

Of anchorites and beadsmen: Faith at work

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [March 7, 2001](#) issue

Sometime in the 14th century an English woman we know as Julian came to the Church of St. Julian and St. Edward in Conisford at Norwich, where, in a manner of speaking, she was voluntarily “buried alive.” As a priest performed the ceremonies of the burial office, Julian took up residence as an anchoress in a small apartment attached to the church. She was now dead to the world, but not completely so. She had access to the church as well as a “world-side window” that allowed her to receive and counsel visitors.

Within this enclosure Julian was expected to do the work of prayer, which her community apparently found valuable enough to warrant supporting her for the rest of her life. It was also within this enclosure that Julian of Norwich, as she came to be called, wrote the incomparable account of her visions or “shewings” titled *Revelations of Divine Love*.

From the Reformation point of view, Julian’s vocation would surely have counted as another “Romish” abuse. First of all, Julian was wasting a life that might have been spent more profitably with a husband and children. Second, she was specializing in an area that was both the prerogative and the responsibility of all Christian souls. And finally, in what is often a great concern to church reformers both past and present, she was running up a bill. The woman even had servants!

From a modern point of view, Julian’s vocation would be judged morbid—notwithstanding how readily and unceremoniously we “entomb” our elderly and disabled, how thoughtlessly we consign them to lives without purpose. Though her community paid for her support, Julian was seen as providing an indispensable service to her community. She was on the payroll. In contrast, many of the cloistered, closeted souls in our society are merely on our conscience, and sometimes not even there.

This is true not only of persons consigned to institutions. I used to visit a homebound elderly woman in my parish who spoke with regret of how little she could do, at her age and in her weakened condition, “for the church.” (She would also on occasion lament the scarcity of great women in our tradition, another sore spot that was soothed somewhat by hearing about Julian of Norwich.) I would tell her that in another time, or in another culture, her “minor” role in the church would have been a paid position.

She was a woman of sublime kindness and matchless serenity. No matter how harried I felt when I first walked into her little house, I felt better after walking out of it. No matter how dry or faltering were my prayers at any given time, I felt secure knowing that she was praying for me. I was not the only person in the parish who felt this way. Nor was she oblivious to the importance of her prayers. Still, she was not serving on the vestry or making biscuits for the fall supper or, in her final years, even joining us in Sunday worship. By all the usual definitions she was no longer active in her church.

It is from my acquaintance with this woman that I date my practice of always including a petition that “your servant be diligent in doing the work of the kingdom” in every prayer I say with a sick, decrepit or disabled person. I try to remind those in hospitals that they are in a sense our most persuasive evangelists (because they preach “strength made perfect in weakness”) and our homebound and institutionalized that they are in a sense our “anchorites”—though I may have to explain what an anchorite was.

Still, I stop short of putting my money where my mouth is. Telling someone that her work is important is something like telling someone that her cooking is delicious: the compliment is nice, but the proof is in the eating. And the proof of the value of work in our society, in spite of all protests to the contrary, is in what we are willing to pay for it.

Of course, many Christians love to feign squeamishness about money, especially in regard to “spiritual” matters. The sentiment goes that money contaminates our faith, whereas the real concern is that faith might arrogate our money. But in the church, no less than in the world, money talks—and what is more, money hardly ever lies. Tell me all you want to about your values, but show me your checkbook register and you won’t have to tell me anything. The Apostles’ Creed and the Pledge of Allegiance never said more about a person’s real beliefs than his budget did. The

church that nurtured Julian of Norwich was corrupt and in some ways neurotic, but no one ever walked out of a 14th-century cathedral claiming that the faith of its builders was insincere.

Julian's vocation was by no means a rarity. Contemporary records show that there were anchorages scattered throughout England. As late as Shakespeare's plays we find allusions to medieval "beadsmen," that is, persons pensioned to "pray the beads" on behalf of a benefactor. If we find the latter practice strange, is it because of the bean-counting piety of the medieval church, or because our own bean-counting parsimony could never justify paying such a price for such an impractical service?

I wonder if it may be time to amend the church budget. Surely there are people especially suited to prayer, some because they are undistracted by other kinds of work. Perhaps in place of the usual platitudes on the power of intercession, we ought to offer these people a stipend. But why pay someone to pray when we can pray ourselves? For the same reason we pay people to do almost anything else we can perform ourselves, and often do perform ourselves—sing, teach, stand guard, grow vegetables, put out fires—because some people might do it more proficiently and because, as Paul says, "the worker is worthy of his hire."