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An Explorer's Guide to



# JULIAN OF NORWICH

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## Why Julian Now?

**What is it about Julian** that speaks to us today? Why are her fourteenth-century *Revelations of Divine Love* so relevant to us in the twenty-first century? What is Julian telling us that we desperately need to hear in our violent, suffering world? During our exploration of Julian's *Revelations*, I expect we will discover answers to these questions. But first, let me tell you how I heard about this extraordinary woman and how she became a major source of inspiration for me. I sincerely hope that through this book she will become an inspiration for you as well.

Julian has been a presence in my life since high school. I attended a private academy in New York City where I learned to think long and hard about everything and to be unafraid of asking tough questions. My favorite theology teacher used to quote Julian to me whenever I was in crisis: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." Considering that from the time I was nine years old I was a professional actress on Broadway and television, and taking into account that all through high school I was trying to juggle adolescence with acting and academics, you can imagine that I was in crisis a lot! I drew great comfort from Julian's words; yet all that time, I never really knew who Julian was.

Jump cut to the late 1970s. As a young wife and mother, I finally read Julian's *Revelations* and was overwhelmed by her passionate questioning (just like my own), her luminous faith, her buoyant hope, and her large-heartedness. Julian struck me as an immensely courageous woman. Most of all, in every one of Julian's sixteen revelations of Christ on the cross, I heard, for the first time, the gospel in a woman's voice and from a woman's point of view. That was life-changing. I read Julian's Short and Long Texts over and over again, for decades. My children remember seeing the *Revelations* next to the Bible on my reading table the whole time they were growing up. It was the sound of Julian's voice, speaking to me directly off the page, that strengthened and guided me through some very difficult times. Here was a theologian, and (as I became convinced through my research) a wife and mother, who dared to write about God in maternal terms from her own deep experience of being a mother. Julian became my spiritual mentor and my friend.

For years, I taught Julian's *Revelations* in courses on the history of Christian mysticism. Students, both male and female, were deeply struck by Julian's brilliance of mind and warmth of heart, responding very personally to her profound understanding of why and how "all shall be well." I've also led retreats with Julian for groups of all ages and religious affiliations. I've found that both students and retreatants want to know more about Julian's medieval world and what kind of life she might have lived, and to be guided into her sometimes challenging text, precisely so they can relate the *Revelations* more directly to their own spiritual paths. It is this live audience that inspired me to write my first book on Julian: *Julian's Gospel: Illuminating the Life & Revelations of Julian of Norwich*.

While doing exhaustive historical research on every aspect of the fourteenth century that could possibly throw light on Julian's life, I continued to delve into Julian's text and subtext for hidden clues to

her mind, her heart, and her story. I wanted to bring this fascinating woman to life by reconstructing a personal history in a dramatic and poignant way that could resonate with modern readers. I also wished to provide contemporary men and women with the necessary theological explanations and spiritual context in order to experience Julian's text on a deeply personal level. After four years of research and writing, *Julian's Gospel* became the first book to combine an in-depth historical reconstruction of Julian's life in fourteenth century Norwich alongside a chapter-by-chapter exegesis of her *Revelations* (using my new translation of Julian's text from the Middle English). Now I offer you a concise but still comprehensive investigation of Julian's *Revelations* in this *Explorer's Guide*.

### Julian's "Three Gifts"

Let us begin where Julian begins. In a matter-of-fact tone, she tells us that she was nobody special, "a simple creature that could [read] no letter" (that is, she could not read *Latin*).<sup>1</sup> She writes that the revelations were shown to her in "the year of our Lord 1373, the eighth day of May."<sup>2</sup> However, before she relates her visionary experiences, Julian shares some personal background information with her readers. In the process, she reveals how devout—and daring!—she was as a young girl. She had "earlier desired three gifts of God. The first was the mind of his passion. The second was bodily sickness in youth at thirty years of age. The third was to have of God's gift three wounds": true contrition, natural compassion, and a longing for God.<sup>3</sup> In other words, she wanted to be spiritually wounded by a genuine sorrow for sin, a willingness to perform the

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<sup>1</sup>Georgia Ronan Crampton, ed., *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Georgia Ronan Crampton, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), Sloane Text, II:42.39. All translations of this Middle English text are my own.

