

# Celebrating Women Witnesses

## A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

### Julian's Fourteenth Century Context

On an evening in May 1373, a young woman lay on what she believed would be her deathbed, attended by a curate who held a crucifix before her eyes. Suddenly she experienced a vision of the dying Christ:

*I saw the red blood trickling down from under the crown, all hot, flowing freely and copiously, a living stream, just as . . . when the crown of thorns was thrust down upon his blessed head . . . I accepted it that at that time our Lord Jesus wanted, out of his courteous love, to show me comfort before my temptations began; for it seemed to me that I might well be tempted by devils, by God's permission and with his protection, before I died . . . I saw that this [vision] was strength enough for me, yes, and for all living creatures who will be protected from all the devils of hell and from all their spiritual enemies (ST 3).*

Julian, the woman in question, interpreted her experience as an answer to a prayer, uttered in her youth, for a bodily sickness, through which she might better understand the passion of Christ. Such a prayer finds little resonance with twentieth century folk, at least those of us privileged to live in the first world. We tend to interpret it as a morbid or pathological preoccupation with suffering. Suffering and death for us, all too often, are occurrences that ought not to be. However, in Medieval times, suffering and death were commonplace: diseases now curable claimed the lives of untold numbers, perpetual wars killed men in the prime of life, childbirth took the lives of young women, infant mortality was high.

Yet death visited the fourteenth century with an intensity scarcely imaginable, even to the Medieval mind. At the time of Julian's experience, she and her contemporaries had already lived through three episodes of the Black Death, which wiped out an estimated one-half of the population of Europe. In such a context the Christian symbols of the passion and death of Christ took on new meaning.

A second element in Julian's near-death experience is fear - fear of evil, of devils, of damnation. In Julian's day, the hour of death was regarded as a time when the powers of evil would

seek to snatch the soul from the welcoming arms of God and drag it into the fires of hell.

Damnation was a frequent topic of popular preaching, and a robust fear of it was considered a desirable emotion to instill in

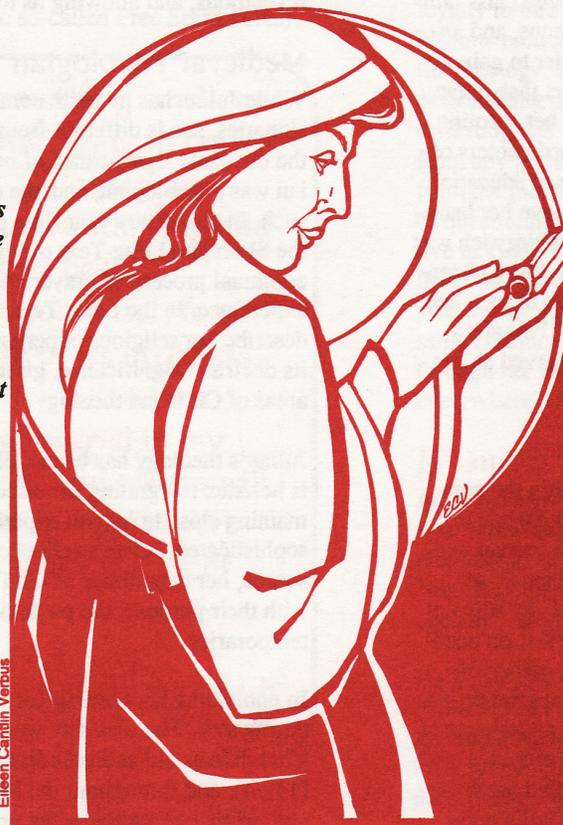
the hearts of the faithful. The fear of succumbing to temptation at the hour of death was counted among the agonies of dying.

Here, then, is a young woman grappling first hand with both the physical agony of dying and the mental anguish of fear. Into the midst of this suffering comes the redemptive word of God. Julian was saved from her physical agony. More important was her profound realization of the intensity of God's love for her, which drove all fear of eternal damnation from her mind forever.

Julian's was a personal, concrete experience of the essence of the Christian mystery of salvation: that the event of Jesus Christ, culminating in his passion, death and resurrection, has conquered both sin and death, and that the power of God's grace abounds much more than the power of sin. She learned that a Christian who penetrates into the tremendous love of God for us and into the power of Christ's resurrected life cannot live in an attitude of scrupulous anxiety about sin or debilitating fear of eternal damnation, but rather in an attitude of awestruck joy over the loving God who only longs to save. This is the message of Julian's revelations. Into the atmosphere of sin, suffering and death of the late Middle Ages comes the reassuring word that God has compassion on that suffering, that indeed God has shared it all with the human race.

