

SCHOOLS OF HOLINESS

MOTHER JULIAN OF NORWICH

HOLINESS is one thing only, the Christ-life. 'I live,' says St. Paul, 'now not I, but Christ liveth in me': and that saying gives the key to the whole subject. I am alive, he says, in the eyes of God, only *so* far and in such proportion as, looking at me, He sees Christ's life in me, sees me as Christ—rather, perhaps, sees Christ as me. For there is now but one human life pleasing to God, and that is Christ's—'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased'—there is now no other way or truth or life but such as has been revealed to **us** by Him, there is no other name given to us whereby we must be saved, *so* that on each of those who are by Baptism incorporated with Christ, it is incumbent to express His life in theirs. They are not to lose their identity in His, but they are to equate their lives to His, putting Him on, being formed into Him. It is more than just modelling themselves upon the precepts that He has given: by this mystical incorporation with Him there is planted in their being a Christ-germ which is the life of their life and upon the development of which the whole of their supernatural quality depends. As God 'utters' Himself in all creation, *so* are they to utter Christ in themselves—but always as themselves, according to the varieties of time and place and circumstance and nature and disposition that are theirs. The Holy Spirit will bring to their minds all things that He has spoken: that is, will shape and mould to the special needs and powers and opportunities of each the essence of His life.

Hence it is that in the annals of the Church there are saints—Christs grown to full stature—belonging to every conceivable category of human existence, to both sexes, to all ages, to every social station, to every type of character and every set of circumstance or opportunity, as diverse one from another as the stars in the skies, but all one and

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identical in the one-ness of their spirit with His. **God** is in all His creation as the voice of the singer is in his song, and in like manner is the Christ-life in the life of all His saints.

It is the main purpose of these papers to exhibit this identity-in-diversity in the persons of a selected group of Christians of recognized holiness, belonging to different ages and living under differing circumstances whether exterior or interior. Not all of them are canonized saints, for after all, canonization is no more than an extrinsic mark of the approval of the Church, conferred by the leading of the Holy Ghost, and chiefly for the sake of us others, upon here and there one of the many whose holiness is already, for the most part, patent and established. Indeed, it may be that one feels more at ease in one's study of those who have not received this seal of authenticity, for it is unquestionable that the halo may dazzle rather than illuminate those of us who look to the saints for points of resemblance to our own conditions and necessities, and for example and guidance in our own efforts to be something of what they were. Those who are 'raised to the Altar' seem often, to our admiring eyes, to be raised, too, out of our own humble world, and therefore to exceed our hope of profitable personal contact with them. We have to remind ourselves, in spite of this, that holiness really means no more than the achievement of a task which God has laid upon us all and which, therefore, all of us have to attempt. The English word 'holy' derives from the same root as its homophone 'wholly'; it suggests that not to be holy is to be unfinished, incomplete, to have failed, and that the saint is nothing more exceptional than a 'whole man'—what Our Lord commanded us all to be, 'Be ye therefore perfect [complete] as your Heavenly Father is perfect,' setting this 'impossible ideal before us in order that we might never rest satisfied that we have reached the limit of perfection that is required of us. The means by which, in spite of all our weakness, we may keep, and still aim at, the ideal set before us, is the development within us of that Life which in Christ Himself did actually reach

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it and which He now, through the 'unutterable groanings' of the Holy Ghost, labours to promote within us. And what can be a better object-lesson to our hesitations and our fears than the spectacle of those men and women (many of them so ordinary and so homely) in whom we may watch that growth triumphing over just such obstacles, and in the midst of just such disabilities, as beset ourselves?

MOTHER JULIAN OF NORWICH was born in the first half of the fourteenth century. It was the age of Poitiers and Crecy, a heroic age in many respects, or at least a manly age, when the pursuit of adventure was not haunted by the desire of ease or comfort or troubled by the fear of pain or hardship. But it was an age, too, of many terrible things. The Black Death had ravaged Europe, diminishing the population of England, for example, by nearly one-half: and behind the panoply of arms and chivalry there was an ugly degeneracy already setting in, with the growth of luxury and oppression of the poor, leading to bloody uprisings and reprisals and (as always under such circumstances) to religious unrest. Wyclif was born about the same date as Mother Julian, and had already made himself felt as a disruptive influence at the time that she was writing her Revelations. These matters do not, however, concern the object of this brief study of her spirit and teaching except in so far as they may help to locate her, as it were, and to bring her a little out of the dim half-light in which (as Elia has remarked) we so often tend to view our forefathers of the 'Dark Ages,' as if they really did grope their way about in a sort of permanent gloaming. The conditions of her day were, indeed, and allowing for obvious differences, not so very much unlike those of our own. On a lesser and less clear-cut plan there were the same problems of antagonism between property and poverty, between licensed slavery and unlicensed liberty, between justice and injustice, and men were as perplexed by and as resentful of failure and death, of the manifold inequalities of fortune and happiness, and of the never-ending quarrel of the body

