

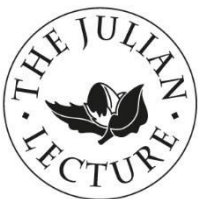
The Julian Lecture 1998 - Celebrating the 625<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her  
*Revelations*

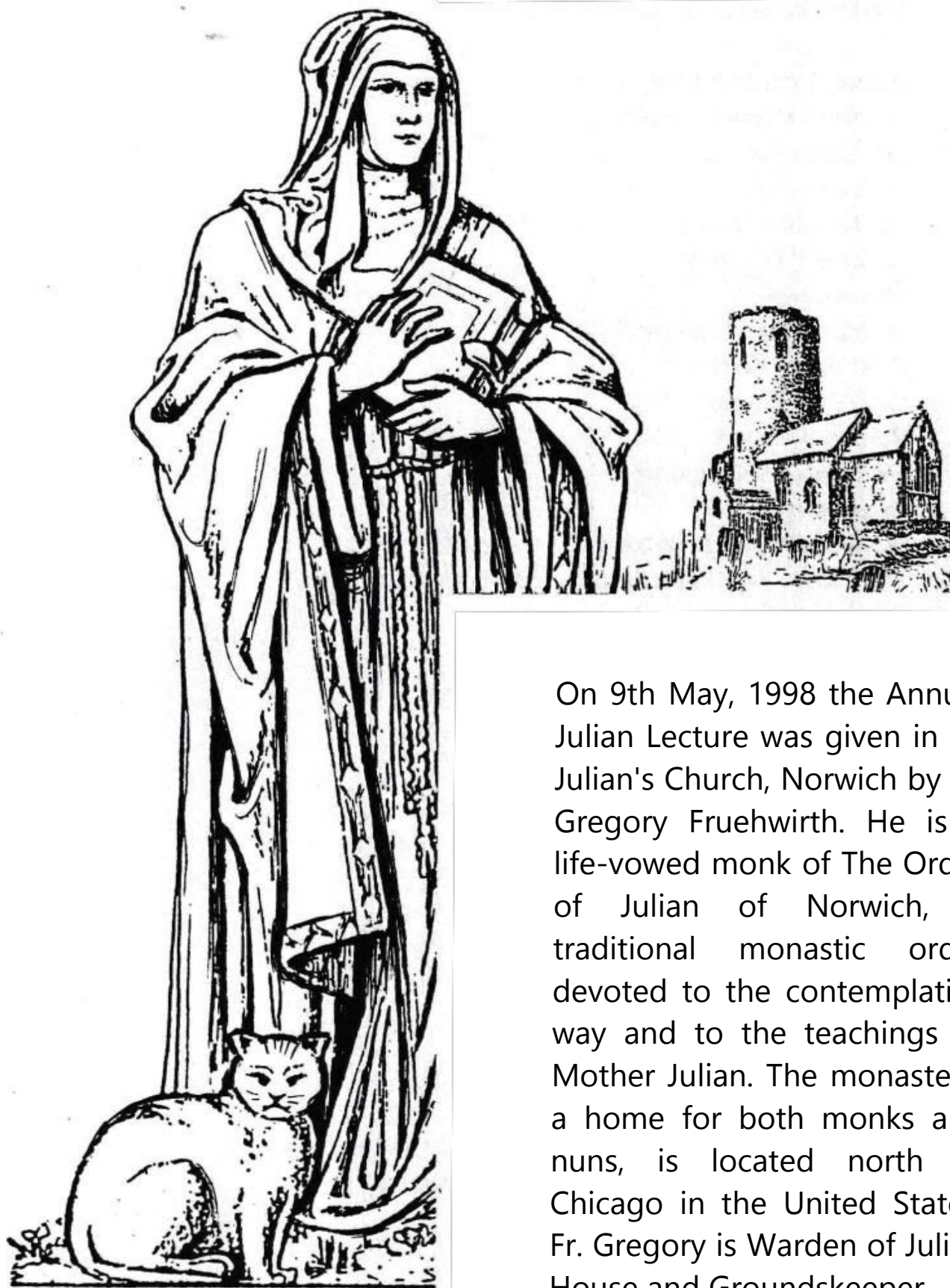
# Into the Blessed Heart of Christ

**Contemplative Life and Prayer in the Spirit of  
Mother Julian**



**Father Gregory Fruehwirth, O. J. N.**





On 9th May, 1998 the Annual Julian Lecture was given in St. Julian's Church, Norwich by Fr. Gregory Fruehwirth. He is a life-vowed monk of The Order of Julian of Norwich, a traditional monastic order devoted to the contemplative way and to the teachings of Mother Julian. The monastery, a home for both monks and nuns, is located north of Chicago in the United States; Fr. Gregory is Warden of Julian House and Groundskeeper.

In this lecture Fr. Gregory explores how Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* provides an implicit theology of contemplative prayer and through the narrative structure of the Revelations itself, a challenging pattern for growth in the contemplative way.

