

JULIAN OF NORWICH AS SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

Sr. Scholastica Marie, OJN

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The first time I heard Julian of Norwich's name was at an Advent Quiet Day in my home parish in Greenville, SC. Fr. Bill Melnyk, our assistant rector, had a devotion to Dame Julian which began while he was a seminarian at Sewanee, and during that Quiet Day in December of 1982 Fr. Bill mentioned Julian's understanding that there is no wrath in God.

I had ALWAYS "known" that (and I say the word KNOWN with quotation marks--since it was a knowing that went beyond a rational knowing—"knowing in unknowing" as Catherine Doherty names it), and though the perception that there was no wrath in God was a truth for MY life, I had never, ever heard such a statement from within the Church. Southern Christianity is fairly infamous for its foundation of hell-fire and brimstone salvation, and although the Episcopal Church in the South is inclined to be more polite and proper than the tent evangelist which that image may conjure up for some of you, appeasing a judging and wrathful God was always on the edge of most teachings of the faith. Jesus' statement "if you love me, you will keep my commands" was invariably taught as directives which by keeping the commandments would lead us to God's love rather than a knowing of God's omnipresent love inspiring and guiding us to keep the commandments.

That may not seem like much to you within this enlightened group, but when ALL of one's faith is focused through the lens of "God's-gonna-getcha-for-that" there's always a bit of brimstone and smoke curling around the edges of one's spirituality.

So that Saturday in 1982 was a major crossroads in my life. The next day I asked Fr. Bill for the exact wording of that statement (1) that there was no wrath in God, (2) the name of the book from which it had come (he had his copy of Showings on the lectern during the Quiet Day), and (3) I asked him to tell me more about this Julian person--but that was all on a Sunday morning with the usual Sunday stresses for every parish priest, so there was no time for any follow through.

Well, the follow through happened—in God's time—as almost everyone in this room knows so well. Yet I use that incident—which now sounds like ancient history—to illustrate how Julian first began guiding my spiritual growth 15 years ago. And an interesting sidelight to that is: after I met Julian, people started approaching ME to ask questions about their spiritual life.

Julian of Norwich as a modern day spiritual director was presented by Mother Julia Gatta in the now out-of-print book, Three Spiritual Directors for Our Time, and this past year a book came out written by a Benedictine monk, Ambrose Tinsley entitled, A Neighbour—Kind & Known: The Spirituality of Julian of Norwich, copies of which you have seen by now on the book table and perhaps have already purchased one of your own.

When we realize that one of the primary advantages of an anchorite in a medieval parish church was the availability of a listening ear and when we consider that it was Margery Kempe's visit to obtain spiritual counsel from Mother Julian which gives us one of the primary validations of her existence at St. Julian's, one might begin to search Julian's writing for comments possibly made to those who may have stopped by her "window on the lane."

I introduced myself as presenting this talk from one of Julian's "even-Christians"—and the more I began developing what I might present, the more ridiculous it seemed for me to stand in front of a room filled with Julian's "even-Christians" and assume to inform or enlighten YOU. I warned the other Members Regular that my presentation would be "different" and that difference is: this presentation on Julian of Norwich as Spiritual Director will not (I hope) be a monologue. When I finish with what I want to say, I'd like to open this up for the rest of you to add comments and insights about Julian's guidance in YOUR spiritual life.

I know that Oblates and Oblate Probationers are expected to look at this on an on-going basis by their Rule/reports--and the rest of you feel free to add your own insights— including any Regulars who would like a chance to speak.

The following is a quote from the OJN Julian Gathering Pamphlet on Spiritual Direction:

From Biblical times until the present, those who have struggled along the path of spirituality have always turned to experienced and holy people for assistance, for guidance, for clarity about direction, method, and goal....Spiritual direction has never been a substitute for one's own spiritual work and struggle, but it can be a reassurance and a protection....As fallen human beings, we are seldom able to keep the vision clear and the practice appropriate without the objectivity provided by another with whom we share the journey.

It is a mistake to assume that spiritual progress is chronological--that because of our present modern age and high-tech lifestyle we should be 20 centuries ahead in our spiritual needs and that the thinkers of an earlier age can be of no help to us. All spiritual direction which claims the name Christian must look at and draw upon the rich tradition of spiritual writing and spiritual striving. And one of the greatest errors of the present time is to assume that any spirituality is better than none. The tradition which has shaped the Christian culture is important, because it is a "living" tradition, not a fossilized tradition which we simply repeat and produce.

What prompts us into spiritual direction, both for directees and directors, is the desire for God.

The idea behind spiritual direction is that although none of us walks the identical road in our pursuit of union with God, there are some universal milestones and some directional signs which are useful and important to everyone, and which tend to serve as curbstones to keep one from wandering too far astray.

Spiritual direction is not a forum for personal culture, whether one's director is a medieval anchoress or a contemporary religious; and programs for the cultivation of either virtuous living or self-fulfillment are NOT spiritual direction. Mother Julian's writing might be understood as primarily a work of spiritual direction. Julian says quite plainly that God gave her the "shewings" for the sake of her even-Christians, and she calls the visions a "blessed teaching" and "a lesson of love":although it has been only in our 20th century that her writing has truly come into its own. The scholars have almost agreed (I dare not say that all are in total agreement—this isn't paradise yet) that the Long Text of Julian's "shewings" was the result of almost 20 years of reflection and meditation on the meaning of those visions of May 8, 1373. Julian did not perceive her writing merely as a self-expression of her "great experience" as Ambrose Tinsley chose to call the visions, for

early in her writings Julian protests that the visions were granted only so ALL might be stirred to greater love of God.

“Everything I say about me, I mean to apply to all my fellow Christians, for I am taught that this is what our Lord intends in this spiritual revelation..”

