

they will ask naturally and supernaturally; they will desire it with all the ardour of their being, to attain to it they will spend all their strength, they will beg the true friends of God to help them; they will cling to them so that they will draw them with themselves towards the al.-powerful Good God.

May this infinitely tender God grant us all this grace. Amen.



MOTHER JULIAN HERSELF

BY

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.



RULE was written at the very end of the twelfth century for two or three sisters, anchoresses, and was designed to train its readers in the more perfect life of contemplation. But it treats of the first stages of the spiritual life, and, as we have seen, it only rises above the humdrum of the purgative way in its final section. Now we are to consider the doctrine of a woman who had no doubt been trained by that or a similar 'Riwle', and had so far profited by it as to have first been favoured by a series of visions in which she was passive in her acceptance of the 'Revelations', and finally, to have reached the highest forms of prayer. We are thus given the opportunity of studying the effects of the *Ancren Riwle* in their perfect stages; we are here taught the outcome of the natural growth of the spirit if it follows the straight lines of an authorised rule.

We may call this 'The Way of Wisdom' and place Mother Julian firmly in the Unitive Way, because of the main theme of her visions. Doubtless some of these appearances are imaginative and 'sensible', but that is accidental to the essential doctrine of the *Revelation of Divine Love*. Her knowledge and sight come, as her own title informs us, from the touch of love, from affinity with divine things. Her knowledge is an affective knowledge; she has been led to see things in their highest causes. Mother Julian is not concerned with her growth in the spiritual life; she does not consider her own prayer. All that may be found in the *Cloud of Unknowing* and *Epistle of Privy Counsel*, works which provide a comprehensive companion to the *Revelations*. *The Cloud* considers the unseeing way of prayer in which the soul is established in the Unitive Way. Mother Julian, on the other hand, describes the vision of all things in the love of God which should be the counterpart of

the 'unknowing' side of union. For in this third way the vision of infused contemplation begins to flower in unusual and wonderful ways.

Thus Mother Julian sets forth a cosmic view of all things and all happenings in relation to God, and in particular to the love of God. Her outlook has the deeply metaphysical style of the *Epistle of Privy Counsel*, but whereas the latter is still limited to the relationship of the individual soul with God, her mystic eye brings all things into focus with the Trinity down to the very uttermost, the problem of evil.

For the Trinity is God: God is the Trinity; the Trinity is our Maker and Keeper, the Trinity is our everlasting love and everlasting joy and bliss, by our Lord Jesus Christ. And this was shewed in the First Shewing and in all; for where Jesus appeareth the blessed Trinity is understood, as to my sight. (chapter 4.)¹

It is as though she had been a student of St Thomas's *Prima Pars* for the greater part of her life. She conveys her meaning in a dialectical form, searching for the truth of her visions. She does not give us any moral exhortation, but sets forth simply what has been revealed to her of the mystery of divine Love as a far greater direction to prayer than any analytical discussion of states of prayer.

Though the three Persons in the Trinity be all even in Itself, the soul took most understanding in Love; yea, and He willeth that in a'l things we have our beholding and our enjoying in Love. (c. 73.)

For fifteen years this anchoress of Norwich meditated on what had been revealed to her, and finally our Lord speaks to her once again to make all clear :

Love was His meaning. . . . Hold thee therein and thou shalt learn and know more in the same. But thou shalt never know nor learn therein other thing without end. (c. 86.)

In the world of today her message is needed far more than any other, for we are in danger of being crushed under a lethal pessimism which derives from the decline and degeneracy of our age, and which in its turn contributes to hasten that same decline. This depression leads us to wars and to individual human catastrophes of all sorts. Mother Julian shou'd give us new heart by showing the u'timate explanation, the events of the world in their highest cause. She insists on a more passive approach to the love of God, which might be summed up in the words of Mme Maritain: 'You are for ever seeking what you must do. You have only to love God and serve him with all your heart'. But the doctrine of this theo-

¹ I here use Grace Warrack's edition of the *Revelations*, first published by Methuen in 1901. It is a convenient and readable edition.

logical recluse must be taken as a whole and no part of it isolated for one's own convenience. The words of the scribe who wrote out the *Revelations* early in the fifteenth century are to be borne in mind: 'I pray Almyty God that this booke com not but to the hands of them that wil be his faithfull lovers. . . . And beware thou take not on thing after the affection and liking, and leve another. . . .'²

The anchorites of the fourteenth century were still a familiar feature of English life. One century more and they would be already approaching dissolution. By the time the Church came to be despoiled of her property in the sixteenth century there seem to have been few left in England. The anchoress in her heyday might be leading a laxer life than that described in the *Ancren Riwele*, but it is unlikely that the majority were at all seriously relaxed. For the English spiritual writings of the period—the *Scate*, the *Cloud of Unknowing* and its companions—were addressed mainly to recluses of this sort, and they presuppose a fairly advanced and fervent life of prayer. And then here is Mother Julian herself in the full stream of holiness and mystic prayer flowing out from Eckhart through Tauer to the Flemish Mystics, and from them across the North Sea to East Anglia. The original MS of the *Revelations* seems to have been written in a combination of East Anglian and Northern Dialects which suggests a connection with the mystics of Yorkshire who were in the same line of descent, and it lends colour to the hypothesis that this stream of mysticism was carried back and forth in the traffic of merchants. The wool of Yorkshire was carried to East Anglia and over to Flanders, and this may have established the intimate connection with the prayers of the continent. Mother Julian herself is a contemporary of St Catherine of Siena, whom she resembles in a remarkable way. But she does not appear to have known of the great Italian Dominican, though one of St Catherine's most faithful followers was William Fleet from Lincoln, who was himself in contact with his English Augustinian brethren, including certainly Master Walter Hilton.³ Mother Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* are comparable in many ways with the Dialogue of the great Siennese.

