

JULIAN AND I: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTION ON JULIAN OF NORWICH JULIANFEST 2006

I. INTRODUCTION: SHARING MY VERY SELF

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Saint Paul says that he was determined not only to preach the Gospel of God when visiting Thessalonica, but to share his very self with the congregation, so dear had they become to him. In much the same way, you are all very dear to me. I have known many of you for years, and many of you have shared with me the trials and joys of your lives. A very intimate connection can develop as we live and pray together in the widespread community of the Order. We are moreover bound together in a special way by our commitment to a common endeavor: retrieving the great contemplative tradition for our Church and creatively re-shaping it for the future. God has brought us together as a community to do something priceless and beautiful in the Church.

As a result of this intimacy, I knew that in giving an address at JulianFest this year, I wanted to do more than talk about Julian and her spirituality, wonderful though Julian is. I also wanted to share with you something of myself, something that comes directly from my own life and journey in God. This address is thus a kind of an autobiographical reflection on Julian, sharing with you how Julian has been most important to me over the past decade and a half of monastic life. If I don't blush to use my life as a doorway for understanding Julian, it is because Julian herself boldly interwove autobiography (this is what I experienced) with theological reflection (this is what ultimate reality is). When we go deeply into the individual and personal, we discover, I believe, the universal.

II. JULIAN AS ENCOURAGING ACCEPTANCE AND GRATITUDE

If you ask the Member's Regular about their relationship with Julian, you will discover that for a few of us, love of Julian came first and generated a vocation to the Order. Others of us wanted to be monks or nuns, and we only later became fascinated by our patron. However we went about it, Julian first or the monastic vocation, all of us were solemnly urged at our profession of vows to study and put into practice the wisdom of Mother Julian. There is thus in each of our lives an interplay between living a monastic life and the beautiful wisdom of Julian's *Revelations*. Monastic practice, contemplative prayer, and Julian's mysticism mutually influence each other.

I personally knew nothing of Julian when I started to explore my vocation, and yet I have found the basic inspiration for my whole monastic life in her. After sixteen years of reading and praying over the *Revelations*, I remain continually surprised by their ability to lead me into deeper insights and more committed spiritual practice. Julian's *Revelations* record an encounter with God at such an essential and timeless depth, that wherever we go in the spiritual life we find Julian's thoughts and experiences still illuminating and challenging us. Because Julian was at the exact center of Reality, every point on the circle of life relates to her.

My first real teaching on Julian came soon after I entered the novitiate. As an extern postulant, I had read her *Revelations* but they hadn't gone very deep. I can't remember exactly what occasioned a written note from Sr. Scholastica-Marie (I had probably been waxing eloquent about the darkness of life, as I did then), but on a little index card she reminded me of what Julian said about the greatest penance being to accept life as it is and to live it as gladly and gaily as we are able. The actual passages from Julian read,

"...it is a loving humility of a sinful soul (wrought by the mercy and grace of the Holy Spirit) when we will willingly and gladly accept the scourging and chastening that our Lord Himself wishes to give us. (And the chastening shall be wholly tender and very gentle if we will only consider ourselves pleased with Him and with all His works.)" For the penance that man takes upon himself was not shown to me – that is to say, it was not shown in particular – but it was shown particularly and highly and with full lovely demeanor that we shall humbly and patiently bear and suffer the penance that God Himself gives us, with remembrance of His blessed Passion." [Lesson of Love. Ch. 77]

"For it is the most honor to Him of anything that we can do that we live in our penance gladly and merrily because of His love, for He looks upon us so tenderly that He sees all our living here to be penance." [Lesson. Ch. 81]

Like my whole reading of Julian up to that point, this didn't go very deep at the time. Because I wasn't ready for it, I simply fired back a note to Sr. Scholastica, arguing my case for being dismal! I can see now how very deeply and intensely I was attached to my own feeling of discontent, and how the thought that I should let go of being unhappy was threatening to me.

