

Mother's Day 2024
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“Jesus Christ, who opposed good to evil, is our true Mother. We have our being from him, where the foundation of motherhood begins, with all the sweet protection of love which endlessly follows...As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. Our Father wills, our Mother works, our good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms. And therefore it is our part to love our God in whom we have our being, reverently thanking and praising him for our creation, mightily praying to our Mother for mercy and pity, and to our Lord the Holy Spirit for help and grace.”¹

So writes Julian of Norwich, a 14th century mystic who while gravely ill, on the brink of death, was given sixteen revelations from God, revelations that gave her the meaning of not only her suffering but all suffering, and all sin. And she deeply enmeshed that sin and suffering in the over-arching, undefeatable, all-powerful love of God. We have two texts from her, one short and one long, elaborating on these revelations. They are the first known texts in English that were written by a woman.

The image of God as Mother in Christianity is not original with Julian. We find it in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament. We find it in various theologians and mystics prior to Julian. We find it in artistic and poetic representations, and particularly certain conventions in the portrayal of Mary the God-bearer, enthroned with her child in ways that are also used to show God the Father enthroned with the crucified Jesus.

Julian emphasizes God the Mother as a way of showing how entirely and utterly comprehensive, how relentless and undefeatable, is God's love for us. God's love is the basis of our creation and our ongoing lives and of our salvation. It is eternal. It is intimate and immediate. It is as deep as deep can be. It is part of the very Being of God, just as much as is God's power or God's Fatherhood. Indeed, for Julian God the Mother is the second Person of the Trinity, the source and direction of all wisdom and loving-kindness, just as the first Person, God the Father, is the source and direction of all power and goodness; along with the light and grace of the third Person, God the Holy Spirit. And, says Julian, “in these three is all our life: nature, mercy[,] and grace, of which we have mildness, patience, and pity, and hatred of sin and wickedness.”² And Christ our Mother embodies all these things as both fully divine and fully human.

Indeed, Christ our Mother is the revelation, the assurance, that God loves us precisely as who we are as living human beings, human in our sensuality, our use of and reliance on our senses, and in our bodiliness, not despite it. Sensuality is always a form of connectedness between ourselves and the rest of the world; it is in and through our senses, our bodies, that we encounter the world, that we comprehend the world, that we respond to the world. And for

¹ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, translation and critical introduction by Edmund Colledge, OSA, and James Walsh, SJ. Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978). Long Text Chap. 59, p. 296.

² *Showings*, Chap 59, p 296.

Julian, this sensuality, this connectedness is part of the very being of God. It's not secondary, or something that comes into being only in creation. And God affirms that sensuality and connectedness, God insists on it, in the incarnation of Christ.

And when Julian looks for the closest, fullest human reflection, human embodiment of this being of God, expressed in the love of God, she looks to human motherliness, for "The mother's service is nearest, readiest and surest: nearest because it is most natural, readiest because it is most loving, and surest because it is truest." Even so, "No one ever might or could perform this office fully, except only him."³ That is, human mothering—no matter who is doing it, no matter how strong and good and true it is—comes from Christ's love and resembles it; yet at the same time, human mothering is never complete, or full, or perfect. But it will be. In and through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

God's love for us is intense. It is fierce. It is undefeatable. It is intimated. There's nothing abstract or distant about it. It is immediate, urgent. It is the fabric of our daily life, no matter our circumstances or experience. Even when we sin, even when we suffer for our sins or the sins of others, God's love is there. In Julian, it is the motherliness of God that underscores and emphasizes this. And so, in her sixteenth and final revelation, Julian passes along these words from God through Christ: "He did not say: You will not be troubled, you will not be belaboured, you will not be disquieted; but he said: You will not be overcome."⁴

"As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother." "And in accepting our nature [our true Mother Jesus] gave us life, and in his blessed dying on the Cross he bore us to endless life. And since that time, now and ever until the day of judgment, he feeds us and fosters us, just as the great supreme loving of motherhood wishes..."⁵

So happy Mother's Day.

Even so, Mother's Day as we know it tends to be overly commercialized, and in a highly sentimentalized, quasi-pious way. In our time, Mother's Day is firmly connected to certain understandings of gender, particularly femaleness, and of family, and to certain pervasive notions of race and class and status. The public, commercial representations of Mother's Day pay no attention to the origins of the observance. In Britain and elsewhere, young female servants were allowed to visit their mothers on a particular Sunday in Lent, as they could not do at any other time of the year—the origins of Mothering Sunday. Nor is there much attention given to the roots of Mother's Day in the 19th century U.S., as women spoke out and worked against the great and pervasive need for sanitation and healthy food and water for everyone, but especially for the poor women and children who did not have access to the basic needs. Also in the 19th cen. U.S., women established a day to call for peace and the eradication of war, and to provide help and comfort regardless of what side of the Civil War they and their families were enmeshed in.

³ *Showings*, Chap. 60, p. 297.

⁴ *Showings*, Chap. 68, 315.

⁵ *Showings*, Chap. 63, p. 304.

And of course Mother's Day as we know it expresses quite particular notions of what it means to be human, especially to be female but also by contrast male; notions of family, and notions of the body and our sensuality and sexuality. Mother's Day often relies on an ideal that no one can attain, and that covers over the great challenges of mothering for most women and men in the world today, and in history. There is, I think, an unavoidable ambiguity and ambivalence about Mother's Day.

Julian's vision of God our Mother, of Christ our Mother, gives us a way to find hope and energy and helpfulness in that ambiguity. Whatever our own experience of mothering, our own practice of mothering, mothering is nevertheless rooted in the absolute, unconditional, and all-pervasive love of God, made human flesh most fully in Christ our Mother.

That fierce, relentless, intimate love calls us, inspires us not only to celebrate whatever good mothering we have had in our own lives. As much, maybe more, it challenges us to resist and overcome and transform all that is counter to it. Poverty, which affects predominately women and children, in its forms of hunger, thirst, insecure and unsafe housing, deprivation of education and of health. Degradation and dehumanization, through abuse of all kinds, to which women and their dependent children are most vulnerable; and through systemic and intransigent hatred and disparagement on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, class and caste, sexuality, age, education, and so on. And simple inattention, neglect, failure of kindness, compassion, and empathy.

The love of God our Mother, in and through Christ our Mother, stands over against all that. It resists and it heals and it transforms all that. The love of God our Mother, in Christ our Mother, shows us that there is a real and possible and, ultimately, triumphant alternative, an alternative that we are graced by God to provide in our own lives, however partially, in ways that are suited to our own experience and circumstances. All our loving, however we embody it, springs from that love that is the being of God. It is that strong, that powerful, that enduring. And our loving longs not only to receive but also to offer such love, to return it and to let it be fulfilled in the love of God. God our Mother loves everything about us, in all our limitation, regardless. And God our Mother will bring us safely home. And so all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well.⁶

⁶ *Showings*, short text Chap. xxii, p. 165.