## [1] **Introduction**

As many of you know, The Order of Julian of Norwich possesses a two-fold apostolate: first, we desire to restore the classical tradition of contemplative spirituality in the Church and secondly, to study and promulgate the teachings of our Blessed Mother Saint Julian. Thus when I professed life vows in The Order of Julian almost five years ago, I promised, among other things, to practice daily contemplative prayer and to study and put into practice the spiritual teachings of Mother Julian. For a long time I was content to set these two promises side by side in my life, like two books on a bookshelf, both of which are read, but neither of which really enters into open dialogue with the other. I faithfully did my daily hour of still prayer and I faithfully engaged Mother Julian in serious and reverent study. Fine and good.

But slowly the fact that I had promised not only to study, but to put Mother Julian's teachings into practice began to nag at me. Much of the contemplative ethos that I had by then imbibed had been strongly Carmelite in character; I was actually involved for a year or so in an academic study of John of the Cross, and my chief spiritual guide at that time was the English Carmelite nun Ruth Burrows. I began to wonder, however, if I needed to listen to Julian more carefully so that I might discover, within the Revelations, some real directives about how to go about the contemplative life and how to

approach, even understand, what I was doing in my time of still prayer. I sit there cross-legged on the floor for at least an hour a day. I relax my mind and body. I recollect myself within and, expecting nothing from God, I just remain there in silence before the even greater silence and love of God. This is a wonderful practice, yet how could I understand it in terms of Mother Julian's theology? As I read and re-read Julian with this question in mind, and worked through various layers of her theology, I slowly <sup>[2]</sup>became convinced that she offers us a unique understanding of contemplative prayer. Nowhere does Julian provide us with explicit instructions on how to do contemplative prayer such as we find in *The Cloud of Unknowing* or in the wonderful books by Fr. Basil Pennington or Fr. John Main. What Julian does offer us is an approach to and an understanding of contemplative life and prayer that shimmers with her own beautiful insights and which is, moreover, seamlessly interwoven with the rest of our Christian, religious, liturgical, and active lives. I would like to share in this lecture the understanding of contemplative prayer that Mother Julian has given me, and to explore as well the connection between contemplative prayer and the redemptive work of Christ, mediated through the word and sacraments of the Church, which Julian has also made plain for me. Finally, there is the question of how the disciplined practice of contemplative prayer fits in with the suffering, grief, and painful limitations of our everyday lives in a fallen world - a question which Mother Julian is especially sharp on.

Before we dive into Mother Julian though, I need to define briefly what I mean by 'contemplative prayer' since it means many different things to different people. When I speak of contemplative prayer, I am speaking in the relatively narrow sense of that type of prayer where we set aside all words, images, thoughts, reasonings, and quietly allow ourselves to rest in the reality of our faith, rest in the enfolding presence of God. It is a prayer of simple presence,

attentiveness, silence, and of waiting. Such waiting is also, for Christians, an act of trust and love, of desire and faith launching out into the darkness beyond all perception and thought. John of the Cross described this way of prayer succinctly when he bid us: 'Never pause to love and delight in your understanding and experience of God, but love and delight in what you cannot understand or experience of him. Such is the way...of seeking him in faith.' [*The Spiritual Canticle* 1.12]

But we don't have to borrow a description of contemplative prayer from the great Carmelites. While Julian does not analyse prayer as systematically as a John of the Cross or a Teresa of Avila, her <sup>[3]</sup>authentic and deep experience of contemplative prayer is evident throughout the *Revelations* for instance when she writes:

*Then I saw that [God's] constant working in all manner of things is done so well, so wisely, and so powerfully that it surpasses all our imagining, and all that we can suppose and comprehend. And then we can do nothing more than to gaze at Him and rejoice with a high mighty desire to be wholly one-ed to Him, and to pay attention to His prompting, and rejoice in His loving, and delight in His goodness.*

[Chapter 43. All quotations of Julian are from *A Lesson of Love: The Revelations of Julian of Norwich* (1988), edited and translated by John-Julian Swanson, O.J.N.. New York: Walker and Co.]

This is an exalted incomprehensible prayer, as I see it, for the whole cause for which we pray, is to be one-ed to the vision and the contemplation of Him to whom we pray, marvellously rejoicing with reverent fear and such great sweetness and delight in Him that for

the time being we can pray absolutely nothing except as He moves us. [Ch. 43]

'For the time being we can pray absolutely nothing except as He moves us': This is the heart of contemplative prayer, whether in dryness and obscurity or in a consoling sense of divine presence. Indeed, Julian passes on to us even-Christians Christ's instruction to her to 'pray inwardly':

*Pray inwardly even though it seems to give thee no pleasure, for it is beneficial enough though thou perceivest it not. Pray inwardly, though thou sensest nothing, though thou seest nothing, yea, though thou thinkest thou canst achieve nothing, for in dryness and <sup>[4]</sup>barrenness, in sickness and in feebleness, then is thy prayer completely pleasing to me, though it seems to give thee but little pleasure. [Ch. 41]*

Contemplative prayer, in the sense I am using these words, can thus be pleasant or tedious. It can be approached through various techniques, schools, or methodologies, but regardless of what is experienced or what technique is used all contemplative prayer involves the loving, silent attendance upon God in the darkness beyond all thought, all words, all perceptions, and images. Julian, I am certain, entered naturally and without modern, self-conscious analysis into this way of prayer and knew its nature deeply, but she did not write much about it. In order to draw out of Julian a full theological understanding of contemplative prayer we need first to step back and explore Julian's understanding of our human nature.