## JULIAN OF NORWICH

### Medieval Theologian



### Medieval Woman

We know little about Julian's life. Born in 1342, she lived until at least 1416. She recorded her vision of the Crucified, accompanied by sixteen revelations of the love of God, in what is now called the Short Text (ST) of *Showings*. About twenty years later she published an expanded version of the same experience in the Long Text (LT). At some point she was enclosed as an anchoress at St. Julian's Church in Norwich. This means that she lived in solitude dedicated to a life of prayer and contem-

plation, but available to townspeople, who would consult her for spiritual advice. The rest of what we can gather about Julian's life depends on conclusions drawn from her own comments, from the style and quality of her writing, and from the general situation of women in fourteenth century England.

The most stunning piece of evidence about Julian supplied by her text is that she was a scholar, firmly grounded in scripture and classical Christian theology, but also familiar with the writings of the spiritual authors of her day. She may have been a nun before her enclosure as an anchoress, since such a lifestyle would have provided her with the independence, leisure, and freedom to pursue a life of study. If this is true, Julian probably came from a wealthy upper or middle class family, since poor women were unable to become nuns, and anchoresses needed financial independence in order to gain ecclesial approval for enclosure. However, the fact that Julian may have been a nun does not by itself explain her learning. While early English convents had been renowned centers of learning, by the fourteenth century their quality of education had greatly declined. How, then, did Julian achieve her learning? Again, we must speculate. The cathedral at Norwich was attached to a Benedictine priory with one of the finest libraries in England, and all the major religious orders of men had houses in Norwich - with libraries and scholars. Perhaps a cleric or friar befriended the young Julian and served as her teacher and mentor.

### Medieval Mystic and Visionary

Julian was a mystic, a term best understood within the context of the Christian life of grace. Grace is the presence of God in our midst, affecting and transforming all human reality. So constant and pervasive is this divine influence, so united with human thoughts and actions, that it is usually not noticed as something out of the ordinary. However, on occasion, a particular experience may point to the presence of God with unusual clarity and force. Mystical experience is a particularly strong manifestation of this special experience of grace, involving an intense awareness of God's presence and accompanied by a knowledge and love of God that are recognized as extraordinary. This consciousness of God's presence allows the power of God's grace to work in the mystics to a great degree.

Julian also fits into the tradition of continental women visionaries who flourished during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Based upon what she tells us about them, Julian's visions were probably products of her imagination, resembling the images experienced in dreams, yet she certainly understood them as insights given to her by God.

Visions gave validity to women's religious autonomy and authority in a day when these were not respected. To speak in the name of Christ, who revealed religious truths to them, earned for many women an esteem that would have been

withheld had they spoken on their own authority. For the women themselves, visions encouraged growth in self-confidence and provided an acceptable vehicle for self-expression. In visionary experiences women's deep longings for authenticity encountered the divine, and found there the affirmation of such longings, allowing for a gradual growth in the confidence necessary for creative self-expression. Julian's experience seems to have had this effect upon her. While in the Short Text she denies that she ought to be considered a teacher, and points to Jesus as the true author of her text, she eliminates these passages from the Long Text. Instead, Julian herself is very much present there, confidently recounting how she came to a deeper understanding of her revelations, and allowing us to see a creative mind at work.

### Medieval Theologian

While Julian has much in common with other medieval visionaries, she is different from them in her desire to plumb the doctrinal significance of her experience. Put simply, Julian was a theologian, and she deserves to be recognized as such. In the twenty year time period between the writing of the Short and Long Text of Showings, Julian engaged in a continual process of prayer and study on the meaning of her experience. In the Long Text, she does far more than merely describe her religious experience; she attempts to explicate its doctrinal significance, giving expression to all the main areas of Christian theology.

Julian's theology has been called a theology of integration. It is holistic, integrating the affective with the rational, and remaining close to human experience. Although theologically sophisticated, Julian's reflections never lose touch with their source, her experience of God in the midst of suffering, and with their purpose, the pastoral comfort of her suffering contemporaries.