And yet, it is not quite everyone whom Julian represents. In Chapter 73 Julian tells us exactly to whom she is writing, and why. She writes:

“I speak of such men and women who because of God’s love hate sin and dispose themselves to do God’s will.”

So Julian’s audience for whom she wrote are not those on the brink of conversion nor those at the beginning of a dedicated Christian life, but those who have earnestly lived the faith for a number of years. Such persons yearn to make spiritual progress; to be free of sin and attraction to evil; and to experience union with God to the furthest degree possible in this life, through contemplative prayer. I think that is a good definition of those who can truly “hear” Julian, and I believe it gives the parameters of who we are in the Order of Julian as we commit ourselves to live by Rule and to wait on God in the silence of our praying.

Therefore if spiritual direction is helping another to make spiritual progress; to be free of sin and attraction to evil; and to experience union with God to the highest degree possible in this life...What are Mother Julian’s guidelines as a spiritual director? Julian’s guidelines for us are the same which she had for her own life: contrition, compassion, and her longing and desire for God. And we remember that she calls those conditions three wounds., and surely everyone in this room can supply a tale or two about woundings received on the path toward holiness.

Certain of Julian’s characteristic themes—her constant reaffirmation that “all shall be well,” her understanding of sin as a kind of sickness that afflicts us—seem a natural fit for modern therapeutic spirituality. However, the therapy which Julian offers is a radical one that challenges the conventional therapeutic pieties: holiness as simply becoming a whole person and salvation as self-actualization.

The Jesus of Julian’s revelation is not the Jesus of feel-good religiosity. It is Jesus the Lord of creation brought low to share in the suffering of creatures. The promise that “all shall be well” is not a promise that God is planning to relieve us of pain in this life. It is the paradoxical promise that the union of our sufferings with the suffering of Christ will somehow prove redemptive. Julian’s seemingly comforting message that “all shall be well” turns out to be the disturbing message that we are called to share in the compassion-unto-death of Jesus.

And this IS good news—for it grows out of the understanding that God views us and our sinful condition, in the mirror of Jesus and His loving obedience. Our identity, both as individuals and as the human race, are literally “knit” into the saving person of Jesus. What Julian offers is nothing less than a radical therapy for our damaged selves.

Whereas the presumption of modern therapeutic spirituality is that we will “get better,” that our goal is “wellness,” Julian’s presumption is that we will never get “better” until we enter into the bliss of heaven. And

yet, paradoxically, everything is already “better.” Dorothy Day summarized Julian’s teachings by saying “the worst has happened and been repaired,” meaning that the true tragedy of the human race is not this or that fall of mine OR yours, but the primal falling of Adam—which has already been restored in Christ. Julian writes that God said to her,

“For since I have made well the worst harm, then it is my will that thou knowest from that that I shall make well everything that is less bad.”

Yet this restoration does not nullify the real pain and sin into which we fall. Julian writes:

“All we who shall be saved, for the period of this life, have in us a wondrous mixture both of well and woe: we have in us our Lord Jesus arisen; we have in us the misery of the misfortune of Adam’s falling.”

Among contemporary spiritual directors it is commonplace to point out that life in this world is always one of well and woe. But Julian is unusual in claiming that it is not simply that we live in an alternation between the two, but that our lives are always completely of woe and completely of well. The two exist simultaneously. In the midst of suffering and sin, we are intimately united with Jesus who suffers the effects of sin. For Julian this means that one cannot speak of stages of spiritual progress or measure where one stands on the “ladder of perfection.” What we can know is that even in the depths of sin and suffering, we are deeply enfolded in the love of God. Not unlike Thérèse of Lisieux,—Julian teaches not a way of perfection but what Dominican Simon Tugwell has called a “way of imperfection.”

Our culture resonates to Julian’s learning of **sin** being understood not **as a matter of deliberate fault**—**but** rather **as a sickness or blindness**. But Julian’s way of imperfection is radical therapy, for Julian’s point is not “every day in every way I’m getting better and better.” Instead Julian knew,

“It truly behooves us to see that by ourselves we are just nothing but sin and wretchedness.”

This is a gloomy truth...while at the same time she reminds us that God,

“of His courtesy will not show our and sin and our weakness to us except by the light of His grace and mercy.”

Julian’s most all-embracing spiritual directive consists in what she calls “noughting”—a term that encompasses both suffering and sin, and also the stripping and purification of our desires that we may desire nothing but God. **Noughting is the path** for Jesus’ disciples:

“We shall be noughted following our Master, Jesus, till we be full purged.”

Julian thinks that life itself will strip us if we let it, that our existence brings with it its own penances. Our penance is to be found in the diminishments of everyday life: the disappointments and failures—minor irritations and major betrayals—sickness—aging—and death. These things happen: they do not need to be sought out. Yet in these woes is also found our weal, in this sickness is found our cure,

“and in the remedy He wills that we rejoice.”

As life strips us of all the things to which we have fastened our affections, we can come to see that

“the remedy is that our Lord is with us, keeping and leading us into the fullness of joy.”

On the cross, God too is stripped. He sees His offer of fullness of life in the kingdom rejected;

God is betrayed by His Friends, suffers excruciating pain, and dies. Even in OUR deepest noughting—especially in our deepest noughting—when everything is taken from us—God is still there. And just as God brings creation out of nothingness, so too God transforms nothingness into the fullness of joy.

Julian’s directives in the spiritual life teach us things modern culture would have us deny. Julian teaches us that life IS painful, but can be borne with grace. Julian tells us that we will never find rest in the things of this world—whether material goods, goals, friends, or family—but that we can love them and love God through them if we can see them with God’s eyes. Julian as a spiritual director will guide us to the truth about God, our world, and ourselves.