

Julian of Norwich's image of Mother Jesus

## **Like breastfeeding children, we are fed from Christ's own body, the 14th-century mystic wrote.**

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Julian of Norwich, statue at Norwich Cathedral

In the late 14th century a woman on the brink of death had visions she believed to be from God. Later she would devote her life to a small cell next to a church where she would write and reflect on these visions. Recently I went and sat in that cell. It is simple, quiet, and, at the time, empty. In order to get there I walked through St. Julian's Anglican Church and through a door off the main worship space. Because her name is unknown, she has been given the name of Julian, the patron saint of the church where she lived and worshiped.

So there I sat, in the cell of Julian of Norwich. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. As my feet rested and my spirit relaxed I looked for an image in my heart. I wanted to channel some of that same spirit that revealed such beautiful and profound images to her. What I saw was my breastfeeding child. It was a memory of sitting up in the middle of the night with my newborn and marveling at how his tiny jaw moved up and down, his body calmed, and his belly filled with what my body

provided him. A memory of how it felt to be so connected and to be so satisfied in mutually fulfilling each others need. A memory of that mix of instinct, love, relationship, and human dependency.

I thought of this and I understood what Julian meant when she wrote of feeding from the breast of Christ. When I first read these words I was in seminary and had not had the experience of babies, but of course I am a human and know what it means to be hungry and fed. The words surprised me, touched me, and stayed with me until 12 years later I sat in her cell with my eyes closed and my breath slowed. [One translation reads this way:](#)

*The mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does, most courteously and most tenderly, with the blessed sacrament, which is the precious food of true life ... The mother can lay her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus can lead us easily into his blessed breast through his sweet open side, and show us there a part of the godhead and of the joys of heaven, with inner certainty of endless bliss ... This fair lovely word 'mother' is so sweet and so kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone or to anyone except of him and to him who is the true Mother of life and of all things. To the property of motherhood belong nature, love, wisdom, and knowledge, and this is God.*

Sitting in her cell with my sweet memories before me, I understood the beautiful connection she expresses between Christ and humans, the deep love, sharing, and vulnerability in the act of self-giving and being fed. I also felt deeply understood as this simple and beautiful act that my body did was held up, made holy, celebrated, and revealed as a means of knowing Christ.

Two days later our group had the privilege of a talk from Brian Thorne, a professor of psychotherapy and expert on Julian of Norwich. He talked about the human need for validation, to be heard and seen. He looked at the ways in which Julian does this for people through her writings of God's radical love, grace, and acceptance. As I was listening it occurred to me that this woman who wrote about God almost 700 years ago, who wrote the first book ever written in English by a female, has provided a space outside of dominant male metaphors for Christians to feel seen, understood, and deeply loved. At a time when any kind of feminization of men is still seen as

degrading and humiliating by society we have the image of Jesus as mother. It is powerful, endearing, strong, and deep. It is a reminder that our experiences of God are valid. Jesus's sustaining milk is for all of us and powerful things happen when we share the ways in which God has revealed God's self in our lives.

I opened my eyes and walked over to the table with little candles for prayers. I looked upon Julian's statue and said a prayer for my dear friend struggling with cancer. She is a mother and the pain of seeing her children worry about her, the fears of not being able to provide for them are at times overwhelming. I lit the candle and left it there, because I knew Julian would understand. I knew too that our loving Mother Jesus hears our prayers in a way that is deep, loving, and real.

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