

"All Shall Be Well": Merton's Admiration for Julian of Norwich **Thomas del Prete**

This article was inspired by the birth of my daughter. We named her Juliana after the Lady Julian of Norwich, England, the fourteenth century solitary and Christian mystic (who lived in small "cell" or "anchorhold" adjoining the Church of St. Julian), the same Julian who inspired Thomas Merton through her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*. This seemed more than fitting; God's assurance to Julian that "all manner of things shall be well" seemed somehow confirmed by the mystery and wonder and vitality embodied in our own Juliana's birth.

Yet I also knew that the optimism which echoed in my own time from the depths of the inner experience of an extraordinary woman of the fourteenth century reached a world in which hope often hung by the thinnest of threads, and in which life - and even the life-sustaining capacity of the earth - was so often threatened and violated. Sadly, the life-affirming experience of my daughter's birth had its counterpoint in urban alleyways, in remote villages in El Salvador, in Sarejevo, in Somalia, in Cambodia, in South Africa, and elsewhere.

We can be sure that the tenuousness of life, no less than its tenacity, was apparent to the Lady Julian as well; she in fact grew up in the shadow of the medieval plague known grimly as the Black Death.¹ How then could the fourteenth century recluse of Norwich accept that "all manner of things shall be well," and in what sense might her twentieth century admirer and counterpart at Gethsemani Abbey, himself well aware of the various plagues which prey on humanity, understand and agree?

In order to respond to these questions, we need some understanding of Merton's admiration for Julian and the central Christian mystical insights which bridge the six hundred year distance between their lives. Interestingly enough, Merton first extols Julian through the very medium he used to launch his protest against the ways of power in the world. He declares in one of his "Cold War Letters" in 1961 that Julian "is a mighty theologian, in all her simplicity and love."² And, in another letter:

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 of the Spanish mystics rolled up in one bundle. I think that Julian of Norwich is with Newman the greatest English theologian.³

Merton extends this praise in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* when he writes that Julian is a "true theologian with greater clarity, depth, and order than St. Theresa."⁴

Even assuming a certain amount of momentary infatuation and enthusiasm, it is clear that Julian captured Merton's mind and heart, and for reasons that went well beyond the fact that they shared a vocation for the contemplative and solitary life. What appealed to Merton perhaps first of all, evident in his direct references to Julian, was a certain quality of authenticity and originality in her theology, a quality linked to its origin in both experience and reflection. Secondly, there are the theological themes which recur in *Revelations of Divine Love*, and which resonate to some extent with Merton's own insight and reflections, especially the themes of divine love and mercy. Not least of all, as Michael Mott has pointed out, Julian helped awaken in Merton a deep appreciation for the feminine in Christianity, an appreciation expressed most notably in his prose poem, *Hagia Sophia*. I will treat each of these areas in some depth in order to prepare for a final discussion of what Merton calls Julian's orientation to an "eschatological secret," her deeply Christian faith, trust, and hope that indeed, in spite of all signs to the contrary, "all manner of things shall be well."

You may recall that Julian's book, *The Revelations of Divine Love*, is an account and interpretation of actual "showings" or visions Julian received from God during a period of deathly illness when she was 30 years old. She had petitioned God for such an illness, believing that as a result she would live more fully and truly for God. During the course of her sickness she recalled her desire to identify compassionately with the Lord's passion, to suffer, as it were, with him, out of love. To her, living in the religious climate of the fourteenth century, this was a natural development for the soul longing spiritually for God. The visions that were granted her in response - some vivid portrayals of Christ's passion, others more in the order of awareness and insight - were unexpected, as were the nature and depth of divine love they revealed to her as she meditated on them over time, over, in fact, a period of at least twenty years. In Merton's words, "She first experienced, then thought, and the thoughtful deepening of experience worked it back into her life."⁵ Her book is her humble and faithful rendering of what she received and learned and came to live more and more deeply. It is offered as an unfinished work, to be continued according to God's love and will to be known and loved, an invitation, really, to our own meditation and contemplation.

Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* is then the fruit of prayer, of personal experience, of meditation, and of love. These are for Merton the roots of true theology. Merton says with Evagrius Ponticus (of the fourth century) that "[one] who really prays is a theologian and [one] who is a theologian really prays."⁶ Prayer in this context means both contemplation and experience of the deepest revealed mysteries. Julian herself says that "prayer makes the soul one with God."⁷ Julian's theology would not exist except for her prayer and steadfast meditation, and the faith and personal relationship to God which prayer implies.

Merton emphasises faith and personal relationship as essential ground for the work of the theologian. As he explains it, "Theology is the intelligence of God that is the fruit of loving, inquiring, investigation faith." It is also "grounded in a personal relationship of enlightened faith."⁸ The task of the theologian is not simply to talk "about" God or what others say about God, but to make clear and understandable what must first be believed (thus St. Anselm's declaration, *credo ut intelligam* - I believe in order to understand). Theological understanding emerges from and then supports what is most important: the effort to orient and open the whole self as fully as possible to God, to, then, the love and guidance of God who wills to be known by us in and for love. Though by her own account "a simple, uneducated creature," Julian was an unusually talented theologian in the sense which Merton values most. As he says, her work represents "an admirable synthesis of mystical experience and theological reflection." What distinguishes her even more is the "eloquent witness" to the teaching and tradition of the Catholic Church she bears in her "mystical commentary" on the basic doctrines of the Catholic faith.⁹

One of the doctrines which Julian illuminates in an original way is the Redemption. Merton points to Julian's unique emphasis on the redemptive love of God through which the redeemed sinner actually becomes God's merciful "gift" to the Son.¹⁰ We are, in fact, Christ's "bliss" and "crown".¹¹ Julian reveals a divine love and mercy so superabundant as to make Christ's suffering insignificant compared to his joy in preserving us in the love for which we were made. So Jesus tells Julian:

It is a joy, a bliss, an endless delight to me that I ever suffered the passion for you, and if I could suffer more I would.¹²

That we could possibly be worthy of such sacrifice cannot be a sign of anything but our true identity in Jesus in love. According to Julian, Jesus' spiritual thirst is to have us whole in him in love, and it cannot be satisfied until this wholeness is finally achieved.¹³ That God wills to ensure this for Jesus and for us is but an expression of the love of the Father for the Son in whom we are all united.¹⁴ Thus our redemption is God's "gift" to Jesus.

There are, then, at least two fundamental dimensions to Julian's vision of redemptive love: one is the relationship and love between the Father and the Son in the Trinity; the other is the nature of humanity's relationship in love to Jesus in which the love of the Trinity is somehow reflected. These aspects of Julian's portrayal of divine love suggest at least one of many possible points of connection between Merton and Julian, which can be illustrated with reference to Julian's vision of the lord and servant.

During her dialogue with God, Julian inquires how, on the one hand, the Church can hold us blameworthy for our sins and how remarkably, in God's eyes,

according to what is revealed to her, we ultimately have no blame. God answers with "a marvelous example of a lord and servant."¹⁵ The lord is God the Father, the servant is Jesus, and the Holy Spirit "is the equal love that is in both of them." Jesus is both the "Son" equal to the Father, and the servant who is the "rightful" Adam, which is to say all of humanity. Adam, even in sin, has always been united to Jesus, has always been regarded with the utmost love and compassion. The new Adam, of course, is humanity restored in and through Christ's death and resurrection. The key to Julian's interpretation, then, is not the question of blameworthiness for sin, but the realisation of our original and inviolable unity in love with the Son. It is the Trinitarian love and wisdom - which is steadfast and endless - that ultimately matters. While sin is a tragic and grievous source of pain and spiritual blindness, the Father can assign no more blame to us than to the Son, than to Christ himself.¹⁶

