



## Article

# *The Comfort and Challenge of Julian of Norwich's Showings for Contemporary Catholic Spirituality*

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This paper attempts to reclaim a spiritual classic, Julian of Norwich's *Showings*, for a contemporary Catholic audience. I begin by introducing *Showings* and reviewing Julian's use of female, maternal imagery for the divine. Next I engage contemporary scholarship in theological and historical-critical analyses of the text. These analyses establish the Trinitarian and Christocentric character of Julian's theology and properly contextualize Julian's experience and understanding of God as Mother. Then I suggest how Julian's female divine imagery offers both comfort and challenge to contemporary Catholics. I conclude that Julian's Christ-centered Trinitarian theology has enduring value for Catholic spirituality and offer ways to make use of her imagery today.

I approach Julian of Norwich's *Showings* as a student of spirituality influenced by feminist theology and as a lay minister sensitive to the conflicts and tensions among Catholics regarding female imagery for God. Also, I am aware of the danger of romanticizing mysticism and the error of reading contemporary feminist concerns back into Julian's text. I intend for this paper to be a critical and creative analysis that respects the meaning and context of Julian's theology and takes seriously the spiritual concerns of today's Catholics. I imagine my audience to be those who wish to be introduced to Julian and her theology. In particular, I hope to be helpful to those who are concerned about the use of female divine imagery in Catholic spirituality.

### Julian's Spiritual Classic

As a female student of theology, I will never forget my introduction to Elizabeth A. Johnson's *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. Personally, I found the text to be not only deeply inspiring and poetic but also eminently reasonable and orthodox. After studying Johnson's engaging and convincing text, I was hopeful that no one would argue against her thesis that "we need a strong dose of explicitly female imagery to break the unconscious sway that male Trinitarian imagery holds over the imaginations of even the most sophisticated thinkers."<sup>2</sup> Yet nothing much changed in Catholic spirituality; images in liturgy and prayer remain predominantly androcentric. This was before Johnson drew attention over her subsequent text, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, heavily criticized by the United States Conference of Catholic

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2 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 212.

Bishops' Committee on Doctrine.<sup>3</sup> I continue to be cautious about sharing my thoughts and feelings regarding female images of God, for example, as "SHE WHO IS."<sup>4</sup> Imaging God in female terms remains uncomfortable and even scandalous to many Catholics.

Another important moment in my theological education was my introduction to Julian of Norwich's *Showings*. Once again, I found myself inspired by a poetic text conveying the mystery of Trinity in female imagery. Yet in this case the text was medieval rather than modern, more mystical than theological. The author was an anchorite rather than an academic; a venerated mystic rather than a controversial theologian. I wondered if Julian's Trinity could have broader appeal than Johnson's. I wondered if Julian's imagery of the motherhood of God could find greater acceptance among Catholics than other female imagery, such as SHE WHO IS. Could *Showings* contribute a dose of female divine imagery to challenge assumptions and imaginations, as encouraged by Johnson and other feminist theologians, while still offering the comfort Julian intends? This led me to further study of Julian and her text.

Julian of Norwich's *Showings* is considered by many to be a classic text of Western Christian spirituality.<sup>5</sup> According to Philip Sheldrake, SJ, a spiritual classic is a text "that brings us into transforming contact with what is enduring and essential in our religious tradition."<sup>6</sup> Julian was an anchoress, named for the Church of St. Julian in Norwich, England, to which she was attached. *Showings* is Julian's description and theological understanding—written for the spiritual formation of her fellow Christians—of the mystical vision of Christ's passion given to her by grace. Julian dates her mystical experience, "a revelation of love which Jesus Christ, our endless bliss, made in sixteen showings,"<sup>7</sup> to May 13, 1373, when she was 30½ years old. She knew that these showings, initially recorded in her short text, would be "greatly moving for all those who desire God's will."<sup>8</sup> Following twenty years of "inward instruction," she articulated in the long text "with great care" the meaning of the revelation.<sup>9</sup> Her texts, "begun by God's gift and his grace,"<sup>10</sup> remain in print and continue to be studied by Christians and other spiritual seekers.

"(T)he book of revelations of Julian the anchorite of Norwich,"<sup>11</sup> as Julian describes it, was copied and distributed locally until the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century when an English Benedictine, Serenus Cressy, published a print edition in 1670. The earliest extant manuscript is dated 1450. *Showings* is mentioned by French mystic Pierre Poiret in his 1708 encyclopedia of Christian mysticism, *Bibliotheca Mysticorum Selecta*.<sup>12</sup> With the 20<sup>th</sup> century came a number of new translations of *Showings*. With interest in spirituality and mysticism growing, medieval women mystics, such as Julian, were "rediscovered" and "achieved an almost cult status."<sup>13</sup> The medieval devotion to "Jesus Our Mother" became a popular scholarly topic after a 1949 article by André Cabassut, followed by efforts to

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3 USCCB Committee on Doctrine, "Statement on *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, by Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson" (March 24, 2011), 21. The committee denounced Johnson's text for presenting a doctrine of God that "does not accord with authentic Catholic teaching on essential points." <http://dev.usccb.org/about/doctrine/publications/upload/statement-quest-for-the-living-god-2011-03-24.pdf>.

