



Julian Jottings

Thoughts on Things Spiritual

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ALLELUIA, CHRIST IS RISEN

FR. GREGORY, OJN

Why do we say “Alleluia”? What is the actual content, the belief or experience behind our “Alleluia”?

For most people, without a lived connection to the mystery of Easter, we say ‘Alleluia’ because everyone else is saying it. It is something we do in Church, and so the function of saying “alleluia” is that it enacts and confirms our belonging in a community that is doing the same thing. This is good, but it is limited because there is no actual content behind it other than a desire for social belonging, albeit to a divinely created community. The thinness of this reason for saying “alleluia” is revealed if we imagine a community in which for every person in the community this was the *only* reason for saying it. If this were so, then the act of saying the word would have no actual meaning or content at all. It would just be a social shibboleth, charged perhaps with some happiness on Easter, but of no real application or meaning to anyone’s interior reality or what we are giving our lives to. It would be a cypher signifying only group-belonging.

“Alleluia” is of course a cry of praise, in its liturgical use, following on Jesus’ Resurrection from the dead. This is why we use it so much in Easter. But what is the content behind it? If we were on a desert island, completely alone, with no community to belong to, and the word had no social function and we had no sense of the liturgical year, why say it?

The ability for “alleluia” to have any real content, for it to be generative of life-purpose and meaning, and to reflect an experience of God, depends on a prior relationship of profound discipleship to Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and destroyed by us and yet risen from the dead. By profound




discipleship I mean an attitude, like St. Paul in Philippians, in which we have chosen to count as sheer loss, as rubbish, any means of having an identity at all, any personhood or direction in life, any sense of self-worth, apart from what we receive, day by day, in a relationship of mutual loving and total dependency and intimate knowing in our Lord. This kind of intimate personal dependency on Jesus for everything should normally grow as we mature in the Christian life.

At the beginning, Christian life can indeed be merely about social belonging. It can serve important relational functions with other important persons in our lives. It can then become about theology and getting a reassuringly clear world view. It can be about the safety of a rock-solid morality in a tradition. It can be also about having an inspiring life-purpose such as being prophetically active for social justice or engaged in healing, following the life-example of Jesus.

But all this — social belonging, cognitive clarity, social programs, and inspiring purpose — are really only second or third-order religious reality. They are not the core, not the essence of our lives in Christ. At some point grace demands of us something more, and the demand comes, as Julian says, usually in the total shattering of our lives [*Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 28] and of everything we thought good about ourselves or worthy in life. All our good causes or good contemplative feelings or practices or religious experiences are totally shattered by grace and life experience. And then what we are we left with? Like Saint Paul, all we are left with is an increasingly passionate, intense, overwhelming and all-consuming need to be utterly one with Jesus, to receive from Jesus, in whatever way he chooses, our whole selves. We enter into a relationship of utter discipleship and dependency on Jesus — not as an idealized figure, but as a free person who engages us freely, spontaneously, and unpredictably. We become dependent on him as the one from whom we receive not a justice program or moral example, but the very core of our personal being. He feeds us with his love for us, his delight and desire for us, his supreme joy. This love regenerates us from the absolute center of our being and gives us a new being, the new life, in which we have nothing at all in life but to cleave to him in delight as well as suffering. Our whole being is lived in growing sensitivity and response to His desire.

If we experience and know and give ourselves to this kind of discipleship, “alleluia” means everything to us. It means the Lord of our whole being is risen, is alive, and following the total devastation of losing him, watching him brutally murdered, he is now here, risen, in love, showing us his wounds, bidding us peace, and commissioning us now for apostolic mission. The utter desirability of his body





sends up a new, flaming desire in us to be totally with him, as well as compunction for having been so radically unfaithful to him. He is now with us, and with us eternally, intimately, intensely. The one we love is now within us as well as without and he has begun to share with us not only his desire for historical action in the world in which we share, but the delight of his own eternal being with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

And finally, as we celebrate his rising with him, we begin to glimpse, know, and feel a new destiny for our bodies: not to death, not to corruption, but to be taken up into his power, to be transfused with the light of his life, the melody of his own glorious being. The bodies we now have are thus no longer bodies of death, but bodies that have begun to be transfused with the bliss of eternal being, the singing of heaven, the presence even of the Holy Trinity. So this flesh that I have here and the feeling I have of myself as embodied is now open to and begins to be touched and filled with the fullness of God.

And that is something, on a desert island, with no one else around, and with no idea if it is Easter or not, for which to say, “Alleluia, alleluia!” Blessed be God.



ON FALLING INTO A DITCH

SR. CORNELIA, OJN

There are plenty of physical images in Julian: the vivid pictures of rain dropping from the eaves, of blood dropping in various patterns, of herring scales, of cloths in the wind; the drying and discoloring of a corpse on a gibbet; the body as a purse; the heap of foul black mortal flesh. We are in the presence of a keenly observant woman. The purpose of her images is not to foment our emotions into horror or disgust or ecstasy (as some devotional writers tried to do) but rather to put into our minds a state of poetic or spiritual receptivity, of “oh, yes — I’ve seen that too”. She tells it as she sees it, whether her words are homely tales, descriptions of natural events, or theological reflections. But such a straightforward approach should not trick us into ignoring what she is saying. For example, falling into sin, falling into a ditch, falling into the maiden’s womb — how often the word ‘falling’ occurs! Yes, it is an obvious and commonplace expression, but do we really notice it for what it would involve us in? And think about the constriction of a ditch. Have you ever lain down in a ditch, especially an English ditch which is deeper and narrower than ours? Think about the constriction of pain, the constriction of the enclosed anchorhold, the constriction of the grave.

If the spirit of our Blessed Mother Saint Julian informs the conduct of our monastic rule, I certainly need to recognize the worth of the physicality which she may convey either in what she says or in what her life represents. To see the worth of physicality not just for the sake of its psychological or emotional influence (which of course is there) but in a straightforward appreciation of our quite amazingly constructed body, a body which our Lord chose to share. A quick example will show the sort of thing I mean. When I was bathroom cleaner for the Community, I rejoiced in the humiliation

of spirit produced by cleaning up folks' intimate messes. But I saw the considerable physical effort involved more as a persecution of me than as a worthy gift to offer. So when people thanked me for doing this work, I interpreted the comment purely at the self-centered psychological level. That they should actually be grateful for my having saved them some bodily labor didn't even occur to me. There should not have been such a split in the appreciation of the gifts which my task gave me: a gift which I received, but also a gift which I had to offer but perversely chose not to see in that light.

The charism of our Order does not afford the sort of bodily asceticism of the Desert Fathers, whose understanding of how the body worked was very different from ours. Nor is our culture's almost pathological cult of the completely fit body appropriate in our monastery. But the physicality of our homely surroundings and our work should be appreciated for the bodily gifts which they can offer to our spiritual life. All of us here are familiar with the "true self/false self" method of discernment in our spiritual life. I am suggesting that all of us need to become more attentive to a discernment of "true body/false body". And that we need to begin this project by looking first of all "in the spirit of our Blessed Mother Saint Julian". I think that we may all find some surprises.

The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ is a treasure. God meant the incarnation as glory. But we have only earthenware jars to hold this treasure. Wherever we go we carry with us in our body the death that Jesus died for us, so that in our body the life that Jesus lives may be revealed as well. To share his glory means to share his sufferings. We are thus rewarded without end, beyond what we would have been had we not fallen — when our wounds become not our blemishes but our honors.

