

## 6. Julian of Norwich

During an illness thought to be fatal, on May 13, 1373, Julian of Norwich, a thirty-year-old "holy woman" (sancta, as such women were called), received sixteen revelations, which she called "showings," centered on Christ crucified. In her youth, she had prayed for "bodily sickness," a deep appreciation of Christ's passion, for the "wounds" of "true contrition and of loving compassion," and of "longing for God." This mysterious woman exemplifies the new and complex relationship between illness, suffering, visions, and mystical states that emerged in her times.

**I. Introduction to Julian of Norwich:** "For we do not fall in the sight of God, and we do not stand in our own sight". Julian of Norwich in Harvey D. Egan, *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 194.

Brief biography: Neither the birthplace nor even her name is known. Because she came to live as an anchoress in a "cell" adjoining the parish church of St. Julian in Norwich, the name "Julian" was probably adopted. It is logical to assume that at least the long text was written while enclosed. She was highly educated and Norwich was known for its splendid libraries. Her text evinces a solid knowledge of the classical spiritual writers, the Latin Vulgate, and a mastery of the rhetorical arts. Julian has been compared with Chaucer and called the first woman of letters in the English language.

**II. Showings:** Julian of Norwich's mystical classic, *Showings*. She received sixteen "showings" (revelations) during a severe illness. These revelations centered on Christ crucified. As a youth, she prayed for "bodily sickness," in order to receive a deep appreciation of Christ's passion, and to increase her "longing for God." In her times, a complex relationship between illness, visions, suffering, and such was developing theologically, due in part to the disasters of late 14th century England. She is the "exemplar par excellence" of this mystical, theological trend; yet reference to these events are absent from her work.

The vision: "Suddenly I saw the red blood running down from under the crown, hot and fresh, plenteous and life-like, just as it was in the time that the garland of thorns was pressed down on [Christ's] precious head." - *The Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich* chap. 4, 51. The Trinity also appeared in all her revelations. Revelations and insights given bodily, through spiritual means, and through words formed in her understanding. The visionary and highly detailed character of her mysticism makes her unique among the English mystics. Christ revealed his passion in five ways. Her emphasis upon the joyful aspects of

Christ's sufferings distinguishes her from the more "doloristic" mystics. Christ's humanity was revealed to her as consisting of three heavens. All revelations ceased after this approximately twelve-hour period. The Lord assures her that what she had seen was "no hallucination" and that nothing could overcome her. Commanded by the Lord to write, this mystic penned one of the few first-hand accounts of someone at death's door, a work known as *The Short Text*. Desiring to comprehend better what had been revealed, she prayed over and contemplated her revelations for almost twenty years to obtain deeper "spiritual understanding." The result is *The Long Text*.

**III. Julian's Mysticism:** Julian experienced all her showings as signs of God's "familiar," and intensely personal love. Her vision of something "no bigger than a hazelnut" in the palm of her hand.

The salient feature of Julian's mysticism stresses Jesus' blood as a way to attain union with the triune God. Blood as redemptive presence. His blood even descended into hell to break its power. Her blood mysticism is also a form of Sacred Heart mysticism. Julian's visionary mysticism grappled with the Pauline mystery: where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more (Romans 5:20).

Theological dilemma: Love/wrath. Adam's sin caused the "greatest harm" ever done. We participate in his vile sin. Sin causes both our wrath and anger toward self, others, and even God, yet, it is something "necessary." Paradoxically, she emphatically taught that she "saw no wrath in God because a Trinity of love cannot be wrathful. Therefore, wrath is the obdurate person's experience of love filtered  
Courtois, 17th c.

The Trinity revealed God's complete victory over sin in the crucified and risen Christ. Her famous statement: "All manner of things shall be well." Julian asked for a revelation of purgatory, of the damned, and of hell. God called her attempt to contemplate the damned "folly," instructed her to "look away," and to pay close attention to Him, her savior and salvation. He was all she needed to know. The paradox of redemption intensified in her revelations because it was revealed to her that sin was not only "no shame" but also that it would be an "honor to man."

Julian's emphasis upon the Trinity's love and mercy, and wrath as the human perversity and opposition to love and peace. She even dared to write that God cannot forgive because it is impossible for love to become angry. Her confusion intensified because she knew Church teaching.

The solution revealed in her classic vision of the "lord and servant." 1. Twenty years of paying attention to every detail of her revelations. The Lord God "looks on his servant [Adam/Christ] very lovingly and sweetly and mildly." The worst part of the fall of Adam/Christ was his inability to turn his face to see the Lord's gaze of love.

Julian replies to her critics: God as Love looks upon Adam and the entire human race as "one man" (Jesus) because "in the sight of God everyman is one man, and one man is everyman." Because of Adam's "happy fault," we were given such a marvelous redeemer that Julian chose Jesus as her "heaven." Apocatastasis (Greek) The belief that everyone will be saved. Origen, Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Julian's Trinitarian emphasis: Trinity as Father, Wisdom, Mother. "It follows that as verily as God is our Father, so verily is God our Mother." Christ is also our mother from whom we have our "sensuality." One dimension of Julian's Sacred Heart mysticism brings out the motherhood of Christ. It is our precious mother Jesus who will sprinkle us all "with His precious blood." What is God's and life's meaning? Love.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. As mentioned, Julian does not directly reference the tragedies of the late 14th century. Nonetheless, do you think that events such as the black death and various wars impacted her emphasis on sickness and suffering?
2. Do you agree with Julian of Norwich that the Triune God is in no way wrathful? Why or why not?
3. Do you find Julian's focus on the blood of Christ helpful or strange/foreign?