4 Johnson, *She Who Is*, 241-245.

5 All quotations from Julian used in this paper are taken from the translation of her short text (ST) and long text (LT) by Edmund Colledge, OSA, and James Walsh, SJ, *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978). References are given by text (ST or LT), chapter number, and page number. Chapter numbers are consistent across translations; page numbers are particular to Colledge and Walsh's text.

6 Philip Sheldrake, SJ, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 172.

7 LT, 1, 175.

8 ST, 1, 125.

9 LT, 51, 270.

10 LT, 86, 342.

11 LT, 86, 343.

12 Colledge and Walsh, *Julian*, 17.

13 Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 1.

uncover the medieval usage of female God-language, especially by Julian who developed it most fully.<sup>14</sup> Scholars have been attempting to retrieve the “forgotten women in history,” including Julian.<sup>15</sup> Articles and books, both academic and popular, continue to be written about *Showings*, reflecting the enduring and essential character of Julian’s work. Though not a canonized Catholic saint, the church of her anchorhold has been reconstructed and is open today as a parish of the Church of England and a British heritage site. Adjacent is the Julian Centre, with a shrine to Saint Julian, retreat and workshop offerings, and an annual Julian Day celebration each May in commemoration of her visions.<sup>16</sup>

### Maternal Divine Imagery in *Showings*

In the twenty-five chapters of the short text and the eighty-six chapters of the long text of *Showings*, Julian employs a variety of images to illustrate her mystical experience and understanding of God. God as Mother is one of many images in *Showings*, appearing only in the long text, not the short. Julian’s use of maternal imagery and explanation of divine motherhood is found especially in chapters 52 through 63 of the long text. Julian opens chapter 52 with: “And so I saw that God rejoices that he is our Father, and God rejoices that he is our Mother, and God rejoices that he is our true spouse, and that our soul is his beloved wife.”<sup>17</sup> Other descriptions of the Trinity with maternal God-language include:

“For the almighty truth of the Trinity is our Father, for he made us and keeps us in him. And the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother, in whom we are enclosed. And the high goodness of the Trinity is our Lord, and in him we are enclosed and he in us.”<sup>18</sup>

“In our Father we have our protection and our bliss, as regards our natural substance, which is ours by our creation from the beginning; and in the second person, in knowledge and wisdom we have our perfection, as regards our sensuality, our restoration and our salvation, for he is our Mother, brother and savior; and in our good Lord the Holy Spirit we have our reward and our gift for our living and our labour.”<sup>19</sup>

Though she most often speaks of motherhood in reference to the second person of the Trinity, she understands motherhood as triune in God: God’s motherhood of love, motherhood of grace, and motherhood at work.<sup>20</sup> The attributes she ascribes to divine motherhood—love, mercy, grace—she applies variously to the persons of the Trinity. Here is another example: “In the first we have our being, and in the second we have our increasing, and in the third we have our fulfillment. The first is nature, the second is mercy, the third is grace.”<sup>21</sup> There is no conflict or division, for within this Trinity there is “endless intent and assent” and “full accord.”<sup>22</sup> Thus the Trinity speaks to us:

“I am he, the power and goodness of fatherhood; I am he, the wisdom and the lovingness of motherhood; I am he, the light and the grace which is all blessed love; I am he, the Trinity; I am he, the unity;

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14 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 110-111.

15 Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 77.

16 See <http://juliancentre.org/>.

17 LT, 52, 279.

18 LT, 54, 285.

19 LT, 58, 294.

20 LT, 59, 297.

21 LT, 58, 294.

22 LT, 53, 283.

I am he, the great supreme goodness of every kind of thing; I am he who makes you to love; I am he who makes you to long; I am he, the endless fulfilling of all true desires.”<sup>23</sup>

Between our souls and the Trinity there is a reciprocity that is often paradoxical, expressed by Julian in a number of ways, for example: “before he made us he loved us, and when we were made we loved him,”<sup>24</sup> “we are in God and he is in us,”<sup>25</sup> “(o)ur soul is created to be God’s dwelling place, and the dwelling of our soul is God,”<sup>26</sup> and “he says: I love you and you love me, and our love will never divide in two.”<sup>27</sup> Created in God’s image, the soul is “a created trinity, like the uncreated blessed Trinity, known and loved from without beginning.”<sup>28</sup> Thus our substance is of the Trinity, whereas our sensuality is exclusively of Christ our Mother.

