

## A COMMENTARY ON JULIAN OF NORWICH'S *THE REVELATIONS OF DIVINE LOVE* The Eighth Showing • Chapters 16-20

### Introduction

From the very beginning of our study of Julian's Revelations we have noted the centrality of the Passion to her spirituality. The first gift which Julian asks of God is a clear sight, a sharp memory, an abiding consciousness of the Passion. Julian wanted to live her life as an act of consecrated intimacy with the God who revealed Godself in the Passion of Jesus, wounded by compassion, contrition, and holy longing, and as we have seen, God granted her this extraordinary grace. The First Showing thus begins with a sight of the bleeding of Christ's head. In the Second Showing, Julian sees the discoloring of the face of Christ, and in the Fourth Showing the plenteous bleeding of the whole body from the scourging Jesus was given by the soldiers. All of these showings thus draw our attention directly to the Passion as the central reality of Julian's experiences and so of our monastic vocations. But even the showings which have a more metaphysical character —such as the Third with its sight of 'God in a point'— brought us indirectly to the Passion through their implicit insistence that we become detached from all created reality, from habits of earthly judgments, from the goodness or badness of earthly experience itself. Since such detachment involves the acceptance and allowance of suffering of various kinds, it is won in a Christian only out of love for Christ who suffered all with and for us.

The Eighth Showing is the culmination of Julian's theme of the suffering humanity of Christ. After the Eighth Showing, Julian will have no more visions of the bleeding or discolored or dying Christ, not because she loses interest or leaves the suffering Christ behind as her thoughts run ahead to other matters, but because in the Eighth Showing Julian is taken so deeply into the Passion that, at the very moment in which she thought she had reached the final moment of Christ's death, she passed into a new awareness of the joy, bliss, and eternal life within the crucified Christ. Christ remains crucified even as he is glorified. What one experiences, Passion or Glory, is both a matter of perspective and a matter of how God chooses to reveal Godself to one, which 'countenance' God is showing the soul. The point is that, while Julian will not meditate any more on the suffering of Jesus, especially not in the graphic, visual manner of the First, Second, Fourth, and Eighth Showings, the suffering Christ is not left behind. Rather, Julian has found heaven inside him and is living out of that new center. Our study of the Eighth Showing thus brings to its climactic end not the actuality of the suffering Christ but the immediate presence of this suffering, and thus presents us in a final way with an aspect of our charism, our vocation, which remains central even when we are not experiencing anything that could be directly seen as a share of Christ's Passion. Ruth Burrows relates that after many years of searching in her Carmelite vocation, she discovered the firm conviction that in the Christian monastic life, Jesus is everything, that everything is Jesus and the whole monastic journey is not defined by spiritual experiences no matter how sublime but by the steadfast surrender of the soul to God through whatever life happens to give one, regardless of how spiritual or unspiritual this may seem<sup>1</sup>. The Eighth Showing, which is both an epiphany of divine compassion and a personal record of Julian's self-surrender to God, will insist on exactly the same thing.

### The Final Suffering of Christ

In the course of two chapters, sixteen and seventeen, Julian describes in great detail her vision of the final sufferings of Christ: the profound drying of his body on the Cross, the discoloring of his face and especially the lips, the pain and thirst all this caused, and finally a most disturbing image of a second garland of loosened skin and dried

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<sup>1</sup> Burrows, Ruth. *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*. (Starrucca, PA: Dimension Books (Reprint), 1981).  
The whole book is saturated with this idea.

blood forming around the crown of thorns. As Skinner notes in his translation of Julian, such graphic meditations on every detail of the Passion of Christ were very prevalent in Julian's day and believed to have in themselves spiritual power. Knowing this, these chapters appear less morbid, yet they remain disturbing no matter how much historical understanding we wrap around them, which is perhaps as it should be. Julian moderates her visions or thoughts very little; whether of divine bliss or suffering they all run quickly out to the extreme.

