

The Eucharist as Iconic Experience of Divine Love: Ancient – Future Orienteering with Julian of Norwich

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Abstract

This paper explores Julian of Norwich's experience of divine love through her understanding of "*poynthe*," culminating in her mystical revelation of the blood of Jesus. In the medieval context of plague, war, and hopelessness, Julian experiences the blood of Jesus on the cross present in the Eucharist as a place of safety and joy, something which can speak to the contemporary reader during this time of pandemic, racial strife, and global pessimism. First, the stage is set by historically examining the socio-cultural milieu of fourteenth-century England, mystical spirituality, and sacramental practice of the Eucharist in the medieval Church. Next, the image of blood as it relates to Julian Norwich's idea of time expressed as "*poynthe*" in her *Showings* is presented to illuminate the transformation of suffering into God's great love which upends all social and religious barriers to unify people in neighborly love. Contemporary implications are made for viewing the Eucharist as icon of remembrance through which Christ is experienced in his suffering at a kingdom table of divine love for a world that suffers and bleeds. Julian of Norwich presents visions of healing, restoration, and theosis where all of humanity's wounds are healed by Jesus' bloody wounds. In a Eucharistic preview of the festal banquet of kingdom shalom, Julian's vision of divine love as a place of safety and joy inform a present Eucharistic table where all are welcome for Jesus is present with his suffering ones and iconically in the faces of his wounded children gathered around the table.

Preamble

Though the persons of the blessed Trinity be all alike in their attributes,
it was their love which was most shown to me,
and that it is closest to us all.

And it is about this knowledge that we are most blind,

for many men and women believe that God is almighty and can do everything,
and that he is all wisdom and can do everything,
but that he is all love and wishes to do everything,
that is where they fail.

And it is this ignorance which most hinders God's lovers

~Julian of Norwich¹

Our global milieu of pandemic and death, racial hatred and ethnic unrest, “wars and rumors of wars,”² economic poverty and doomsday prophecy, reveals the present-day anxiety and apocalyptic fear for many people in our world today. The medieval milieu for Julian of Norwich living amidst the bubonic plague, the Hundred Years’ War, peasant revolts, and executions of heretics in the fourteenth century was not dissimilar. At times of horrific human suffering, those times when Jesus warned that the “love of most will grow cold,”³ Julian’s love for God neither waxed nor waned but grew, challenging her generation with encouragement toward deeper faith, hope, and love. “In the midst of all this, Julian lived, prayed, and ministered, grounded in her central conviction that the universe belongs to a God who is love, that eventually ‘all manner of thing shall be well.’”⁴ As “the apostle of hope”,⁵ what vision can a medieval mystic like Julian of Norwich shine forth for the twenty-first century follower of Jesus?

“The Christian of tomorrow,” stated Karl Rahner, “will be a mystic, someone who has experienced something, or else he or she will not be at all.”⁶ Likewise, Henri Nouwen wrote that the mystic “whose identity is deeply rooted in God’s first love” will be the minister of the future.⁷ But for many contemporary Christians, the idea of mysticism creates a disconnect; mysticism is elusive, nebulous and.....medieval. Tied into the medieval church’s mysticism was its sacramentality, especially with the centrality of the Eucharist as icon, “the primary means by which believers came to know and

¹ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, in *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 168.

² Matthew 24: 6, NIV.

³ Matthew 24: 12, NIV.

⁴ Elaine E. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), p. 30.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Annemarie S. Kidder, introduction to *The Mystical in Everyday Life: Sermons, Prayers, and Essays*, by Karl Rahner, ed. and trans. by Annemarie S. Kidder (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), p. xviii.

⁷ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 28.

experience God.”⁸ Amy Laura Hall, in her prose-like musings about Julian, relates, “The cross is repetitively given to us in the Lord’s Supper, but Jesus’s sacrifice is that one *poyn*te through which all of us are pulled for our safety and joy.”⁹ It is precisely this *poyn*te, concerning the blood of the Eucharist, that Julian of Norwich has fresh insight for followers of Jesus today. At a time when many participants at churches are unable to partake or have modified the Eucharistic offering of the cup and the bread due to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, perhaps an iconic message of divine love, and the import it brings to human suffering will aid our generation to embrace and reimagine the Eucharist more hopefully, more lovingly, and more neighborly.

This paper will discuss the Eucharist as icon of divine love as illuminated through the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich. I will do this by focusing on Julian’s vision of *poyn*te with regard to the blood of Jesus in the medieval context of plague, war, and hopelessness. Implications will be made for our current global context of pandemic, racial strife, and pessimism in order to reframe Eucharist as icon of divine love, a place of safety and joy, for our present human suffering toward a more inclusive sacramental practice.