Through the Incarnation, God joined himself to us in Mary’s womb, uniting our substance and sensuality, in endless union in Christ as the perfect human being. Thus our Lady is “our mother, in whom we are all enclosed and born of her in Christ,” while Christ is “our true Mother, in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come.”<sup>29</sup> A mother carries her child within her womb until childbirth, but our Mother Jesus “bears us for joy and for endless life.” A mother gives her child her own milk, but our Mother Jesus feeds us with “the blessed sacrament...the precious food of true life.” A mother lets her child rest at her breast, but our Mother Jesus leads us into his breast through “his sweet open side.”<sup>30</sup> Julian links our Mother Christ Jesus with “our mother Holy Church.”<sup>31</sup> We do not need to go far to know who we are, but go to “Holy Church, into our Mother’s breast, that is to say into our own soul, where our Lord dwells.”<sup>32</sup>

### Analyses of Julian’s Theology

Maternal divine imagery is found in the Old Testament (for example, the Prophet Isaiah describes God’s labor pains), the New Testament (for example, Matthew’s Jesus speaks of himself as a mother hen), Patristic spirituality (for example, Ambrose of Milan writes of God’s breasts and womb), and medieval spirituality (for example, Anselm of Canterbury, William of St. Thierry, Bernard of Clairvaux and Julian of Norwich refer to Christ as mother).<sup>33</sup> God as Mother is the image Julian is most associated with, but not because it is unique to her. Rather, it is because Julian most fully develops this imagery from scripture and tradition. It is with “theological precision” that Julian “applies this symbolism to the Trinitarian interrelationships,” rooting her Trinity in divine motherhood and centering her theology on Christ as our saving Mother.<sup>34</sup> According to Jean Leclercq, OSB, “(t)hrough her experience and her understanding, she grasps the total mystery of God, as far as this is possible in this life, and she wants to communicate to us a glimpse of it.”<sup>35</sup> The maternal divine imagery in *Showings* has been the focus of both popular and academic studies. Contemporary theological scholarship establishes Julian’s theology of divine motherhood as Trinitarian and relational, Christocentric and incarnational.

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23 LT, 59, 295-296.

24 LT, 53, 283.

25 LT, 54, 286.

26 LT, 54, 285.

27 LT, 58, 293.

28 LT, 55, 287.

29 LT, 57, 292.

30 LT, 60, 298.

31 LT, 61, 302.

32 LT, 62, 303.

33 Kathryn Reinhard, “Joy to the Father, Bliss to the Son: Unity and the Motherhood Theology of Julian of Norwich,” *Anglican Theological Review* 89, no.4 (2007): 630-631.

34 Jean Leclercq, OSB, preface to Edmund Colledge, OSA, and James Walsh, SJ, *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 9.

35 Leclercq, preface, 11.

Margaret Ann Palliser cites three elements of Julian's economy of salvation: trinitarian love, incarnation, and oneing. These elements work together as "a single mystery of love," as Palliser explains: *love unmade* is God the Father, "the source of the mystery of Trinitarian love"; *love made* is the soul in God, "our ontological status in Christ by virtue of his incarnation"; and *love given* is the life of love, "our practice of the virtue of charity, made possible by the action of the Holy Spirit." Thus Julian's theology is "christo-trinitarian"; the Christ event—the "oneing of our sensuality to our substance in himself in his incarnation"—is central to our participation in intratrinitarian love.<sup>36</sup> The incarnation is the "ground" of Christ's motherhood, and the "tender, compassionate service of a mother who suffers for and with her children becomes the primary image Julian uses to portray the work of Christ's motherhood of mercy."<sup>37</sup> For Julian, Christ is not *like* a mother; rather, mothers are *like* Christ. Christ is the archetypal mother, "our true mother from whom all motherhood derives." The same is true of God the father, from whom all fatherhood derives. Human parenthood reflects intratrinitarian reality.<sup>38</sup>

