

FROM REV. WILLIE J. SMITH - MAY 12, 2026

As we travel into the remaining days of the Easter season, I wanted to offer for your consideration Julian of Norwich, mystic and theologian. Little is known about her. She lived during the 14th century in northern England.



Julian survived two plagues—one that killed 75 percent of the population of Norwich when she was a child and a second that killed 75 percent of the children there when she was a young woman of childbearing age. Eventually, she took up residence in an anchor-hold at what we might call an inner-city church, surrounded by stockyards, a slaughterhouse, and a very smelly tannery, not far from the charity hospital where the most desperate cases were cared for by nuns and beguines. She lived there for the rest of her life.

Julian gained a reputation for being a person of deep prayer and a good person to whom one could take ordinary pains and struggles.

In the anchor-hold, she was also writing a book about an experience from a time in her life when she had wanted desperately to die. She had a series of “showings”—as she later called them, searching for an English word that would express what she had seen—in which Christ revealed to her the depth of God's love for humanity. She tried to pass on what she had seen through two versions of the same book. She was, as far as we know, the first woman to write a book in English.

Julian remained unknown outside English-speaking monasteries until the spirituality movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when non-Catholics were looking for sources and discovered Julian among them. Evelyn Underhill included Julian in her groundbreaking 1911 book *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. From there, the tradition grew, with Julian's writings being passed from hand to hand by people in search of spiritual wisdom, practical theology, and the practice of prayer.

The Julian we all know well by now is a spiritual counselor for the deeply worried. Most of us have gone through periods or moments in our lives when we have needed her words: “All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of all thing will be well,” even if we've said them without fully believing them. Or maybe we have said them to friends going through hard times, hoping that they may imbibe the words better than we've been able to.

Julian's thought has often been reduced to one resonant image: the hazelnut as a symbol of God's love. Julian is also, to many of us, the purveyor of that strange teaching that there is no such thing as sin. That seems utterly impossible to us, as we look in ourselves and all around us and see both sin and its evidence. It makes us think that she must have been naïve in some way, locked away in that anchor-hold, someone who refused to see the world as it really is, as we know it to be.

Another well-known but little-understood aspect of Julian's theology is the idea that God is our mother.

To begin, Jesus' mother is our mother because she bore the incarnate Word through whom we have our own incarnation. But Jesus is also Mary's mother, because she has her being in Jesus and through Jesus, just as he has his being in her and through her. God the Father is also our mother, and the entire Trinity is our mother. In other words, the motherhood of God is essential—in everything, through everything. "We are in God," Julian writes, "and God, whom we do not see, is in us."

For Julian, sin is like the stuff that goes into the compost. It isn't yet what it will be. For the moment, it appears as slime. But through God's inner, mysterious working, it will become soil. And until sin becomes soil, God isn't finished with it. A hopeful image to hold to. We will hear some of her words at the Eucharist this coming Sunday.

For now, I will let Julian offer a final word: "For there is a force of Love moving through the universe that holds us fast and will not let us go."
May it be so. May Jesus grant it. Amen.