

# A GFS Australia Spirituality Study



*14th Century English Mystic  
Julian of Norwich - A Woman for our time*

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## *Introduction – Who was Julian?*

When Julian of Norwich wrote her book “The Revelations of Divine Love” about 600 years ago, she told her readers to forget her and to look to Jesus. A number of editions of her book have been published and translated into several foreign languages. Some major critical works have been accomplished and all over the world scholarly and devotional studies have been written.

Julian has been included in the Liturgical Calendar and for some people she has become virtually their ‘patron saint’. In America a religious Order has been founded bearing her name, and in the UK well over a hundred ‘Julian Groups’ encourage the practice of contemplative prayer. Thousands of pilgrims visit her shrine in Norwich each year with many linking themselves to the work there by becoming ‘Friends of St Julian.’

So, how is it that the theology of an obscure Norfolk woman, almost forgotten for 600 years, has become so influential? What is it about the vision of a 14th Century recluse – a style of life which seems so alien to our contemporaries – that speaks so clearly to the condition of 21st Century people?

I believe that the answer to these questions may well lie in the similarities between her day and ours. Hers was an age of aggression – the Hundred Years War; unemployment, high taxes and political unrest in England. Julian’s time was also an age of fear and social distress – the Black Death ravaging the population, and questions were being asked about existing structures. Hers was an age when the Church was in some disarray – religious rivalries, rival popes, and doctrinal controversies.

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Yet, in spite of her overwhelming adversities, Julian was clearly a woman of courage. Although she was enclosed in her cell, she demonstrated a freedom of spirit as she reflected on the challenges in her day. Her stability, patience and assurance are matched by an adventurous, bracing and inquiring spirit.

Julian was unafraid to push at the boundaries of doctrinal orthodoxy, yet she remained a faithful daughter of the church. As Julian faced the paradoxes and sufferings of Christian life, we see that she is grounded in that peace which can only come from total belief in, and acceptance of, the all-embracing love of God.



**Reconstructed Cell at St Julian's Church Norwich**

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Julian writes "God did not say 'you shall not be afflicted, you shall not be tempest-tossed,' but God did say 'you shall not be overcome.'" This blessed assurance comes from the visions she was granted by God on 8 May, 1373. After a week's illness involving great physical and spiritual distress, and which it was thought could culminate only in death, she received sixteen 'shewings' [Middle English spelling for 'showings'] or understandings, of the amazing love of God, whilst she gazed at a crucifix.

Julian was a realist about the human condition and although a mystic, she was completely down-to-earth, even whilst her heart and mind were so utterly in heaven.

It seems to me that it is likely that these are the qualities that make Julian's thought and theology so helpful and relevant for us in our time. Julian understood that God is concerned with the whole person – body, mind and spirit – and I believe that it is her insistence on the fundamental unity of our being with the all-embracing love of God, that has so much to offer us today.

## **What Julian Tells US**

'This revelation' she writes in referring to her mystical experience, 'was made to a simple unlettered creature.....the year of our Lord 1373, on the eighth day of May.' She also tells us that she was thirty and a half years of age at the time, so we know for sure that she was born in the year 1342. There are a few minor details about people who came to visit her on that momentous day, which also have some significance.

There are remarks about the characteristics of God which lead us to think that she have had had splendid parents and there are some references to Saints, and several quotations from other writers.

But that is all she tells us.

Even her real name may be unknown – certainly her surname is – for even the 'Julian' by which we know her may well come from the dedication of the church where she lived in Norwich, St. Julian the Hospitaller or St Julian of Le Mans. The scribe of one manuscript adds a prologue in which he says she is a recluse at Norwich and still alive in the year 1413.



**Inside St Julian's Church, Norwich, Norfolk - Door to Cell (right) of St Julian's.**

## What Other Sources Tell Us

In the archives of the City there are several Wills leaving legacies to Julian by name, or the anchoress St Julian's Church. The first of these, by William Reed in 1394 makes it clear that by this date she was certainly occupying her cell. Others up to 1416 refer to her by name, and as late as 1429 a final Will leaves money to an anchoress in the churchyard

After this there is silence. So, perhaps she died then, at the considerable age of 87 years. We also know that Margery Kempe of Lynn, another mystic – although a very different style of mystic to Julian – visited her sometime around the year 1415. Margery tells us in her book of the wise counsel she received, so quite clearly by this time Julian was widely known and respected. No other external material mentions Julian.