Historical Background

Julian was born during a tumultuous period of upheaval and human suffering in the Middle Ages, when nationalism gave rise to the Hundred Years’ War between France and England with consequences for the church, as religion and politics toxically entwined. The Great Schism of the West with its two rival popes were split along national allegiances in Europe resulting in further conflict and corruption.¹⁰ The bubonic plague, or Black Death, raged throughout Europe, decimating a third of Europe’s population in three years, and half the population of Norwich,¹¹ with continued outbreaks for decades to follow; about half of the priests died in Norwich.¹² Infected people vomited blood, died horribly and quickly,¹³ and were buried without dignity and without last rites, leaving family members in

⁸ Gerald L. Sittser, *Water From a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), p. 143.

⁹ Amy Laura Hall, *Laughing at the Devil: Seeing the World With Julian of Norwich* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 86.

¹⁰ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2001), p. 327.

¹¹ Heath, *Mystic Way*, p. 30.

¹² Hall, *Laughing at the Devil*, p. 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

despair due to fear of eternal separation from loved ones.¹⁴ The plague, transmitted through flea-ridden rats, spread across trade routes, affecting economics, employment, and politics. Medieval society destabilized with food shortages,¹⁵ political turmoil, and riots.¹⁶ A Peasant's Revolt in England, heightened by aristocratic feudalism's stratified hierarchy, was subdued with brutality and with church support. On the outskirts of Norwich, Lollards had been marched to their deaths as heretics.¹⁷ Julian's world was tragically blood-stained by disease, war, and death.

Religious and societal strife was widespread. Amy Laura Hall gives insights into fourteenth century feudalistic social class rules about language:

If you spoke Latin, you were trained in theology and could talk about God. If you spoke French, you were part of the aristocracy. And if you spoke English, you were someone who mostly did not matter to the first two groups, unless you tried to change things. Then you were punished.¹⁸

Hall discloses class-based social ranking according to bloodlines, identified by clothing. She states that "some people had superior blood and others had inferior blood...And the things that went on under the label 'Jesus Christ' or 'Church' were part of that hierarchical ordering."¹⁹

In the fourteenth century church, the complex worship rite, the High Mass, was visibly hierarchical as clerks, subdeacons, deacons, and priests stood on "increasingly higher steps before the altar."²⁰ Only clergy could read the holy words in Latin and handle the sacred objects,²¹ and the Eucharistic prayer was whispered.²² Unintelligible to common people, lay participation in worship was minimal,²³ which in effect, ranked spiritual holiness by exclusion. The Lateran Council of 1215 which declared the doctrine of transubstantiation also decreed Holy Communion with the bread to be received

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 15-16.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 16.

¹⁶ Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, p. 327.

¹⁷ Heath, *Mystic Way*, p. 30.

¹⁸ Hall, *Laughing at the Devil*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

²¹ Ibid., p. 15.

²² Richard M. Spielmann, *History of Christian Worship* (New York: Seabury Press, 1966), p. 59.

²³ Ibid., p. 58.

once annually²⁴ and the cup representing the blood was only to be consumed by the priest.²⁵ The Eucharist, likewise, was a class-based procession reinforcing the social ranking of medieval England with the aristocratic class first, followed by those ranked by societal prominence and last of all, the common people.²⁶ Hall asks,

How is Jesus's blood sweet, when the distinction between bloodlines was what supposedly divided people from one another? How was Jesus's blood poured out unaccountably a source of safety when blood and vomit were part of the recurring devastation of death by disease?²⁷

Medieval Mysticism

Although the medieval church was sacramental and the Eucharist was the principal way believers experienced God,²⁸ by the fourteenth century the sacraments were offered infrequently, ranked and ordered, and further complicated by fear of and fixation on death and hell brought on by the bubonic plague.²⁹ These practices hindered the experience of knowing God especially among lower classes of people. Mystical spirituality, which reached its pinnacle in the Middle Ages, is more concerned with how one can truly know and be in *union* with God.³⁰ Sittser differentiates the sacramental from the mystical. Sacraments appeal to the senses, are the means of grace, and are rooted concretely in earthly reality. The mystical, in contrast, appeals to intuition, its end is union with God, and it soars into heavenly realities.³¹ Sittser explains,

Christian mysticism has always found a way to explain its vision of spiritual reality to the larger church, though often with a quiet voice. That

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Hall, *Laughing at the Devil*, p. xvii.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁸ Sittser, *Water From a Deep Well*, p. 143.

²⁹ Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, p. 328

³⁰ Ibid., p. 165-166.