In publishing her theological reflections, Julian was taking a daring step. The idea that women ought not teach in the Church is as old as Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (14:34), and throughout the Middle Ages, concern about unauthorized preaching by lay people, especially women, motivated Church authorities to investigate such preachers and teachers for heresy. It is thus no surprise that Julian should remark in the Short Text: *God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher, for that is not and never was my intention; for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail.* Yet she knew that God had entrusted her with a revelation for the benefit of her fellow Christians, and so she continues, *But because I am a woman, ought I therefore to believe that I should not tell you of the goodness of God, when I saw at that same time that it is his will that it be known?* (ST 6) The disclaimer about being a teacher, however, is missing from the Long Text, seeming to imply a confidence to teach, in God's name, which Julian had appropriated to herself over a twenty-year time span.

## Julian and Medieval Heresy

Julian's courage in publishing her theology is enhanced when viewed against the background of the prosecution of Medieval heresy. In 1312 the Council of Vienne had issued a decree legitimating the investigation of the Beguines, claiming they dared to "discourse on the Trinity and the divine essence" and in doing so, spread opinions contrary to the faith. The Beguines were holy women experimenting with ways of living a common life centered on prayer, but bypassing many of the rules that governed religious orders of women, so as to be active in works of charity, particularly among the poor. Many of their adherents were mystics and visionaries who became renowned for their holiness and piety. However, they became associated with the so-called Free Spirit heresy,

[God] showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand . . . I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be?

I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.

Julian of Norwich  
Long Text

which supposedly taught that human beings could achieve such a state of perfection in this life as to be incapable of sin, thus having no need for the sacraments or the mediation of the Church. Julian would have known of the prosecution of the Free Spirit heresy that lasted throughout the fourteenth century, particularly in the Low Countries. Norwich was a city in constant communication with Flanders because of the wool trade, and there was a community of Flemish merchants living in Norwich.

Although Julian was not a Beguine, there are indications that she may have been afraid of being accused of heresy. One is struck by how often she protests her loyalty to official Church teaching, particularly when she is explaining her revelations regarding sin and salvation. Julian teaches that God does not look upon the sinner with wrath, but only with

love and compassion because of the suffering caused by sin; that sin can become cause for glory rather than damnation; that we ought not dwell overmuch upon past sins, becoming filled with anxiety, but instead give more attention to the love of God. Julian knew that such statements could be interpreted as disregard for one's sinfulness, in a way similar to the claims of the Free Spirits.

The significance of Julian's struggle to reconcile the truth of her experience with official Church teaching ought not to be lost on contemporary women. Julian provides a courageous example of one who, based upon her own experience of God, dared to question Church teaching, out of a spirit of love and loyalty to that Church, in a day when such questioning could be construed as heresy punishable by death. In articulating her theology, she appropriates Church tradition selectively, emphasizing those points of doctrine compatible with her own religious experience. Her courage to do this did not stem from any pretense of greater learning on her own part, but from the fact that she trusted absolutely, after a good amount of questioning and discernment, in her revelations as indicative of God's will for herself and the whole Church. She published her text as an effort to lead others, in a time preoccupied by the momentous questions of sin and salvation, to that same confidence in the love of God which she had learned through her revelations, a love which promises, always and everywhere, *all will be well*.

## Julian Today

Julian's *Showings* has become popular today because its message is perennially significant. This message is one of absolute trust in God's love, expressed beautifully in the famous "hazelnut" passage. Such trust in God is also greatly encouraged by Julian's picture of Jesus as mother:

*We know that all our mothers bear us for pain and for death . . . But our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for endless life . . . The mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does, most courteously and most tenderly, with the blessed sacrament . . . This fair lovely word "mother" is so sweet and so kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone or to anyone except of him and to him who is the true Mother of life and of all things (LT 60).*

Julian ends her *Showings* with the following passage. For her, the last word about God is love:

*I was taught that love is our Lord's meaning. And I saw very certainly . . . that before God made us he loved us, which love was never abated and never will be. And in this love he has done all his works, and in this love he has made all things profitable to us, and in this love our life is everlasting . . . In this love we have our beginning, and all this shall we see in God without end (LT 86).*



Eileen Cantin Verbus

### Julian of Norwich References:

Julian of Norwich. *Showings*. Edited by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. New York: Paulist, 1978.

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This brochure was prepared by Joan Nuth, a Professor of Theology at John Carroll University and the author of *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich*.

