JULIAN OF NORWICH:
THOMAS MERTON'S REASON TO HOPE

Michael J. Callaghan

How did a twentieth century Cistercian monk living in Kentucky become so deeply impressed by a fourteenth century English mystic who was a recluse? Julian of Norwich gave Tom Merton a sense of hope! The purpose of the following presentation is to answer the questions regarding what exactly Thomas Merton read about Julian of Norwich and her world, how Merton acquired such knowledge and how this experience of reading and writing about Julian gave Thomas Merton so much joy in the midst of a controversial and varied life style. By studying the editions of Julian's writings and volumes of English Medieval history available to Merton at Gethsemani, by paralleling themes in Merton's life and writings with Julian's themes and experiences, one can begin to paste together a living picture of hope from these two distinct and historically different mystics.

The appearance of the following texts in the monastic library at Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey gives positive testimony to Thomas Merton's having read Julian of Norwich's *Showings*. Some texts are directly related to the light they shed on specific editions and translations of *Showings*; other texts, used by Merton show his general reading of fourteenth century English, religious history.

A text of Julian's *Revelations*, a thirteenth edition version of the British Museum manuscript, edited by Grace Warrack, and published by Methuen of London in 1949, appears in the holdings at Gethsemani. The full title of this edition is *Revelations of Divine Love Recorded by Julian, Anchoress at Norwich Anno Domini 1373*. Of particular interest for this study is the long text of Julian's *Showings*, the Harper publishers' 1961 edition of *The Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich*, translated into modern English by James Walsh, S. J. This was the text Merton used in his research on Julian.

In the Preface to this text, James Walsh remarked that, for the most part, he favored "the readings of the Paris MS against those of the Sloan MS."[1] This fact could be significant if there is any way to connect this manuscript with Merton's French background.

There is a note of purchase attached to *An Anthology of Mysticism*, by Paul de Jaegher, S. J. and translated by Donald Attwater, et al., published by Newman press of Westminster in 1950. The attached note on the inside cover is more than likely the date on which this text was purchased by Gethsemani: July 22, 1963. Pantin's *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century*, published by the University of Notre Dame Press in 1963, and stamped "April 3, 1963," could bear evidence to work Merton was researching at this time. Of interest in this regard is Merton's letter to W. H. "Ping" Ferry on June 12, 1963 which begins: "Thanks for the letter and the packet of things. I was especially glad of the little *Pelican* on mysticism [by F. C. Happold]. It looks great, so far."[2]

In the bibliographical notes to the chapter on the English mystics in *Mystics and Zen Masters*, there is an entry for Paul Molinari's *Julian of Norwich: The teaching of a 14th Century English Mystic*, published in New York by Longmans in 1958. Of note is the fact that Merton and Molinari share the following reading preferences regarding the fourteenth century English mystics: Dom David Knowles' *The English Mystics*, published in London in 1927; articles by Conrad Pepler, O.P. in the periodical *Life in the Spirit* for the year 1949; an English translation of De Guibert's *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, published in London in 1954; Evelyn Underhill's

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[1] Julian of Norwich, *The Revelations of Divine Love*, James Walsh, S. J., Long Text ed. (New York: Harper, 1961) vi. All citations from *Showings* refer to this text.

[2] Thomas Merton, ""To W. H. Ferry"," *The Hidden Ground of Love*, (June 12, 1963; San Francisco: Harper, 1985) 214.

Mysticism, not dated, published in London; and A. Poulain's *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, translated from the French 1931 edition, published in London in 1950.

Julian was an educated woman of the late middle ages, whose desire for union with God led her to a hope-filled request, in prayer, for a vision of Christ's suffering, a form of bodily sickness and the reception of the wounds of Christ's passion: "Mynde of Christ es passio*n*n . . . bodelye syeknes, and . . . to haue of goddys gyfte thre wonndys."[3]

Two accounts, one to a smaller audience, the other to a general readership, exist in seven manuscripts of *Showings*.[4] From the spirit of this text, Julian's audience gained a sense of her great hope that in a society of changing demographics, in a world at political and religious war, in a church divided and less clearly defined than in days gone by, "alle thynge schalle be wele"; "all things shall be well."[5]

Julian's mystical experience, narrated in the two versions of *Showings*, was Christo-centric, trinitarian, and eschatological. Christ, fully human and fully divine, was the goal and source of the revelations; the revelations were energized by a trinity of desires -- contrition, compassion, and union with the trinity of persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; hope was the ever-present eschatological theme throughout *Showings*. The trinitarian and Christological aspects of Julian's teachings about prayer were Augustinian and Franciscan in origin. Marian Glasscoe states that Julian's desire for

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[3] *A Book of Showings*, 201.