Most significant to the Eighth Showing and the Revelations as a whole is that Julian is not looking on these final death-pains of Christ as a disinterested onlooker, but she is wrapped up with Christ in his pains, suffering them with him to a degree, so unexpectedly sharp, that she can hardly bear it. Julian has been given her gift not only to suffer as a true lover of Christ with Christ in his dying, she has been wounded to the very core of her being with divine compassion, and as she tells us, this hurt so much she actually repented of her initial desire for this kind of intimacy with Jesus.

That showing of Christ's pains filled me full of pain, because I was well-aware that He suffered only once, though He wished to show it me, and fill me with awareness as I had before desired. And in all this time of Christ's pains I felt no pain except for Christ's pains. Then I thought, "I knew but little what pain it was that I asked for", and like a wretch I repented me, thinking that if I had known what it would be, I would have been loath to have prayed for it, for it seemed to me that my pains went beyond any bodily death. [LOL 17]

A remarkable detail from the Short Text of the Revelations, not included in the Long Text, is that as Julian experienced the death-pains of Christ in her own body and mind, she appeared to those around her to have actually died herself! She says that her mother, 'who stood with the others and watched over me, lifted her hand to my face as if to close my eyes, since she thought that I had died.'<sup>2</sup>

### **Compassion**

Even as she repents of her original desire to be so intimate with Christ, Julian remains aware that the pain she is suffering is the pain of compassion, sprung from a union of true love. This leads her directly, in Chapter Eighteen into a reflection on the compassionate unity of all things, all creation in fact, in Christ at the moment of his Passion. The Blessed Virgin Mary is the chief icon for Julian of this compassionate unity with Jesus in his pain, but she broadens this bond of unity to include all lovers of Christ and then all of humanity, bound up together in this crucifixion, whether we are aware of it or not. Finally, compassionate unity is extended even to inanimate creation, suffering with Jesus since Jesus is the ground of their existence.

His true lovers suffered more pains than their own bodily dying... I saw a great one-ing between Christ and us, as I understand it, for when He was in pain, we were in pain. And all created things that could suffer pain suffered with Him (that is to say, all created things that God has made for our service). The firmament and the earth failed for sorrow in their nature at the time of Christ's dying, for it belongs naturally to their character to know Him for their God in whom all their strength is situated. When He failed, then it was necessary for them out of nature to fail with Him as much as they could, out of sorrow for His pains.

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<sup>2</sup> Beer, Frances. Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love and the Motherhood of God. (New York: Boydell & Brewer, Ltd., 2001). Ch. 10.

And thus they that were His friends suffered pain for love. And universally, all — that is to say, they that knew Him not — suffered because of the failing of all manner of comfort, except the mighty hidden protection of God. [LOL 18]

As Julian will write later, all the pains of creation are in some manner Christ's own pains, what he suffered in the Passion, and inversely, Christ's particular pains in our own specific sufferings are felt like a vibrating wave moving through created reality. Precisely because the divine Ground of history and creation is dying, all history and creation is marked, is bound to fail and die with him out of the essential and deep connection between a creature and its creative ground. It is as if all of creation is gathered in concentric rings around the figure of the suffering Christ. The rings closest to the center are suffering most because they are most conscious and most loving, but nothing in creation, not even the sky or the physical earth is free from this bond of com-passion.

Although this is not the primary point I want to dwell on in the Eighth Showing, perhaps a digression here could be tolerated. When 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers have described modern and post-modern man, the word 'alienation' has been used as often as any other. Human beings, at least North American and European humanity, have suffered a strange and almost total alienation of themselves from everything else, as if the bonds which connect an individual with his or her reality have been progressively severed, one by one. We are said to live in alienation from Nature, from each other, from any sort of a social community, from our deepest selves, from God. The progress of the 'modern' age has involved a continual stripping of our ability to be, feel, and know ourselves as connected to anything beyond the shifting play, or nightmare, of unconnected and self-referential, subjective consciousness.