³¹ Ibid., p. 163.

voice spoke with greatest authority and clarity
during the medieval period.³²

The quiet mystic voice that was anchored in medieval sacramentality and yet soared with wings into heavenly mysteries with revelations of divine love was the anchoress, Julian of Norwich.

Julian was probably a pious laywoman in her twenties when she became an anchoress, walled up in a small cell attached to the Church of St. Julian in Norwich, England.³³ Sittser explains that “one window opened into the sanctuary, thus allowing her to participate in the Mass, another to the outside world, thus making her accessible to the citizens of Norwich.”³⁴ In that threshold mystical space, Julian participated inwardly in the sacramental rituals of the church, yet her window opened outwardly into the community to offer pastoral care and spiritual direction, healing and peace, to people overwhelmed with grief, loss, and fearful anxiety.³⁵ When Julian was about thirty years old, she asked for union with Christ in his “Passion,” to be one with Jesus on the cross. She also asked for “bodily sickness” and “three wounds”.³⁶ She became gravely ill and “In her room, focusing on a simple household crucifix on the wall, she sees everyone and everything that ever was and ever will be held safe by God in love.”³⁷ When she recovered, she wrote down sixteen “showings”, divine revelations of love, in a short text in vernacular English expanded twenty years later in her long text.³⁸ After reflecting and prayerfully asking questions about the meaning of her visions for over fifteen years, she received an answer from God recorded in the last chapter of her long text, revealing and summarizing the theme of her visions:

What, do you wish to know your Lord’s meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love. Remain in this and you will know more of the same. But you will never know different, without end.³⁹

³² Ibid., p. 166.

³³ Heath, *The Mystic Way*, p. 30.

³⁴ Sittser, *Water From a Deep Well*, p. 180.

³⁵ Heath, *The Mystic Way*, p. 30.

³⁶ Julian, *Showings*, ST: 1, p. 125.

³⁷ Hall, *Laughing at the Devil*, p. xiv.

³⁸ Sittser, *Water From a Deep Well*, p. 181.

³⁹ Julian, *Showings*, LT 86, p. 342.

The Poynte of Blood in Julian's Visions: Divine Love

Julian saw the Lord's meaning and answer to everything as Love. Her mysticism is, above all, christocentric. Her focused gaze on the cross gave her eyes to see Jesus' self-giving love inclusively for all people, and ears to hear Perfect Love's voice as a personal gift, however, writing her revelations of divine love in vernacular English poured out those words as a communal gift for her generation and the generations to come. Specifically her vision of Jesus' blood being poured out is a striking picture for reflection in her bloody world and in ours.

Julian's vision revealed Jesus' suffering, as both God and man, with "red blood trickling down from under the crown, all hot, flowing, freely and copiously, a living stream" as the crown of thorns was thrust on his head.⁴⁰ Julian interpreted this as his "courteous love, to show her comfort" in her own suffering.⁴¹ In the longer text, she further illuminates this copious bloody vision as abundant and profuse, "like raindrops off of a house's eaves."⁴² She described this vision as "living and vivid and hideous and fearful and sweet and lovely."⁴³ Most poignantly, it gave her strength in knowing that "our good Lord, who is so to be revered and feared, is so familiar and so courteous, and most of all this filled me full of delight and certainty in my soul."⁴⁴ The vision with its "hideous and fearful" portrayal of blood seemed to trigger her real experience of collective community trauma, but paradoxically, it strengthened her with a sense of safety and even joy. Amy Laura Hall puts forth that Julian did not address or even ask the theodicy question, calling God into account; without denying the evil, her vision redirected and redefined "how to see one another within and after a display of regional tragedy and domination."⁴⁵ Jesus' blood "at-ones" people, uniting them in ways in which they cannot be separated from another. Unique and personal suffering unites and "kins" people as family with common and communal experiences of deep suffering and trauma. The place of safety is in the healing offered through the self-giving love of Jesus experienced as "blood". Like a loving mother holding a suffering

⁴⁰ Julian, *Showings*, ST 3, p. 129.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴² Julian, *Showings*, LT 7, p. 188.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Hall, *Laughing at the Devil*, p. 62.

child, “God draws each person together, toward God and kinned, or ‘at-oned’ in blood through Jesus.”⁴⁶ Hall further elaborates,

The cross is the bloody truth of sin. The cross is also the bloody truth of God’s abundant, floor-soaking love, poured out. The sign of the cross, or the significance, is layered, brought into one *poyn*te, so that those who concentrate on the cross may experience reassurance and even delight.⁴⁷