But is this so odd or unusual? Most of us, in one way or another, use discontent – what Julian calls 'wrath' – to give us a sense of personal importance. If we can't be important in the ordinary way of being someone with power whom others look up to and make room for, if we have lost out in life's game (and we all have lost out in some way), then we can still make for ourselves a kind of inverted self-importance by discontent, by resentment against reality. If we don't win, we can always sulk or rage! The more I have thought about this, the clearer it has become that the whole reality of our false selves is constituted precisely by just this movement of discontent, refusal, and rejection, a basic ingratitude thrown against reality. Our false selves are created by fear and alienation and discontent, and living from this base is the essence of pride.

Because the false self (which is who we usually think we are!) is created in this action of rejection, authentic acceptance, thankfulness, and celebration are all very threatening to us – just as Sr. Scholastica's note was threatening to me. Unless you are in some way secure in your true self, in your truth as a beloved child of God, you will not have the freedom to accept what is, gladly and gaily. Humility is acceptance and surrender, and with it the ability to live gladly and gaily with what is.

The Cistercian nun Sr. Miriam Pollard gave us a wonderful image for the kind of creativity that can come through surrender in her book *Acceptance*. She says that all life is crossed with limitations, and these limitations mean suffering. These limitations, our suffering, are like fieldstone walls bordering the field of life. They tell us: Here you can go and no further. The humble soul, accepting the limitation, the suffering, plants climbing roses between the stones of the wall and makes something beautiful.

This first teaching from Julian – that the most praiseworthy, god-pleasing and beneficial thing we can do is to learn to rejoice with God in our existence (though crossed with penance) and our salvation – is still very much a challenge to me, and I imagine to most of us. Instead of saying 'yes' to ourselves and to God, it can be so tempting to be bitter and ungrateful, to be *spoiled* in a truly radical sense. Even when we see how completely toxic such discontent and bitterness is to prayer and relationship with others, we hesitate to let go of it. We cling to what destroys us because it protects us and gives us a false sense of personal reality and importance. Yet, for all that, simple acceptance and gratitude, in line with the monastic emphasis on humility, and the contemplative experience of prayerful surrender, is what God asked of Julian again and again in the course of her *Revelations*. It is the key of the *Revelations* and the spirituality that Julian invites us to. Julian teaches us to understand our spiritual lives as a movement from wrathful refusal to grateful surrender, from cursing to blessing, from alienation to communion. The question which has always fascinated me is how we can best assist God in this transformation from a cursing, false self to realizing the eternal truth of our being in blessing.

III. JULIAN AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Life itself, the sheer flowing-onward of time, is a great gift, even when we are locked away in the dungeon of our discontent, our wrath. As life runs on, God constantly sends little invitations to us to come out of our prison. A bird sings just outside. Some apple blossom petals blow in through the window. Perhaps someone comes to visit us in our prison. Someone prays for us.

After about five years in the community, I began to invest serious time and energy into Julian. Previously, I had focused my attention on John of the Cross and various theological studies. These gave me a new capacity to think theologically, which I then used to explore Julian. For half a year I spent around an hour each day mulling over very brief sections of the Middle English of her *Revelations*. Through this prolonged and meditative study, I realized that Julian's *Revelations* is not just a relentless series of pious quotes and comforting words, but is actually a narrative, a story. It is the story of Julian's own hard struggle, as I have already described it, to move from alienation, distraction, and discontent, to loving surrender to God and simple, glad thankfulness. The *Revelations* are complicated, but once

you grasp this underlying narrative of Julian's journey from discontent to gratitude, everything fits together organically in a beautiful whole.

Out of all this study, prayer and the daily practice of monastic life, two very special insights were born, which in turn support two fundamental ways of joining Julian in her spiritual journey from wrathful discontent to glad communion. First, Julian validated and supported the experience of contemplative prayer as a healing encounter with God's eternal life already within us. Secondly, Julian led me into healing dialogue with the suffering Christ.

