TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

The Relevance of Julian for Today

THE REVELATIONS OF DIVINE LOVE, or showings as Julian calls them, that she received on May 8th 1373 and meditated on for twenty years before writing the longer account, have been little known until the twentieth century. The rediscovery of Julian of Norwich, and the growth of interest in her in recent years, suggest that as a spiritual guide she has a particular relevance for our own times. There are a number of reasons why this might be so.

Julian lived at a time of political, religious and social upheaval (c. 1344–c. 1423), marked by the Hundred Year War, the Black Death, the Peasants' Revolt and the rise of the Lollards. The message of her revelations, with the repeated assertion that 'All shall be well' is not the expression of a facile optimism but rather of a Christian faith tested and matured through suffering. Her affirmation that God's love is the ground of all that exists is needed more than ever in a world where Christians might be tempted to despair because of the complexity of the problems facing them and the magnitude of the world's suffering.

Unlike the spiritual teaching of some contemplatives, the teaching of Julian can be appreciated by Christians from all walks of life, and assimilated into their spirituality. As an anchoress, Julian had a ministry of spiritual direction and counselling which would have brought her into contact with the lives of ordinary people. She is writing for 'such men and women as hate sin and dispose themselves to do God's will' (ch 73),[1] and she takes for granted a serious commitment to prayer on the part of her readers, but in the longer version she does not presuppose an eremitical or monastic lifestyle. Julian is also an important witness to the role of women in the past as spiritual directors and theological teachers, at a time when women are becoming increasingly involved in these ministries.

She is a model of honesty in her relationship with God. Her faith is shaped by searching and struggle. She is particularly troubled by the problem of sin. How can God permit it and, in the face of sin, how can all be well? Julian's courage in pursuing her questions, although at times she brands this as folly, is an encouragement to honesty on the part of her readers. As Julia Gatta points out,[2] Julian's intense exchanges with the Lord are a model not only for dialectical prayer but also for direction

itself, as a relationship characterized by full and open expression of doubt and dilemma.

Another way in which Julian is helpful to twentieth-century Christians is in her Pauline awareness of the solidarity that binds us together in Christ. 'For all mankind which will be saved by the sweet Incarnation and the Passion of Christ, all is Christ's humanity, for he is the head and we are the members' (ch 51). This saving solidarity in Christ is emphasized in the highly significant parable of the lord and the servant (ch 51). The consequence of this strong sense of solidarity is compassion. Julian stresses both the compassion of Christ for us, and also the compassion to which we are led as we contemplate the crucified Lord. Her own contemplation of the passion gave her compassion for all her fellow Christians (Short Text, ch xiii). She also recognized that 'every natural compassion which one has for one's fellow Christians is Christ in us' (ch 28).

Therefore, although she lived as an anchoress and wrote of the Christian's personal relationship with Christ, she does not advocate a purely individualistic piety. The corporate life of the Christian in the Church with participation in the sacraments is an integral part of her vision. The wide scope of her vision provides a theological basis for the service of others and for action for social justice. Julian has a thoroughly incarnational piety, with a refreshingly earthy and practical approach to life. She provides a healthy antidote to those movements in Christian spirituality which tend to create a dichotomy between soul and body, and to devalue the body. The Lord in his incarnation enters totally into our human life. Julian frequently describes Jesus as familiar and close to us, portraying him in a number of homely images, such as clothing, where he 'wraps us and enfolds us for love' (ch 5) or as a 'kind nurse, who has nothing else to do but attend to the safety of her child' (ch 61). Even the most basic of bodily needs are part of God's providence; 'he comes down to us in our humblest needs for he does not disdain what he has made, nor does he disdain to serve us in the simplest natural functions of the body' (ch 6). In a western world which has a tendency to be schizoid, out of touch with the body, Julian's spirituality is a reminder of the total identification of God with us in the incarnation, and of his nearness, tenderness and familiarity.

Finally, the richness and profundity of Julian's theology, and the integration and wholeness she achieved in her own life and understanding between, for example, thinking and feeling, body and soul, personal experience and the teaching of the Church, originality and orthodoxy, theology, spirituality and psychology, masculine and feminine language about God, the human and the divine—all this makes her a helpful guide to those who are struggling with issues of integration and wholeness.