A theological reflection on this suggests that alienation is more than just a passing, negative experience which a permanently existing and autonomous self needs to tolerate or correct. To suffer alienation, dis-connection, isolation, is in some manner to suffer the loss of the actual reality of one's own being, most certainly and dramatically of the reality of one's personal being and identity. Alienation is not so much an unfortunate aspect of existence as it is a diminution of existence itself: it is not accidental, but an ontological sickness of the most profound order. Alienation is, in other words, sin, according to the classic definition which Julian ascribes to: sin as a lack of being that should be there. Following this line of thought, which would be argued from the doctrine of the Trinity and the image of the Trinity in human beings, the Church is clearly understood as having as its primary task the re-constitution of fallen, alienated, ontologically-diminished human beings by leading them to share in the life of communion in the Holy Trinity. They become new creatures defined and constituted by a new communion made possible by the self-gift of love realized in Jesus and the inner gift of the Holy Spirit of Charity, conforming us to Jesus and re-creating us as men and women of communion.

From this perspective, Julian's vision of the compassionate suffering of all beings in the suffering and death of Jesus, all of creation in some measure dying with him as he dies, has great importance. It suggests to us in the monastic life that our communion with each other, with the natural world and with God may be found not by seeking it directly in the other —trying to engineer community-togetherness, or allowing a clinging dependency on another monk or nun, or a naïve attempt to be at one with Nature, or the direct attempt to have a spiritual experience of union with God— but only by taking a detour into the Passion of Christ. Because the Son of God was murdered and died in our world, fissures have opened up irreparably between all created beings. The whole world, as one Orthodox theologian suggested, is dying, it is passing out of being, and is suffering this fissuring death —that is, alienation— precisely in those cultures most defined by Christianity. Thus we can't resuscitate what is already dying or dead. There is no more direct path back to a pre-modern sense of communion with 'Nature' or 'God' or even each other, however much we may admire (and skew) these sentiments. Julian might say that everything is gathered about Christ and is now dying with Christ, and our re-union, our re-creation as creatures constituted by communion, might depend not on our direct efforts to be friendly, etc, but on our willingness to abide with Christ in

the Passion exactly as this is played out in the humble and overly-familiar terms of our own life, our own community. But this idea, that the reality of our new being as creatures of communion is found in and through the Passion of Jesus takes us directly back to the Eighth Showing and Julian's struggles with this very choice for Jesus as her heaven, as her love and her communion.

### **Choosing Jesus for her Heaven in Well and Woe**

The last thing which Julian noted before her discussion of compassion in Chapter Eighteen, was her own surprise at how painful it was to suffer with Christ in his passion, and her repenting of her original desire for this gift. This slight moment of inner wavering, where Julian appears to pull back if only a little from the reality of the Passion is finally brought to a head, when Julian receives, she says, a suggestion to look away from the crucified Christ, to look directly to heaven. 'I had a proposal in my reason,' she says, '(as if it were like a friend) which said to me, "Look up to heaven to His Father."

Julia Gatta, in her book *Three Spiritual Directors for our Time*, points out that in this suggestion, Julian is being tempted to a kind of transcendental religion, a religion in which one seeks heaven, seeks communion, seeks finality in love, apart from, or by going around, the Crucified Christ<sup>3</sup>. What is marvelous about Julian, remaining true to her depth of devotion to Christ in his suffering, is that she does not give in to this very reasonable suggestion —made all the more reasonable by the fact that Julian and those about her believe that she is dying, when it would make all sense to look away from the Cross to heaven itself! Instead, she reverses her original feelings of having repented of her desire to be with Christ and instead chooses him for her heaven in well and woe.

I answered inwardly with all the powers of my soul and said, "No, I cannot, for Thou art my heaven." (This I said because I wished not to look up, for I had rather have been in that pain until Doomsday than to have come to heaven otherwise than by Him, for I was well-aware that He who bound me so painfully, He would unbind me when He wished.)

So was I taught to choose Jesus for my heaven, whom I saw only in pain at that time. I delighted in no other heaven than Jesus, who shall be my bliss when I come there.