Palliser's theological analysis begins from Julian's experience of Christ as archetypal mother; in contrast, Liz Herbert McAvoy's analysis begins from women's—and especially Julian's—lived experiences. For McAvoy, Julian uses motherhood as a way of expressing divinity. Julian's lived experiences as a female enable Julian "to inscribe the female onto the divine."<sup>39</sup> In *Showings*, God as Mother is not "a theoretical idea used as an analogy to explicate theological insight," but rather "motherhood becomes the matrix out of which develops a means of access to the divine."<sup>40</sup> Julian's theology of Christ's motherhood "underpins her entire exegetical process."<sup>41</sup> When an ailing Julian experiences the vision of Christ's passion, Julian's suffering body merges with Christ's suffering body in "a mystical moment of coincidence of God with humankind." McAvoy refers to this as "the feminization of Christ's body."<sup>42</sup> Julian later describes the uniting of God with humanity—the oneing of substance and sensuality—in Mary's womb at the incarnation. In both instances, child (Julian/human) is united in mutual love with mother (Christ/God). The centrality of the incarnation makes Mary's role critical role in the economy of salvation: "through her and her female humanity the entire Trinity is transformed and made more relevant to all of humankind."<sup>43</sup> Julian unites the feminine and the divine, McAvoy argues, and rescues traditionally inferior feminine and maternal qualities by transforming them into a means of accessing divine mystery.<sup>44</sup>

Though McAvoy demonstrates that a female, maternal imagery is central, Kathryn Reinhard reminds us that Julian is not elevating the female experience nor disregarding males. Rather, Julian's theology is "profoundly holistic."<sup>45</sup> While Julian clearly links the bodies of women to the body of Christ, Julian always uses a masculine pronoun when referring to Christ or God as mother. Julian uses "He," never "She." Julian neither denies the maleness of the historic Christ nor attempts to make Christ a woman. Rather, Julian understands the saving work of Christ's passion as female, maternal work. The motherhood of Christ is revealed in his "labor and suffering of birth bringing about new life."<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Julian sees us enclosed in Christ our Mother, and thus simultaneously enclosed in Mary the mother of Christ. This way God is incarnate in a female body as well as a male body. Reinhard explains that through this "dual incarnation" Julian shows that male and female, Father and Mother, are equally present realities in God. Just like a male body, "the female body is a similarly legitimate fleshly en-

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36 Palliser, Margaret Ann, OP, *Christ, Our Mother of Mercy: Divine Mercy and Compassion in the Theology of the Showings of Julian of Norwich* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), 107-108.

37 Palliser, *Christ, Our Mother*, 116.

38 Palliser, *Christ, Our Mother*, 116.

39 Liz Herbert McAvoy, "'The Moders Service': Motherhood as Matrix in Julian of Norwich," *Mystics Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (December 1998): 183.

40 McAvoy, "The Moders Service," 194.

41 McAvoy, "The Moders Service," 184.

42 McAvoy, "The Moders Service," 185.

43 McAvoy, "The Moders Service," 188.

44 McAvoy, "The Moders Service," 193.

45 Reinhard, "Joy to the Father," 644.

46 Reinhard, "Joy to the Father," 638.

closure for God.”<sup>47</sup> According to Julian’s trinitarian theology, “the fatherhood of God is complemented by the motherhood of God and the lordship of God.” Julian unites God’s fatherhood and God’s motherhood in the Trinity, into which we are brought when enclosed in Christ. We are not only enclosed by the Trinity, the Trinity is enclosed in us—the “created trinities” of our souls.<sup>48</sup> The wholeness of creation in the image of God—male and female—is restored. As Reinhard explains, in Christ our Mother “we are reunited not only with God our Father but also with each other.”<sup>49</sup>

Julian’s theology of Christ as Mother is relational and “deeply Trinitarian,” as Reinhard writes.<sup>50</sup> According to Julian, our enclosure in Christ brings us into the intimate life of the Trinity, into communion with the divine ultimate mystery. We become a part of these reciprocating relationships; just as we are enclosed in the Trinity, the Trinity is enclosed in us. With our souls as created trinities, we must be truly loved as God loves, and we can truly love as God loves. If the human soul mirrors divine communion, then our identity is defined by divine love and our purpose is living in and out that divine love. Reinhard describes this reciprocity: “God loves his creation in the same manner that God relates in love to God’s self within the Trinity;” God is enclosed in us and “we bear God out into the world.” We are birthed into Mother Christ, and we birth Christ’s love into the world “in our actions towards our brothers and sisters.”<sup>51</sup> Julian wrote, “I saw that every kind of compassion which one has for one’s fellow Christians in love is Christ in us.”<sup>52</sup> As she states at the end of her long text, love is the meaning. Her theology is neither self-seeking nor self-promoting, but is relational, directed toward reconciliation and communion. “Incorporation into the wholeness of the Trinity is a restoration of the wholeness of creation,” as Reinhard explains.<sup>53</sup>

### Julian’s Historical-Cultural Context

Historical-critical analyses of the text properly contextualize Julian’s experience and understanding of God as Mother. Taking Julian’s theology of divine motherhood out of context has led to confusion and misunderstanding regarding Julian’s sources and intentions. According to contemporary scholarship, Julian’s spirituality reflects her medieval context. Julian was not unconventional to speak of God as Mother; it was neither individualistic nor self-indulgent for Julian to use female imagery for the divine.

