

[Spirituality](#)



Detail of depiction of Julian of Norwich by Oblate of St. Francis de Sales Br. Mickey McGrath (Mickey McGrath)



by Mickey McGrath

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

August 16, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Some of my favorite saints in heaven, as well as here on earth, were what Republican vice presidential candidate JD Vance would call "[childless cat ladies](#)." In my mind and experience, some of the strongest, bravest, most talented and intelligent — and let's not forget overlooked, patronized and defamed — people in church history were women who were childless, unmarried and closely connected to cats.



Depiction of Julian of Norwich by Oblate of St. Francis de Sales Br. Mickey McGrath (Mickey McGrath)

Back in the day, monasteries and anchorite's cells always had cats on hand for keeping mice and rats to a minimum. The great medieval British mystic and anchoress [Julian of Norwich](#) is frequently depicted with a cat because she famously had a very loving relationship with hers, and rightly so: That special pet was her only companion in the walled-up cell attached to a church in which she lived. As was the custom, the anchoress wasn't allowed out of the cell once she was sealed in with stone and mortar, but that didn't stop her from becoming one of the greatest mystical wisdom figures in medieval Christian history. It was probably just as well in the long run because it kept her safe from contact with the contagious victims of the [Black Plague](#), who passed by on the road outside her tiny cell window. Over half the population of Norwich died during the plague epidemic, but she survived, thanks to her anchorite isolation.

In my rendering of Julian seen here, she has created a special pillow for her cat on which to rest in her lap. The iron bars of her cell window are designed with an opening through which she received Communion and an occasional bowl of food. On the floor is a copy of [Revelations of Divine Love](#), the first known writings by a woman written in the English language. I made the artistic choice to give her a colorful shawl and matching shoes because that is what her male clerical counterparts would have worn in her day, only theirs would probably have had jewels encrusted on them. The candle is the Light of Christ illuminating the darkness of alienation and isolation, as well as soulful peace and creative serenity in her dark nights of the soul.



"St. Clare and Friends Taking a Cat Nap" by Oblate of St. Francis de Sales Br. Mickey McGrath (Mickey McGrath)

[St. Clare of Assisi](#) had a pet cat in her monastery with whom she also shared a very special relationship. Clare loved to knit as a meditation exercise and once, while knitting as she lay sick in bed, the ball of yarn rolled onto the floor and across the room. Her beloved cat jumped off the bed and retrieved it for her. In my illumination of this special event, Clare is napping, the cat is napping, the Holy Spirit is napping — even the mice are napping peacefully under their blankets lined along the bottom border. This picture is entitled "St. Clare and Friends Taking a Cat Nap."

Another favorite childless cat lady saint is [St. Thecla](#), a beloved early Christian martyr who was commissioned by St. Paul himself to preach the Gospel. She was renowned in the early church as a "female apostle" who chose to be childless and was sentenced to be killed by wild beasts in the arena. The story goes that instead of devouring her, the lionesses circled around to protect her from the other beasts and then escorted her safely out of the arena. Following this episode, Thecla became a traveling preacher who cut her hair short and dressed in men's clothes. She spent the final decades of her life living in a cave, where she died at age 90.



"St. Thecla" by Oblate of St. Francis de Sales Br. Mickey McGrath (Mickey McGrath)

Admittedly, Thecla's cats were much bigger, scarier and more dangerous than those of Julian and Clare, but all three women can inspire us — male or female, with or without kids and cats — to rise above the limitations placed upon us, to seek higher and holier goals than money, prestige and power and to discover the loving presence of God in all circumstances of life.

Advertisement

As [St. Jane de Chantal](#) once said, "The peak of perfection lies in wanting what God wishes us to be." She was the mother of four children, but I won't hold that against her.

[Related:](#) [Childless women – cat ladies or not – have long played key roles in the Catholic Church](#)