Julian's explanation of Jesus as both "Son" and "Adam" bears some comparison with Merton's own explanation of Jesus as the "second Adam" in one of his most theological works, *The New Man*. Drawing on the Apostle Paul and the Fathers of the Church, as Julian also did, Merton explains that it is Christ in whom Adam is created, restored, and sustained.¹⁷ Like Julian, Merton identifies our humanity with Adam in Christ as an eternal reality of God. While Merton does not address the question of sin in this particular context, nor the relationship of the Father to the Son as Julian does, he does stress the importance of our own effort to join in love with Christ to help effect the unity of all in His one body.¹⁸ On the question of sin, we might explore a possible parallel between Julian's explanation that our nature in God is our "substance" and that our remaining nature is our "sensuality," and Merton's distinction between our true, inmost self in God and our false (egocentric) self which is a source of sin and yet which is nonetheless "blessed by the mercy and the love of Christ."¹⁹ In fact, eventually for Merton, as for Julian, God understands the sinner mercifully, which means from the perspective of the inmost reality of the sinner, which is not at all sinfulness but sonship.²⁰

There are other interesting, if not striking similarities and parallels in Julian and Merton, even in the use of language. Where Merton, for example, speaks of "the hidden ground of love," or "hidden wholeness of love,"²¹ Julian talks of the "wholeness of endless love" and "our life entirely grounded and rooted in love."²² Julian informs us that "the ground of mercy is love, and the working of mercy is our preservation in love,"²³ while Merton explains that "mercy is ... life" and "the epiphany of ... God's redeeming Love" for us.²⁴ Where Julian says "All things have their being by the grace of God,"²⁵ Merton says "All being is from God."²⁶ Julian tells us that God "who made all things for love keeps them in the same love,"²⁷ Merton that "Everything that is, is holy," born out of God's "creative love,"²⁸ Julian and Merton share a deep sense of our unity in Christ, in God, in love, and of the love for others to which this sense of unity can lead us.

"In man is God and God is in all, and he who loves this way loves all," Julian writes.²⁹ We read in Merton that "The more I become identified with God, the more will I be identified with all the others who are identified with Him. His love will be in all of us."³⁰ When Merton assures us that "we are already one,"³¹ he echoes Julian who reminds us "we are all one in love."³² These seeming congruities in Julian and Merton can be viewed as simply a matter of shared insight and perception and religious and spiritual heritage. We might also say that they originate in a timeless experience of faith and love to which we are all called. Certainly they provide a basis for saying that what Merton admires in Julian, that is, what Merton calls Julian's "theology of all the all-embracing totality and fullness of the divine love" and her theology of mercy, he shares with her to a great degree.³³

Although it is difficult to determine how and to what extent Merton's thinking and understanding are influenced directly by Julian, there is no question of the significant impact of her description of the maternal nature of divine love and wisdom.³⁴ According to Julian, "the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our mother" and Jesus is our true mother and the true mother of life; in him we are endlessly born. Jesus "feeds us and fosters us just as the noble sovereign nature of motherhood wills."³⁵

As Michael Mott informs us, Julian's wonderful portrayal of the infinitely loving and nourishing motherhood of Jesus and the maternal wisdom of God supports Merton's poetic evocation of Hagia Sophia, the feminine symbol of wisdom in Russian mysticism.³⁶ The gentle, dawn-like lines which open the poem tell of a "hidden wholeness" which is "Wisdom, the Mother of all."³⁷ God is "at once Father and Mother."³⁸ And Sophia expresses God's power as mercy and love:

Sophia is the mercy of God in us. She is the tenderness with which the infinitely mysterious power of pardon turns the darkness of our sins into the light of grace. She is the inexhaustible fountain of kindness, and would seem to be, in herself, all mercy.³⁹

