

Julian of Norwich's words continue to affirm Christ's love

By Beatrice Ganley, SSJ
Guest contributor

This poem's words (at right) kept intruding on my mind as I settled into the guest house at Julian of Norwich's shrine. What drew Eliot to this 14th century woman, I wondered. Those two lines about all being well, along with six other lines used elsewhere in the poem come directly from Julian of Norwich's 14th century work, "A Revelation of Love," or "Showings" as it is titled in a recent translation.

In addition to my attraction to Julian's spirituality, I was drawn to her as the first woman to write a book in the English language, indeed, perhaps the first person to write an autobiographical work in this language.

Norwich has always been a city of churches, more than 60 in Julian's time. Thirty two of those churches are still in use today. In the 14th century, Norwich had at least 50 dwellings who, like Julian, lived in small dwellings attached to various churches.

Located on a busy street, the shrine is an unpretentious site. Near the church and shrine is a small guest house in the care of the community of Anglican Sisters, The Community of the Sacred Passion. Next to the guest house is a library housing a variety of materials related to "Mother Julian," as she is frequently called here.

Julian (c. 1342-1429) lived through three visitations of the Black Death. When she was about 7, 19, and 27, a scourge that took an estimated one-third to one-half of the population devastated England. After the disease had run its course, cattle stood without being milked in the fields and crops went unharvested, the survivors too numbed and horrified to attempt to go one with the daily demands of living.

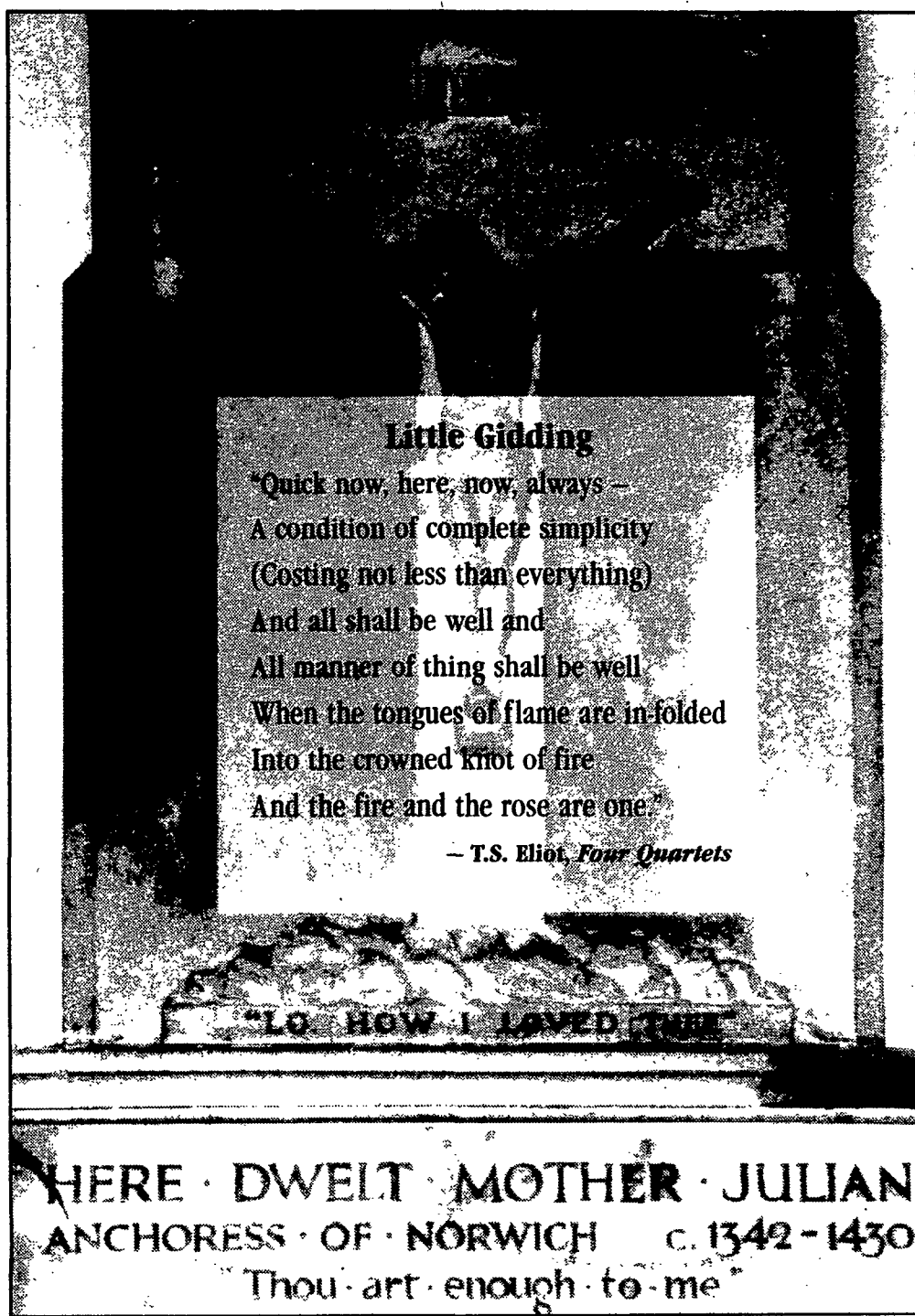
Julian also lived through the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, which must have been comparable to the violence and destruction of the French and Russian revolutions. The church was dealing with popes and antipopes. The Reformation's rumblings were heard in John Wycliffe's preachings and the wandering Lollards. At the same time, heretics were being burned or killed and tossed into a lime pit. Near Julian's cell was a site called "The Lollard Pit."