<sup>2</sup>Crampton, *Shewings*, II:42-43.39.

<sup>3</sup>Crampton, *Shewings*, II:43-45.39.

corporal and spiritual works of mercy towards her fellow human beings, and an all-consuming desire to love God with all her heart, with all her soul, with all her mind, and with all her strength (Mk 12:30, Lk 10:27, Mt 22:37, Deut 6:5).

Julian explains that she already had some feeling for the passion of Christ, but she wanted to experience more, “by the grace of God.” She longed to be like Mary Magdalene and the other women whom she described as “Christ’s lovers,” standing at the foot of the cross, so that she “could have seen bodily the passion that our lord suffered for me, that I might have suffered with him as others did that loved him” (2:8-10.125-127).<sup>4</sup> This was the first gift she requested:

And therefore I desired *a bodily sight*, wherein I might have more knowing [greater understanding] of the bodily pains of our savior, and of the compassion of our lady [Christ’s mother] and of all his true lovers that were living at that time and saw his pains. For I would have been one of them and have suffered with them. (2:10-13.127, emphasis added)

Surely Julian did not make such a request because she thought she deserved a vision for being devout. She was quick to add that she never asked for another *shewing* (her word for a visionary experience) until she would see God at her death, for she believed firmly she would be saved by God’s mercy. She simply wanted to have a physical sight of Christ on the cross in order to share his sufferings more intimately and to love him more deeply. She was convinced that after such a bodily vision she would have a truer understanding of and sympathy for all that the Lord had endured for our sins. This was “the mind of the passion” Julian longed for: to undergo in some

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<sup>4</sup>See Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006). Except where footnoted, I will reference this critical text throughout *An Explorer’s Guide to Julian of Norwich* as the source of my own translations.

measure what Mary Magdalene and the other “true lovers” of Christ saw, heard, and felt at the crucifixion. In other words, like so many of us, she didn’t just want theoretical knowledge; she craved real *experience*.

In the Short Text, Julian called her mystical experiences *shewings*, an older English word that meant “manifestations.” These came to her as bodily sights of Christ on the cross; in locutions or words that she heard spoken directly by Christ; and in intellectual and spiritual understandings that continued to develop throughout the rest of her long life. Julian considered all her mystical experiences to be direct *shewings* from God.

The second gift presents more of a problem: Julian requested “a bodily sickness” from God. She didn’t desire merely a token illness, but one that would be “near death,” so that she would receive the last rites, fully expecting to die, surrounded by her loved ones also convinced she would die. She wanted all kinds of the pain, both physical and spiritual, that she and most Christians of her time were taught to expect at death; that is, terrors and temptations by devils and every other possible kind of agony “except the outpassing of the soul”; that is, except the actual separation of the soul from the body in death (2:24.127). Julian certainly had a vivid imagination! She longed to suffer through all this so that she might be “purged [of sin] by the mercy of God, and afterward live more to the worshippe of God because of that sickness, for I hoped that it might be a help to me when I should die” (2:25-27.127-129).

Julian insists that this idea came “freely, without any seeking” as a graced inspiration (2:17.127). Nevertheless, she must have been influenced by the ardent devotion to the *imitatio Christi* (imitation of

Christ) that pervaded religious literature throughout the medieval period. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs* encouraged his Cistercian monks to use their imaginations to recreate vivid scenes from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in order to increase their love of virtue, expel carnal vices, and combat temptations. St. Francis of Assisi (ca. 1181–1226) focused his own spirituality, and that of his friars, on the imitation of Christ's poverty, humility, love of the marginalized, and most especially on his sorrows and sufferings. St. Bonaventure (1221–1274), who became minister General of the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor, considered that meditating on the passion was essential for anyone who wished to burn with love for Christ.

