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A God of many faces

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Jun. 3, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

God showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand. It was as round as any ball. ... I thought, ?What can this be?? My question was answered in general terms. ... ?It is everything that is made.? I marveled at how this could be, for it seemed that it might suddenly fall into nothingness, it was so small. An answer for this was given to my understanding: ?It lasts and ever shall last because God loves it. And in this fashion, all things have their being by the grace of God.? In this little thing, I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second is that God loves it. The third thing is that God keeps it. And what did I see in this? Truly, the Maker, the Lover and the Keeper.?

oly Trinity

, 39-40

These are the words of the English mystic Julian of Norwich (1342-circa 1416) who, at the age of 31, had a series of visions that she described as ?showings? or *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*. Through these spiritual experiences, Julian probed the mystery of a God who loves in triplicate, as Father, as Son and Mother and as Spirit; or, as she put it, as Maker, Lover and Keeper.

Romans 8:14-17
Matthew 28:16-20

Julian also compared Jesus to a mother who is wise, loving and merciful. Because she believed that a mother?s role was the truest of all callings on Earth, she associated God with motherhood in terms of God?s creative power, God?s tender protection of every creature, God?s desire to be so close to humankind as to become incarnate.

While other theologians attempted to parse the profound mystery of the Trinity, the anchorite of Norwich took a simpler tack. She explored the manner in which the triune God is experienced by human beings. Those experiences of God were redemptive in a world fraught with so much tragedy: the Hundred Years? War, bubonic plague, fear of death and brutal punishments were all part of the 14th century. Cutting off hands or feet, blinding and other forms of mutilation were common penalties for theft and disloyalty. Human life was cheap, and a certain degree of pessimism, fear and anxiety characterized the darker side of English life. Yet amid all those harsh and hateful experiences, Julian could write with hope and assurance: ?God loves us and delights in us. All shall be well and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.?

As Shawn Madigan has explained, the God of Julian?s visions calms human fears (*Mystics, Visionaries and Prophets*, Fortress Press, 1998). The motherly, gracious God of the ?showings? creates, restores and sustains.

The courteous Lord is a loving servant who raises all humanity to the heavens. The compassionate God does not wish harm to come to the children but desires only to forgive the wrong they do. Even if someone becomes honestly discouraged about personal (or global) evil, the community of the church stands ever near to mediate the Spirit.

Although we are separated from Julian by almost seven centuries, her world was not so different from our own. We are not waging a Hundred Years? War, but hundreds of wars continue to take their toll on humanity. Bubonic plague is no more, but HIV, malaria and countless strains of influenza decimate populations worldwide. Social ills plague the planet; famine, injustice, greed, violence and apathy abound.

In the face of all these struggles, and when difficulties seem insurmountable, we might take a cue from a wise woman named Julian and look with hope into the faces of God. There, amid all the transcendent glory and grace, we will see the face of One who welcomes and encourages our steady gaze. Despite the evil, the heartaches and the incomprehensible wrongs that human beings heap upon one another, God does not flinch or turn away. Nor does God desire that our guilt and deserved shame should cause us to divert our eyes or turn away. God asks only that we look and listen to the love that is revealed before our eyes. In her ?showings,? Julian heard God say, ?I am God, the power and goodness of fatherhood; I am God, the wisdom and lovingness of motherhood; I am God, the light and the grace which is all blessed love; I am God the Trinity; I am God the unity; I am God the great supreme goodness of every kind of thing; I am God who makes you to love; I am God, the endless fulfilling of all true desires.?

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