## **Julian's anthropology**

This is perhaps a bit simplified, but for Julian the human soul was composed of two dimensions or parts, an inward part, also called the substance of the soul, and an outward part, also called the sensibility. That Julian divided the soul into these two parts is not at all innovative; it is a common theme of medieval psychology. What is innovative and deeply interesting is however how Julian defines each of these parts of the soul, drawing her ideas not only from medieval thought but from her own mystical experiences, from the *Revelations*.

What Julian called the 'outward part' or 'sensibility' is best defined as our normal, experiential consciousness. It includes not only our five physical senses, our body or fleshliness, but also our emotions, our conscious thoughts, our wills. Everything in fact that can change, whether it is our intellects which can think now one thing, now another, our wills which can be choosing this or that, our senses, our inner imaginary life: all these things fall in the domain of Julian's sensibility or outward part. The sensibility is our spirit as given over to finite, <sup>[5]</sup>changeable, material reality and it contains everything from physical sensation to abstract thinking. It is our everyday consciousness of reality. Many people today would say that there is nothing more to us than this constantly shifting kaleidoscope of thoughts, sense impressions, desires, emotions, fantasies. On this outward level of the kaleidoscopic, experiential consciousness, what we call the 'self' is a convenient construct which we use to give our lives coherence, definition, and direction through the day-to-day.

Deeper and more fundamental to us than this outward sensibility is however what Julian called the inward substance of the soul. While most of us experience only rarely, if at all, this depth of ourselves,

Julian was led in the course of her showings to experience this depth of her soul repeatedly and with great intellectual clarity, and what she says about this inward substance is truly astounding. It is a life in us, utterly hidden from normal consciousness, where we are everlastingly held in loving, contemplative union with God from the very moment of our creation. It is a place where we already are and always will be one with God in peace and love. 'The inward part', Julian wrote, 'is an exalted, blissful life which is totally in peace and love....' [Ch. 19]: 'This inner life is that exalted essence, that precious soul, which is endlessly rejoicing in the Godhead.' [Ch. 55], It is there that the soul 'continually...does what it was made for: it perceives God, it contemplates God, and it loves God.' [Ch. 44]. The 'essence of our human nature,' she says, 'is now blissful in God, and has been since it was made, and shall be, without end.' [Ch. 45].

In sharp contrast to the constantly shifting kaleidoscope of our outward, experiential consciousness, this blissful inward substance is kept securely and everlastingly by God in this state of contemplative union.

*Before ever [God] made us he loved us, and when we were created we loved Him...and thus is man's soul made by God and at the same moment knit to God.. And therefore...there can, and will be, absolutely nothing separating God and man's soul. In this endless <sup>[6]</sup>love man's soul is kept whole as the matter of the revelations means and shows; in this endless love we are led and protected by God and never shall be lost, for He wishes us to be aware that our soul has a life which, of His goodness and His grace, shall last in heaven without end, loving Him, thanking Him, praising Him. [Ch. 53, emphasis mine]*



And Julian is very clear that the outward sensibility where we consciously live almost all our lives, with its tempests and crises, its continual struggle for coherence and meaning, is in fact utterly dependent on and finally subordinate to that inward substance where we are one with God:

*I saw truly that the inward part is master and ruler of the outward, and neither receives orders nor pays heed to the will of the outward, but its whole intention and will is endlessly committed to being one-ed into our Lord Jesus. (That the outward part could turn the inward to agreement was not shown to me; but rather that the inward moves the outward by grace, and both shall be united in bliss without end by the power of Christ, this was shown.) [Ch. 19]*

Thus while in our outward sensibility we can be choosing now this and now that, now revolting against grace and now being cooperative, this outward and changeable will is in fact dependent on, as Julian wrote:

*a divine will [in the soul's inward substance] that never consents to sin, nor ever will. This will is so good that it can never will evil, but evermore continually it wills good and does good in the sight of God. Therefore our Lord wishes that we recognize this in the Faith and the Belief of the Church and specifically and truly that we have all this blessed will whole and safe in our Lord Jesus Christ. [Ch. 53]*

Thus regardless of what we are experiencing in our outward selves, regardless of whether we are beatified saints or obstinate sinners, there exists in us <sup>[7]</sup>entirely secure and at peace a substantial life where we are utterly surrendered to and held in loving communion

with God. Again and again Julian bids us to be aware of and believe in this depth of our soul's life, far beneath our everyday, experiential consciousness, where "continually [the soul] does what it was made for: it perceives God, it contemplates God, and it loves God". [Ch. 44]

Already, after this brief look at Julian's two-tier mystical psychology of outward sensibility and changelessly blissful inward substance, an understanding of contemplative prayer can easily be seen. When we practice contemplative prayer in the spirit of Mother Julian we are not trying to find a God who is 'out there' apart from us. Rather, what we seek is to establish a harmony, between our outward, experiential selves and that blessed inward depth where we are already one with God. Julian's psychology suggests that we are all always undergoing the glory of what the Carmelites called infused contemplation and divine union in our depths; what we need is to find some way to get in touch with that depth of ourselves.