Julian's qualities as spiritual director

Julian's reputation, skill and sensitivity as a spiritual director are attested by her contemporary Margery Kempe.[3] Julian recognized the spiritual favours given to Margery as genuine, and the exterior manifestations of Margery's piety, such as her violent fits of weeping, did not pose the same problem to Julian that they might to some twentieth-century directors. Julian's experience of God and of herself gave her the capacity to discern God's action in herself and others. She has a profound self-knowledge. All that she says is rooted in her own experience, and she speaks with both humility and authority. She is also deeply rooted in the tradition of the Church. In spite of her claims that she is ignorant, she is clearly a cultured woman, familiar with the bible, with thomistic theology and with other spiritual writers.[3]

Like any good spiritual director she does not focus attention on herself or her own experience and revelations, but directs her readers to God. She advises them to 'disregard the wretch to whom it was shown, and that mightily, wisely and meekly you contemplate upon God'(ch 8). One of Julian's most striking qualities is her compassion, which is the fruit of her contemplation. 'What can make me love my fellow Christians more than to see in God that he loves all who will be saved?' (ch 37). Her self-knowledge enables her to enter sympathetically into the experience of others.

Julian's contemplation leads her to, or overflows into, a pastoral ministry. The whole of her experience and writing is permeated by the awareness of God's tender and merciful love, which she wants to communicate to others. This awareness, wholly without sentimentality, and rooted in a profound theology, is often communicated through familiar images.

Julian's writing is marked by her simplicity (though her thought is rich and complex), joy and familiarity with God. Her personality, as it emerges from her writing, is characterized by directness, honesty, practicality, insight, perceptiveness and warmth. Her message is shaped by her personality, which does not interpose itself between the message and the reader, but rather facilitates the communication of the message.

The fundamental attitude—trust

Julian constantly reminds her readers of the need for trust. During her second revelation, of the face of Christ during the Passion, she was taught to understand that the soul's constant search pleases God greatly. For it cannot do more than 'seek, suffer and trust' (ch 10). In the course of this revelation, Julian is given to understand that if a man or woman were at the bottom of the sea, 'if he could see God, as God is constantly with man, he would be safe in soul and body and come to no harm'.

The soul is called to surrender itself to God with complete confidence (ch 10).

Julian singles out two sins that the Lord showed her in particular, 'impatience or sloth' and 'doubtful fear' (ch 73). The reason why these sins oppress us is our 'ignorance of love'. Julian constantly recalls her readers to the reality, immensity and tenderness of God's love as the only context within which sin can be faced and understood. Without a sufficient awareness of God's love, the recognition of our sinfulness can lead to depression and fear. This may be taken for humility, but in fact it is a sin, since 'it is God's will that we have most faithfulness and delight in his love' (ch 12).

Awareness of God's love does not however allow us to indulge in sin or to minimize its reality and severity. 'For sin is so vile and as much to be hated that it can be compared with no pain which is not itself sin' (ch 40). The closer we come to God, the more acute our sense of sin, but that awareness should not lead us to despair, or to hate or despise ourselves, for 'no more than his love towards us is withdrawn because of our sin does he wish our love to be withdrawn from ourselves or our fellow Christians' (ch 40).

The fact that Julian speaks with such conviction of the need for trust indicates that she herself experienced this struggle. Her sane and balanced outlook enables her to encourage those who are disheartened or despairing. Our Lord does not want his servants to despair because they fall 'for our falling does not hinder him from loving us' (ch 39).

Julian is skilled in distinguishing between true and false guilt and fear. She takes affectivity seriously, but emphasises that feelings need to be interpreted correctly. Desolation, she points out, is not always caused by sin. It can be a means of purification (ch 15). We should not dwell on feelings of sadness, but 'preserve ourselves in the endless delight which is God' (ch 15). Consolation is a gift of God, but both sorrow and consolation are expressions of God's love, and both may be helpful at different times.