Julian’s view of time is encapsulated in her word of choice—*poyn*te. As she focused on the cross, Julian experienced a concentrated view of God which is instantaneous where all people and “all manner of thing” are layered prism-like, situating and defining every space and every moment of time in that place of divine love expressed through his blood.⁴⁸ Julian says,

I saw God in an instant (*poyn*te) of time, that is to say in my understanding, by which vision I saw that he is present in all things. I contemplated it carefully, seeing and recognizing through it that he does everything, which is done...So I understood in this revelation of love, for I know well that in our Lord’s sight there is no chance; and therefore I was compelled to admit that everything which is done is well done, for our Lord God does everything.⁴⁹

Jesus’ love demonstrated by his copious blood on the cross was a “window into heaven”,⁵⁰ an icon, unveiling “all that was, is, and will be fully disclosed, through the cross, as a gift of love.”⁵¹ Julian saw time *through* the cross, not as moving forward toward a goal, but non-directional—anti-trajectory. Time and space instantaneously collapsed through the *poyn*te that is Jesus. This changes time itself so that “the cross pulls all time inward toward Jesus.”⁵² In this way, Julian is seeing God’s way of seeing,

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 19-22.

⁴⁹ Julian, *Showings*, LT 11, p. 197.

⁵⁰ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), p. 301.

⁵¹ Hall, *Laughing at the Devil*, p. 19.

⁵² Ibid., p. 23.

revealing only love. This brings Julian the reassurance that she is both littleness and *everything* in Christ for she sees “all that is made: a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, held safe in God’s pierced palm.”⁵³

Implications for Julian’s Medieval World

Julian did not live in denial of the reality of her own grave illness, and she was well-acquainted with the grief and the bloody mess in the world to which her small cell window opened. Yet she affirmed, “I chose Jesus as my heaven in all times of suffering and of sorrow.”⁵⁴ Lanzetta summarizes this way,

In the paradoxical association of images of suffering and bliss, Julian emphasizes the great pathos God has for our sins, and the immeasurable joy that comes through realizing and transforming all that fractures this great love. Spiritual suffering opens our hearts; it moves us from individual needs toward the concern for the flourishing of others.⁵⁵

In effect, Julian’s vision upends time into a *poynite* where all that is and was and is to come in our collective human suffering is familial, recalibrating kinship into one blood, making us “at-oned” with God and simultaneously with humanity. In doing so, she subverts the culture in which she lived, mixing the bloodlines that stratified humanity divisively and unjustly, to instead, blood-bond people as siblings.⁵⁶ The bloody bubonic plague was no “respector of persons”; the plague dealt a bloody death to the rich and the poor, the holy and unholy, alike. Neither ought Eucharistic practice be ranked and ordered according to aristocratic hierarchy. When remembering Jesus’ death on the cross, his body and blood in bread and wine, we re-member our own bodies broken and blood spilled out in shared human suffering mingled with the unitive divine love of God who suffers with us—all of us.

⁵³ Denise Levertov, *The Stream and the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes* (New York: New Directions, 1997).

⁵⁴ Julian, *Showings*, ST 11, p. 143.

⁵⁵ Beverly J. Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 116.

⁵⁶ Hall, *Laughing at the Devil*, p. 104.

In medieval context, only clergy received the blood from the cup, and laity received the bread only on special feast days.⁵⁷ Julian's vision gave her "the blood of Jesus right straight into her body and being"—without even an intermediary mediator. Her vision defied the clergy-laity distinctions of authority and holiness in medieval Eucharistic practice; in effect, her vision might have said, "Let all be well in the abundance of Jesus blood! There is enough copious divine love for us all!" Should the blood of Jesus, his copious love, be withheld from anyone since we all suffer, and we all are in need of love of God and love of neighbor? In union with Christ, all collective pain is pulled into the fissure of the cross of abundant divine love. That is Julian's *poyn*te of safety and joy in the blood-stained medieval milieu of plague, war, and death.

Contemporary Implications: Eucharist as Icon

The sacrament of Eucharist is an icon of remembrance, a window through which we encounter Jesus in his Passion.⁵⁸ Bishop Barron elaborates,

Jesus, as the Icon of God, is nothing but giving.
He gives himself away as food...The cup of the
Last Supper anticipates and sacramentally represents
the blood that will be copiously poured out...Jesus is
love poured out, all the way to death.⁵⁹

Not merely symbolic, "The experience of participants in the Eucharist is an experience of Christ."⁶⁰ Cuneo suggests that an icon is not only the mediator of divine Presence, but also the vehicle for divine action, forming and shaping us as participants in communicating God's divine action in the world.⁶¹ As an icon, the Eucharist invites us to enter into the reality of the kingdom of divine love,⁶² to

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 88.