This explains why in contemplative prayer we leave behind all words and images, all meditation on the gospels or on the humanity of Christ. It is not because words and images are themselves bad, but because we are seeking to quiet our outward, thinking, sensing, judging selves so that in that silence we can be drawn back into a harmony with the reality of our inward depths of divine union. Pious thoughts, words, images - all these should edify and nurture us but when we enter into contemplative prayer we recognize that these good things can also keep us suspended in the realm of the constantly shifting outward consciousness and so render us unable to actually touch our own inner depths. We cease thinking about or imaging the love of God so as to be able to touch that love directly, without any outward mediation. Quieting, bringing to peace our outward selves, we are drawn back as if by a gravitational force into harmony with our blissful substance which has always been engaged

solely in the loving contemplation of God. Julian puts this most powerfully when she writes:

*[8] Although we, (by the wrath and the contrariness that is in us) are now in tribulation, uneasiness, and woe (as it falls to our blindness and frailty)...When we, by the action of mercy and grace, are made humble and gentle, we are completely safe. When it is truly at peace in itself, suddenly the soul is one-ed to God... [Ch. 49]*

Contemplative prayer is simply a technique we employ to open ourselves to the mercy and grace that draw us into peace with our inward depths, thus one-ing us inwardly and outwardly to God.

### **Sin, redemption, and contemplative prayer**

When it is truly at peace in itself, suddenly the soul is one-ed to God: this is a beautiful and profound understanding of contemplative prayer: it is exactly what we are about whether we are practicing Centering Prayer, or Mantric Prayer, or have drifted unintentionally into the contemplative space within the rosary or scriptural meditation. But this understanding of contemplative prayer remains inadequate for all of us who are faithfully engaged in the full spectrum of the Christian life, since it does not yet address the place of Christ and Christ's redemptive work in the contemplative life.

How does the Church's drama of sin and redemption fit into such a scheme? How do the sacramental, scriptural, ecclesial dimensions of our lives fit in with our hour a day of contemplative prayer? The

problem arises first of all because in contemplative prayer we live behind all the outward, physical signs of our religion: all words, confessions of faith, images, doctrines. The problem, however, becomes especially acute due to the fact that in the religious emptiness, the silence and darkness of contemplative prayer, we may experience a sense of union with God in our depths. This seems to suggest that the emptiness of contemplative prayer can affect a re-union with God entirely apart from Christ and Christianity. The danger here is two-fold: Either we can be so convinced of the truth of contemplative prayer that we will renounce outward Christianity with all its doctrines, liturgies and symbols as un-contemplative and unreal, or we will be so <sup>[9]</sup>shocked by the large claims and by the "religious emptiness" of contemplative prayer that we will shun contemplative prayer as un-Christian, as having nothing much to do with the salvation wrought for us in Jesus Christ. We either leave the church as un-contemplative, as lost in the illusion of a distant, aloof deity; or we condemn contemplative prayer as yet another pagan attempt to find our way to God apart from Jesus Christ. Both of these routes are taken all too frequently in our day. The church is denounced by some contemplatives as utterly unreal while contemplative prayer is denounced by some Church authorities as New-Age and fundamentally un-Christian.

Mother Julian was herself aware of the danger that her mystical insights into the inward, blissful substance of the soul where we are always one with God could mislead some to devalue the redemptive work of Christ, which is to say that she saw how the contemplative awareness of inner union with God could put into question the necessity of the redemptive work of Christ mediated through the Church. In a passage directly following the assertion that in 'human nature is guarded an essence which can never be nor should be parted from God' Julian is quick to add:

*Notwithstanding this rightful knitting and this eternal one-ing, still the redemption and the buying back of mankind is necessary and beneficial in every instance, since it is done for the same intention and to the same end that Holy Church in our Faith teaches us. [Ch. 53]*

Notwithstanding our eternal one-ing with God from the moment of our creation, still the redemption and buying back of mankind is necessary. How can Julian say this? If we are eternally one with God, what do we need to be bought back or redeemed from? Is Julian just being inconsistent to save herself from the wrath of the ecclesiastical censors? I don't believe so. Rather, while Julian saw very clearly the beatified depths of the human soul, I believe that she saw with equal clarity the human tendency to live in such a way that our outward, everyday selves <sup>[10]</sup> can be set up in frightful opposition to those very inward depths.

While for Julian it is impossible that we should be alienated from God absolutely, it remains quite possible and indeed a historical fact that we can become alienated from ourselves, from our own inward depths where we are one with God. The more I have reflected on this possibility traditionally called sin - the more I see what a horrible picture it paints: the outward self, originally a harmonious and blessed emanation of that blissful inward depth, cuts itself off from that inward depth and sets itself up in wrathful, fearful opposition to its own source, suspended in its transient, kaleidoscopic, ultimately meaningless world. The outward soul re-creates itself as a nothingness founded on violence, wrathfully opposed to the very ground of its existence and blessedness, and so becomes, more and more, a self-destructive illusion living on borrowed time, all sound and fury in the historical plain, not able to signify anything. It is for this reason that Julian does not write of sin in her Revelations merely

as an illusion to be overcome or as merely subjective guilt feelings to be psycho-analyzed away, but as the 'harshest scourge that any chosen soul can be struck with' [Ch. 39], as something which is rightfully hated by both nature and grace [Ch. 63], as a most 'cruel hell':