In Julian's own fourteenth century, meditation manuals proliferated, not only for parish priests and cloistered nuns and monks, but also for the laity. They urged the faithful to enter deeply into the scenes of Christ's passion and death through imagination and recollection. Older Latin *Meditations on the Life of Christ* were translated into English so that they could be preached in vernacular sermons and used as private devotions. Richard Rolle (ca. 1290–1349), the English hermit of Hampole, wrote his own vernacular series of *Meditations on the Passion*, which depicted the sufferings of Christ in particularly gruesome detail. Perhaps the most revered religious manual of the time was *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, sections of which were translated into Middle English rhyming couplets in the early fourteenth century and eventually rendered in English prose around 1400 as *The Mirrour of the Blessed Lyfe of Jesu* by Nicholas Love. All these manuals were designed to arouse in the soul a deep repentance for sin, a profound identification with the sufferings of Christ on the cross, and a burning desire to devote one's life to God. In the fifteenth century, such meditation manuals culminated in *The Imitation of Christ*, a classic work of piety by Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471). As a result

of this practice of “affective devotion” every true Christian, like the early martyrs, was supposed to be ready to suffer anything and everything in imitation of Christ—even death.

At first, it might seem to us that Julian internalized this spiritual goal of martyrdom to an inordinate degree, perhaps dangerously so, in accordance with some of the extreme ascetical practices of the time. She might have been led to flagellate herself as did so many medieval mystics. She might have starved herself into a mystical experience, like the *anorexia mirabilis* (marvelous fasting) women who reportedly ate only the Eucharist for sustenance. (St. Catherine of Siena was one of these.) She might have pierced her head with a crown of thorns, driven nails into her flesh, deprived herself of sleep and food, or tried any number of other severe measures to bring on a deathly illness.

Thankfully, we have no evidence that Julian ever advocated or engaged in any extreme penitential practices whatsoever. On the contrary, Julian comes through her writings as the healthiest, most well-balanced woman imaginable. (Maybe that’s why she lived well into her seventies, surviving at least five cycles of the bubonic plague.) Julian strongly advocates “overpassing” the inevitable sufferings of this life, not indulging in or intensifying them. She counsels the utmost respect for the holiness of the human body. She teaches that there are many ways besides suffering for its own sake to be a true imitator of Christ. In fact, when writing the Long Text of her *Revelations* decades later, Julian admits that her desires for a bodily vision and a near-death experience were *conditional*. Perhaps, looking back, she realized that in her youth she had been somewhat presumptuous, even rash. (How many of us have asked God for a gift that was rash?)

These two desires of the passion and of the sickness that I desired of him were *with a condition*. For it seemed to me this was

not the common course of prayer. Therefore I said: “Lord, thou knowest what I would want. If it be thy will that I have it, grant it to me, And if it be not thy will, good lord, be not displeased, for I will not but as thou wilt.” (2:28-31.129, emphasis added)

Fortunately, Julian prayed in imitation of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Yet, not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42; Mt 26:39). That saved her from her own early tendency to ascetic extremes. Yet Julian adds explicitly that she had wanted to have this sickness when she was “thirty years old” (2:31.129). As we shall see, this youthful desire proved to be prophetic after all. By her own account, Julian experienced a near-death illness exactly at thirty and a half years old.

For the third gift, Julian was inspired by a sermon she heard about St. Cecilia who suffered three wounds to her neck and died a martyr in the second century. Julian conceived “a mighty desire” to have three *spiritual*, not physical, wounds:

For the third [gift], by the grace of God and the teaching of holy church, I conceived a mighty desire to receive three wounds in my life, that is to say, the wound of true contrition, the wound of natural compassion, and the wound of willful longing for God. (2:33-36.129)

Because these spiritual desires were in conformity with what she knew to be the right attitude of mind and heart, Julian asked confidently for these wounds “without any condition” (1:37.129). She was sure this third and last request would be perfectly pleasing to God.<sup>5</sup> And then Julian tells us something astounding: “The two desires [gifts] said before passed from my mind, and the third [for three wounds] dwelled continually” (2:37-38.129).