And this has ever been a comfort to me: that I chose Jesus for my heaven, by His grace, in all this time of suffering and sorrow. And that had been a learning for me that I should evermore do so, choosing only Jesus for my heaven in well and woe. [LOL 19]

The passage speaks for itself; it is the direct account of Julian's release of everything to God in Jesus. This is the pivot point on which the whole first half of the Revelations, through the Twelfth Showing, is balanced. The First through Eighth Showings lead to this point of final crisis for Julian: will she choose Jesus with experiential clarity about the meaning of this choice, or will she falter and not cement the bond of loving desire for God in Jesus that initiated her original desire for the Three Gifts and thus made the Showings possible? The amazing and wonderful thing is that she choose Jesus, and counsels us to do the same. Unmistakably, this moment in Showing Eight challenges us with a direct and essential reality of what it means to live in Julian's spirit, according to her wisdom. This is a most essential passage in Julian; if any single portion from her Revelations demands application to our life, this is it.

If we reflect however on the ground already covered in this study, it is clear that we have more often than not been talking about exactly this choice for Jesus as our heaven in well and woe, conscious and intentional union with Jesus as the center and meaning of our lives and vocations in OJN. And precisely because this choice for Jesus as our

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<sup>3</sup> Gatta, Julia. *Three Spiritual Directors for Our Time*. (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1986). Pp. 72.

heaven is worked out in Julian's Revelations in terms of compassionate unity with the suffering Jesus on the Cross, we are led once again to the conclusion that as Julian monks and nuns, the way that we realize loving union with Jesus is through our choice to remain with Jesus in his suffering, his passion and death. We have seen for instance, that given Julian's search for God in the foul, black mortal flesh of the crucified Christ in Showing Two, we as Julian monks and nuns are bound to seek for God, or at least to wait upon God with the negative aspects of our monastic communities and lives. In short, our Jesus is not so much the healing or preaching Jesus, or the Jesus who sends the Holy Spirit, but the suffering and dying Jesus. It could be our special charism to live into this aspect of the reality of Jesus just as other Orders exist as manifestation of the teaching Christ (Dominicans) or the healing Christ (Franciscan nursing orders). This is something which we have seen from the very first class, when we looked at Julian's request for a sight of the Passion, and which we have seen run as a theme through all the meditations. What Showing Eight does, with this dramatic and explicit choice for Jesus as heaven in well and woe, is not so much extend what has already been said about the Passion-centered nature of our Order, but emphasizes and inscribes it as of the highest meaning and importance.

### **Two Final Qualifications**

That being said, two things need to be noted, especially as the danger of a 'cult of suffering' or of a self-indulgent, self-pitying suffering looms whenever one speaks about the necessity for monks and nuns to allow suffering in their community for the sake of unity with Jesus and thus the truth of their vocations. There is also the danger that this idea could be used, perhaps unconsciously, by persons who are causing suffering as a license not to reform, or not to change.

The first important note is that this surrender by Julian of her entire life to be with Jesus, in well and woe, is the pivotal moment in the first half of the Revelations precisely because it is exactly at this point of utter and absolute surrender that Julian passes, suddenly, without warning or expectation, through the 'exterior' reality of suffering into the divine interior of joy and bliss. Almost immediately after this choice for Jesus as her heaven in well and woe, Julian thought Jesus was going to die but experienced instead the transformation of her experience from grief to joy. She writes,

...just at the same time that I thought, by appearance, that His life could no longer last, and the showing of the end properly needed to be near, suddenly, as I gazed upon the same cross, He changed His blessed countenance. The changing of His blessed countenance changed mine, and I was as glad and as merry as possible.