In the heart of Norwich there stood, until the Germans destroyed it in 1942, a church with a round Norman tower and other early features, dedicated to St Julian. It belonged in the fourteenth century to the large nunnery on the outskirts of the town, the Benedictine Abbey of Carrow. It was in a cell outside this church

² Page 204 in the Warrack edition. The whole postscript should be read.

³ Cf. Aubrey Gwynn, S.J. 'The English Austin Friars in the time of Wyclif' (Oxford 1940) pp. 150-205).

that Mother Julian established herself. It has been suggested that like many recluses of that time she began life in a regular community. (In the eyes of Cassian and the early Fathers, a successful community life was a necessary prerequisite to the higher form of solitude—the hermit must learn first to live with his brethren.) And where else if not at Carrow, in whose gift the cell lay? She may have chosen the church of her patron saint and obtained the necessary permissions from Carrow, but it is likely that she was Benedictine trained in her early years. She was probably well-to-do, her family being able to provide for her anchorhold; but on her own admission she was unlettered, 'cowde no letter'⁴ (c. 2). She was born towards the end of 1342.

She cannot have spent many years in community for she was only in her thirty-first year when the events she describes took place. And our Lord himself draws attention to this fact; 'I thank thee for thy travail, and especially for thy youth', he says; and she, meditating on this: 'And specially the age of them that willingly and freely offer their youth unto God, passingly is rewarded and wonderfully is thanked' (c. 14). It was on the 8th day of May in the year 1373, the day after England had been celebrating the feast of St John of Beverley, at four o'clock in the morning that the visions came to Mother Julian. She was very sick at the time and she and her neighbours thought she was at death's door. So her own mother was there, the local curate (c. 5), and others as well. And the shewings lasted until nine o'clock in the morning. It is natural that St John of Beverley should appear to her, and she remarks on his English character (c. 38 and cf. Warrack's footnote to p. 78). She was surrounded thus by her natural neighbours, both saints and sinners, a young English woman apparently delirious and dying in the heart of Norwich.

But she recovered suddenly at the first vision and was apparently quite well by the morning when she had had fifteen of these shewings. Then the following night came the final, sixteenth, shewing to summarise and conclude them all. She seems to have had these revelations written down fairly soon without any explanation or commentary, for the earliest MS, the Amherst MS, appears in this form. But her mind could not rest with such vivid representations stored in her memory, and for twenty years she puzzled over, meditated on and drew deep theological conclusions from what she had seen. She explains how these sights are preserved: 'when the Shewing which is given in a time is passed and hid, then the faith

⁴ It is argued that this remark contains more of humility than truth as she appears throughout to be a well-instructed woman and of some culture.

keepeth it by grace of the Holy Ghost unto our life's end' (c. 7). But before her life's end, after these years of pondering, she has further light from the Holy Spirit:—

The first (of the three properties) is the beginning of teaching that I understand therein, in the same time; the second is the inward teaching that I have understood therein afterward; the third, all the whole Revelation from the beginning to the end (that is to say of this Book) which our Lord God of His goodness bringeth oftentimes freely to the sight of mine understanding. . . . For, twenty years after the time of the Shewing, save three months, I had teaching inwardly. . . . (c. 51).⁵

That was in 1392 or 1393, and it must have been after that date when the explanation and commentary were finally set down. She was still alive in 1413, but we hear nothing more of her. Until the Book of Margery Kempe was discovered there were no traces of contemporary references to her and there are few extant MSS of the *Revelations*, facts which show that she was no outstanding figure in her day. But Margery did go to seek her out in Norwich, and she was evidently at that time of some local fame for the meeting between these two was not a chance affair. (cf. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, c. 18.)

There is little more to know of her outward life. Her book gives little indication of her surroundings or upbringing. The Scriptures which she must have heard expounded from her tenderest youth, and which must have been frequently on the lips of the clergy who came to visit her, hardly put in an appearance, except incidentally, as when she understands the Annunciation and the words of our Lady, 'Lo me, God's handmaid' (c. 4). Once she quotes St Gregory's life of St Benedict and once she refers to the legend of the pseudo-Denis (c. 18). Yet her outlook has a Dominican flavour, for, although her insistence is naturally all upon Love, she sees it always in terms of understanding and she looks forward constantly to the *vision* of heaven (cf. cc. 36 and 44). She may have had a Dominican confessor or director. Before she entered religion she would certainly have heard the Dominicans preaching in the Norfolk pulpits, as we may understand in reading the Book of Margery Kempe. But nothing more can yet be ascertained of the biography of this holy maid.

⁵ The same sort of divine locution had occurred fifteen years after the visions as she explains in the last chapter (c. 86).