Caroline Walker Bynum debunks contemporary myths of Julian’s originality and feminism by locating Julian within her historical context. The medieval use of images of divine motherhood did not originate with *Showings*. Bynum points to the popularity of maternal imagery with twelfth-century Cistercian monks, who likely borrowed it from the Benedictine Anselm of Canterbury. The Cistercians and other cloistered authors applied maternal images to male authority figures—abbots, bishops, and the apostles—as well as to God and Christ. They found such images particularly suited to their community life and cloistered setting.<sup>54</sup> This does not mean that they held mothers in higher esteem or that they were endeavoring to speak especially to women. Rather, references to the motherhood of Christ reflect two broad twelfth-century trends: the rise of affective spirituality and the feminization of religious language.

Bynum explains that the rise of affective spirituality focused on the humanity of Christ and privileged analogies from human relationships. Emotional, “homey images” were employed to emphasize the “approachability” of a

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47 Reinhard, “Joy to the Father,” 639.

48 Reinhard, “Joy to the Father,” 643-644.

49 Reinhard, “Joy to the Father,” 645.

50 Reinhard, “Joy to the Father,” 642.

51 Reinhard, “Joy to the Father,” 643.

52 ST, 13, 149.

53 Reinhard, “Joy to the Father,” 645.

54 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 112-113.

“loving and accessible” God. The focus was more on creation and incarnation than on atonement and judgment; the tone was more optimistic and conveyed “a sense of momentum toward a loving God.” Rather than highlighting sacrifice, increased Eucharistic piety and attention to the passion of Christ emphasized “the fact that Christ is what we are.” Such spirituality countered the major heresies of the time such as dualism and antisacredotalism.<sup>55</sup> Medieval physiology held that a mother’s milk was processed blood, thus this and other nurturing, maternal images could be applied to Christ who feeds us with his body and blood in the Eucharist and whose wound flowed with blood as a mother’s breast would with milk.<sup>56</sup> There was an increase in devotion to Mary, Mother of God, and interest in female saints. Such Marian devotion and Eucharistic piety as well as fidelity to Holy Mother Church all figure in Julian’s theology of Trinitarian motherhood.

Bynum explains that female language was a better fit for the spirituality, physiology, and culture of the late middle ages, versus the images of warfare and masculinity more popular in tenth- and eleventh-century monasteries. Feminized religious language made use of medieval physiology and cultural perceptions of women to describe God as generative, sacrificial, loving, tender, and nurturing,<sup>57</sup> to describe monks and friars as humble, “weak women,”<sup>58</sup> and abbots as bearing “the burdens of pastoral responsibility” as a mother would a child.<sup>59</sup> Amid the deterioration of women’s political and social status<sup>60</sup> and the perpetuation of the view of women as defective physiologically, spiritually, and morally,<sup>61</sup> Bynum reminds us that the medieval use of motherhood imagery, especially in male monastic communities, “shows at least as much hostility toward actual mothers and actual women as it does romanticizing of them.”<sup>62</sup> Likewise, it would be an anachronism to identify Julian or her use of maternal imagery as feminist.

Though the spirituality of Julian’s time was relatively optimistic, the socio-political atmosphere would not have engendered optimism. According to the date she gives of her revelation, Julian was born around December 1342. This means she wrote *Showings* in the midst of the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453). Rather than preaching peace, the Church supported the war and blessed the expeditions of the kings. Every major religious order had a presence in the city of Julian’s anchorhold, Norwich. As a busy port city, “the gateway to England,” Norwich was an important center for trade and transportation.<sup>63</sup> As a child and young woman, Julian survived two outbreaks of the Black Death (1348 and 1369). A severe famine (1369) and economic hardship led to social unrest and the Peasants’ Revolt (1381). Grace Jantzen suggests this may be why Julian in *Showings* expresses such sensitivity around pain and death and addresses the question of suffering in a universe loved by God.<sup>64</sup>

This was also the time of the Avignon Papacy, resulting in the Great Schism (1377). Followers of Church reformer John Wycliff were severely persecuted and burned at the stake at Lollard Pit in Norwich (1397). Perhaps this is why *Showings* stresses love and unity among Christians, as Jantzen suggests.<sup>65</sup> Rather than retaining her mystical experience as a private possession and personal devotion, Julian thoughtfully documented and shared its revelatory message of divine comfort and tenderness with her fellow Christians struggling in an environment of chaos and conflict. Julian begins and ends *Showings* with references to divine love. In the first chapter of the long text she identifies Christ’s revelation to her as of love and in the final chapter she sums up the significance

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55 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 129-130.