The feast day for Julian of Norwich is celebrated on May 8. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that day or at another appropriate time.

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FutureChurch  
17307 Madison Avenue  
Lakewood, OH 44107

[www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org)

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# A Prayer Service in Honor of Julian of Norwich

*This prayer service can be used at sunrise or vespers on Julian's memorial day (May 8, the day she received her revelations), or for any occasion.*

**Gathering Song:** For morning prayer: "Morning Has Broken" arranged by David Evans to a poem by Eleanor Farjeon. For vespers: "At Evening" by David Haas. For any occasion: "God Beyond All Names" by Bernadette Farrell. Or any appropriate hymn.

## Greeting

**Presider:** In the name of our God, Source of all being, Eternal Wisdom and Holy Spirit.

**All:** Amen.

**Presider:** May the grace and peace of Jesus, Wisdom Incarnate, be with all of you.

**All:** And also with you.

**Presider:** Let us greet one another in the peace of Christ. (*Exchange a sign of peace.*)

**Presider:** Let us pray. Sophia, Holy Wisdom, you can do all things. While remaining in yourself, you renew all things. In every generation you pass into holy souls, making them friends of God and prophets. We thank you for the gift of your friend and prophet Julian of Norwich. May her example of joy and trust in you be an inspiration for our own lives. Be in our hearts as we listen to her words and reflect on them in your presence.

**All:** Amen.

## Reflecting on Julian's Revelations

**Reader 1:** "Our good Lord showed a spiritual sight of his homely love. I saw that he is to us everything which is good and comforting for our help. He is our clothing, who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, surrounds us for his love, which is so tender that he may never desert us. And so in this sight I saw that he is everything which is good. . . For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the trunk, so are we, soul and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of God. Yes, and more closely, for all these vanish and waste away; the goodness of God is always complete, and closer to us, beyond any comparison." (Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, Long Text, ch. 5 & 6)

*Pause for silent reflection.*

**Psalm Response:** Psalm 16

**All:** **God is to us everything which is good and comforting for our help.**

**Group 1:** Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to you: "You are my God; I have no good apart from you." All my delight is in your saints; the faithful who dwell in your land.

**Group 2:** Those who choose other gods increase their sorrows; their offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips.

**Group 1:** You are my portion and my cup; you are my fortune, my prize.

The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have been given a welcome heritage.

**Group 2:** I will bless you who give me counsel; in the night my heart instructs me.

I keep you always before me; because you are near, I shall stand firm.

**Group 1:** Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; even my body rests securely.

For you do not give me up to death, or let your faithful see the grave.

**Group 2:** You will show me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy, in your hands, happiness forever.

**Group 1:** Glory to you, Source of all being, Eternal Wisdom, and Holy Spirit.

**Group 2:** As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

**All:** **God is to us everything which is good and comforting for our help.**

**Reader 2:** "We know that all our mothers bear us for pain and death. O, what is that? But our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for endless life, blessed may he be. So he carries us within him in love and travail, until the full time when he wanted to suffer the sharpest thorns and cruel pains that ever were or will be, and at the last he died. And when he had finished, and had borne us so for bliss, still all this could not satisfy his wonderful love. . . . The mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does, most courteously and most tenderly, with the blessed sacrament, which is the precious food of true life; and with all the sweet sacraments he sustains us most mercifully and graciously. . . . This fair lovely word "mother" is so sweet and so kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone or to anyone except of him and to him who is the true Mother of life and of all things." (*Showings*, Long Text, ch. 60)

*Pause for silent reflection.*

**Response:** Wisdom 6:12–16, 7:24–27

**All:** **Our true Mother Jesus bears us for joy and for endless life.**

**Group 1:** Wisdom is radiant and unfading, and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her.

**Group 2:** She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for she will be found sitting at the gate.

**Group 1:** To fix one's thought on her is perfect understanding, and one who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care,

**Group 2:** Because she goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought.

**Group 1:** For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; Because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.