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<sup>5</sup>For further discussion of the religious context of Julian’s prayers, see Grace M. Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 53-70.

Julian admits that she forgot about the first two of her youthful desires. She allowed her longing for a vision of Christ's suffering on the cross to pass completely from her mind. She didn't remember her wish to suffer a near-death experience. She only recalled the desire for the three wounds of contrition, compassion, and longing for God. And these informed her whole life.<sup>6</sup>

### Julian's Near-Death Experience

Julian writes that at precisely thirty and a half years old, she was dying—not just pretending to die, but *really* dying.

And when I was thirty years old and a half, God sent me a bodily sickness in which I lay three days and three nights, and on the fourth night I took all my rites of holy church, and thought not to have lived until day. And after this I grew weaker for two days and two nights, and on the third night I often thought to have passed [died]; and so thought those who were with me. (3:1-5.129-131)

She had been suffering from an unknown illness for seven days and nights. According to the practices of medieval medicine, her urine and pulse would have been examined; she would have been bled by a doctor and given a strong mix of herbal remedies by the women attending to her. She would have also received the last rites (“Extreme Unction,” as it was then called) from a local priest, made her final confession, been given absolution, and received holy Eucharist.

Julian remembers that during this time she felt “a great loathsomeness to die [hatred of dying],” not because there was anything on earth she wanted to live for, nor because she feared the pains of death, but because she wished she could have lived longer “to have

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<sup>6</sup>For further analysis of Julian's “Three Gifts,” see Veronica Mary Rolf, *Julian's Gospel: Illuminating the Life & Revelations of Julian of Norwich* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 225-41.

loved God better and for a longer time, that I might, by the grace of that living, have more knowing and loving of God in the bliss of heaven” (3:5-10.131). She might have experienced St. Paul’s own inner conflict between the “desire . . . to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil 1:23), and the wish “to remain in the flesh” (Phil 1:24) in order to serve others. Julian considered what she had already suffered on earth to be miniscule compared to the endless joys of heaven. She even wondered, “Good lord, may my living no longer be to thy worshipp?” (3:11-12.131). Nevertheless, she was convinced she would die and she fully assented to God’s will.

Somehow, she hung on through that seventh night until daybreak. By this time, her breathing was labored, her heart rate accelerated, her pain excruciating, and she writes that “my body was dead from the middle downward” (3:14-15.131). The women around her bed moved Julian into an upright position, with pillows for support, to give “more freedom of my heart to be at God’s will, and think about God while my life would last” (3:16-17.131). Someone (perhaps her mother, who Julian tells us stayed at her bedside) sent for the local curate, or parish priest, to provide prayers and comfort at her passing. He came quickly with a child acolyte, who carried a standing altar cross with the figure of Christ on it. The little boy might have placed the portable crucifix on a trestle table or blanket chest at the foot of Julian’s bed because it would remain there for the duration of her revelations. The priest prayed over her and told her to set her eyes on the crucifix. Julian had a mind of her own. She writes that she could not speak and thought she was doing very well with her eyes fixed upwards toward heaven, where she trusted she would go. Nevertheless, in obedience (and no doubt with some difficulty), she managed to lower her gaze and fix her eyes on the face of the crucifix. “For it seemed to me I might endure longer by looking forward than upwards” (ii:27-28.67).

After this, Julian’s sight began to fail even as it grew ominously dark in the room all around her, as dark as if it had been the middle

of the night. Yet Julian remembers that around the crucifix there remained a natural light, adding that she never knew how. She felt the presence of fiends who might tempt her to sin even as the rest of her body began to die. Her hands fell down on either side of the bed, and her head grew so weak, it leaned over to one side. Her greatest pain was shortness of breath and the slow, steady draining of life from her body. She was certain she was at the point of death.