56 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 132-133.

57 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 131.

58 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 138.

59 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 147.

60 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 142-143.

61 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 135.

62 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 144-145.

63 Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 6.

64 Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 7-8.

65 Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 11-12.

of her spiritual experience: “Know it well, love was his meaning...I saw very certainly in this and in everything that before God made us he loved us, which love was never abated and never will be.”<sup>66</sup> Julian is oft-quoted for her confident assertion that “all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well.”<sup>67</sup>

Julian experience of the motherhood of God inspired her life of holiness and prayer. Jantzen suggests it is possible Julian was educated by Benedictines nuns at Carrow Abbey school in Norwich. Julian shows clear signs of an education, especially between the composition of the short text, written soon after the revelation, and the long text, written at least twenty years later. Some assume that Julian was a nun, but Jantzen states there is no evidence of this.<sup>68</sup> Rather than enter a convent, Julian chose the vocation of an anchorite or anchoress: “to be set apart for prayer and communion with God, to seek his presence and develop holiness of life.” Anchorites were known for their sanctity and spiritual guidance. In her anchorhold, Julian would have had a window to the church interior and a window where people could come for counsel. Margery Kempe, another English mystic, writes of receiving spiritual direction from Julian (1412-1413).<sup>69</sup>

It is not clear when Julian began to live as an anchoress. Some suggest she may have been a wife and mother prior to entering the anchorhold. Perhaps she wrote so vividly about motherhood in light of personal experience.<sup>70</sup> Though it is unknown if Julian was a mother, we know she experienced a relationship with her own mother, who was with her at her near-deathbed when she received Christ’s revelations.<sup>71</sup> Yet only God could live up to the ideals Julian held regarding motherhood; Julian wrote: “This fair and lovely word ‘mother’ is so sweet and so kind itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone or to anyone except of him and to him who is the true Mother of life and of all things.”<sup>72</sup> Julian’s intent is not to elevate mothers over fathers or females over males, but rather to highlight God over all people, loving all without end. Julian makes it clear that everything she writes is meant to apply generally, “to all my fellow Christian...to the comfort of us all.”<sup>73</sup>

### **The Comfort and Challenge of Julian’s Divine Imagery**

I hope that the above theological and historical-critical analyses have established Julian’s Christocentric Trinitarian theology as sound and orthodox, and that she was a holy and devout woman of the medieval Church who dedicated her life to God and her fellow Christians. The sources of her imagery included scripture and tradition, her female embodiment and her mystical experience. Her intentions were to share the good news of God’s motherly love and teach us to love God and others in return. As she wrote, “This revelation was given to my understanding to teach our souls wisely to adhere to the goodness of God.”<sup>74</sup> Thus I believe Catholics need not be scandalized by Julian’s female imagery, but rather be comforted by her message of divine love. Even Pope Benedict XVI appreciates Julian’s theology, endorsing her in his general audience after visiting the United Kingdom in 2010. Though Benedict finds “a certain daring” in Julian’s likening of divine love to motherly love, he also affirms Julian’s mystical theology, stating that she “understood the central message of the spiritual life.”<sup>75</sup>

Broader acceptance and appreciation of Julian’s theology allows Catholics to not only draw comfort from her divine imagery but to benefit from the spiritual challenge it offers. Patricia A. Fox explains how cognitive-affective

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66 LT, 86, 342.

67 ST, 13, 149.

68 Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 18.

69 Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 29.

70 McAvoy, “The Moders Service,” 186-187.

71 ST, 10, 142.

72 LT, 60, 299.

73 ST, 6, 133.

74 LT, 6, 184.

75 Pope Benedict XVI, “General Audience: Julian of Norwich” (December 1, 2010), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20101201.pdf](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20101201.pdf).

dissonance provides “entry into holy mystery.”<sup>76</sup> Fox credits Julian for using “the dissonant power of language to uncover some of the deeper mysteries of the triune God.” Julian’s use of Christ as Mother challenges all gender stereotypes and allows all human beings to find themselves reflected in Christ. Through oneing with Christ, men and women participate in the divine nature. Distinctions between the masculine intellect and feminine affectivity are subverted as Julian attributes both divine Wisdom and Motherhood to the male physical form of Christ. Julian’s trinitarian theology is true to the Christian conception of the Trinity as “difference in communion.”<sup>77</sup> The liberating power of *Showings* allows Catholic imaginations to experience God in newer and deeper ways and offers alternatives to the limited imagery currently found in most prayer and liturgy.