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and the soul, then as now. No doubt there was then **as** great a proportion as now of persons to whom Providence and the love of God for men had become hollow-sounding phrases: there was religious fervour and belief, but there was also religious hypocrisy and disbelief. If there was great piety in many quarters, and that perhaps of a more genuine and simple quality than much of what passes for such to-day, no doubt there was a great deal, too, of indifference as well as of downright impiety. So that we shall be mistaken if we allow a matter *so* unimportant as a date to constitute a barrier between the outlook, the problems, the mentality, of the England in which Mother Julian lived, and those of our own.

She had lived the life of an Ankers from an early **age**, and it appears to be established that her Revelations **oc-**curred in her thirty-first year. They lasted for no more than a few hours, beginning early on May 8th, 1373. There were sixteen *Shewings* in all, and they ended with her complete restoration to health from a sickness which had lasted a week and of which she had very nearly died.

These are the *Revelations of Divine Love*, most fitly so called, for the inspiring theme of them all is the love of God for man, and from them she draws a doctrine of God's unceasing and minute care for every detail, no less than for the whole grand scheme, of human life: of His ineffable nearness to and occupation with us all: with a consequent assurance of safety, of certainty, of personal concern with even the least of His creatures, such as should meet every juncture of life, even the most desperate.

No one will ever grasp the full implications of the Faith, or ever be able to move about at ease in it, who is insensible to its mystic aspect. Without that, one is left with a host of most practical problems which must remain unsolved and insoluble. By the 'mystic aspect' one means radically that apprehension of the relation between God and ourselves which takes into account His *otherness* **from** us and realizes that it is just because of this otherness that He is able so completely to identify Himself with us **and** to enter into, without disturbing or altering, all the **acci-**

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dents of human existence : that He is able to be in, though not of, even what seems to us bad or cruel, and to enter intimately into our human ways without clashing with them. Of all the happenings of life, however strange or difficult they may seem, she has, on His authority, but one thing to say: 'Wouldst thou witten Our Lord's meaning in this thing? Wit it well: love was His meaning.' And again, 'Ere God made us He loved us: which love was never slacked nor ever shall be.'

'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.' It is impossible for us now to understand how this can be, for there are so many things that manifestly are very far from 'well' and from which it is no less impossible to see how anything but ill can ever come. Are we then only to trust that somehow, in the end, 'when God has made the whole complete,' some sort of balance will be struck, some mysterious cancelling out of evil with good will take place, there will be a dove-tailing of the irregularities of life into one unbroken whole? Meantime, are we to make what shift we can to bear with the present evil, in blind reliance on God's promise that so it shall be, and that later we shall see and understand how?

This is not what Mother Julian teaches. It is true that she does not attempt to explain to us the working of God's Providence, which is to draw good out of everything and to 'make all well'—for no mortal mind could either explain or understand that. But her emphasis is rather on the truth that, even now, all *is* well—'See! I am God: see! I am in all thing: see! I do all thing: see! I lift never mine hands off my works, nor ever shall, without end: see! I lead all thing to the end I ordained it to from without beginning, by the same Might, Wisdom, and Love whereby I made it. How should anything be amiss?'

She saw God 'in a point': all His works as one thing, finished and complete, as the colours of the spectrum are one and complete in the pure white ray. There is no deed to be done, as if in repair or adjustment of what is gone wrong: the deed *is* done: it is the one deed that there is,

for it is the deed by which God is God. Nothing is done but just this, that the Son is born of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, from 'without beginning' to without end. How, indeed, should anything be amiss, since all that is is this? There is no doing, no being, outside this: the very individualities of created things have the reality of their being and act only in the manner in which they participate in the perfections of God—are utterances of Him, are words, self-expressions of Him.