And in this moment, suddenly all my pain was taken away from me and I was completely whole, and especially in the upper part of my body, as ever I was before or after. I marveled at this change, for it seemed to me that it was a private *werking* of God, and not of nature. (ii:36-39.67)

In this sublime moment, she was completely cured of her deadly illness, as Christ cured the woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years (Mt 9:20-22; Mk 5:25-34; Lk 8:43-48). Julian knew this had not happened naturally, but only by God's private *werking*. She marveled at the change, but at the same time, she was still not convinced she would live, nor did she fully *want* to, for her heart was set on being delivered from this world of suffering.

Then she recalled the "second wound" she had asked for in her youth, that is, "the wound of natural compassion":

And suddenly it came into my mind that I should desire the second wound of our lord's gift and of his grace: that he would fill my body with mind and feeling of his blessed passion, as I had prayed before. For I would that his pains were my pains, with compassion and afterward longing for God. Thus I thought I might, with his grace, have his wounds that I had desired before. (iii:1-6.67)

Even though this "second wound" sounds remarkably like the first gift she had requested, namely, a bodily sight so that she might

experience “the mind of his passion,” Julian makes it very clear that, at that moment, she did not desire such a bodily sight or any other special *shewing* from God. She only wanted to feel the greatest possible compassion for Christ on the cross in front of her. “With him I desired to suffer, living in my mortal body, as God would give me grace” (iii:8-9.67). In this state of total surrender, suddenly Julian saw the figure of Christ come to life on the crucifix. So her revelations began, which we shall discuss in part two.

### Julian the Mystic

By now, you may be wondering: How can I wrap my postmodern mind around the revelations of a medieval mystic? Indeed, it may require quite a leap. But consider this: What if you could travel back to the fourteenth century, enter medieval Norwich, and become immersed in the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile experiences of Julian’s world? Imagine seeing what Julian saw, hearing what she heard, and feeling what she felt during her visions. How might her vivid experiences of Christ on the cross transform your life as they did Julian’s?

In the Long Text, Julian used a fairly new Middle English word for her mystical experiences that came into use in the 1380s: *revelations*. This word implied both visionary and prophetic pronouncements believed to be of divine origin. In Julian’s Long Text, *revelations* referred to her book, to the revelations taken as a whole, and to each of the sixteen individual revelations.<sup>7</sup>

We take such imaginative journeys all the time. Through films, plays, television series, and books, we break out of our self-enclosed

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<sup>7</sup>See Watson and Jenkins, *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, side note on 1:1.122.

world and enter different dimensions that suggest almost-unthinkable possibilities. We venture into the lives of people who at first may seem strange or positively alien to us, only to discover that once we grasp their motivations, feel their inner conflicts, and share some of their deepest longings, we are able to sympathize with them. We may even *identify* with them.

Likewise, if we are willing to use our creative imagination, we might be able to enter into the contemplative dialogue with Christ that Julian describes in her *Revelations*. However, just as world travelers who want to immerse themselves in a foreign culture must be wary of criticizing unfamiliar customs and practices, so we must be willing to suspend any disbelief or skepticism that we may have about “visionaries.” We must try to keep an open mind about what Julian believed she saw and heard. Indeed, Julian herself will guide us in this. Her disarming honesty and clarity in describing her experiences help make them believable and easier to accept. Layer by layer, she manages to break down our doubts by her directness and our incredulity by her faith.

