

# JULIAN AND COMMUNITY

A Sermon by Fr. John-Julian OJN

In his “Politics”, Aristotle makes the following comment: “Hence it is evident that the city-state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal.”

In saying that man is “a political animal” Aristotle uses the Greek adjective *polítikos*, and this word does not mean “political” in our modern sense of the word – and it surely ought not to be translated in that way. What Aristotle means is that human beings are animals who by their very nature will live in a polis, a city, a community. In essence, he is simply declaring that human beings are naturally gregarious — that, by nature, they tend to gather together and to live in communities rather than in eremitic solitude.

And that came very much into my mind these last few days as I began to think about this homily. If human beings are naturally gregarious, are naturally community-dwellers, what can we say about and anchorite like Julian of Norwich? shall we say that she is unnatural? or un-human?

No, because Julian is ALSO gregarious. Indeed, her choice to isolate herself in her anchorhold at St. Julian’s is precisely because she is gregarious.

But the difference between Julian and others is that she chose the community with which she would live with much more discretion than most — she carefully chose her community: it was to be the community of the Holy and Blessed Trinity.

And if we examine just this aspect of a Christian’s choice of a primary community, we see a progression which makes a lot of sense and explains a lot.

1. First, we have those Christians whose primary community is the secular culture in which they live. It is this which defines their lives, provides them with a set of values, and supports those values as they are demonstrated in their behavior. To be sure, they consider themselves “Christians” — but they are so only in a very legalistic sense of their having been baptized — and probably in hoping to be buried with a church funeral.
2. Secondly, we have those Christians – few and rare though they be – who have made their parish their primary community. There it is that they find their values and their spiritual support. It is in the parish that they find the strength and courage to stand against some of the forces of the secular world. [However, it is only truthful to say, that the parish community generally appears to come more and more to resemble the secular community around it as time goes by.]
3. Thirdly, there are Christians who either select as their primary community a relatively small number of particularly committed people who have chosen to follow the stricter evangelical counsels of our Lord and to live what we now call “a monastic life”. (I am under no illusions about the adequacy of our living out the monastic ideals, but the fact remains that a monastic community per se inculcates, requires, and overtly supports a Christian life and values of a more demanding, more consistent, and more rigorous nature.)
4. And fourth, the vocation of the anchorite is the choice of God Himself as one’s primary community — as one’s polis, one’s “city” — so that for the recluse, the words “city of God” do

not refer to an extrinsic reality, but might better be translated not as “the City of God”, but as “the city is God”.

I think it is probably fair to say that for all of us these four degrees represent an historical and chronological pathway we have trod — from the legal fiction of Christianity, to the parochial commonalty, and to the monastic peculiarity. And that leaves the last step: the discovery of the Trinity as one’s primary community. For Julian, that apparently happened on a somewhat permanent basis when she was 30 years old. For most of the rest of us, it happens (if it happens at all) very rarely, intermittently, momentarily, in a fragmented and temporary way.

But it is the life and the goal which we as Julians seek. This is what each of us must look for: to be a mystical anchorite within the perfect community of the Holy Trinity.

And then “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall – at long last – be well.”

And, by the way, here is the next sentence from Aristotle's “Politics”: “...man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a city-state, is either a bad man or is...above humanity...”