## The anchoress

The cell where Julian lived was under the control of the Benedictine Nuns of Carrow Abbey, about a kilometer down the road. It had been occupied before Julian and was occupied after Julian. Its exact current location is disputed for some evidence suggests it was on the eastern or western side of the churchyard, while other evidence indicates it was attached to the Church. The present cell was rebuilt in 1952, during the post-war reconstruction of the church, on foundations uncovered in 1906 which have strong claims to be the original site.

Wherever it was, we may surmise that Julian began to live there about two years after the events of 1373, which would have been the normal waiting period for anyone who had asked to embrace the solitary life of an anchoress.

The fact that Carrow controlled the cell has led some scholars to think that Julian was herself a member of the Carrow Community when she received the revelations. This has also led to the use of the title 'Dame' Julian which is the customary way of addressing Benedictine Nuns.

However, the presence of her 'curate' at her supposed death-bed, rather than a chaplain, suggests she was a laywoman at the time. If Julian was a parishioner of St Julian's then that curate would have been Father Thomas Whiting, the Vicar. If she lived in this area it is possible that she had received some education from the nuns, or that, as the devout young woman she undoubtedly was, she had visited their houses.



**Sketch of St Julian's Church at Norwich circa 1800's**



Squint inside St Julian's Church on wall of Cell where Julian would have been able to receive communion.



One scholar who has studied the language of Julian's book "Revelations of Divine Love" however, claims that there are traces of northern dialect, which if true, make the reality of her origins even more complicated. The truth is we do not know her origins. Despite Julian's disclaimer that she is 'unlettered' it is clear that somehow she had received some education, and this suggests she came from a wealthy family.

It has even been conjectured that she belonged to the eminent Norfolk families of Erpingham or De Blickling.

Certainly, she would need to have had sufficient means to support herself in the solitary life, for bequests from wills would only have come much later when her reputation became known as a spiritual advisor and anchoress and was well respected.

### Julian's Life-Style

The solitary life has always been accepted as one vocation for Christians. From earliest times right up to the present day, both men and women have responded to such a call. In the England of the Middle Ages it was particularly popular, and Norwich boasts the sites of over 40 hermitages or anchorholds attached to churches, city gates, and other places. Some had more than one room, as is probably the case with Julian's cell, for we know the names of two people who looked after her at various stages. One of them, Sara, herself became an anchoress at St Giles' in Norwich in later years.

The essence of the life was 'withdrawal'. Some people literally went away to remote places, and they are usually called hermits. But some withdrew within society, anchorites and anchoresses, whose 'anchored presence' amid the community was seen both as a challenge to the activism of ordinary people and a kind of symbol of stability in faith.

Their lives of prayer and contemplation were highly regarded by their fellow-Christians (hence perhaps the many bequests to such men and women). Solitaries were often used as counsellors, seeing people in difficulties and providing guidance and direction.

The life was considered an 'order' in itself and there was no need to have been a member of a Religious Community beforehand.

Nor was the life necessarily particularly rigorous. It is thought that it may have been a good deal more congenial than the life of a peasant in the Middle Ages – as at least one had some space and privacy. However it had its own trials – notably the staying-put, though it is unlikely that many would have been literally unable to leave their cells. It was certainly meant to be a disciplined and austere life of prayer.

One of the most popular programs for such a life was the Ancren Riwe [Anchoress Rule] written in the 13th century. It is at very likely that Julian lived by that rule. Certainly the theory that she did gives rise to the inclusion of a cat in several images of her, for a cat was the only creature allowed by the rule, and it would doubtless have been useful in keeping down the rats which would have been common in an area so near the port.

It is also the Ancren Riwe which gives rise to the highly probably idea that Julian's cell had three windows, for the rule gives considerable detail about their construction and appearance. One would have looked into the church (in the spot where the present cell window is – the Squint) so that she could hear the services and receive the Sacrament. One would look onto the churchyard path so that she could counsel those who visited her and one communicated with her servant's room so that she could receive human company and care. The humanity and sanity of the Ancren Riwe would certainly have been suitable for the woman whose character shines so clearly through her book.

### What made Julian?

Although we can say that the revelations themselves were given by God, yet they were given to an ordinary human-being whose background, upbringing and character must have influenced both how they were received and how she transmitted them.

We may know little of her early life, and little of her later years beyond the fact that she lived as an anchoress for a long period and wrote a book, but we do know a great deal about the circumstances of the age in which she lived. It was a time of aggression, insecurity and turmoil. And while she says nothing about contemporary events, they must have been to some degree formative and significant. They also make it the more remarkable that she is best known for that glorious assurance that 'all shall be well.'

Social, political and theological change was in the air. She lived during five reigns and the monarchy often changed hands by violent means. For the whole of her lifetime England was engaged in the Hundred years War and she surely heard of its triumphs and disasters.