⁵⁸ Preston Yancey, *Out of the House of Bread: Satisfying Your Hunger for God With the Spiritual Disciplines* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), p. 127; also Baber, H.E., "Eucharist as Icon," <https://home.sandiego.edu/~baber/research/eucharistasicon.pdf>, p. 5.

⁵⁹ Robert E. Barron, "Broken Bread, Broken Body," in *The Word on Fire Bible* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, 2020), p. 422.

⁶⁰ Baber, "Eucharist as Icon", p. 7.

⁶¹ Terence Cuneo, "If These Walls Could Only Speak: Icons as Vehicles of Divine Discourse," *Faith and Philosophy* 27, no. 2 (April 2010), p. 123-141.

⁶² Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well*, p. 125.

be people whose identity is wrapped up in self-giving divine love, to become “broken bread and poured-out wine”⁶³ in a world of suffering and bloody messes.

Julian did not see the blood as substitutionary for a debt owed but as magnanimously flowing, full of the life and love of Jesus, the source of her great joy.⁶⁴ Her visions are full of healing imagery, where the “blessed Trinity will make well all things which are not well,”⁶⁵ unveiling the shalomic kingdom redemption of restorative love and salvific theosis. Jesus’ blood therapeutically and kenotically heals, without wrath, without shame, and without blame, but with mercy, with compassion, and with deep love. The wounds of humanity are healed by Jesus’ own bloody wounds.⁶⁶ This means that the wounds that others have inflicted and the wounds that I have caused are being held and being healed in the blood that flows from divine love. All are welcome to this iconic Eucharistic table for who, in all of humanity, could possibly be excluded from the love of Jesus?

Bishop Barron states,

In the table fellowship that he practiced throughout his ministry, Jesus consistently undermined the systems of domination and the social stratifications that marked the culture of his time. His order (God’s kingdom) would be characterized by an equality and mutuality born of our shared relationship to the Creator God who “makes his sun shine on the evil and on the good” (Matt. 5:45). Therefore, games of ambition and claims of social superiority are inimical to the community that finds its point of orientation around the table of Jesus’ Body and Blood.⁶⁷

Just imagine how we might eat that way in our churches! No denominational or doctrinal or baptismal lines formed or drawn to receive the Eucharist. No proof of holiness or purity certificates required to eat bread and drink wine at the family table where everyone hungers and thirsts and is fed

⁶³ Heath, *The Mystic Way*, p. 49.

⁶⁴ Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. 207.

⁶⁵ Julian, *Showings*, ST 15, p. 152.

⁶⁶ Heath, *The Mystic Way*, p. 31, 36-37. See also Isaiah 53: 4-5, NIV.

⁶⁷ Robert E. Barron, “Understanding the Last Supper,” in *The Word on Fire Bible* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, 2020), p. 427-428.

with divine righteousness and sustained by divine love with generous, open-hearted hospitality. All are welcome to this Eucharistic preview of the festal banquet of kingdom shalom because Jesus is present *with* his suffering ones and Jesus is present *in* the faces we see across the table, his iconic wounded children.

Just imagine how we might eat sacramentally in our homes, through ordinary liturgy of a shared meal with people not typically on our guest list! Might bread and fish multiply with abundance if we shared our littleness, our hazelnuts, with neighbors in *eucharisteo*, giving thanks? After hours of talking about Jesus along our neighborhood Emmaus roads, might strangers in our community invite us to *their* dinner tables and finally recognize Jesus when we break bread together in their safe abodes? In our shared experience of woundedness and suffering, might we lean into the story in another's heart with solidarity, listening and lingering over glass of wine or a cup of coffee? Might we defy isolation and pessimism by holding each other closely to recognize Jesus' loving Presence in the midst of us and within us in the reality of our bloody messes and the heartbreak of our collective community trauma?

If Julian of Norwich's visions have contemporary meaning for us, then divine love *is now* present and alive, plenteous and overflowing, in joy and in suffering, and in the flesh and blood among us. Our challenge in times of pandemic and socio-cultural divide is to live out this reality with everyone as though it were true, prophetically and even defiantly at times. An iconic Eucharistic people following Jesus not only foreshadow a future kingdom of shalom where all wrongs will be made fully and finally right, but this good news must be grounded in earthly reality to bring justice today through a co-suffering, self-giving, inclusive love ethic with our neighbors for our joy and our safety in this present time of pandemic and societal upheaval. Then indeed, "all manner of things shall be well."⁶⁸

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⁶⁸ Julian, *Showings*, LT 32, p. 231.

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