But the dreadful problem of sin and its consequences faces her. She knows that sin, being evil, is 'no-deed,' and is therefore not part of the 'all-thing' which is the act of God. But this hardly offers a practically satisfactory answer to the average man to whom sin is a very real thing indeed. Here, again, faith is our only support. We *must* believe that sin is real and actual and the cause of all the miseries of the world: that it is so because (being an opposition to the will of God) it is an un-creative, destructive thing; and that it is attributable to the sinner and offensive to God. But how to square this with Our Lord's assurance that 'all will be well'—still more, with the necessary implication that all *is* well? Our minds will not compass the synthesis of such irreconcilables: only in the infinite Wisdom of God, 'in a point,' is it accomplished. To understand it now would demand in us a mode of comprehension as incompatible with our nature as an appreciation of Art would be with the nature of an irrational animal. But faith, if it does not explain, may still satisfy—braestet *fides supplementum*—'It behoved that there should be sin: but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.' But, 'Ah! good Lord, how might all be well, for the great hurt that is come, by sin, to thy creatures?' And to this she received the reply that Adam's sin was 'the most harm that ever was done, or ever shall be, to the world's end,' but that the Redemption is more pleasing to God 'and more wonderful, without comparison, than ever was the sin of Adam more harmful'; wherefore, 'since I have made well the most harm, then it is my will that

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thou should know thereby that I shall make well all that is less.'

Our Lord said to her, 'Thou shalt see thyself that all manner of thing shall be well'; He will make all well 'by a deed which the Blessed Trinity shall do at the last Day'—only then shall we know how, when we shall know as we are known. But Mother Julian shows us how to see, even now, something of the working of that great deed. By that incorporation, that one-ing, with Christ which is ours, there has been established between us and Him an ineffable union which makes one thing of our human lives and His, giving to ours a divine quality so that all our travail that comes from our sin is His very own salvific travail and pain which abolishes sin and redeems the world. 'I understood that we be now, in Our Lord's meaning, in His cross with Him in our pains and our Passion, dying.' 'We are in dis-ease and travail with Him, as our frailty asketh.' 'I saw a great one-ing betwixt Christ and us, for when He was in pain we were in pain.' 'As long as He was passible He suffered for us and sorrowed for us: and now He is uprisen and no more passible, yet He suffereth with us.' The mystery of sin, in the face of God's irresistible will and His all-embracing activity in all that is, remains: but one has a glimpse of how it is that 'out of the eater cometh forth meat, and out of the strong cometh forth sweetness'—of how, in spite of all appearances that would convince us of the contrary, all is well.

And the reason. It is that everlasting love that God has for us: 'He is our clothing that for love wrappeth us, claspeth us, and all becloseth us for tender love that He may never leave us.' And all things that are, so portentous as they seem to us who see them out of all scale and proportion in the less than half-light of our earthly intelligence, are 'a little thing, the quantity of an hazel-nut,' yet in this little thing are three properties, 'The first is that God made it: the second is that God loveth it: the third, that God keepeth it.'

Hence Mother Julian did not, could not, think of pain as mainly an evil. She saw it first and foremost as the

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blessed instrument of our one-ing with Christ—*Solutio omnium quaestionum*—and as the opportunity of that literal compassion with His suffering which should make it our own, with all that that means and all the peace and security that flow from it. That knowledge made ‘all manner of thing well’ indeed: and for her, the anxious problems that tax our faith simply did not exist—how, thus, should anything be amiss?

If God were of the same nature as ourselves, no matter how immeasurably more wise and perfect, how should we justify His conduct of the world, even so far as our limited intelligence and experience show it to us? How should we reconcile His power with His performance, how explain unmerited suffering, the triumph of wrong and the defeat of good, the rule of darkness and ignorance, the prevalence of evil in every department of created being? There can be no solution, no reconciliation between faith in the existence of an all-powerful, all-good God, who governs the world, and the evidence before our eyes of the evil that fills it from end to end, but in the recognition of the incommensurability of His Being with any order of being of which we have, or could have, cognisance. Our very ignorance of the nature of such a Being justifies us in believing that with Him it may be—must be—‘all well.’ A well-known spiritual writer has called this a ‘noble nescience,’ for *to* be resigned to it argues a courage and a robust faith which will draw upon the best that is in human nature to support them. Upon this faith we may build, and Mother Julian shows us how to build, belief in a purposive Love surrounding, sheltering, cherishing us in every juncture of our lives, shaping the least no less than the greatest of our circumstances to the one end, that fulness of content for which we were created in the direct knowledge and everlasting possession of God, who made us for Himself in such wise that in nothing less than Him can we ever find rest.

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