penance and the highest, as I see it, for this penance never goes from us until the time that we are fulfilled when we shall have Him for our reward. And therefore He wills that we fix our hearts on the transition — that is to say, from the pain that we feel into the bliss that we trust. [LOL 81]

Julian says that for our penance we are not to actively invent ways of proving to ourselves how spiritual and religious pure we really are, but are instead to live gladly and merrily with the usual and banal sufferings, the ignominious

wear-and-tear of daily life, an essential part of which is the humbling sight of ourselves as in fact sinful. Life itself is our highest penance, the fact of our sin can our most significant pain, and we can do most honor to our Lord by living with life as it comes to and our own weakness gladly and merrily.

Such counsel has the effect, first of all, of directing us away from any kind of indulgent spiritual romanticism and straight back to the rigors of daily life. Julian's counsels undercuts both romantic dreaminess in directing us straight back to daily life, and it undercuts the ego's need to prove again its religious identity, threatened by the revelation of its own sinfulness, with new and heroic penance. Julian will have none of this. What she wants us of is the humility to accept without histrionic despair or a need for heroic penance, the plain and unadorned, naked fact of our sinfulness, and then to get on with daily life with new resolve simply to rejoice with God's own joy in us. Part of what is implied here is that ,as rejoicing in a selfish way in ourselves becomes more and more impossible, we are forced to find our joy outside of ourselves, in God. Just as St. Benedict guides us firmly towards humility as central to the life of the monk, and is also very clear about the dangers of murmuring, complaint, and bitter resentment in community, so too Julian wants the new awareness of our sinfulness to have the effect not of making us heroically penitential, but of breaking down hope of finding joy in our fabricated selves so that we can find our joy ever more deeply, extensively, and powerfully in God. To pursue heroic penance would usually be just another maneuver of the self seeking to rest in its own glory. Julian wants to prevent this by directing us back to daily life, urging us to live there,at ground zero, gladly and merrily.

As has already been noted, this counsel is already embedded in the Order's life. Since very early in the Order's life it has been understood that the effort to live gladly and merrily in community is perhaps the greatest ascetical and penitential practice we are called to, the greatest renunciation of self, the greatest hardship and mortification. Our most basic and self-defining documents stress that we are not an Order involved in rigid or heroic ascetics, but that we are definitely committed to whatever is needed for the life-long conversion of self to Love. What is needed for such a conversion, Julian might say, is a willingness to see, soberly and honestly, and without despair or self-loathing, the sin which God is pointing out to us, and because of God's love for and joy in us, to return to daily life as the very place where we makes the act of surrender to God that one-s us to his love and his joy.

Conclusion

Julian concludes her treatment of how we best work through sin in the spiritual life by telling us that she was urged by God to live balanced between the presumptuous pride which lives heedlessly on one side and doubtful despair and self-loathing on the other.

...in this same showing (Showing Thirteen) where I saw that I would sin, was I taught to be cautious of my own uncertainty, for I am not aware of how I shall fall, nor do I know the measure nor the greatness of my sin... Also our gracious Lord, at the same time, showed me most certainly and powerfully the endlessness and the unchangeability of His love. And also, by His great goodness and His grace inwardly guarding, that His love and that of our souls shall never be separated in two, without end. Thus in this fear I have cause for humility that saves me from presumption; and in the blessed showing of love I have cause for true comfort and joy that saves me from despair. [LOL 79]

On one hand, we have our own inevitable sin, a fact which saves us from presumption, pride, and living mindlessly. On the other, we have God's love in us, and our eternal, essential union with God which saves us from despair. Living between the two means living not in a romantic daydream of holiness not in indulgent despising of the self, but in God, in God's joy in us, through the penance that we find in daily life. Sin is inevitable, but if we flee to God, not only is sin's its poison drawn from us and our community by the medicine of the Cross, but we discover the possibility of a new life centered not in what we do for God but in what God so lovingly has done for us.