[4] *Ibid.*, 1-28. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh give an extensive explanation of the manuscript tradition related to the short and long texts of *Showings*. Because of the space of time between the writings of the texts, each text has its own manuscript history.

[5] *Ibid.*, 249.

"visual experience . . . [was] catered for by texts like the immensely popular Franciscan *Meditatione Vitae Christi*."[6]

Julian's great service to her fellow citizens of England and to the Church in England was the fact that she carefully chose the clearest, simplest, most appropriate language to communicate her special experience of God. Her invitation to England to come to God is unequivocal. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh consider her task similar to Geoffrey Chaucer's:

> The experts tell us that Chaucer was at work on his translation of Boethius c. 1380, that is, at the time when Julian may be presumed to have been considering the problems which she must solve in the composition of her long text (if, that is, the short text itself were already published, which we do not know). Chaucer's problems were not dissimilar. Either writer was called upon to render into contemporary English matter which might seem intractable: in Chaucer's case, Boethius' haunting and evocative rhythms and meters, in Julian's, the *processe* of her visions and locutions, and her own given insights, often of a profundity which, she tells us, seemed as if it would defeat her powers of language. They were both rescued from their dilemma by rhetoric, Chaucer more easily than Julian, since he was turning into English another man's *colores*, whereas she was adapting to her own ends literary devices few of which anyone before Chaucer had attempted to employ in her native language.[7]

To understand Merton's attraction to and preference for reading French authors on the spiritual life, and how this experience led him to read, research, and be

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[6] Marion Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics: Games of Faith*. (New York: Longman, 1993) 215, 335.

[7] *Showings*, 48.

influenced deeply by Julian of Norwich, readers can consult the sentiments of theologians concerning the French school:

> The French School offers a powerful spiritual synthesis, blending profound mysticism with zeal and energy for reform. Rarely has such a deep sense of the communion with God in the Spirit of Jesus Christ been expressed and written not only for priests and religious but for the laity as well. It is a spirituality of profound transformation and exquisite adoration. It is lyrical, poetic, and passionate in its love for Jesus Christ and, through his Spirit, in its devotion to the Father.[8]

The French method of spiritual theology spoke to Merton's style of learning by appealing to his mother tongue, the language he used, however briefly, to articulate the ideas of "mother" and "father;" the English style of prayer, found in Julian, spoke to that linguistic base from which Merton began to seek, ever so slightly, the answer to the "why" and "how" of his life. Seeking God in the French spirit gave Merton familiar ground on which to begin his intellectual journey to God; finding God in the English medieval mystical school sustained and strengthened Merton's desire to persevere on the journey. The French School of Spirituality gave Merton the authority with which to speak; the English School of Spirituality gave heart and substance to that authority.

Reading Julian's *Showings* confirmed Merton's hope in God, a hope which gave him enough confidence to share his vision with others. It is as if Merton's relationship to Julian's *Showings* began unconsciously in 1953 when he first recorded his thoughts for the text of *Thoughts in Solitude* and matured in 1960-61 when his

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[8] Lowell M. Glendon, S. S., "French School of Spirituality," *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 1993 ed.:420-23.

reading of *Showings* affirmed what he read and thought in 1953. Merton's *Thoughts in Solitude* was the prelude to his encounter with Julian. Merton's seven years of writing and reading prepared him to understand Julian's experience of how God's love is revealed. Julian's experience of God led her to see prayer as a service to her fellow Christians; Merton's solitude, being alone with God, and his reflection on that experience led him to conclude "no man is an island." Merton's thoughts became revelations not of God's love for one individual but for all people.

Merton wrote about Julian in an affective, personal way, so characteristic of the spiritual writers who wrote in his first language. On Christmas Day, 1961, Merton wrote:

> the main thought of my heart (it has been a thought of the heart and not of the head) is that while Christ is given to me as my life, I also am given to Him as His joy and His crown (Julian of Norwich) and that He wills to take delight in saving and loving me. And this is all for me.[9]

In this passage, Merton's comments were focused on the fifty-first chapter of the long text of *Showings*. The fifty-first chapter contained the parable of the lord and the servant. What seemed to appeal to Merton was Julian's comment regarding the place of the Servant/Son after his sojourn in weal, woe, joy, and bliss: "Now standeth not the Son before the Father on the left side, as a labourer; but he sitteth on the Father's right hand in endless rest and peace . . . right in the highest nobility of the Father's joy."[10] The servant/son's nobility was present only when "he had won his peace, rightfully, with

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[9] Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, Victor A. Kramer, vol. 4 (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 189.

