

Julian of Norwich: The Loving Motherhood of God

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One of my spiritual mentors is a woman who lived six hundred years ago: Julian of Norwich. I admire her for the clarity of her descriptions of spiritual experience, her balanced and orthodox presentation of God as mother, and the divine comfort of her vision of our sin and redemption.

Very little is known of Julian of Norwich's life. She lived in late fourteenth-century England. At the age of thirty, she fell seriously ill. As she lay dying in the presence of her mother and the priest who had given her the last rites, she had a lengthy vision of Christ's suffering on the cross and his redeeming love. She recovered and became an anchoress, walled into a small apartment, with one window into a church and one window onto the world. This extreme enclosure, so foreign to modern sensibility, did not prevent her from having an active ministry. She is known to have provided spiritual advice to many over several decades and was still living in 1416.¹

Julian recorded her visions and her reflections on them in a book she called *Showings*, which survives in an early short version and a later, longer form.² Mystical experiences arouse deep emotions and are by their nature difficult to communicate; it is not surprising that many medieval spiritual writers' turgid prose and emphasis on extreme ascetic practices seem uncongenial to contemporary taste. Julian of Norwich's writing is different. Her experiences and reflections are clearly, almost unemotionally, described. While her vision begins with Jesus' bloody crucifixion, she did not remain weeping at the foot of the cross over Christ's pains and her own in the usual late medieval style, but found in the crucifixion a comforting vision of Christ's redeeming love. The complexity of Julian's thought cannot be encompassed in a short article; her language is simple, but her theology is not. However, three aspects of her writing in particular have been important to me as a Christian.

The most striking aspect of Julian's writing is her description of God as Mother: "As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother" (296). It is for this that Julian is best known in feminist circles, and justly so. She was by no means the first or the only spiritual writer of the Middle Ages to use feminine language for God. Medieval spiritual writers most often associated feminine imagery with the second person of the Trinity, identified with Holy Wisdom (Sophia), or specifically with the person of Jesus. Caroline Bynum's *Jesus as Mother* has described the widespread use of physically feminine, mothering images for Jesus in the Middle Ages, usually by male writers.³ Such images sound strange to contemporary ears, but might not have seemed as strange to Jesus himself, who compared himself to a mother hen longing to gather her chicks (Luke 13:34).

Julian is in this medieval tradition in that most of her feminine language for God is applied to the second person of the Trinity. She refers to Wisdom as our mother: "the high might of the Trinity is our Father, and the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother, and the great love of the Trinity is our Lord" (294). She also refers to the incarnate Jesus as our mother: "our saviour

is our true Mother, in whom we are endlessly born" (292), and comments that a "mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does . . . with the blessed sacrament" (298). Unlike other spiritual writers, however, Julian associated God's motherhood with all three persons of the Trinity:

"I understand three ways of contemplating motherhood in God. The first is the foundation of our nature's creation; the second is his taking of our nature, where the motherhood of grace begins; the third is the motherhood at work . . . and it is all one love." (297)

Julian's theologically precise and orthodox understanding of God's motherhood can inform our own spirituality. Though I have not quoted her many male images of God, as they are less unusual, Julian is inclusive in using both mother and father images for God. She retains the tradition of calling on God as our Father, which Jesus himself initiated, but without subordinating her Mother images to her Father images: "as truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother." Each member of the Trinity is described in both male and female language, and all such language is understood as metaphor for the Uncreated Eternal. Julian's fresh and balanced images assure us that seeking a feminine image of God within orthodox Christian theology is not a passing cultural fad.

A second aspect of Julian's work that is meaningful for me is the way she writes about sin. Our twenty-first-century culture is struggling hard to be inclusive, to remember that God hates nothing he has made, but we can become so fearful of being judgmental that we ignore the reality of sin and the need for repentance. Julian fully accepts her church's teaching about sin and the need to obey God's law, but the weeping penitential passion of most late medieval spiritual writers is absent from her work. Instead, she speaks of sin as an illness or a pain, as part of what we suffer. She advises that, when we fall into sin, we should not hide from God in shame, but run to God for comfort and healing as a child runs to his or her mother when hurt:

But often when our falling and our wretchedness are shown to us, we are so much afraid and so greatly ashamed of ourselves that we scarcely know where we can put ourselves. But then our courteous Mother does not wish us to flee away, for nothing would be less pleasing to him; but he then wants us to behave like a child. For when it is distressed and frightened, it

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runs quickly to its mother; and if it can do no more, it calls to the mother for help with all its might. So he wants us to act as a meek child, saying: My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my beloved Mother, have mercy on me. I have made myself filthy and unlike you, and I may not and cannot make it right except with your help and grace.