In Sophia's mercy, so strong as to transform sin, there are echoes of Julian's vision of the maternal mercy of Jesus. Julian says, "In our mother, Christ, we have our reforming and our restoration by mercy."⁴⁰ Jesus' mercy is all the more complete and irrepressible in the face of sin because it is rooted in the love of the true mother. This same quality of mercy appears in Merton's work again. As he discusses the "motherly compassion of God" represented in the Nativity, he notes "the importance of a concept of sonship in which the mysteries of the Mother and of the Holy Spirit are needed to fill out the full meaning of the redemptive love of the Savior on the Cross."⁴¹ For Merton, this is "a unique aspect of the divine mercy."⁴² Certainly Merton's understanding of the merciful and redemptive love of God, so central in Julian, expanded and deepened as he came to understand its

maternal quality.

As we begin to apprehend both the immensity and the intimacy of God's merciful and redemptive love reflected in Julian and Merton, we can begin to comprehend and then respond to God's words to Julian, "that all manner of things shall be well."⁴³ It is only in recognising the love of God who would suffer more for us if it were at all possible that we can begin to accept with Julian God's assurance that the world, which is but a hazelnut in God's palm, is held in the deepest care. It is only in believing the love and mercy that holds us no more blameworthy for sin than the Son who died for us that we can begin to ask for and find that love and mercy in our own hearts. It is only in trusting and attending to the love and mercy which preserve us tenderly and maternally, both in "woe and well-being," to use Julian's words, that we can begin to fully live and love and rejoice in God and our own being. And, finally, our recognising, believing, trusting, and attending only become fully realised in our loving-giving - in the free giving of ourselves to the ever-present working of God's mercy and love in us, in the world, in Christ.

Julian is dismayed and puzzled about sin, about what Merton calls the "problem of evil" in the world, and frankly about why God allows it.⁴⁴ The message she receives from God in response is mystifying: "Sin is necessary, but all shall be well ..."⁴⁵ She learns that God does not assign blame to her for sin; that sin, in fact, is not part of our "substance" or being in God. Julian learns as well of a "marvelous lofty secret hidden in God ... a great deed ... ordained by God from eternity, treasured and hidden ... [by which] he will make all things well."⁴⁶ In view of the anguish in the world and the Church's teaching that there are those who will be damned to hell, Julian struggles, as we all might, between doubt and wonder at God's words, resolving the issue finally as a matter of trust and faith in the word and mercy and love of God.

Merton says that the acceptance of this contradiction and "hidden dynamism" is the heart of theology for Julian, and signifies for us what it means to have a "wise heart."

To have a "wise hear," it seems to me, is to live centered on this dynamism and this secret hope - this hoped-for secret. It is the key to our life, but as long as we are alive we must see that we do not have this key: it is not at our disposal. Christ has it, in us, for us. We have the key in so far as we believe in Him, and are one with Him ... The wise heart lives in hope and in contradiction, in sorrow and in joy, fixed on the secret and the "great deed" which alone gives Christian life its true scope and dimensions! The wise heart lives in Christ.⁴⁷

The great and secret deed announced to Julian, and her acceptance of it, is what Merton calls Julian's orientation to "an eschatological secret." Eschatology has to

do with our understanding of the time of the end or the end of time, the time Christianity understands as the Parousia or the Second Coming of Christ. To be oriented to the great deed, however, to fully believe in it, is much more than to be oriented to a mysterious and distant event; it is in itself an experience of the *present*. Paradoxically, part of the meaning of the great deed to come is that it calls us to an even more trusting and faithful relationship to God now. In Julian's words, "[God] loves us and delights in us, and wills that, in the same way, we love him and delight in him and strongly trust in him - and all shall be well."⁴⁸