[10] *Showings*, 143.

his hard travail."[11] The final posture of the servant/son was "in his city in rest and in peace."[12] It appears that Merton's hope for Christmas 1961 was to continue to serve the God who called him to Gethsemani, to accept the city/community of God as it presented itself at Gethsemani and to find his peace at Gethsemani. In Merton's search for a posture of peace, he hoped to be numbered among those who were "the crown which is the Father's joy, the Son's worship, the Holy Ghost's liking and endless marvellous bliss to all that are in heaven."[13]

Julian's understanding of the parable of the Lord and the servant of chapter fifty-two emphasized the confidence God has, under any circumstances, in the servant he has chosen. For example, the Lord knows and sees the struggles of servant even when he falls:

> In the servant, then, was shewed the blindness and the mischief of Adam's falling; and in the servant was shewed the wisdom and goodness of God's Son. In the Lord was shewed the ruth and pity for Adam's woe; and in the Lord was shewed the high nobility and endless worship that mankind is come to by the power of the passion and the death of his well-beloved Son. Wherefore he mightily rejoiceth in his falling, for the high raising and fullness of bliss that mankind is come into, overpassing what we should have had, if he had not fallen. It was to see this overpassing nobility that my understanding was led unto God, in the same time that I saw the servant fall.[14]

Hope, as Merton read this virtue in *Showings*, was a way for God to express his confidence in his people and

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[11] *Ibid.*, 142.

[12] *Ibid.*, 143.

[13] *Ibid.*, 143.

[14] *Ibid.*, 145.

a way for all believers to express their confidence in God in "ruth and pity, joy and bliss."[15] Presumably, Merton read this fifty-first chapter of *Showings* while wearing his Cistercian habit; it is safe to say, then, that the thoughts of the servant, also wearing a white "kirtle" appeal and apply to Merton's mind-set: "I stand before thee [Father] all ready to set out, and to run. I would be on the earth, to thy worship whenever it is thy will to send me. How long must I desire it?"[16] From 1961 until the end of his life, Merton would deal with his life of enclosed silence and the continuing threat of the Cold War of the 1950s erupting into nuclear holocaust.

Two days after his Christmas reflection on Julian, Merton recorded how deeply Julian's spirituality touched his life. On December 27, 1961, he wrote:

> This morning I was praying much for a wise heart, and I think the gift of this Christmas has been the real discovery of Julian of Norwich. I have long been around her, and hovered at her door, and known that she was one of my best friends, and just because I was so sure of her wise friendship I did not make haste to seek what I now find.
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> She seems to me a true theologian, with a greater clarity and organization and depth even that St. Theresa. I mean she really elaborates the content of revelation as deeply experienced. It is first experienced, then thought, and the thought deepens again into life, so that all her life the contact of her vision was penetrating her through and through.
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> And one of the central convictions is her eschatological orientation to the central, dynamic secret act 'by which all shall be made well' at the last day, our '*great deed*' [underlined

[15] *Ibid.*, 137.

[16] *Ibid.*, 141.

> twice] ordained by Our Lord from without beginning.
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> *Especially the final paradox*--she must 'believe' and accept the doctrine that there are some damned, yet *also* the 'word' of Christ shall be 'saved in all things' - and 'all manner of thing shall be well.' The heart of her theology is this apparent contradiction, in which she must remain steadfastly. And I believe that this 'wise heart' I have prayed for is precisely in this - to stay in this hope and this contradiction, fixed on the certainty of the 'great deed' - which alone gives the Christian and spiritual life its true, full dimension.[17]

The "great deed" about which Merton read is the act of Christ's passion, mentioned in the twenty-seventh chapter of the long text. According to Julian, reconciliation came about not because of the individual's awakening to his or her personal sin, but by believers' realizing the painful effects of sin in the world. Whatever doctrinal ambiguities concerning satisfaction and repentance may be present in this text, Merton seemed to be struck by Julian's teaching on the nature of God's compassion. Julian's teaching on God compassion becomes, for Merton, an invitation to pursue the "high marvellous secret hid in God."[18] The desire, the ghostly thirst, is planted in each individual by the one who alone can satisfy that desire. Julian's comments in the thirty-first chapter give clarity to how Merton read the text of the twenty-seventh chapter:

> This quality of longing and thirst cometh of the endless goodness of God, just as the quality of pity cometh of the same endless goodness. . . In this goodness is the essence of the ghostly thirst, which is lasting in him as long as we are

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[17] *Ibid.*, 189.

