

Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Ávila, Theodidacts, by Jodi Simmons

art selection and comment by [John Kohan](#) in the [September 8, 2021](#) issue



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Schooled in Eastern Orthodox art, Jodi Simmons offers an iconographic variation on Italian Renaissance “holy conversation” imagery, in which saints from different eras are shown gathered around sacred figures like the Madonna and Child, as if holding divine debates. Crafting the plain gold leaf background typical for icons into a symmetrically embossed sanctuary, Simmons presents two different models of contemplative women who cracked glass ceilings in ecclesiastical discourse—Teresa of Ávila, the first female doctor of the church, and Julian of Norwich, the first documented female writer in the English language.

Julian holds the hazelnut of her vision of the divinely ordered universe beside the mouse-catching cat that shared her life in an anchorite cell. Teresa stands at a desk, taking time out from her travels across Spain founding convents to draft her guide to the mystical life, *The Interior Castle*. They look up to Christ in the rose-windowed central niche, the third party in the conversation. He is depicted in a gender-ambiguous portrait taken from early Christian mosaics as the incarnation of the eternal Logos, measuring the world he has made with a compass. Explains Simmons: "These women speak with authority because they are theodidacts. Their knowledge comes from God."