*The same true love that touches us all by His blessed comfort, that same blessed love teaches us that we should hate sin for the sake of love alone...For if before us were laid all the pains in hell and in purgatory and on earth, death and all the rest, over against sin, we ought rather to choose all that pain than sin, because sin is so vile and so much to be hated, that it cannot be compared to any pain - if that pain is not sin. [Ch. 40]*

Sin is so frightful not because it separates the soul entirely from God or because it makes God angry - two propositions which Mother Julian would find absurd (How can anything truly separated from God even continue to exist?). But sin is frightful because it creates an opposition, an enmity between our everyday, experiential consciousness and the inward depth where we are eternally one with God. The result of sin is <sup>[11]</sup>that our day-to-day self lives alienated from and opposed to its own ground, floating off and detached from it, supported in its violent nothingness by the energy of its own wrath. And all of us, as inheritors of original sin, know, feel, experience this split in ourselves to some degree. Hell is not being utterly cut off from God, but being utterly alienated from our own deepest selves where we possess a life that always continues in perceiving, contemplating, loving God. Our eternal destiny, affected from the moment of our creation, is precisely this blissful union with God, and the critical question is whether we choose in our outward, historical lives to align ourselves with this blissful reality.

In such a context, it is clear why the redemptive work of Christ remains necessary. Christ does not placate God's wrath or fulfil an abstract principle of divine justice, but reconciles our outward, historical, experiential selves with the inward depths where we are always lovingly one with God. Christ slakes not God's but our wrath, and this is salvation: a state where our outward, historical selves live not in angry enmity against their own inward depths, but in harmony with that depth of divine union. It is wholeness, unity, peace and freedom from selfishness. We are redeemed from the condition of being split off from our own depths, saved from the futile violence of trying to fabricate meaning and a sense of self out of the kaleidoscopic world of our everyday, experiential consciousness. Christ makes us whole, reconciling outward with inward, sensibility with substance, our history with eternity, earth and heaven, the demands of daily life with love. And the ascendant Jesus is uniquely able to effect the redemptive reconciliation between inward, blissful depth and outward consciousness because while our inward depth 'is total in each person of the Trinity... our fleshiness,' Julian wrote, 'is only in the Second Person Jesus Christ... in Him and by Him we are... honourably brought up into heaven and full blessedly one-ed to our essence.' [Ch. 58] Through Jesus, who is united uniquely to both our inward, blissful depth and our outward, experiential consciousness we are able to recover the unity of these two parts of ourselves:

*[12] This bringing back [of humanity from death] could never be until the time that the Second Person in the Trinity had taken the lower part of mankind (He to whom the highest part was one-ed in the first creation) and these two parts were in Christ - the higher and the lower - which is but one soul. In Christ, the higher part was one in peace with God in full joy and bliss; the lower part, which is fleshly, suffered for the salvation of*

*mankind.* [Ch. 55]

In Christ we discover the unity of our experiential, day-to-day consciousness with our inward, eternally blessed depths, a unity torn apart by sin but re-realized, re-created in the Incarnation.

The essential thing to note here is that the redemption which Christ accomplishes for us, which the Church mediates to us through liturgy, sacrament, doctrine and scripture, is identical to what we are seeking in contemplative prayer. The redemptive work of Christ was to unite the outward consciousness with the inward depths of human nature; and in contemplative prayer we open ourselves in an especially intimate and profound way to exactly this redemptive action of Christ, seeking to unite outward consciousness with inward depth. What this means is that, first of all, at the centre of the Church's life with all its institutions, liturgies, doctrines, sacraments, is the reality of contemplative prayer. One who is proficient in contemplative prayer dwells at the very centre of the church's busy life, for such a one has drunk deeply of the redemptive activity of Christ which constitutes the Church in its very essence. This gives new power to the old adage that the hidden contemplative - whether as enclosed religious or as a mother of four - is the spring of life at the very ground of the Church. The contemplative knows with direct immediacy in his or her time of depth prayer the primal mystery which constitutes the Church and vitalizes all her teaching and her sacraments the fundamental mystery of our reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ.

[13] Conversely, the contemplative not only lives at the centre of the Church, but the Church lives at the centre of the contemplative. Yes, during our hour of contemplative prayer we do set aside even the holiest of words, images, thoughts, and desires and rest in blank



silence. We don't think about theology or imagine the Good Shepherd carrying his sheep. But the truth expressed in scripture and doctrine, the grace given in the outward sacraments, the glory of good liturgy, the authority of the ecclesial institution, are all outward, historical expressions and beginnings of the truth, the grace, the glory, and the infallible authority of contemplative prayer. As long as we remain historical, physical creatures we cannot abandon the historical, physical, outward expressions of our faith.

A life deeply immersed in the redemptive activity of Christ mediated through word and sacraments is all at once a preparation for, a beginning of, and an outward expression of the contemplative life when it has finally reached its own maturity, precisely because what is going on in contemplative prayer and in the outward life of the Church is essentially the same thing: the redemptive activity of Christ in us. Contemplative prayer is the very heart of the Church and the Church defines the heart of contemplative prayer: this is a challenging axiom both for contemplatives, who might shy away from the Church with all her doctrines and outward busyness, but also for Church authorities, who are often wary of contemplative inwardness. Ecclesial and contemplative existence, if not identical, nonetheless must live at the very centre of each other, giving mutual priority to each other. Julian's Revelations thus provide us with an understanding not only of what we are doing when we sit there cross-legged on the floor for an hour a day, but also of how this silent, empty, apparently religion-less prayer is in fact intimately one with the mystery of our graced redemption in Christ and so one also with our life in the sacramental, historical Church.