[18] *Ibid.*, 92.

> in need, drawing us up to his bliss. All this was seen in the showing of his compassion; and that too shall cease at doomsday. Thus he hath ruth and compassion on us, and he hath longing to have us. But his wisdom and love permit not the end to come, until the best time.[19]

For Julian of Norwich, the object, the goal of hoping and believing, was the person, the incarnate God, the mother of all creation who is

> very Mother of life and of all. To the property of Motherhood belongeth kind love, wisdom and knowing; and it is God.[20]

In Chapter XIV of *Thoughts in Solitude*, Merton spoke of landscape as that which gave him faith enough to hope: "Landscape is a good liberator . . . for it calms and pacifies the imagination and the emotions and leaves the will free to seek God in faith."[21] Jürgen Moltmann's understanding of hope can be a key to understanding Merton's landscape as a way of hoping in God: "what matters is to perceive in the outward form of temporality and transience the substance that is immanent and the eternal that is present."[22]

The abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky provided constant proximity to and involvement in the natural world. Just as language about God leads to hope at the center of our silence before his Word, so the natural surroundings led Merton to the unseen Providence at the center of the cycles of Merton's monastic life, his season of hope. Jürgen Moltmann explains this kind of hoping: "The God of the exodus and of the resurrection is not eternal presence, but he promises his presence and nearness to him who follows

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[19] *Showings*, 97.

[20] *Showings*, 164.

[21] *Thoughts in Solitude*, 111.

[22] Moltmann, 27.

the path on which he is sent into the future."[23] Hope has a silent geography centered in God.

While Merton became acclimated to the geography of Gethsemani and its surroundings, God used Merton's gift of writing to lead him into a new geography of the spirit. Writing of his vocation sojourn was a way that Merton gave hope to himself and others. Merton began *The Sign of Jonas*, the account of his years in monastic formation, the time of his life as scholastic, his advancement to Holy Orders, with a question:

> Where does all this take place? In a valley in Kentucky . . . hot in the summer . . . cold in the winter. [In] a monastery built in the 'knob country' about the time of the Civil War . . . A few miles from the place where Abraham Lincoln was born, and monastic childhood. [It] has had the same landscape of steep and wooded hills, broad fields of corn, and rocky creeks.[24]

This is a journal written at a most hopeful time in Merton's adult life; Merton's writing contained rich, visual imagery, yet the landscape was a means to a discovering a spiritual geography. Hope had its own geography below the natural surface:

> Much more important are the events that take place in the depths of a monk's soul. These usually keep pace with exterior events of one kind or another. [Yet] they have a free development of their own that may or may not flow quietly with the calm current of feasts and seasons.[25]

Thomas Merton learned to hope as he journeyed through the "feasts and seasons" of *The Sign of Jonas*. Upon his ordination to priesthood, he arrived at one of

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[23] Moltmann, 30.

[24] *The Sign of Jonas*, 6.

[25] *Ibid.*, 8.

the many points of discovery concerning hope and its relationship to love: "To love God is everything. And love is enough. Nothing else is of any value except in so far as it is transformed and elevated by the charity of Christ. But the smallest thing, touched by charity, is immediately transfigured and becomes sublime."[26] Julian, too, understood hope as that virtue which leads to love:

> And from the time that it was shewed, I desired oftentimes to know what was our Lord's meaning in it. And fifteen years after, and more, I was answered in ghostly understanding. 'What wouldst thou know thy Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well. Love was his meaning. Who sheweth it thee? Love. Wherefore sheweth he it thee? For Love. Hold thee therein. Thou shalt know more in the same, but thou shalt never know other therein, without end.'[27]

Merton's belief in hope being found at the center of the mystery of creation was summarized in *No Man is an Island*:

> Upon our hope, therefore, depends the liberty of the whole universe. . . the beasts and the trees will one day share with us a new creation and we will see them as God sees them and know that they are very good . . . the goodness of creation enters into the framework of holy hope.[28]

This statement echoed Julian's statement made some six hundred years earlier about a God longed-for in hope. God showed Julian the hazelnut which she held in the palm of her hand:

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[26] *Ibid.*, 182.

[27] *Showings*, 209.

[28] *No Man is an Island*, 19.