**Group 2:** For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.

**Group 1:** For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of [God's] goodness.

**Group 2:** Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets.

**Group 1:** Glory to you, Source of all being, Eternal Wisdom, and Holy Spirit.

**Group 2:** As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

**All:** **Our true Mother Jesus bears us for joy and for endless life.**

**Reader 3:** "[God] showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God. . . . And so our good Lord answered to all the questions and doubts which I could raise, saying most comfortingly: I may make all things well, and I can make all things well, and I shall make all things well, and I will make all things well, and you will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well. . . . And in these five words God wishes us to be enclosed in rest and in peace." (*Showings*, Long Text, ch. 5 & 31)

*Pause for silent reflection*

**Psalm Response:** Psalm 23

**All:** **Everything has being through the love of God.**

**Group 1:** O God, you are my shepherd; I shall not want.

You make me to lie in green pastures.  
You lead me to restful waters, to restore my soul.

**Group 2:** You guide me in paths of righteousness for the sake of your name.  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your crook and your staff give me comfort.

**Group 1:** You prepare a table before me in the presence of my foes;  
you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.

**Group 2:** Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in your holy house forever and ever.

**Group 1:** Glory to you, Source of all being, Eternal Wisdom, and Holy Spirit.

**Group 2:** As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

**All:** **Everything has being through the love of God.**

**Reflection on Julian's words:** *Depending on the setting and circumstances, this would be the place for either a speaker to preach on the significance of Julian's revelations, or for shared reflection among the group.*

### Closing Ritual

**Presider:** Dear friends, I invite you now to voice your concerns to our faithful and gracious God.

*(Here is the place for spontaneous prayers or prayers could be prepared ahead reflecting the needs of the group.)*

**Response to each petition:** God, of your goodness, hear our prayer.

**Presider:** Please say with me Julian's prayer of absolute trust in God.

**All:** "God, of your goodness, give me yourself, for you are enough for me, and I can ask for nothing which is less which can pay you full worship. And if I ask anything which is less, always I am in want; but only in you do I have everything." (*Showings*, Long Text, ch. 5)

**Presider:** I invite you to come forward to receive a blessing and a gift which is a symbol of trust in God's providential care.

*(The presider anoints each one's forehead with oil, and hands each one a hazelnut. It might be appropriate to have these in small boxes wrapped as gifts, although this is not essential for the symbolism. As each person comes forward, the presider says these or other appropriate words: "Receive the blessing of God and remember that all will be well." After everyone has been blessed, all say together once again Julian's prayer of trust. "God, of your goodness, give me...")*

**Presider:** Let us go forth now in peace to bring the message of God's steadfast love to all we meet.

**All:** Thanks be to God.

**Closing Song:** *End with an appropriate song, such as "Holy Is Your Name" by David Haas.*

*Acknowledgments:* Citations from *Showings* are from the edition translated and edited by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist, 1978). Psalm 16 and 23 are from *People's Companion to the Breviary* published by The Carmelites of Indianapolis (1997 edition). The passage from *Wisdom* is from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Prayer service developed by Joan M. Nuth, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Theology at John Carroll University, Cleveland.

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*Julian of Norwich: Medieval Theologian*

1. Name the centuries in which Julian lived.
2. How old was she when she had a near death experience?
3. How old was she when she actually died?
4. Julian had a vision as she lay dying as a young woman. Give the following details of that experience:

Whom did Julian see in her vision?

What was happening in her vision?

5. What were two elements of the time period that influenced what Julian saw and how she interpreted it?
  - a.
  - b.
6. How was the medieval experience of death different from our culture's perspective on death and dying?

7. Julian continued to experience more revelations and visions after her recovery.

How many more revelations did she have?

What is another name for these visions?

How did these visions differ from the first one in 1373?

8. Julian became an " anchoress ." What does this term mean?

9. Julian was a scholar, firmly grounded in \_\_\_\_\_ and

\_\_\_\_\_.

10. Name some factors that may have influenced Julian to become so learned:
- a.
  - b.
  - c.
  - d.
11. According to the article, what is a mystical experience?
12. What was so significant about the visions that women of Julian's time had?
13. How did Julian differ from other medieval visionaries?
14. Why was it so risky for Julian to be known as "a teacher" or a "theologian?"
15. Read the passage about the hazelnut, found in the box. Then read the two passages at the end of the article (LT 60) and (LT 86). Explain what these passages have in common.
16. What do the writings and life story of Julian of Norwich have to say to Catholics today?



*This worksheet was prepared by Janet Claussen as a part of FutureChurch's **Celebrating Women Witnesses Teacher's Edition**. To order the complete edition with 12 essays, prayer services and worksheets, go to [www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org) or call 216-228-0869 X5.*