## [14] **The contemplative meaning of the eighth showing**

When planning this address, I originally hoped at this point to examine the narrative structure of the *Revelations* so as to find there a paradigm for contemplative struggle and growth. I believed that if, instead of extracting various quotes from Julian's writings in an analytic way, we walked with Julian step by step through the Revelations with all its twists and turns, the dramatic tensions and eventual resolutions, we could find there the story of the contemplative life in miniature. And this paradigm would in turn reinforce what we have already discussed as Julian's theology of contemplative prayer. The problem however is that the more you look at Julian, the more you find. There are enormous riches in the very structure of the story she tells that have not yet, to my knowledge, been tapped; and because of this very richness we would need a whole week of talks and discussion groups to work through this issue. An enormous richness can easily become an unmanageable embarrassment of riches. Consequently, what I would like to do now is to take only one small section of the *Revelations* which is to my mind the critical turning point around which the whole work pivots and which serves as well as a paradigm of the spiritual challenge addressed to every contemplative in the Church today. This most critical turning point, narratively and theologically, of Julian's *Revelations* is to my mind found in the eighth showing.

The eighth showing does not of course stand alone. *Revelations of Divine Love* begins with Julian's relation of her desire for three gifts and three wounds and moves into a description of the near-death illness which establishes the context of all the showings. The showings properly so called then begin with a two-fold vision which starts the first showing: a physical sight of the bleeding of Christ's head in his passion combined with an inward, joyful vision of the

blissful Trinity, and the rest of the first showing along with the next five all involve a graceful spinning out of various divine mysteries which are presented in germ in that initial double vision. The essential thing to note about these first six showings is that they are basically unproblematic. Julian is being led wide-eyed and without any interior <sup>[15]</sup>conflicts into various dimensions of God's love for us either as transcendent, providential ground of being or as suffering saviour. None of the disturbing tensions, questions, struggles found later in the *Revelations* are yet in evidence. The seventh showing however represents a sharp change of affairs, for here Julian is suddenly removed from the blissful progression of divine mysteries found in the first six showings and is plunged into a rapid alternation between anguished pain and joyful security, an experience which serves as a harbinger for the direct challenge which Julian will face quite soon in the critical eighth showing where everything that she is, is put on trial.

Following the rapid, inexplicable fluctuation between anguish and peace of the seventh showing, the eighth showing begins by tipping over completely into the anguish with a graphic sight of Christ's sufferings: the bloodless drying and shrivelling of the flesh, the discolouring of the face and the thirst of Christ. Julian relates the nightmarish vision of the body sagging heavily and tearing on the nails, and of the double garland of thorns, skin, and dried blood woven about Christ's head. Most importantly, Julian is not witnessing these torments as a detached, pious spectator, but as one being drawn into the actual suffering of these pains with Christ. She is experiencing the agonies of the Passion with Christ, suffering with him, and she realizes in the midst of great pain that she is in way over her head - so much so that she actually repents of ever having asked to be united with Christ in his death. As she wrote:

*That showing of Christ's pains filled me full of pain, because I was well-aware that He suffered only once, though He wished to show it me, and fill me with awareness as I had before desired. And in all this time of Christ's pains I felt no pain except for Christ's pains. Then I thought, "I knew but little what pain it was that I asked for", and like a wretch I repented me, thinking that if I had known what it would be, I would have been <sup>[16]</sup>loath to have prayed for it, for it seemed to me that my pains went beyond any bodily death. [Ch. 17]*

Once she is actually experiencing it in her own body, the reality of the Passion proves too much for her, and Julian draws back from this compassionate union with Christ crucified. The spiritual crisis initiated by Julian's repenting of her desire to suffer with Christ - a crisis of profound depth for a woman whose spirituality had hitherto revolved around a loving desire for Christ - comes soon to a sharp, articulate, unavoidable head. Her love for Jesus is put on trial and explicitly tested for its purity, its selflessness, by a suggestion to seek God apart from compassionate union with Christ. As she herself wrote:

*I had a proposal in my reason (as if it were like a friend) which said to me, "Look up to heaven to His Father". And I saw well with the Faith that there was nothing between the cross and heaven that could have distressed me. Either it was appropriate for me to look up, or else to answer. [Ch. 19]*

Very clearly, Julian is being tempted to seek heaven apart from the crucified Jesus, to pursue a transcendental spirituality which is not wounded with contrition, compassion, and longing. Given the depth of her suffering, and her initial repentance of asking to suffer thus with Christ, it is a miracle that Julian somehow holds firm, for she responds:

*I answered inwardly with all the powers of my soul and said, "No, I cannot, for Thou art my heaven." (This I said because I wished not to look up, for I had rather have been in that pain until Doomsday than to have come to heaven otherwise than by Him, for I was well- aware that He who bound me so painfully, He would unbind me when He wished.)...I delighted in no other heaven than Jesus, who shall be my bliss when I come there. And this has ever been a comfort to me: that I <sup>[17]</sup>chose Jesus for my heaven, by His grace, in all this time of suffering and sorrow. [Ch. 19]*

