

Companion guide
for the video program

PIONEERS
of the
Spirit

Julian
of Norwich

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Pioneers of the Spirit JULIAN OF NORWICH

Background

Julian of Norwich was an English mystic whose life is shrouded in mystery. We can only glean from existing documents that she lived in Norwich, at that time the second largest city in England. She lived during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries from c. 1342 to some time after 1413, the dismal era of the Black Death, the Hundred Year's War, and Peasant's Rebellion. Yet in Julian we find an amazingly optimistic and reassuring voice, deeply compassionate in the face of these crushing realities, and affirming of God's loving nature and perfect care of humanity.

Julian's form of religious service is virtually unknown in our day, but was a widespread vocation during this era in England. She was an anchorite, an enclosed "prayer warrior," usually attached to a church, but secluded in a cell which was entered only by a servant and perhaps a cat. The vocation of the anchorite developed out of the hermetic tradition, and an anchorite's chief social duty was to pray for the welfare of his or her community, doing spiritual battle with the forces of evil. As a symbol of great commitment to prayer and devoted service to God, anchorites were also often consulted as spiritual directors, and most anchorite cells included two windows, one opening onto the street for access by townspeople, and one opening into the church, so that the anchorite might view the Mass and receive the Eucharist.

Scholars are not certain how Julian came to be the anchorite at St. Julian's, Norwich, the church from which she took her religious name. We do know, as a result of her book the *Revelations of Divine Love*, that when she was thirty years old she became very ill, and while on her deathbed received a series of sixteen revelations in a state of ecstasy lasting five hours. She wrote her first version of this experience shortly after her recovery, and a longer version twenty years later as her interpretation of this experience and its meaning.

It remains a mystery to scholars how Julian received what is clearly a profound and theological training. *Revelations* is a sophisticated work both theologically and literarily, and, in fact, is the first book known to have been written in English. The work is packed with rich, vivid imagery, and has been described as something like a whole imaginative universe centered on the cross of Christ and the Holy Trinity. As is often the case with texts written by Christian mystics, the *Revelations of Divine Love* is startlingly unfettered by the prevailing perspectives of its culture and era. In it Julian transcends the focus on a wrathful God held by many of her contemporary Christians. Despite the grim realities of rampant plague and visible death, Julian insists that the world is sustained by a God of pity and infinite self giving. From this stance Julian advocates and inspires complete trust in God's love. Julian's guidance was widely sought by persons residing both near and far, and she continues to act as a guide to contemporary Christians struggling to sustain their faith in the face of the evil and suffering of our day.

Questions for Discussion

It has been suggested that as important as whether or not you believe in God is the question, what *kind* of God do you believe in? Julian believed in a loving, self-sacrificing, comforting God, a “courteous Lord” who thanked human beings for their endurance of trials in life, who cared for us as tenderly as a mother, and poured out a selfless suffering love on all God’s beloved children. How are your images of God similar to those of Julian? How do they differ?

How do you think Christians come to know that they are fully loved by God?

How do you interpret Christ’s sacrifice on the cross? How does this express to us the extent of God’s love for us?

Why do you think Julian was stunned by the thought that God suffers for us? Is this a startling notion to you?

When Julian asked God how all could be well when such harm was so visible in the world, God responds, “I am able to make all things well, and I shall make all things well, and you will see for yourself that all manner of things shall be well.” Does this answer satisfy your questions regarding why a good God permits evil? How does it address the question?

In the vision of the hazelnut, Julian glimpses creation from the perspective of God and discovers that God is so much “bigger” than creation, God’s love so effortlessly and eternally sustaining, that there is no need for insecurity. Do you think the twentieth century needs to recover this vision of a “big enough God”? How might this type of theology help respond to other views of God espoused in our era?

When Julian recalls the omnipotent love of God she is able to laugh or deride the vision of the devil as having no power over her. How do you think our fears give power to negative forces in our lives? How can our faith in God help us to banish anxiety? Is anxiety indicative of insufficient faith?

Julian came to see the stumblings and failures of human beings as allowed by a loving God as part of the developmental process, just as a mother, though it pains her to watch any harm come to her young child, must allow it to test its independence. What do you think of this analogy? Do you think we learn spiritually by trial and error?

Which is more likely to lead to despair: tragedy itself, or ignorance that love exists while in the midst of tragedy? How are difficult times eased by the knowledge that we are loved?

What do you think of Julian’s mother imagery for Christ? Does it surprise you that this imagery was considered “orthodox” by fourteenth century believers? How accurately does it describe the objective reality of Christ in your experience?

Practical Application Suggestions

Julian of Norwich took the unusual step of writing down her visions. Perhaps you too may want to start a spiritual journal which can serve as a prayerful conversation between you and God, and as an aid to spiritual reflection. In "Journaling — A Way to Pray", Elizabeth Canham, who directs a retreat center in North Carolina, writes "Journaling is not just for the giants of Christian history. It is a means of grace available to each of us, a way to grow in the life of faith." If this idea appeals to you, you may want to read Elizabeth Canham's book which is filled with practical advice, *Journaling with Jeremiah*, Paulist Press, 1992, or Edward Farrell's chapter, "The Journal — A Way Into Prayer" in *Prayer is a Hunger*, Dimension Books, 1972.

For Further Reading

C.W. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. University of California Press, 1982.

Julia Gatta, "Passion and Compassion" in *Three Spiritual Directors for Our Time: Julian of Norwich, The Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hilton. Cowley Publications, 1986.

C. Hugh Hildesley, *Journeying with Julian*. Morehouse Publishing, 1993.

Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*. Paulist Press, 1988.

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Brant Pelpetry, *Christ Our Mother: Julian of Norwich*. Michael Glazier, Inc., 1989.

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