This effect, of course, is very comforting to Catholics who sympathize with feminism. Sandra M. Schneiders explains that feminist spirituality endeavors to reclaim “the likeness of women to the divine, rehabilitate the bodily as the very locus of that divine likeness, and the right of women to participate in the shaping of religion and culture, i.e., the realm of the ‘spirit.’”<sup>78</sup> While Julian was not a feminist, her theology can contribute to each of these endeavors. Throughout much of Christian history, God has been described as manlike or metasexual and Godliness as male or asexual. This is a problem because it suggests a “fundamental incompatibility of the Godhead with femaleness,” as Kari Elisabeth Børresen explains.<sup>79</sup> Børresen finds in *Showings* an “inclusive description of God both as Father and as Mother.” Julian applies this “divine wholeness” to humans as well, for in the oneing of the triune God with created humanity, the spiritual and bodily elements of humanity are unified.<sup>80</sup> In contrast to what the Church typically offers, Julian offers them a “fully Godlike, Christomorphic and female role model.” For Børresen, this theology “overcomes the gender hierarchy of traditional typology” and can heal the “androcentric duality of traditional doctrine.”<sup>81</sup>

While Julian’s imagery of God’s motherhood is affirming, it is not without its limitations. Images shape perceptions of reality, as Brita Gill-Austern explains. Gill-Austern acknowledges the “deep wounding to women’s subjectivity in the idolatry and exclusivity of male images of God.” She cites research on the effects of male God images and patriarchal religious beliefs on the well-being of women; especially affected are women’s self-concept, self-esteem, and sense of being loved by God. She explains that “images of God and self are closely connected; a change in one often brings a change in the other.” For example, compared to her short text, Julian’s long text contains fewer self-disparaging comments.<sup>82</sup> While Gill-Austern encourages the inclusion of maternal images in contemporary spirituality, such as Julian offers in *Showings*, she does so with caution. Gill-Austern considers not only the *quantity* of female images, but also the *quality* of these images. She calls for the inclusion of “liberating” female images, not just “projections of the culturally feminine onto God,” as is sometimes the case with maternal imagery.<sup>83</sup> In this way, Julian’s use of strictly maternal female imagery could be a challenge to Catholics who agree with Gill-Austern. In *She Who Is*, Johnson explains that if motherhood is the only female imagery used, it “may subtly undermine women’s search for identity in their whole person apart from the relationship and role

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76 Patricia A. Fox, “The Trinity: Gender and the Role of Dissonance,” in *Gender in Theology, Spirituality and Practice*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill, Diego Irarrazaval, and Elaine M. Wainwright (London: SCM, 2012), 96.

77 Fox, “The Trinity,” 100.

78 Sandra M. Schneiders, “Feminist Spirituality: Christian Alternative or Alternative to Spirituality?” in *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, 2nd ed., ed. Joann Wolski Conn (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1996), 36.

79 Kari Elisabeth Børresen, “Female Godlanguage in Christian Spirituality,” in *Spirituality and Society in the New Millennium*, ed. Ursula King (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), 35.

80 Børresen, “Female Godlanguage,” 42.

81 Børresen, “Female Godlanguage,” 43.

82 Brita Gill-Austern, “She Who Desires: The Transformative Power of Subjectivity in Women’s Psychological and Spiritual Experience,” in *Psyche and Spirit: Dialectics of Transformation*, ed. W. W. Meissner and Chris R. Schlauch (Lanham, MD: University Press, 2003), 164.

83 Gill-Austern, “She Who Desires,” 165.

of mothering.” In this case, the challenge is to “reclaim mothering as a liberating power, rather than sail off into romantic ideology,” as Johnson suggests.<sup>84</sup>

Quantity and quality of imagery is important, yet, as Patricia Donohue-White notes, all images have limits. Donohue-White explains that there can be “no single, all-encompassing symbol that exhausts the meanings of our relationship to the divine.” Additionally, overuse of one image can distort the human-divine relationship as well as relationships between human beings and between humanity and creation. Donohue-White argues for the inclusion of “an array of symbols and metaphors that can serve to enrich and expand our relationship with God and the world.” Julian’s theology illustrates this kind of inclusion, as Donohue-White points out. Julian uses a plurality of images for God in *Showings*: lord, father, spouse, lover, truth, love, peace, wisdom, and mother. While maternal imagery can be tainted by stereotypes used to perpetuate the oppression of women, Donohue-White also names its benefits: God’s motherhood affirms “embodiment, materiality, dependence, vulnerability, relationality, sustenance, and care for all that lives and serves life.”<sup>85</sup> Thus, *Showings* offers not only a dose of affirming female imagery, but also a diversity of images for God to challenge our imaginations and assumptions, pushing us beyond our comfort zones and deeper into the divine mystery.