Doorway into Julian's Cell  
from inside church

When Julian was six years old the first outbreak of the Black Death occurred, and Norwich, being an important commercial centre and port was badly affected. Historians have claimed that half the population died. Not even enough priests survived to bury the dead, and we may imagine the effects upon a young mind of seeing piles of rotting corpses in the lanes and yards of the city.

Pictures of the Doom, to be seen in many English churches over the chancel arch, with tormented souls being carried down to the flames of hell, must have acquired a particular vividness. The terrible plague struck twice more in Julian's early life.



St Julian's Church at Norwich today  
(Front View)

One of the effects of the Black Death was to exacerbate bad social conditions and the oppression of the poor. Shortages of labour, high taxation, and the bad harvests of the period sent prices soaring. Civil unrest was bound to follow. The Peasant's Revolt in 1381 marked its highpoint.

The causes of the revolt are complex but the imposition of a Poll Tax to finance the war in France acted as a trigger for the rioting. The rich institutions like the monarchy and the Religious Houses which had attracted antagonism by their corruption provided handy targets for looting and carnage. The church was in turmoil. The various Religious Orders were often at logger-heads, and the parish clergy and the mendicant friars threatened each other.

The Papacy was in exile at Avignon, puppet of the secular power, and in 1377 the Great Schism produces rival Popes with all the confusion about obedience which that entailed.

The Lollards had begun preaching with their doctrines being regarded by the religious authorities as dangerous and heretical so they were ruthlessly put down. By the time Julian died, many were being burned alive in the Lollard's Pit which lay just a kilometer from her Cell on the other side of the river. The smoke and flames may well have been visible from her Church cell.

The ferment which issues later in the Reformation, was beginning, and already new ideas were spreading on the Continent. In a port like Norwich, the latest thought from abroad was not long in arriving. Within a city which contained Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian and Benedictine Religious Houses, there was fertile ground for new ideas to be either accepted or rejected.

It is possible that when Julian was young, she may have attended some of the many churches for which Norwich is so famous. There she would have heard sermons reflecting the growing controversies. And gossip of the street-corner and merchants' houses could have easily reached her ears - both before and after - she entered her cell. It was a stimulating but frightening time in which to live. Geoffrey Chaucer, her contemporary, paints a vivid picture of both the horrors and glories of the age.

### Julian's Cultural Background

Although it seems highly probable that Julian could read English, it is considered to be unlikely that she could read Latin. As most of the important works, particularly theological ones - were written in Latin, together with the reality that such books would have been rare and precious, Julian's access to them would have been limited. Popular devotional works had been available since about 1300 and the Bible was translated in 1377. However, the whole matter of the extent to what knowledge Julian had gained is very controversial.



St Julian's current church at back view with reconstructed cell on right.



She quotes from limited sources, yet she seems to have considerable awareness of her spiritual forebears. Certainly her thought is steeped in the writings of St Paul and his letters. However her familiarity with such works may well have come from hearing rather than reading.

Two great figures influenced the mediaeval mind: St Augustine of Hippo and St Benedict. Their ideas were

mediated through such people as Hugh and Richard of St Victor and St Bernard and William of Thierry on the other. From the Augustinian source came an emphasis on intellectual precision and a deep commitment to God and the Benedictine source offered knowledge of a balanced order in the Christian life, with a warm devotion to the sacred humanity of Christ.

Augustinian and Benedictine Houses stood very near to St Julian's Church and the Franciscan House was also close by. The Franciscans laid great stress on Christ's passion and death. Not far up the road were the Dominicans at the Blackfriars Church and they emphasized clarity of thought, precise doctrine and the sanctity of reason.

The teachings of other great English mystics, Richard Rolle; Walter Hilton and the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing, were also well known at the time.

As a trading centre, with many visitors, citizens of Norwich may have also heard reports of the mystical writers on the Continent like Catherine of Siena; Bridget of Sweden and Meister Eckhart.

The ideas of Dionysius the Areopagite, whom Julian mistakenly refers to as St Denis of France, by a popular misconception, were common topics of discussion in spiritual circles. Way back in the 6th Century he had taught the Three Ways – purgation, illumination and union – as the norm of spiritual progress. Although it cannot be claimed with certainty that Julian knew such writers at first hand.

She quotes St Paul and St Peter, though her thought appears to echo William of Thierry, and she appears to have had at least some knowledge of Gregory the Great's Life of St Benedict. In the main however, her claim to be 'unlettered' may well be a serious one.