Rallied by the temptation to an ahistorical, Christ-less spirituality, Julian attains a new depth of self-surrender. For me, this is the single most critical, profound moment in all the *Revelations*. Here we are witnesses to a spiritual betrothal based not on pleasant interior consolations but naked self-forgetfulness in the context of great suffering. And as if to confirm the depth and truth of Julian's self-surrender to Jesus, immediately after her choice for Jesus as her heaven in well and in woe, Julian is able to penetrate through the outward surface of suffering in the Passion into a series of four showings all revealing the joy that Christ has in us and in his own suffering, a series which culminates in the triumphant glory of the twelfth showing where, as Julian wrote:

*...our Lord showed Himself more glorified, as I see it, than I saw Him before... [saying] "It is I, it is I; it is I who am most exalted; it is I whom thou lovest; it is I whom thou enjoyest; it is I whom thou servest; it is I whom thou yearnest for; it is I whom thou desirest; it is I whom thou meanest; it is I who am all; it is I whom Holy Church preaches and teaches thee; it is I who showed myself here to thee. [Ch. 26]*

Julian empties herself in love for Christ and Christ responds by leading Julian into his own glorious emptiness. The parallels here for the spiritual life in general are obvious. After a period of consoling favours, where we explore and are deeply nurtured by the truths of the faith, we are led into a period of suffering where our faithfulness to the God of Jesus Christ, the God of incarnate compassion is deeply tested. Our selfish reasons for practicing spirituality are exposed and we are faced with the dilemma of either abandoning Christ crucified and seeking our solace in an impersonal, faceless, ahistorical spirituality, or of surrendering ourselves more deeply to Christ, entering into his redeeming work of love on the cross, through the pain of our own <sup>[18]</sup>personal suffering. This is a true pattern for the spiritual life, and we go through it again and again. But what is of interest to me, and of special note to contemplatives in particular is what gave Julian - and what will presumably give us the strength and the courage to abandon all selfishness and choose Jesus for her heaven in well and woe. What allowed Julian to make this heroic gift of self in love? In the actual course of the eighth showing, she does not tell us how she was able to make this great gift of herself, how such self-forgetting love was possible for her. But much later in the Revelations, in chapter 55, after explaining how the two parts of our souls which we discussed earlier - the blissful inner substance and the changeable sensibility - are united in Christ, she says that:

*These two parts [of the soul] were seen and experienced in the eighth showing, in which my body was filled with the experience and memory of Christ's passion and His death and furthermore, with this was an ethereal feeling and secret inward vision of the high part that I was shown at that same time [when I could not on account of the intermediary's suggestion look up into heaven], and that was because of the*

*powerful vision of the inner life, and this inner life is that exalted essence, that precious soul, which is endlessly rejoicing in the Godhead.* [Ch. 55]

In other words, what gave Julian leverage on her experience of suffering so that she was not overwhelmed and driven by it away from her love for the suffering Christ was precisely her intuitive awareness of the precious soul which is endlessly rejoicing in the Godhead, that inward substance where, regardless of what we are suffering in our outward lives, we remain steadfastly, blissfully united to God in love. This blissful love is the depth of Christ's soul even as he suffers being forsaken by God on the cross, and it is the depth of our own souls even as we are forsaken by God in the sometimes horrible suffering of our personal lives. Because Julian was especially in touch with her own inner depths where she is <sup>[19]</sup>steadfastly held in union with God, she was able to give her entire outward life and outward self away to Jesus, come what may, blissful well or anguished woe. Seeing thus beyond the outward, temporal, physical flux of well and woe, Julian rooted herself in the eternal truth of her being as a creature endlessly knit in love to God, and this is precisely what allowed her to live in self-forgetful love in the outward, changeable dimension of her life. Knowing, touching, tasting the eternal depth of love within herself, Julian was able then to live lovingly in her outward changeable existence of well and woe.

And so it is with us. As people who follow a disciplined practice of contemplative prayer, we slowly get in touch with that inner depth of ourselves where we are everlastingly one with God. Quieting our outward selves, we are able to rest in the eternal, inner depths of love. We may not experience this inner depth of love with the same clarity that Julian did. Our prayer time may seem to us - to our human deem, as Julian would say to be rather tedious or dead. But if

our contemplative prayer has been deep and true, we will instinctively, unselfconsciously begin to live with a greater degree of selflessness in all we do. Because we are in touch, in some hidden and obscure way, with that substantial life in us which is already utterly surrendered to God in love, we gain a degree of leverage and freedom over our selfish, outward selves and begin to live with less egocentricity even in our busy, outward, day-to-day lives. And when the time of great suffering comes, as it eventually does for all of us, and our spiritual lives are put on trial, perhaps we will already be proficient enough in true love, in true self-forgetting that we will be able to live gladly and gaily with the inevitable penance of our lives as a joyful sacrifice where we are one with Christ on the cross in his redemptive love for the world. Contemplative prayer is thus a particular, powerful means not only of allowing the redemptive love of Christ, preached and realized in the Church, to effect a reconciliation between our outward, everyday selves and our inward, blissful depths, but it is also the way which enables us to join Christ in his redemptive suffering through our own mundane mental anguish, physical suffering, social unrest. With our outward selves rooted <sup>[19]</sup>through contemplative prayer in the self-forgetful love that defines our very essence as human beings, we are able to live self-forgetfully in our daily lives and this is precisely the way we extend the redemptive work of Christ into our time, our world, our hectic lives. Whether we are riding the train, working in the cloister garden, teaching a class of 12-year-olds, when we live in a spirit of self-forgetfulness, living gladly and merrily amid pain and deprivation, we are bringing redemption into our world, our time, our space.