### Realizing the Value of *Showings*

At the start of the recent Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis was asked in an interview with *Crede* magazine about God’s mercy and its relation to biblical images of God’s womb, “the maternal insides of God.” The Pope’s response was that God’s maternity is not widely understood, nor is this “popular language” for God. “Therefore,” the Pope stated, “I prefer to use tenderness, proper to a mother, the tenderness of God, tenderness born from the paternal insides.” Despite his preference to speak of God’s tenderness rather than God as Mother, the Pope did affirm: “God is Father and Mother.”<sup>86</sup> I know other Catholics who feel the same way; they experience and understand God as Father *and* Mother, but they do not speak of female imagery, worried they may cause confusion, misunderstanding, or scandal; I certainly can relate to their caution. However, if we do not attempt to integrate female, maternal images for God into contemporary spirituality, we will not benefit from the comfort or challenge such imagery offers for our transformation.

Introducing divine maternal imagery in liturgy and prayer is the surest way to realize its transformational effect. For Catholics, liturgy is the source and summit of Christian life, as in *lex orandi, lex credenda, lex vivendi*. This Latin phrase means the rule of prayer is the rule of belief is the rule of life, or as we pray so we believe and live. If we pray together in liturgy with comforting and challenging images, such as God as Mother, our faith and practice will be affected. Julian’s own theology was grounded in prayer and participation in the liturgy of St. Julian’s Church; the text of *Showings* contains some of Julian’s prayers of praise and petition. It seems reasonable to suggest that we incorporate Julian’s theology and imagery into contemporary Catholic prayer and liturgy. At this point I am not suggesting inclusion in the Eucharistic Liturgy, but perhaps in the Liturgy of the Hours, paraliturgical celebrations, and in the private prayer of individuals or small groups.

Thus as I conclude, I wish to humbly offer some simple prayer ideas. I offer these suggestions not to cause scandal, but to as ways to realize the transforming affect that Julian’s imagery might have on contemporary Catholic spirituality. This is a prayer from *Showings* addressed to God as triune Mother that may be appropriate for a reconciliation service, Lenten service, or other penitential setting: “My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my beloved Mother, have mercy on me. I have made myself filthy and unlike you, and I may not and cannot make

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<sup>84</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 177.

<sup>85</sup> Patricia Donohue-White, “Reading Divine Maternity in Julian of Norwich,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 24.

<sup>86</sup> Pope Francis, “Text of Pope’s Interview with Italian Jubilee Publication ‘Crede,’” *Zenit* (December 3, 2015), <https://zenit.org/articles/text-of-pope-s-interview-with-italian-jubilee-publication-crede/>.

it right except with your help and grace.”<sup>87</sup> Using one of Julian’s Trinitarian formulations, an opening greeting or closing blessing for a liturgical service may be: “May the almighty truth of the Father, the deep wisdom of the Mother, and the High Goodness of the Lord be with us all.”<sup>88</sup> A possible way to close intercessory prayer addressed to Christ as Mother may be: “We ask this through Christ our Lord and Mother. Amen.” Inclusion of such imagery in a doxology may be: “Glory be to the Father, and to Christ the Mother, and to the Holy Spirit.” Hymnody drawing on Julian’s poetic text is another way to introduce *Showings* through prayer and liturgy, similar to Carol Browning’s musical piece based on Julian’s “All will be well” verse.<sup>89</sup>

When asked by *Credere* how discovery of a more compassionate, emotive God could affect people, the Pope responded that it would “lead us have a more tolerant, more patient, more tender attitude.” Then he called for a “revolution of tenderness,” a term he ascribes to his fellow synodal bishops:

“The revolution of tenderness is what we have to cultivate today as the fruit of this Year of Mercy: God’s tenderness towards each one of us. Each one of us must say: ‘I am an unfortunate man, but God loves me thus, so I must also love others in the same way.’”<sup>90</sup>

It seems to me that the Pope could have easily cited Julian of Norwich, not only in this interview with *Credere* but throughout the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Julian, who called for the same kind of spiritual transformation in response to “our tender Mother Jesus,”<sup>91</sup> closed her short text of *Showings* with this appeal: “God wants us always to be strong in our love, and peaceful and restful as he is towards us, and he wants us to be, for ourselves and our fellow Christians, what he is for us. Amen.”<sup>92</sup> Perhaps for the next Jubilee Year we will be ready to speak of the tender mercy of our divine Mother.

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87 LT, 61, 301.

88 LT, 54, 285.

89 Carol Browning, “All Shall Be Well,” musical score (Chicago: GIA, 2005).

90 Pope Francis, “Text of Pope’s Interview.”

91 LT, 60, 298.

92 ST, 25, 170.