It is thought, however, that Julian was a woman of her day, as in her writings we see her grappling with many ideas, common to her time and often contentious. She frequently protests her wish to be a totally loyal and obedient daughter of the Church (a wise course in days when the charge of heresy was so brutally dealt with), but she is certainly an adventurous person. Julian is not afraid of difficult issues.



I think it is helpful for us to bear in mind that although Julian's Revelations may well have come as a direct gift from God, she is not above the long struggle to understand their meaning.

### The Outline of the Book

As showings and meditations succeed each other in due order, Julian's thought moves forward. Its development is not too difficult to follow.

1. The Love of God Shown in the Cross
2. Love triumphs over Sin
3. Love Unites the Soul to God
4. Love Brings us to heaven

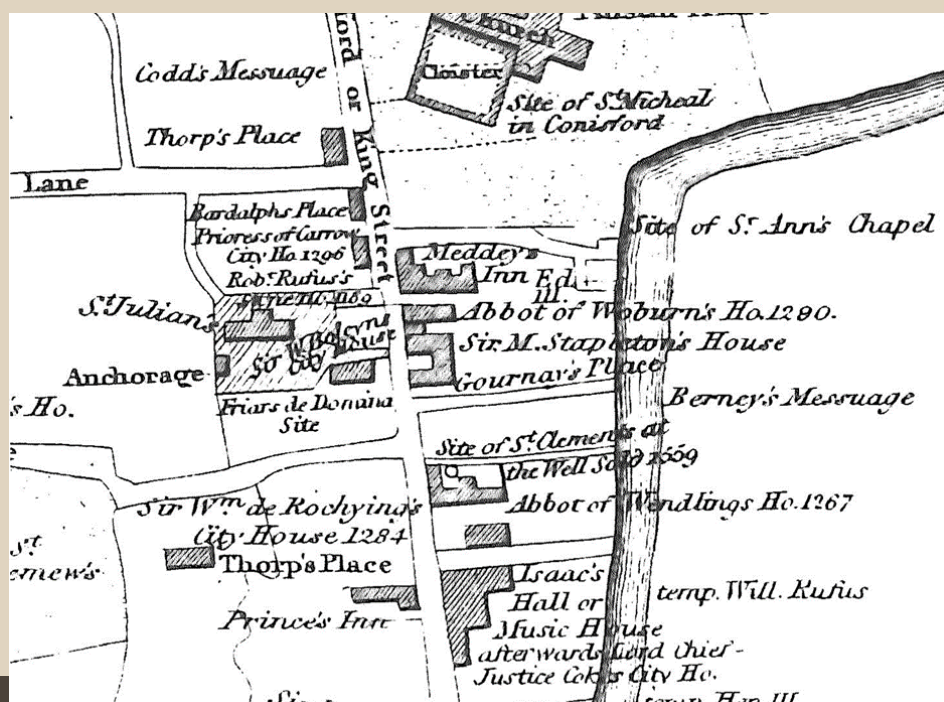
### The Events of 8th May 1373

In her book, Revelations of Divine Love, Julian tells us that some time earlier, she had desired three graces from God:

1. To have the constant recollection of Christ's Passion;
  2. To experience bodily sickness when she was thirty (Christ's age, according to the teaching of her day, when Christ suffered); and
  3. To have three 'wounds'
- i. The wound of true contrition;
  - ii The wound of loving compassion, and
  - iii. The wound of longing for God.

The first two graces were asked for on condition that they were according to God's will. The third grace was asked for unconditionally. This third request for the wounds remained in Julian's mind constantly, although the conditional ones faded.

At the age of thirty and a half years, the conditional wound requests were fulfilled.



Map of Norwich in times of Julian of Norwich. Source – Norfolk Women in History.

For a whole week she was ill. So ill that it was thought she was at the point of death. On the third night – Wednesday – she received the Last Rites of the Church. Then very early on Sunday morning, May 8th, the third Sunday after Easter, her parish priest came again to her bedside. He brought a Cross, and he asked her to set her gaze upon it.

Although she was reluctant to do so at first, because she tells us she had composed herself for death, she obeyed. After a short period in which she felt herself to be dying, her pain suddenly left her and series of wonderful 'showings' (visions) as she calls them, began.

Over the next twelve hours, Julian received 15 revelations of God's love, centering on the Cross of Christ. Then there followed a gap of some hours during which time she says she was terribly afflicted by evil. And then in the early hours of Monday morning, on 16 May, the final (16th) revelation came to her.

Julian describes her experiences in detail. She distinguishes clearly between apparently visual occurrences, mental understandings and spiritual perceptions. She is remarkably clear and almost matter of fact about what happened. She has a realism and even a sense of humour about the events. It would be very hard to prove that she was a neurotic or a mentally imbalanced person.