Julian may be considered a *cataphatic* mystic, willing to engage both rational analysis and vivid imagination in her contemplative practice, as well as to express affective devotion in verbal prayer. Her mysticism is unlike that of the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the fourteenth century inheritor of the *apophatic* tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius (sixth century). The *Cloud* author insisted that the earnest meditator must abandon altogether the use of visual imagery and affective devotions in order to rid the mind of mental constructs about God or Jesus Christ. Only in the silence and darkness of *unknowing* could the meditator experience God. Julian, on the contrary, by drawing inspiration from what she saw, heard, felt, and understood through her revelations, bore witness to a highly visual and expressive form of contemplative prayer. For her, Christ was most certainly knowable through love-longing and intimate dialogue, even

given our flawed understanding. Julian was certain that Christ is present within the citadel of the soul and enfolds us in his love. However, in addition to her visual contemplations of Christ on the cross, Julian experienced peak moments of divine inspiration in which she saw and understood God in a more abstract knowing: as she writes, “in a point.” And oftentimes, like the desert fathers and mothers of ancient Egypt, she was blessed by the Holy Spirit with the gift of a pure “prayer of the heart”; that is, entering into a silent, mystical, loving union with God that is beyond thoughts, images, or words.

Let us trust Julian to reveal herself to us by attending carefully to her distinctive voice. Then, slowly but surely, we may experience some measure of what Julian herself experienced, understand what she understood, even envision in our own imaginations what Julian tells us she saw in her visions. This is the real goal of our *theological* journey. We may discover it has more to do with experiencing the presence of God (*theos*) than following strict rules of *logical* reasoning.

### **Julian the Seeker**

In the course of our exploration, we shall recognize that Julian is not only a gifted mystic; she is also an intellectual seeker after truth. During her visions, she dared to ask Christ on the cross the burning questions that had plagued her all her life. She even dared to argue with Christ during her visions. Can you imagine having a vision of Christ on the cross, asking him your most pressing questions, and then *arguing* with the answers? In fact, many of Julian’s questions are similar to those that we ourselves ask: *What is sin? What causes our sinfulness? How does God see us in our sinfulness? Is God really “wrathful” toward us when we sin? Do our sufferings have any use? How do mercy and grace work? How does Christ save us? How can “all things be well” if even one soul is damned? Is divine love really unconditional?* Questions like these are perennial and, during a spiritual crisis, they can become very, very personal. The strength

of our faith, hope, and even our love may hinge on the answers we choose to make our own. These questions must be asked anew by every generation in order to discover answers that satisfy, answers on which we choose to base our whole lives. Julian can help us toward finding our answers by revealing a theology of God's infinite love and mercy that, if taken to heart, can be life-transforming.

### **Julian the Theologian**

Julian has been called a “mystical theologian” because she received her extraordinary insights about God through direct spiritual revelation, not through systematic, rational investigation. However, throughout her life, Julian examined the import of everything she saw and heard during her visionary *shewings*. In the process, even though she had no opportunity for formal academic training as a scholastic theologian, like Peter Lombard (1100–1160), St. Albert the Great (1200–1280), or St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), she became a *rigorous* theologian. She is always intellectually demanding, but never pedantic or didactic. One can hear Julian's voice speaking directly to the reader as she thinks and argues “out loud” on parchment.

While Julian can be as rational in developing her arguments as any scholastic, she also trusts her intuition to lead her beyond what can be proven logically or fully understood. Sometimes she admits she is at a loss for words: “No tongue may tell, or heart fully think the pains that our saviour suffered for us” (20:5.191). At times, she may have felt like the apostle Paul, who dared not describe his own experience of being caught up into paradise where he “heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat” (2 Cor 12:4). At other times, Julian seems to circle round and round a theme in order to “chew” on it and savor its taste. This is her personal method of “going deeper.” Indeed, each time she returns to a favorite topic, she discovers new levels of meaning. She remains open to the Spirit's guidance, even when she does not comprehend it. Notably, she does

not seek to provide a systematic theology or a comprehensive guide to the spiritual life. That is not her intention. She simply wants to share the story of her grace-filled *shewings* of Christ on the cross and the understanding she received as to their meaning. Yet from her forty years of contemplation on the rich content of her revelations, she manages to shed new light on all the major teachings of Christianity. She stretches the boundaries of what informed faith implies, resurrection hope promises, and unconditional love demands.