## Conclusion: into the blessed heart of Christ

The title of this address was billed as 'Into the Blessed Heart of Christ' and here we are, almost at the end of my talk, and I have said nothing about the blessed, or sacred, heart of Jesus. But if on one level I have said little about the symbolism of the sacred heart, on another level I have done nothing but talk about the contemplative life as being a journey into the depth meaning of the blessed, open, emptied, loving heart of Jesus. Of all the symbols in our Christian tradition, few unite so powerfully the reality of suffering and love as does the symbol of the pierced, empty heart of the ascendant Christ inflamed with love. Julian herself, in the tenth showing, was drawn into this particular symbol and recognized it as evoking the limitless and joyful love of Christ who unites us to himself through his own suffering. As she herself wrote:

*Then, with a glad expression, our Lord looked into His wounded side and gazed with joy, and with His sweet gazing He directed the understanding of His creature through that same wound into His side within. There He showed a fair, desirable place, and large enough for all mankind that shall be saved to rest in peace and love. And with that He brought to mind His <sup>[21]</sup>dearworthy blood and precious water which He allowed to pour all out for love. And with the sweet sight He showed His blessed Heart cloven in two. And with this sweet rejoicing, He showed to my understanding, in part, the blessed Godhead, strengthening the pure soul to understand (in so far as it can be expressed) that this Heart is to signify the endless love that was without beginning, and is, and shall be always. With this our Good Lord said most blissfully, "Lo, how I love thee". [Ch. 24]*

Contemplative prayer in the spirit of Mother Julian invites us first to abide within this blessed, empty, loving heart of Jesus. It is empty and so able to enclose us because of the blood and water that was poured out of it at the Passion, and it is accessible to us only because it was cloven in two by the centurion's spear. Yet abiding within this cloven, emptied heart of love in our contemplative prayer what we discover is that our inner wrathfulness is progressively slaked by Christ's self-giving, self-sacrificial love. Our outward, kaleidoscopic selves with all their thoughts, worries, fears and storms of infantile rage are slowly quieted. The peace and love of God begins to draw even our outward selves into peace and love and so into a living harmony with our blissful inner depths where we are eternally one with God. "Lo, how I love thee", says Jesus, gazing into his opened side, and our contemplative prayer begins as we learn to soak up and be healed by this tremendous love. Over a period of years in the contemplative way we are slowly healed, unified, carried home in our Mother Christ's dear breast. Wrath is converted to meekness, sin to glory, dreadful fear to humble and courteous love.

But contemplative prayer in the spirit of Mother Julian does not simply invite us to dwell in this heart, it also makes of us the strong demand that we allow our own hearts to be emptied out and cloven in two in love. If you remember, the first showing of the Revelations was initiated by the seminal double vision of the bleeding of Christ's head <sup>[22]</sup>superimposed upon the joyful, inward sight of the blissful Trinity. Julian saw the horrible suffering of the Passion coinciding exactly with the blissful joy of the Trinity, and it is precisely this kind of double, or cloven vision and double or cloven hearts which we as contemplatives in the spirit of Mother Julian must carry into our world. On one level we are, through our contemplative prayer, deeply in touch with our substantial life where we are everlastingly one with the Triune God, but on another level we remain in, indeed

become all the more vulnerable to, the suffering, pain, strife, brokenness of the present world. We neither escape from fallen history and the agony of human society into timeless, unincarnate bliss nor do we lose ourselves in meaningless historical flux, renouncing the eternal union with God which is ultimately the truth of who we are. Rather we embrace and remain entirely committed to both these dimensions of our lives, both blissful inward depth and passionate outward self, both sensibility and substance, both suffering personal history and blessed triune eternity. And what holds these terribly disparate dimensions of our lives together, what keeps us from just splitting down the middle and disintegrating, is love. Love draws us into union with our inward depths and love also opens us to the suffering and agony in which our concrete lives are lived. Love is what cleaves us in two as both historical and eternal creatures and yet, through this very cleaving, makes us whole, blessed, true. And this to my mind is the supreme gift which Mother Julian has to give to those practicing contemplative prayer: she encourages us to walk a path which, informed by the truth of both the blissful Trinity and the suffering incarnate Christ, leads first directly to the cross and then through the cross into a state of being where we are simultaneously held in eternal, blissful, unspeakable love and deeply involved with the redemption of the agony and sin of our world. Not merely abiding in Christ's blessed heart, but allowing our own hearts to be cloven, emptied and so sanctified by an incarnate and eternal love, we share in Love's joyful redemption of our world. And for this great gift of allowing us to share in the re-creation of the world through love, may God - Father, Mother, and Lord - always be praised.

*Father Gregory Fruehwirth, O. J. N.*