The first fruit – a validation of the experience of contemplative prayer – came to its final form in an address I offered at the Julian Festival in Norwich in 1998. What I was so eager to share with our friends in England was that Julian perceived a depth in each human soul where we are already, from the moment of our creation, blissfully united to God in love. In our innermost core we sing a beatifying melody of divine love, in fact we **are** this melody of divine love. Most radical in Julian's teaching is her belief that the beatific melody of divine union is preserved in us by God no matter how much we sin or develop outward lives in contradiction to it. This bond of divine union cannot be broken by us; it is the basis of our whole existence, and God has chosen never to let it go. Putting this in terms of my previous remarks: in our outward lives we might be all discontent and wrath, but in our inward selves we are always held in peace and love. And this strange contrariness of outer and inner life is the fundamental mark of fallen human nature. Who we are in history (fearful and wrathful) is contrary to the already-realized eternal reality with us, which is surrendered, glad and grateful – in a word: one with God.

I realize this sounds very abstract. Allow me to ground it a little. At the time that these thoughts were becoming vital to me, I was experiencing challenge both interiorly and exteriorly. Interiorly, I was having to deal with a lot of repressed negative emotions and psychological pain. This was often experienced as lurking dark moods, but sometimes rose to greater intensity and very sharp anguish. Exteriorly, I was at the same time trying to learn how to be Warden of Julian House, a role in which you are bombarded you with all kinds of practical problems that make recollection and peace of mind much more difficult. Putting these two challenges together, it became almost impossible to be open and affirming, glad and gay in the penance that life is. Discontent, withdrawal, and anger become much more constant, tempting, and threatening to my vocation.

In this context, Julian's understanding of our essential union with God was a life-saver because it validated a way I still had of connecting with God in contemplative prayer even when my outward life was often quite troubled. Julian's mystical psychology helped me and can help all of us to claim the full meaning of our experience of formal contemplative prayer – that sitting cross-legged and reciting a mantra is not just a nice thing to do, but a life-saving way of connecting with the freedom and healing power of divine grace. We don't have to resolve all our wrath and fear and confusion and distraction before we can find our way to God. Julian tells us that in our depths we are already one with God in love and bliss. And she teaches us that in our experience of contemplative stillness, we are consciously letting go of the fuss, fear, and anger of our outward self so that we can access the deeper, eternal reality of divine harmony in us. Our emotional and practical life might be atonal dissonance, but twice a day we can leave behind the cacophony to listen for the silent welling of divine joy that is already our deepest reality. This is, I believe, the heart of contemplative practice in every tradition, Christian and otherwise.

In Chapter 49, Julian says it most simply, "When [the soul] is at peace in itself, suddenly it is on-ed to God." [Lesson. Ch. 49]

IV. JULIAN AND THE PASSION OF OUR LORD

Life, as I said earlier, flows inexorably on, sometimes bringing us healing, sometimes bringing challenge. When I got up to speak at St. Julian's Church in England in 1998 to share my thoughts about contemplative prayer, I felt I had come to a point of completion, and I didn't see where I could go further. I didn't see where Julian was going to lead me next, which, as it turned out, was into Christ's Passion.

Just before January of 2000, the Order purchased Llewelyn House and I was asked to lead the creation of a branch house there. I knew that this was going to be a challenge for me. While I have always learned best by jumping into the deep end, over my head, being Warden of a branch house in its first years of formation was water that was almost too deep and too treacherous. I wasn't prepared for the semi-pastoral role that would be asked of me, nor the

endless challenges of learning to live in a very rural culture, turning a half-finished A-frame on twenty acres of abused land into an integrated monastic property. Spiritual and emotional issues in the Order as a whole also had enormous impact on my life and the life at Llewelyn House.

Some people say that contemplative prayer is for them kind of divine therapy that leads to profound healing. This is true for me to an extent, but at this time I needed something more. It was not enough to do a contemplative end-run around afflictive emotions twice a day. These afflictive emotions had to be opened to God in a direct and conscious way.

A special grace at that time was my introduction to a Roman Catholic priest, Fr. Dan Rogers, who became my spiritual director, and who repeatedly challenged my cerebral approach to spirituality, inviting me always to talk with God directly and simply about the various difficulties in my life. I would be venting my negative feelings and pains, and he would ask me, "Have you told Jesus about this?" I have heard that Baron Von Hugel, a revered Roman Catholic spiritual director in the early 20th century, used to make his theologian-directees recite the rosary, just to keep them grounded and humble. Fr. Dan was doing something similar with me.