Julian sees the fruits of our awareness of sin as contrition, compassion and longing for God (ch 39). By these we are healed, and our sorrow and shame will be turned into honour and joy in heaven. We need to hold in our awareness both our sins and the harm they cause, and the everlasting love and mercy of God (ch 52). We are called to accept meekly the penance that God gives us, which, Julian hints, is likely to be more useful than penance we take upon ourselves (ch 77). Living with the awareness of our sinfulness could be seen as part of the penance God sends us. 'All your life', Julian tells her readers, 'is profitable penance' (ch 77). And we are called to rejoice that the Lord is the remedy and that he is with us 'protecting us and leading us into fulness of joy'

(ch 77). And so, 'by knowledge and by grace, we may see our sin, profitably without despair' (ch 78).

Julian frequently encourages her readers not only to trust, but also to rejoice and delight in God, as he rejoices and delights in us. The awareness of sin can itself be a cause for rejoicing. Human blindness and folly, and the temptation of the enemy, can lead to undue sadness and depression, but we are called rather to rejoice in the Lord and in what he is doing in us. Commenting on the words 'You will not be overcome', Julian says:

> God wants us to pay attention to these words, and always to be strong in faithful trust, for he loves and delights in us, and so he wishes us to love him and delight in him and trust greatly in him, and all will be well (ch 68).

Julian's sensitivity, skill and perceptiveness as a spiritual director are shown in her analysis and assessment of affective states. Her psychological insight is shaped and sharpened by her own experience and by the Christian tradition and especially by her experiential as well as theological knowledge of the love of God.

The motherhood of God

Julian is not the first English writer to deal with this theme; it is already found in St Anselm and the Ancrene Riwle, a thirteenth-century rule of life for anchoresses, but she is original in the way in which she uses and develops it. As is often the case with Julian, a theological insight is used to serve a pastoral purpose. For Julian as spiritual director, the practical consequences of belief in the motherhood of God are hope, trust and confidence. Her use of this image is another example of her wholeness of vision and the richness of her theology. To have the motherhood of God explored in depth by a fourteenth-century woman writer is a reminder of the biblical and patristic sources of this image, and an encouragement to those Christians today who are seeking more balanced and comprehensive ways of imaging God.

For Julian, God is our mother as truly as he is our father. Jesus is doubly our mother, in nature by our creation and in grace by his incarnation (ch 58). All the qualities of true motherhood are to be found in Jesus. 'The word "mother" cannot truly be said', Julian claims, 'of anyone or to anyone except of him who is the true mother of life and of all things' (ch 60). All the attributes and services of motherhood are attributed by Julian to the second person of the Trinity. The motherhood of God can be contemplated in creation, in the incarnation and in the 'motherhood at work' (ch 59). Jesus by his incarnation proposed himself 'to do the service and the office of another in everything' (ch 60).

He brings us to life, feeds us with the sacraments, leads us into his breast to show us the joys of heaven (ch 60), and continues to bring us to birth spiritually, protecting and comforting us and raising us up when we fall. Although a mother may allow her child to fall and be distressed for its own good, Jesus will never allow his children to perish. When we become so aware of our falling and wretchedness that we are afraid and ashamed, 'our courteous Mother does not wish us to flee away' (ch 61), but to return and ask for mercy. Jesus may act like a wise mother in allowing us to mourn until the right time has come. He wants us to show the child's characteristic of trust in its mother's love (ch 61), relying on the mother's love and not on itself (ch 63). And so Julian can say, 'I understood no greater stature in this life than childhood' (ch 63). Julian's use of the image of motherhood allows her to explore in depth the dealings of the Lord with his followers. The attitude of the child is the fullest expression of the trust and confidence that is integral to Julian's spiritual message.

Prayer

Julian is more concerned with proclaiming the good news of God's love to her fellow Christians than with describing her own personal union with God or how she attained it.[4] Clearly Julian attained a high degree of union with God, but her aim in her *Revelations* is more pastoral than autobiographical.