To be oriented to the secret and great deed of the end is then to be open more trustingly to the hidden dynamism and mystery of the divine love and mercy always active in our own lives, active in Christ in us. In accepting that "all shall be well" we are not simply comforted, we are freed to live more fully in Christ, to let Christ live more fully in and through us, or, as Merton once put it, "We just let Christ be faithful to us."⁴⁹ For Merton, much more explicitly than for Julian, this eschatological restoration and liberation, if you will, calls and compels us to an eschatological witness to love and mercy as well. As Merton puts it, "We are obliged as Christians to seek some way of giving the mercy and the compassion of Christ a social, even a political dimension. The eschatological function of mercy ... is to prepare the Christian transformation of the world, and to usher in the Kingdom of God."⁵⁰

Shall all be well? The answer, mysteriously and wondrously, is embedded in our very lives, in life itself. It lies somehow in my daughter Juliana's birth, in our own hearts, in our relationship to our brother and our sister, in our work - in our effort, then, as Merton would say, to become what we already really are.

Notes

1. In her vivid chronicle of the fourteenth century, historian Barbara W. Tuchman describes the devastating human and psychological toll of the plague in England as well as on the continent, which led one contemporary to write, "God is deaf now-a-days ..." The plague actually first struck about the time of Julian's early childhood and recurred several times thereafter. See Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978).
2. Thomas Merton, "Cold War Letter #17," Unpublished manuscript, Bellarmine College, Louisville, KY, Thomas Merton Studies Center, 1961-62, p.31.
3. "Cold War Letter" to Sister M. Madeleva in Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), pp.274-75.
4. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1968), p.211.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. by Brother Patrick Hart and Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Bantam Books, 1979) p.93; *Mystics and Zen*

7. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, translated by M.L. del Mastro (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977), p.150.
8. Merton, *Love and Living*, pp.92-93.
9. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, pp.140-41.
10. *Ibid.*, p.142.
11. Julian, *Revelations*, pp.118, 173.
12. *Ibid.*, p.117.
13. *Ibid.*, p.129.
14. *Ibid.*, p.117.
15. *Ibid.*, chapter 15.
16. *Ibid.*, p.170.
17. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1962), pp.131 ff.
18. *Ibid.*, p.155.
19. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp.33-35, 295.
20. Merton, *Love and Living*, p.185.
21. See, for example, Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. by William Shannon (New York: Farrar & Straus, & Giroux, 1985), p.115.
22. Julian, *Revelations*, pp.145, 160.
23. *Ibid.*, 158.
24. Merton, *Love and Living*, p.183.
25. Julian, *Revelations*, p.88.
26. Merton, *Conjectures*, p.220.
27. Julian, *Revelations*, p.95.
28. Merton, *New Seeds*, pp.21, 29.
29. Merton, *Revelations*, p.96.
30. Merton, *New Seeds*, p.65.
31. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. by Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), p.308.
32. Julian, *Revelations*, p.96.
33. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, pp.141-42.
34. *Ibid.*, p.143; Merton's own copy of *Revelations of Divine Love*, a 1961 edition translated by James Walsh, S.J., and published by London, Burns, & Oates, is heavily underlined in the chapters discussing God and Jesus as mother. This copy is housed in the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College in Louisville, Kentucky.
35. Julian, *Revelations*, pp.186, 188, 192, 198.
36. Micheal Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), p.362.
37. Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia in Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. by Lawrence Cunningham (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992), p.268.
38. *Ibid.*, p.261.

39. *Ibid.*, p.263.
40. Julian, *Revelations*, pp.188-89.
41. Merton, *Love and Living*, pp.204-205.
42. *Ibid.*, p.205.
43. See, for example, Thomas Merton, *Vow of Conversation*, ed. by Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1988), p.87.
44. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, p.144.
45. Julian, *Revelations*, p.124.
46. *Ibid.*, pp.125, 132.
47. Merton, *Conjectures*, p.212.
48. Julian, *Revelations*, p.208.
49. Thomas Merton, *Springs of Contemplation*, ed. by Jame Marie Richardson (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, Inc., 1992), p.73.
50. Merton, *Love and Living*, p.197.

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