There is no other theologian quite like Julian. While St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) recorded apocalyptic visions that tended toward an authoritarian view of divinity, Julian disclosed a very human and accessible Christ on the cross, full of unconditional love and tender mercy. While Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), in his intellectually challenging sermons, sought to deconstruct all assumptions concerning the qualities attributed to God, Julian affirmed that we may readily experience the goodness of God in every aspect of creation, even a tiny hazelnut. While theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas and masters of the spiritual life such as Walter Hilton (ca. 1340–1396), author of *The Scale of Perfection*, left us no writings about their own spiritual journeys, Julian revealed her most personal conflicts and failings as well as her deepest longings. Throughout Julian's work, we discover a daring—and yet most accessible—theologian who questions, searches, and struggles for answers. However, near the end of her *Revelations*, she was able to affirm unequivocally that God is life, love, and light. Through her own dark night of the soul, Julian became a mystical theologian of divine light.

Julian is also emotionally raw, often tempted by self-doubt and discouragement, yet constantly renewed in hope. She does something extremely dangerous for a layperson living in the fourteenth century: she discloses her conflict between the predominant medieval idea of a judgmental and wrathful God and her

direct experience of the unconditional love of Christ on the cross. Although she may not go into detail about her daily life, on every page of her text she entrusts us with her heart. Once you allow yourself to sink into the many layers of her writings, Julian will reveal more and more of herself to you.

### **Julian's *Evencristens***

As we read and ponder the *Revelations*, we sense that it is for *our* sake that Julian went to the great trouble of recording every detail of her highly sensuous visions. It is for *our* benefit that she struggled to find human words to convey sublime meaning. She wants us to see and hear Christ's outpouring of love on the cross just as she did. "For it is God's will that you take [the revelation] with as great joy and delight as if Jesus had shown it to you" (8:36-37.153). Julian also assures us that she is not "good" simply because she was privileged to receive extraordinary revelations but only if, because of those revelations, she comes to love God better. She is adamant that if we, her readers, love God better because of what she writes, then the revelations might apply more to us than to herself.

In her humility, Julian never addresses the noble and wise, but the *lewed*, the uneducated lay folk like herself: "You who are simple, for ease and comfort. For we are all one in love" (9:3.153). She speaks to her *evencristens* personally and directly. She writes especially to those who assume they are unworthy to receive God's special graces and insists that she is not any better than "the least soul who is in the state of grace" (9:5.153). In fact, Julian is absolutely sure that "there are many who never had a showing nor sight but of the common teaching of holy church who love God better than I" (9:5-7.153-55). In other words, Julian is saying that anyone who seeks to live according to the revelations of the gospels and the common teachings of Christianity has more than enough personal revelation to live a life of great love and service.

The very fact that Julian wrote down the account of her revelations (not once, but several times) is a major accomplishment. As mentioned, Julian was, by her own account, “unlettered,” which means she could not read or write Latin. She had almost no schooling. She could not study theology at Oxford or Cambridge because in her world women were not allowed to pursue higher education. She had to convey her mystical theology in Middle English, the language of common folk, not the language of the Catholic Church. She had to figure out how to create a language that would express her theological insights—and how to spell it. There was no such thing as an English dictionary. Yet in spite of her lack of formal education, books, or tutors, Julian writes with such consummate clarity, profound imagery, and rich vocabulary that she has been called “the first woman of English Letters.”<sup>8</sup> And, as we shall discuss in the next chapter, she did this despite ecclesiastical edicts issued against any nonordained layperson teaching or writing theology in the vernacular, under pain of excommunication or even death.

