

Julian of Norwich and a Monastic Note

The Cloak, May 2022

Some of you might have noticed that my car's license plate reads OBJN. Over the years, folks have been curious about what the letters stand for. Some have even asked if I'm an ob-gyn perhaps? I've hastened to assure them that I'm not – so if you are in labor, I'm probably not going to be of great help! Anyway, the letters stand for the designation Oblate of the Julian Order.

The Order of Julian of Norwich is a contemplative Order of the Episcopal Church. The Order's Mother house is now in White Lake, Wis., having moved in the past few years from Waukesha to its present site. There are various degrees of affiliation with the Order including Associate, Oblate, and Members regular – the latter who actually live an enclosed life within the community's property. Associates strive to live by the Order's Rule: Daily Office, at least weekly Eucharist, days of obligation observance, etc. Oblates take vows to follow the same rule of life as those living within the confines of the monastery itself, including the practice of daily meditation and silent prayer.

I have been an Oblate since around 2002 and have succeeded more or less over the years to observe daily and weekly practices in line with the vows I took so many years ago. Among the Order's disciplines is the requirement to have a Spiritual Director, someone to meet with periodically to mutually share what we see God perhaps doing in our daily lives, to examine the state of our prayer lives, and so on. I have been blessed with a Director and friend who has become dear to me over the past few years. He's a Roman Catholic priest by the name of Fr. Peter Creed.

I'm going into all this because Fr. Pete has become immersed in Julian of Norwich's theology, and the last time we were together, he gave me a book that has been out a few years, published in 2016. (We tend to give each other books that mean something to us spiritually and want to share them with each other.) The title of this book is *The Drawing of This Love: Growing in Faith with Julian of Norwich*, by Robert Fruehwirth. I knew Fruehwirth when he was Guardian of the Order, and the book is very well written and worth taking a look at if you are interested.

But first, a word about Julian of Norwich herself. She was born around the year 1342 and lived during the time of the Black Plague that swept across Europe and England during her lifetime. When she was around 30 years of age, she underwent a series of experiences that she understood as direct experiences of God or mystical experiences during a time when she herself was very ill. She survived the illness that she assumed at the time was mortal, and these experiences of God became the source of her writings over the course of her life. She became an anchorite at St. Julian's Church in Norwich, taking vows that consecrated her life to prayer and solitude, walled up within the church's building in a way that allowed her access to

communion through an opening into the church's nave, and also allowed her to give spiritual advice to others who came to her window from the outside world.

Over her lifetime she wrote down her understanding of her early mystical encounter with God, and her text is commonly known as *The Revelations of Divine Love* – easily available today in bookstores and through Amazon. The deep theology embedded in this text earned Julian the designation of Doctor of Theology by the Roman Catholic Church, and her text is the first known work written in English by a medieval woman.

Whether or not you've read Julian's work, you probably know her words: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well" – reported by her to be uttered by Christ in her vision of Him on supposedly her deathbed. I have found comfort in those words, and as pastor have sat with others in times of struggle and talked about God's ultimate promise to us all. There is, in fact, so much to say about Julian's life and work, and many books have been devoted to her theological writing. But in the interest of space here, let me just share a short quote from Fruehwirth's book – since it is currently my own afternoon reading during my daily quiet time. He writes:

All our seeking of God is a result of already having found something of God, and wanting more. ... That it will be helpful to us if we approach our lives now with the belief, with the assumption, that God is already in this moment – not yesterday, not tomorrow, but this moment right in front of us. Practicing this, we open ourselves to the present moment in the assumption that God is here, and that we are already seeing God. (pp. 30-31)

Food for thought folks. So join me and experience Julian's work – revisiting or discovering it for the first time – and nourish your soul in the process.