Then brought Our Lord merrily to my mind: "Where is now any point to thy pain or to thy distress?"  
And I was completely happy. [LOL 21]

From this sudden transfiguration of Jesus' face, the next four showings of pure joy and bliss all flow with great energy, culminating in the great Twelfth Showing, with its 'I it am...' sequence. When we live in Julian's spirit, we are not to live 'sadly and morbidly,' dragging ourselves about with a self-pitying and self-indulgent sense of all that we are suffering with Jesus, but 'gladly and merrily' precisely because the focus is not on ourselves, not on what we do or suffer or realize spiritually but on the gracious self-gift and loving humility of God. There can be no cult of suffering, like the kind easily imagined in 19<sup>th</sup> century convents, in a Julian monastery that is being true to its vocation because such a cult is merely a backward and morbid exaltation of the self, not a forgetfulness of self in Jesus that opens the door, as it did for Julian, into the reality of divine joy and bliss in us.

The second thing to note is what Julian says gave her the strength to make this choice for Jesus as her heaven, what empowered her to refuse to seek heaven apart from Jesus, even if this meant great suffering. In chapter 55, Julian writes about the experience of the Eighth Showing again:

... in the eighth showing, in which my body was filled with the experience and memory of Christ's passion and His death — and furthermore, with this was an ethereal feeling and secret inward vision of the high part that I was shown at that same time [when I could not on account of the intermediary's suggestion look up into heaven], and that was because of the powerful vision of the inner life, and this inner life is that exalted essence, that precious soul, which is endlessly rejoicing in the Godhead. [LOL 55]

What gave Julian the strength to stay with Jesus in his suffering was her mystical awareness of a depth of soul, both in Jesus and herself, which is always in a state of blissful and loving communion regardless of what we are experiencing in our outward, historical, conscious lives. Julian had a direct insight, amid all the suffering and pain, into a new level of spiritual reality in Jesus and in her self which she will call the soul's substance or essence, and which we will have ample time to reflect on later. The key point now is that, even as Julian's *Revelations* pushes us inexorably toward the recognition of the centrality of the suffering Christ in our Order's life and charism, the fact that Julian was able to abide with this suffering Christ only because she saw a mystical depth of the soul creates a balancing drive towards the need for us to be in touch with this same inner, essential depth of soul. This need is met, to my mind, by the disciplined practice of silent, contemplative prayer.

## Conclusion

Here then, we can begin to see a balanced and overall picture of the Order beginning to emerge. As we finish the Eighth Showing, the essential call of our life to witness in a special way to the transformative power of the suffering Christ, the Passion-centered nature of the Order, is emphasized and, in a sense, finalized. This theme is utterly central to Julian's *Revelations* and yet, as already noted, in the Eighth Showing it reaches the end of its active development. It will rarely be in the center of the stage again. But even as this theme culminates in a way that leaves its importance for OJN beyond any doubt, another theme quietly begins to emerge, and that is the theme of the soul's deep and abiding union with God in bliss — a theme which occupies a great deal of the second half of the *Revelations* and which corresponds to a parallel call and demand in our Order for a deep life of contemplative silence and stillness. 'Parallel' is perhaps not the best word, as the two themes of the suffering Christ and the soul's inner depth of bliss are intimately woven together in Julian and are in fact mutually supporting, mutually grounding. One can't have either without the other, because they are dimensions of a single whole, a whole which is Julian's spirituality and her gift and wisdom to us: Passion and Contemplation, the dying Jesus and the blissful Godhead, which is, after all, exactly what Julian saw in the first moment of her *Revelations*.

Julian says,

we are now on His cross with Him in our pains and our suffering, dying; and if we willingly remain on the same cross with His help and His grace until the last moment, suddenly He shall change his appearance to us, and we shall be with Him in heaven (between the one and the other there shall be no passage of time) and then shall all be brought to joy.

And so meant He in this showing: "Where is now any point to thy pain or thy distress?" And we shall be fully blessed. And here I saw truthfully that if He showed us His most blessed face now, there is no pain on earth nor in any other place that would distress us, but everything would be to us joy

and bliss. But because He showed to us an expression of suffering as He bore in this life His cross, therefore we are in distress and labor with Him as our frailty demands.

Our whole life, it could be surmised, flows actively between our dying with Christ on the cross, willingly remaining there with the end (especially when the cross is the monastery itself), and the perception, however obscure or brief, of the heavenly joy that is already alive in us.