> Also in this he shewed a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, which seemed to lie in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, "What may this be?" I was answered in a general way thus: "It is all that is made." I wondered how long it could last; for it seemed as though it might suddenly fade away to nothing, it was so small. And I was answered in my understanding: "It last, and ever shall last; for God loveth it. And even so hath everything being -- by the love of God.[29]

Merton's images of God were primarily male; this is not surprising. God's masculine qualities were a safe haven. He reflected on his infant baptism: "My baptism at Prades was almost certainly father's idea, because he had grown up with a deep and well-developed faith, according to the doctrines of the Church of England."[30] There is justification, too, for his God's being a masculine deity. He had more confidence in Owen's power of decision-making: "My father came to the Pyrenees because of a dream of his own: more single, more concrete and more practical than mother's haunting ideals of perfection."[31] Merton evaluated his parents on their not choosing any organized religious practices for their sons. The insight into this "absence" centered on his mother:

> It seems strange that Father and Mother, who were concerned almost to the point of scrupulosity about keeping the minds of their sons uncontaminated by error and mediocrity and ugliness and sham, had not bothered to give us any formal religious training. The only

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[29] *Showings*, 53.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] *Ibid.*

> explanation I have is the guess that mother must have had strong views on the subject.[32]

Merton found praise for Julian's ability to theologize on the maternity of God. In *Mystics and Zen Masters*, he wrote:

> Lady Julian is the greatest of the English mystics . . . she is one of the greatest English theologians . . .the theology of Julian is a theology of the all-embracing totality and fullness of the divine love. . . she is not afraid to speak, with an utterly disarming simplicity, of "Jesus our Mother."[33]

Julian's opening remarks in the final chapter of the long text of *Showings*, chapter eighty-six, was "This book is begun by God's gift and his grace; but it is not yet performed, as I see it."[34] Colledge and Walsh note that this first paragraph of the final chapter contained Julian's call to other contemplatives to journey in hope, described as a

> continuous life-long expression of a Christian's relationship with all the aspects of the person of Christ: at the heart of the Trinitarian mystery, as revealing the Father to men, as sending, with the Father, his own Spirit on the mission of mercy and grace, as one with mankind in the various revealed facets of the Hypostatic union. This expression is found in contemplative unitive prayer -- .[35]

Reading Julian could have been one factor which clarified Merton's questions about sharing his concerns for the future of the world with the world. In 1961, Merton "threw his hat in the ring" on the many debates

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[32] *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 9.

[33] *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 140-42.

[34] *Showings*, 208.

[35] *A Book of Showings*, 731 n. 2.

taking place about the morality of and justification of war in the nuclear age. Articles such as "The Root of War" and "Auschwitz," a poem, appeared in *The Catholic Worker*.[36] Questions of obedience and silence constantly haunted him, concerning the issues of peace and war from 1961 until his death in 1968. At the same time, Merton was reading about Julian. In a letter written in December, 1961, or January, 1962, Merton spoke of Julian of Norwich to Clare Booth Luce of New York:

> Have you ever read the English mystic Julian (sometimes wrongly called Juliana) of Norwich? . . . She is a mighty theologian in all her simplicity and love. Though "all manner of things shall be well," we cannot hope but be aware, on the threshold of 1962, that we have enormous responsibilities and tasks of which we are perhaps no longer capable.[37]

Merton explained the historical context for this letter in the next paragraph: "Our weapons dictate what we are to do. They force us into awful corners. They give us our living, they sustain our economy, they bolster up our politicians, they sell our mass media, in short, we live by them."[38] Merton's turning to Julian at this time was perhaps due to his knowledge that for "all to be well," American society and Catholicism were in need of a "mighty theologian" like Julian. The fact that Merton referred so confidently to Julian indicates he already has some familiarity with *Showings*. In December, 1962, in a letter to Jacques Maritain, praising his deceased wife's, Raisa's, *Journals*, Merton wrote: "Especially she reminds me of that mystic that I love above all others, Julian of

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[36] William Shannon, *Silent Lamp* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 192.

[37] Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, 1994), 26.

[38] *Ibid.*

Norwich . . . She has the same tone, the same candor."[39] Merton refers to Raisa's *Journal* as a "book full of windows."[40] Merton found hope in a book written during a hot period in America's cold war and found similarities between its author and Julian of Norwich. Holy women, hope, and wisdom were the signatures of Thomas Merton's search for peace in the absence of peace. Julian's teachings calmed his longings and set his sights on the nature of true peace and real love.

[39] Thomas Merton, "To Jacques Maritain," *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, Christine M. Bochen, (December 18, 1962; New York: Harcourt, 1993), 33.

[40] *Ibid.*