Sometime after this, thought to be fairly soon, she recorded the sixteen showings and the meanings that she attached to them, in a short book, the text of which still exists. But then she went on to contemplate what had happened for twenty years, during which time God gave her gradually deeper understandings of God's meaning.

Eventually another much longer version of the text was composed and of this longer text, three manuscripts are known to still exist. However, as with the shorter text, they are copies of a much later date than the time of Julian herself.

Several of these documents are held in the British Museum. Whether Julian personally wrote the originals, or dictated them to a scribe – it is hard to tell.

The writing is in Middle English and for most of us requires 'translation'. Printed versions of the texts appears from 1670 onward. Although it was not until Grace Warrack's version in 1901 that "The Revelations of Divine Love" found a wider public readership. The Penguin Classics Book edition by Clifton Wolters in 1966 and the 600th anniversary of the showings in 1973 has led to considerable international interest.

Since then, there has been a great deal of scholarship about both Julian and her book. The book is now translated into many languages and read throughout the world. Julian was included in the Calendar of the Alternative Services Book of the Church of England in 1981, under the title of 'mystic'. Her book is the first one known to be written in English by a woman.

## Julian's Thought

"The Revelations of Divine Love" is a profound and complex book which does not lend itself easily to brief summaries. However, almost every sentence contains wisdom and comfort. It is far from easy to comprehend the whole and its pattern of thought has been compared to a mesh of interlocking ideas, and while the development is precise, it is not easy to discern. Julian has been called one of the greatest of English theologians and her thought repays long and careful study. She was particularly anxious that the book should be read as a whole and not piecemeal.

Julian's subject is love - God's love for humanity, shown forth particularly in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the responsive love in humanity towards their Maker, Keeper and Lover. This love creates all that exists, it sustains and redeems all that is, and it will bring humanity home to God.

It is a love which is unfailing; even in times of sorrow or trial, and continues within us. It is a love beyond all imagining; like the copiously flowing blood of the Saviour on His Cross. It is all-powerful and all-embracing. No trial can overwhelm it, no part of creation is untouched by it.

Julian uses every image possible to underline the wonder of God's love and in them all - particularly in her notable image of God as Mother - there is a marvelous sweetness and gentleness and confidence. God looks on God's creation with pity not with blame and even sin plays some mysterious part in the whole purpose of God, which is to bring all into the bliss of heaven.

It is this apprehension of the fullness of God's love for humanity, which builds in Julian, a remarkable assurance, for which she is well-known. When Julian says that "all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well" she is not just being optimistic. She is reflecting the certainty that God is in control, even when we may feel from time to time, that life is threatening to overwhelm us.

Julian knew suffering, both at the time of her revelations and in her subsequent life, however she is given confidence through the passion and compassion of Christ.

This confidence embraces all that exists - not just the human soul - but our whole being. In the incarnation Jesus entered all of creation - so making it fit again for eternity. This lays upon each individual human person, a responsibility to love themselves and to love their brothers and sisters "All men are as one man, because one Man was all men." (translate to "All human persons are as one because the one person [Jesus Christ] was as all human persons.")

We may sum up Julian's thought as she does herself in the great concluding section of her book:

"Would you know our Lord's meaning? Know it well. Love was his meaning. Who revealed it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For Love..... I saw very certainly that before God made us - God loved us, which love was never abated and never shall be." "He said not 'Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be diseased'; but he said, 'Thou shalt not be overcome.'"

Herbert O'Driscoll writes in *The Mystics Quarterly*, USA, 1985. 'Julian is not only a great lady of the past; she is also a great woman in our future. What Thomas Merton was to spirituality in the 1960s and 1970s, Julian of Norwich is to the 1980s and 1990s.'

I would argue that Julian is also a woman for our time in 2020s – in the 3rd Millennium of Christianity.

#### General Information - The Julian Shrine

The Church of St Julian and Lady Julian's Cell lies between Rouen Road and King Street, about one kilometer from the centre of Norwich, UK.

The Sisters at All Hallows House (next door) welcome people to their Convent for private retreats and rest periods. (Applications made to the Sister in Charge. All Hallows, Rouen Road, Norwich NR1 1QT, England. UK

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# QUESTIONS FOR STUDY:



## QUESTION 01

What is it about the circumstances of the life of Julian of Norwich that resonates with us in our time?

## QUESTION 02

What does Julian of Norwich teach us about life in isolation in a time of uncertainty during COVID-19?

## QUESTION 3

How does Julian of Norwich speak to us across the centuries in terms of her thought, theology and her place in the tradition of the Church?