Julian, as we know, talked directly to God, and argued with God, so she modeled for me this kind of homely, divine intimacy. Most helpful for me in following Fr. Dan's advice, and of a piece with Julian's simple readiness to talk to God, was however Julian's great devotion to the suffering humanity of Jesus. Talking to a Faceless Transcendence whose circumference is infinite and whose center is everywhere (to paraphrase Nicholas of Cusa) does not make much sense. But devotion to the vulnerable humanity of Jesus begins to open the possibility of relating more directly and more affectively to God. I could engage in a kind of dialogue with God about my life through the person of Jesus. Jesus is the word of God to us, and – oddly enough – he is also our word to God, revealing the truth of the human condition nakedly. In this Jesus, we find space to meet with God, a space where we can honestly unfold the truth of our lives before God and God can offer healing by grace.

In this regard, the start of Julian's Ninth Showing has always fascinated me, because in it God speaks to Julian in a way that is most challenging and transformative for us when we are suffering, wearied, sick with anxiety or despair. This is where Jesus – whom Julian has just witnessed undergoing the last torments of his death – asks Julian if she is satisfied with his passion and death: "Art thou well satisfied that ever I suffered for thee?" [Lesson. Ch. 22]. Jesus is asking if, because of the Passion, Julian is willing to let go of her remaining wrath and petulance and surrender herself to the life of rejoicing and communion that is God. He is challenging Julian and us in this, asking if we need anything more than the total gift of Godself in love to let go of our haughty disapproval and to move into a relationship of surrender, acceptance, and trust. In a remarkable passage later in the same Showing, Jesus says to Julian that he could have made a new heaven and a new earth for her everyday, and it would have been easier for him than the labor of the Passion. How often would we rather have a new earth, a different earth, a better creation rather than receive the gift of love manifest in Jesus in the reality as it is? Are we not always asking God for something other than what is, instead of seeking for the gift of love hidden in Jesus in what is? But instead of making earthly reality different so that we could be happy with it, God chose to take it up and to make it an occasion of offering divine love to us. God could have chosen to make a 'better' creation that would please us more easily. God chose instead to give us Godself through the creation that we have. Is this self-giving in Jesus incarnate and suffering death, enough for us?

As Julian points out later in the *Revelations*, the Passion of Jesus is God's way, not of satisfying God with us, but making us satisfied with God. The Passion of Jesus does not rehabilitate us in God's sight, it serves to rehabilitate God in our sight! This sounds odd – because it presumes that we would be so wildly presumptuous as to put 'God in the dock' and condemn him, to use C.S. Lewis' image, but this is exactly what we do when we relish our discontent, our anger, our despair, when we withdraw into a hard, protective shell of wrath – and we all do this to some degree. This is the bare reality of the false self – a ridiculous self based entirely in negativity, in rejection. The devil as Julian sees him – completely ridiculous, pathetic, doomed to futile cursing, and without any reality in God's sight – is the image of this false self taken to the absolute. When we are in this mode, we are refusing the reality that God has made, and the reality also of God.

The key in the practice of opening our lives before God is the faith that Jesus is God's word. As Julian says, the key thing to understand about the Passion is the faith that it is God who suffered there for us. For me, such faith means

the willingness to allow the image of Jesus on the Cross deeply into my imagination, as an image expressing the truth of God. If we do this, if we allow the Crucified Christ to live in our imagination as a living representation of God to us, and if we share with God all our frustration and grief, we will also experience God looking in love on us from the cross. God says, "Yes, I know you are suffering, and I know your suffering deeply in myself. I know the agony, the loneliness, the frustration, the limitations and tragic emptiness you have experienced in life. Yet this is my offering to you! Given my offering to you, given this revelation of my love in Jesus, my closeness and vulnerability to you and all that you suffer: can you be satisfied? Can you be at peace? Given my sharing of all your pains, given that I, God, gave everything away, and am this flow of love and presence, am I in my love in Jesus enough for you? Art thou well satisfied that ever I suffered for thee?"

