

A NECESSARY TENSION: EXPERIENCE AND CHURCH TEACHING IN JULIAN OF NORWICH

A Sermon by Fr. John-Julian, OJN

As most of you know, I spend a lot of time thinking about tiny bits of Julian's work — about her use of the word "point", or the business of the "broad waters", or what she means by "soul". These are all things where my intuition rises momentarily to the surface and says, "Yes, but..." . And in answer, I try very hard to see things from within Julian's own consciousness.

But I want to speak today about what I think is the biggest, broadest, widest, most cosmic of issues that our Blessed Mother confronts in her book. If I had to summarize what I think Julian is about in writing down her visions and her reflection on them, I think I would say that it is the mega-confrontation between personal experience and theological verity.

The first part of her book is primarily about the experience of her showings, her visions of the crucified Lord. After all, one of her requests was that she could experience the crucifixion of Jesus in the same way as those who were historically present at that crucifixion experienced it. And that is the grace that God gives her in the answering of her prayer. That is precisely what the showings do — in fact, they do it so deeply and so powerfully that Julian is almost sorry that she asked for something that caused so much sympathetic pain. She says that if she knew what she was asking for, she would not have had the courage to ask it.

So far, in her work, she adds little to the mystical and ascetic work of others before and after her. The crucifixion is made graphically clear to her, and she sees deeply into the sheer humanity of the suffering savior. In that way, she complements the centuries-long Christian traditions in an almost archetypal medieval way — that is, she experiences the Christ not as ascended, glorified, and divine (as had been the mainline Christian tradition up to that time) but she now has impressed upon her the other side of the Incarnation. Now the true humanity of the Savior rises to the fore, and for a time, like many of her late medieval confreres she is lost in the historicity of the Incarnation, the flesh-and-bloodness of it, the "carnal" part of incarnation, as it were. So, albeit her showings are in some sense midrash on the historico-biblical accounts of the Passion, and although her immersion in the physicality of the crucifixion introduces projections and suggestions about physical details that may not exist in previous accounts, she is much in the mainstream of medieval thought with its then-new humanization of Jesus.

Consequently, if her fame depended upon the showings alone, there would be little there that is unique. However, what is unique is the second part of her book — the part which has to do with comprehending the implications of the visionary experiences she has had — with delving into the tension between what her experiences and intuition tell her, on the one hand, and what she knows to be true from the teachings of her Church.

Let me first say that I think that those who see Julian as some kind of crypto-Protestant, or as radically anti-ecclesiastical, are simply and absolutely dead wrong — and in almost every case, that attitude is merely a modernist projection on the work and insights of a very medieval Catholic woman — that is, to paraphrase Archbishop Ramsey, "to use Julian in a way she never intended to be used".

But the tension in her work is still very plain: she asks herself, and she asks her readers to consider, how one reconciles the utter, immeasurable, almost inconceivable ubiquity of God's love with the church's absorption with sin, punishment, wrath, chastisement, and the like. How does Julian handle the monumental

power of her personal experience when it is set beside the faith of the Church, the historical, traditional, universal creeds and beliefs in which she has placed her confidence?

And it is in this tension that the modernists, to my mind, go so badly wrong. The answer to the question for the modern ascetic or contemporary theologian is to maintain adamantly that personal experience is utterly central and absolutely primary, and that the tradition must bend and give way – or even evaporate – in the face of that experience. In what may be an over-simplified statement, what they say is, “What I experience is true, by virtue of the fact that I experience it. And what I do not or cannot experience is not true, by virtue of the fact that I have not experienced it.”

I could speak for hours on what I believe to be the source of this kind of error as it reflects the cultural, social, and economic developments which inexorably lifted the individual entirely out of the context of the community and deified that individual, making the self the uttermost authority, sturdily denying what used to be considered objective in the name of the all-absorbing subject, the “I”.

But what is the uniqueness of Julian’s way of dealing with that tension between the corporate tradition and the personal experience? Her answer to this conundrum seems a strange one to the modern scientific mind, because Julian’s answer is that there is no solution! And that is a mind-blowing conclusion – almost totally intolerable to the modern mind which glories in its ability to find solutions to all problems.

Julian says, in essence, that the power of her visions seems in some ways contrary to the teachings of the Church. It is a tension that she would like to see resolved. Indeed, she asks God to resolve it in more than one place. And no resolution comes. God does not point a cosmic finger at one side of the problem or the other.

Again, the modern mind can say too easily, “Oh, well, Julian was really just scared of coming to conclusions which would be seen to be Lollardry and heretical, and she just protects herself by not coming down on one side or the other.” And I believe, again, that that is the projection of the modern mind.

Julian’s genius is that she sees the tension, recognizes and understands it, and accepts it! She is not driven to say, “Ah, my visions are right, and the Church is wrong!” or “The Church teachings seem contrary to what I have seen, and so my visions must be in error.” She says, in effect, “This, on the one hand, is what I have seen, and that, on the other hand, is what I have been taught and have believed is true – and I do not understand how one can maintain both at the same time, but that is precisely what I am going to do.”

And so she goes on, deep in prayer as she must have been during those twenty-years of finishing her writings, and lives directly in the insoluble center of the problem itself. What I think she is saying is, “Both of these things are true, but how they fit together is beyond me — and I intentionally give up trying to reconcile them! And someday, in a way I cannot even conceive, God will clear up the tensions. In the meantime, I accept my limits, and live my life within both realities: that of the corporate teachings and that of the individual experience.”

Does she say, “Well, I now know about Jesus’ s unconditional love, so screw all that theology!”? Does she slam out the door of her anchorhold, declaring her final liberation from an oppressive ecclesiastical system, and head off on a peripatetic meandering like her friend Margery Kempe? Does she offer herself to

be burned as a Lollard in defense of her private insights? No! She recognizes the tension, and then lives within it. The Mass is still the Mass, her vows are still her vows, intercession for the departed is still her duty, and she does not doubt for a minute the validity of the theological structure in which she was raised and in which she lived, even though much of it is a mystery to her.

That, I think, is the utterly unique greatness of our blessed patroness – and, to my mind, it is the central message she was meant to provide for our confusing age. In fact, it is never either-or in this business of mystical reality. It is always both-and! Yes: “This thou art; and this thou art not.” and how that can be, I do not understand, but that it is, I believe with all my heart. She said it herself so well in those paradoxical words from Chapter 10:

“And thus I saw Him and I sought Him, and I possessed Him and I lacked Him. And this is, and should be, our ordinary behavior in this life, as I see it.”

That is Julian’s gift to me and, I think, to all of us in the upheaving stresses and tensions of the contemporary Church. We live in the tearing middle of tensions, and I know that I must never take to my lonely self the judgments that are too great for me to make; nor must I discredit myself and my experiences and insights and simply write them off as foolish. And sometimes those two – the teachings and the experiences – will not match exactly — and from there on in, it is simply up to God to work his unknown, and mysterious Great Deed. And then I shall know. And then all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.