Precisely because she had the courage of her convictions, Julian of Norwich became the first woman ever to write a book in the English language, and the first woman to pen a spiritual autobiography in English. Even more, this “unlettered” woman developed a mystical theology that was second to none during the fourteenth century and that continues to break barriers in our own time. Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams attested that “in terms of what her theology makes possible for Christian perception . . . [Julian] deserves to stand with the greatest theological prophets of the Church’s history.”<sup>9</sup> Catholic theologian and religious historian Bernard McGinn asserts, “Few late medieval mystics have provided

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<sup>8</sup>John B. Bury, ed., *The Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 7:807.

<sup>9</sup>Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 143.

as much nourishment for contemporary theological reflection.”<sup>10</sup> And Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote of her:

Julian is without doubt one of the most wonderful of all Christian voices. She gets greater and greater in my eyes as I grow older and whereas in the old days I used to be crazy about St. John of the Cross, I would not exchange him now for Julian if you gave me the world and the Indies and all the Spanish mystics rolled up in one bundle. I think that Julian of Norwich is with [Cardinal John Henry] Newman the greatest English theologian. She is really that. For she reasons from her experience of the substantial center of the great Christian mystery of Redemption. She gives her experience and her deductions, clearly, separating the two. And the experience is of course nothing merely subjective. It is the objective mystery of Christ as apprehended by her, with the mind and formation of a fourteenth-century English woman.<sup>11</sup>

### **A Voice for Our Time**

Perhaps the best answer to the question “Why Julian now?” is that in our age of uncertainty, inconceivable suffering, and seemingly perpetual violence and war (not unlike fourteenth-century Europe), Julian shows us the way toward contemplative peace. In a time of rampant prejudice and religious persecution, Julian inspires us to non-judgmental acceptance and universal compassion. In a world of deadly diseases and ecological disasters, Julian teaches us how to endure pain in patience and trust that Christ is working to transform every cross into resurrected glory. In a generation of doubt, cynicism, and disbelief, Julian offers a radiant vision of faith and hope—

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<sup>10</sup>Bernard McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350–1550)* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2012), 412.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), 275.

not in ourselves, but in the Lord who created us, loves us, and will never, ever abandon us.

Moreover, across six centuries, Julian's voice speaks to us about love. She communicates *personally*, as if she were very much with us here and now. Even more than theological explanations, we all hunger for love. Our hearts yearn for someone we can trust absolutely—divine love that can never fail. Julian reveals this love because, like Mary Magdalene, she *experienced* it firsthand. Julian tells us about her mystical visions of Christ's love on the cross and how that love totally transformed her life. Unlike other medieval mystics (who may appear sometimes too extreme, too ascetic, or too intellectual for our postmodern taste), Julian comes across as a flesh and blood woman, thoroughly sympathetic to our human condition. And in heartfelt terms she expresses her profound awareness of God who became human like us, suffered, died, and was transformed into glory.

Why is Julian so appealing today? I think because she is totally vulnerable and transparently honest, without any guile. She is "homely"; in medieval terms, that means down-to-earth, familiar, and easily accessible. She is keenly aware of her spiritual brokenness and longs to be healed. So do we. She experiences great suffering of body, mind, and soul. So do we. She has moments of doubt. So do we. She seeks answers to age-old questions. So do we. Then, at a critical turning point in her revelations, she is overwhelmed by joy and "gramercy" (great thanks) for the graces she is receiving. We, too, are suddenly granted graces and filled to overflowing with gratitude. Sometimes, we even experience our own divine revelations.

Again and again, Julian reassures each one of us that we are loved by God, *unconditionally*. In her writings, we hear Christ telling us, just as he told Julian: "I love you and you love me, and our love shall never be separated in two" (58:13-14.307). Indeed, Julian's teachings have greatly endeared her to Christians and non-Christians alike.

Everyone can relate to her as a spiritual mentor because we sense that, even though she lived and wrote six hundred years ago, Julian the mystic, the seeker, and the theologian is very much “a woman for all seasons.” Julian’s voice of prophetic hope, speaking to us from the fourteenth century, is one that we in the twenty-first century desperately need to hear.

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