. . . And then he wants us to show a child's characteristics, which always naturally trusts in its mother's love in well-being and in woe. (301)

Julian returned again and again to the necessity for trust in God's mothering love.

Julian's trust included assurance that the sins and pains of the whole world will be redeemed, will be made right, by a most loving God, and this is the third aspect of her writing that teaches me. It is the most difficult thing Julian has to communicate, and she cannot explain it in detail because she was not told how it will happen, but, in her encounter with God, she is told again and again: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." Her confidence was not the cheap optimism of one too young or fortunate to have suffered. She had lived through the Black Death, which killed roughly one third of the population of Europe in the years 1348-1350 and returned periodically thereafter; she had endured a painful, nearly fatal illness; and the life of an anchoress was not easy.

Julian taught that all our pain must be seen in the perspective of the smallness of our world in comparison with the greatness of God's love. Very early in her vision, God . . .

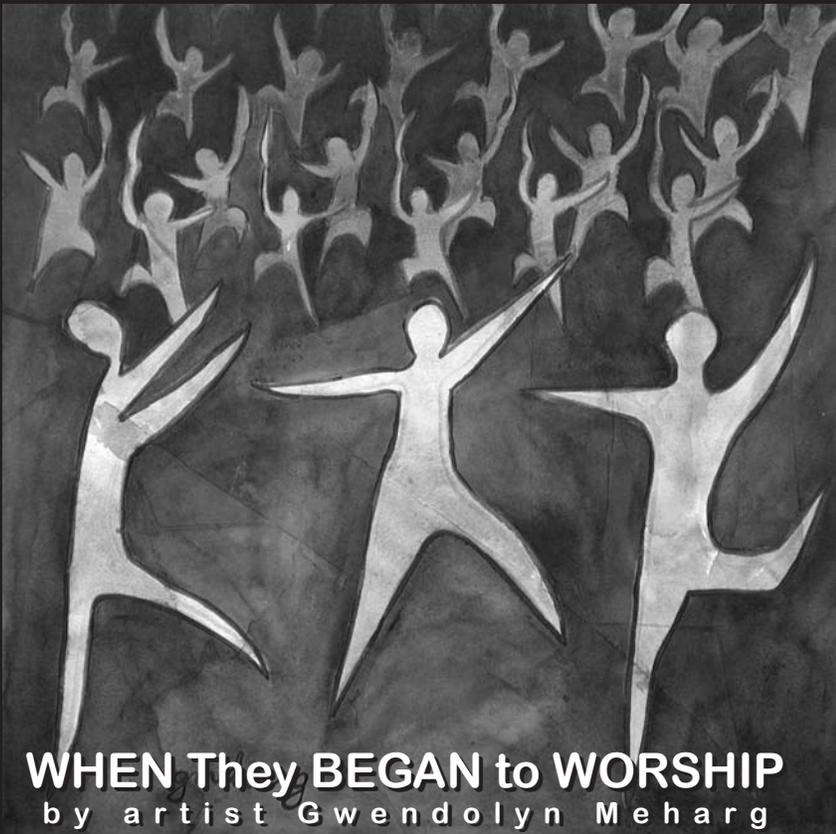
showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, and I perceived that it was as round as any ball. And I was given this general answer: It is everything which is made. I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that it was so little that it could suddenly fall into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has been through the love of God. (130)

God's love is stressed repeatedly throughout *Showings*, and, at its end, love is declared to be the whole meaning of her revelation. Julian's assurance and trust in God is founded on the experience of God's love: "for just as the blessed Trinity created everything from nothing, just so the same blessed Trinity will make well all things which are not well" (152).

Julian's teaching about the motherhood of God, about repentance without fear, and about trust in God's redeeming love make her a true spiritual mother of Christ's church.

Notes

1. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and James Walsch, S.J., "Introduction" to *Julian of Norwich, Showings* (New York, N.Y.: Paulist, 1978), 18-23.
2. Both versions are translated into modern English by Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and James Walsch, S.J., in *Julian of Norwich, Showings* (New York, N.Y.: Paulist, 1978). Most of the quotations throughout this paper are from the longer text, written after Julian had reflected more deeply on her spiritual experiences.
3. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1982.)



When They Began to Worship

This painting depicts the Israelites heading into battle in 2 Chronicles 20 **WHEN** the people began to worship

God set an ambush...

God had promised to deliver them, but **THEY** were required to **GET READY**, to prepare, and to **STEP FORWARD** into battle.

God **IS** our deliverance, but, still, we are to prepare.

ALL—including the women and children—**WERE CALLED** to seek the Lord for direction. **EVERYONE** on their faces seeking the Lord.

AND GOD DELIVERS US WHEN...

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