This is the question that I think lies smack dab at the center of each of our spiritual lives. Can we be reconciled with God? Is Jesus and the gift of the Spirit enough? The old theologies say that the gift of the Spirit creates in us a love for the human person Jesus reconciles us with God the Father. Julian would say that our way to reconciliation with all that is, is through the hidden working of mercy and grace in us in tandem the revelation of God's in Jesus, crucified and glorified:

"Although we, (by the wrath and the contrariness that is in us) are now in tribulation, uneasiness, and woe (as it falls to our blindness and frailty) yet are we sure and safe by the merciful protection of God so that we perish not. But we are not blissfully safe in possessing our endless joy until we are wholly in peace and in love — that is to say, fully gratified with God and with all His works and with all His judgements, and loving and peaceable with ourselves and with our fellow Christians and with all that God loves, as love pleases. And this God's goodness carries out in us." [Lesson. 49]

Perhaps, in ending this section, Julian wouldn't mind if I quoted John of the Cross in his deep love for the Incarnate word. John of the Cross, refers us always to love and meditation on the suffering humanity of our Lord:

"If you desire me to answer with a word of comfort, behold my Son subject to me and to others out of love from me, and afflicted, and you will see how much he answers you. If you desire me to declare some secret truths or events to you, fix you eyes only on him and you will discern hidden in him the most secret mysteries, and wisdom, and wonders of God...And if you should seek other divine or corporeal visions and revelations, behold him, become human, and you will find more than you imagine...In Christ all the fullness of the divinity dwells bodily." [Ascent. II.22.7]

V. CONCLUSION: SEE, I AM GOD!

By way of conclusion, I would like to leave you with one final word which really was God's word to Julian. It comes from the Third Showing, where Julian has just seen God 'in a point,' God in all that is and doing all that is done, and wonderfully pleased and blissful about everything. God says,

'See, I am God. See, I am in everything. See, I do everything. See, I never lift my hands from my works, nor ever shall, without end. See, I lead everything to the end I ordained for it from without beginning by the same Power, Wisdom, and Love with which I made it. How would anything be amiss?' "Thus powerfully, wisely, and lovingly was the soul tested in this vision. Then I saw truthfully that it was appropriate that I needs must assent with great reverence, rejoicing in God." [Lesson. 11]

The whole of the *Revelations*, is the story of Julian being powerfully, wisely, and lovingly tested by God. She is shown the life of heaven, and God invites her to join in, even while she remains in this life.

As we live into the spirit of Julian and follow her teaching, I believe we discover that this is our journey too and our testing. God, through Julian tests and probes at our soul by showing us the all-encompassing, beatifying joy that God is, and inviting us into it. Will we dance with God or will we prefer to stand out and curse the darkness? Tested in this way, we walk daily in practicing surrender and presence and depth. As we walk, our right foot is true contemplative practice with its disciplined silence, stillness, and bareness. Our left foot is meditative union with Jesus in his humanity. Placing our weight now on contemplation, now on the Jesus in his suffering humanity, we progress further and further into the mystery of gladness that God is.

If there was one thing I would wish for our Church it would be a renewal of authentic, solid contemplative practice (not just contemplative wistfulness!) and a return to the devotions around the suffering humanity of Christ. Joining in such devotions in a public and corporate way is a profound means to the healing of our individual wrath and communal conflicts. As the most affluent country the world has ever known and in an age of technological perfectionism, it is perhaps understandable that we would not have much interest in the suffering humanity of Christ, or even much toleration for contemplative stillness. Yet perhaps we can ask God to inspire the Church a renewal of real contemplative seriousness and, secondly, a desire to make Jesus, even in his suffering, the center of our imaginations, our Church life together and our world.

May we as a Church rediscover our identity, gathered about the foot of the Cross. May we learn again the rigorous mental, emotional, and social disciplines of the contemplative way. May we be consumed in the love that has claimed us and everyone and everything for itself in a timelessness of presence, communion, and loving peace.