Julian's teaching on prayer stresses the attitude of confident trust that she believes should characterize the Christian life in general. The two conditions which our Lord wills for our prayer are 'rightful prayer' and 'confident trust' (ch 41). Rightful prayer is explained in the shorter text thus: 'they will not pray for anything at all but for the thing which is God's will and glory' (Short Text, ch xix). We may not be sure that God hears us, because of our unworthiness and our feeling of barrenness and aridity, but in fact our prayer is assured of being heard. Our Lord says, 'I am the ground of your beseeching . . . It is my will that you should have it, and then I make you to wish it, and then I make you to beseech it' (ch 41). Beseeching is 'a true and gracious, enduring will of the soul, united and joined to the Lord's will by the sweet, secret operation of the Holy Spirit' (ch 41). Our Lord encourages us to pray wholeheartedly, even though we experience nothing and feel unable to pray, for our prayer in dryness, barrenness, sickness or weakness is especially pleasing to him. The soul needs particularly to pray when she is tempted and troubled, to make herself supple and obedient to God (ch 43).

Julian again stresses the element of joy, on the part of the Lord and of the one who prays. 'Our Lord is most glad and joyful because of our prayer, and he expects it, and he wants to have it' (ch 41), for through

grace prayer makes us like him. Julian emphasizes three facts about prayer that our Lord wants us to know (ch 42). He is the ground of our prayer, because it is his will that we should pray. Secondly, 'our will should be turned, rejoicing, into the will of the Lord', and thirdly, 'we should know the fruit of our prayer, which is to be united and like to the Lord in all things'. Our prayer and our trust should be equally generous. As Julian says of trust in general, our failure to trust in prayer is due to ignorance. We fail to realize that our Lord is the ground from which our prayer springs, and we do not understand that prayer is a gift given to us by grace and out of love (ch 42).

We need to pray for the 'deed that is now being done' (ch 41), that is, that the Lord may rule us and guide us to glory in this life, and bring us to his bliss. We need both to see that he is doing this, and to pray for it.

Julian provides a definition of prayer in chapter 42 which has an eschatological thrust. 'For prayer is a right understanding of that fulness of joy which is to come, with true longing and trust'. Prayer, she continues, unites the soul to God and is a witness that the soul wills as God wills. The reason why we pray 'is to be united into the vision and contemplation of him to whom we pray' (ch 43). Personal contemplative prayer, in which we are transformed by the action of the Holy Spirit, takes place in the context of the Church and the celebration of the sacraments. Colledge and Walsh point out that when Julian emphasizes the place of thanksgiving in prayer (ch 41), this refers not only to private prayer but to the eucharistic liturgy and the divine office, and they suggest that what is special in Julian is the degree to which she sees petition and thanksgiving integrated as part of a single contemplative process.[5]

There is a balance and wholeness about Julian's teaching on prayer, which takes into account the personal and corporate dimensions of prayer, and also the relationship between the transforming action of God and the response of the one who prays, which is itself the fruit of grace.

Conclusion

Julian of Norwich fulfils the definition of a theologian given by Evagrius of Pontus: 'one whose prayer is true'. Her meditation on the passion does not focus only or primarily on the physical sufferings of Christ, as so much contemporary piety did, but opens out to include the doctrines of the Trinity, incarnation and resurrection, sin and redemption, the Church, the sacraments and our Lady, as well as prayer and spirituality. Her theology grows out of her prayer, and because Julian prays always as a member of the Church, her theology and spirituality represent a balance between experience and the tradition. Balance, which is no doubt partly a question of temperament as well as of theology, makes Julian particularly helpful as a spiritual guide at a time when tendencies towards

polarization are making themselves felt within the Church. Above all, her insistence on the love of God recalls us to the essence of the gospel message and proclaims the good news to us in a way that is needed more than ever today.

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NOTES

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, chapter references are to Julian of Norwich, *Showings,* Long Text, translated and edited by Edmund Colledge OSA and James Walsh SJ, (Paulist Press, New York 1978).

[2] Julia Gatta, *A pastoral art, spiritual guidance in the English mystics*, (Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1987), p 50.

[3] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* ed Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, (EETS, Oxford 1940), pp 42-43.

[4] E. I. Watkin, *Poets and mystics*, (Sheed and Ward, London and New York, 1953), p 80.

[5] *Showings*, Introduction, p 60.