And yet, from her cell came words of consolation and comfort rather than guilt-inducing exhortations that might urge people to repent and mend their ways. She gazed steadfastly upon Christ's Passion and the human experience of "well-being and woe." Then, after years of meditation and reflection, she concluded that love is the meaning of it all: "Know it well. Love was his meaning ... Christ bears all alone the burden of us ... his goodness never allows us to be alone, but constantly he is with us, and tenderly he excuses us, and always protects us from blame in his sight."

How did Julian come to this knowledge? When she was 30 she became extremely ill, so sick that she believed she would surely die. She was anointed. Her mother was hovering near, ready to close her eyes as she took her last breath. At this time she apparently saw Christ in a series of 16 "showings," which — as soon as she recovered — she quickly wrote down in what is called the short version of her revelation. She spent the next 20 years or so recollecting and pondering this one experience, finally completing an amplified version of the 16 visions.

That's it. One book.

Written by a woman, and, of all things, in English (Latin was still the language for significant writing, especially in matters of theological importance), this work did not seem to get much recognition during her lifetime. Some one must have thought enough of the



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This crucifix hangs in the Julian of Norwich shrine, located in a small room inside the Church of St. Julian in Norwich, England.

book, however, to have rescued it from the depredations of Henry the VIII whose followers burned anything of value when they ransacked the monasteries and other religious houses.

In the 17th century, a scribe's copy of the book was found in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris and subsequently published with little notice. Other editions followed in 1843 and 1847, but again did not receive much attention.

It was not until 1901, when an edition was brought out by Grace Warrack of Edinburgh that it began to emerge as a classic of spirituality.

I've read that Florence Nightingale had a copy of Julian's work with her when she served in the Crimean War. Sir Alec Guinness has been quoted as saying, "So often when I am in low waters spiritually, a reminder of Julian of Norwich comes my way and sends me scurrying to read a few pages of the Revelations." Julian would be pleased. Over and over again she speaks of her "fellow Christians" and her desire that her words may bring them the joy and peace that she knows: "... I was humbly moved in love towards my fellow Christians, that they might all see and know the same as I saw, for I wished it to be a comfort to them all, as it is to me; for this vision was shown for all men, and not for me alone."

Such knowledge did not come easily. She speaks of sleepless nights trying to pull life's paradoxes together: "I cried within me with all my might, beseeching God for help in this fashion: Ah, Lord Jesus, King of bliss, how shall I be comforted, who will tell me what I need to know, if I cannot at this time see it in you?"

We too seek to understand the human experience of "well-being and woe." We

delight in life's joys and cringe at the unavoidable awareness of starving nations, homeless people, and plagues of illness as baffling to us as the Black Death was to the people of Julian's time.

But so much about her is conjecture, probability, and surmise — except for her words; these are strong and unambiguous. So too are the historical facts creating the context in which she lived.

I had spent some time photographing the church, the shrine and the cathedral, so much so that I began to chastise myself for not giving my spirit over to a more formal kind of prayer. Determined to make this a valid spiritual experience, I left my camera in my room and went to spend a few moments in the shrine that opens out from the church.

Except for the altar, a crucifix, and a statue of the Blessed Mother on the window sill, the shrine room is bare. The only other thing in the room is a bench, facing the altar, against the wall.

I sat down on the bench, ready to pray. Nothing. No miracle of conversion like the ones I had read about in the books about Julian. Nothing dramatic at all. I may as well have been in the motherhouse chapel back home, an equally quiet and prayerful setting.

Sneaking in upon me, however, were "words" that seemed to surface in my mind: What are you sitting here for? Be off with you, now. Go happily on your way. You came here to see the city, go see it. Take your friend to lunch. Don't make so much of things. Whist ... be off.

OK, Julian, I responded and got up to leave. On the way out, I stopped to read a small plaque on the wall near the doorway. It ends with these words: "Go on your way rejoicing; live gladly and gaily because of his love."

The words Julian has left are an affirmation of humanity's deepest desires and irrepressible beliefs. Coming to us across the 600 years that separate us from her, they still have a profound effect. Through them, a God reminds us that "everything will be all right."

Quotes from Julian are taken from "Julian of Norwich," "Showings," translated by Edmund Colledge, OSA, and James Walsh, SJ, published by Paulist Press, 1978

The information about Julian comes from several sources, but I am most indebted to Sheila Upjohn's "In Search of Julian of Norwich," published in London by Darton, Longman and Todd (1989). For a fuller treatment of the 14th century readers might try Barbara Tuchman's "A Distant Mirror," or "Katherine," Anya Seton's fictional story of John of Gaunt's mistress, Katherine Swynford, who in great distress visits Julian for counsel.

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