

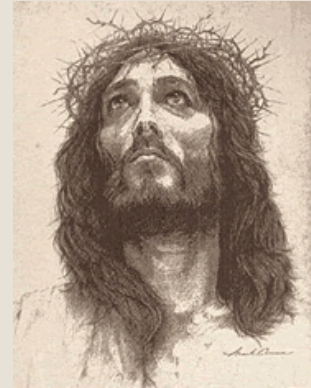
CONTEMPLATING THE FACE OF CHRIST

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Foundress

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In his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, His Holiness John Paul II tells us: "We wish to see Jesus' (Jn 12:21). This request, addressed to the Apostle Philip by some Greeks who had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover, echoes spiritually in our ears too during this Jubilee Year. Like those pilgrims of two thousand years ago, the men and women of our own day – often perhaps unconsciously – ask believers not only to "speak" of Christ, but in a certain sense to "show" him to them" (no.16).



In this Apostolic Letter, with which he concluded the Jubilee Year and directed the Church of the Third Millennium, the Holy Father made reference to the Face of Christ thirty-seven times, calling us to contemplate the Face of the Savior and to make known His true countenance. As a fruit of this Jubilee, for some reason, the Holy Spirit has wanted to direct our attention towards the Face of the Redeemer. "But if we ask what is the core of the great legacy it [the Jubilee Year] leaves us, I would not hesitate to describe it as the contemplation of the face of Christ..Our witness, however, would be hopelessly inadequate if we ourselves had not first *contemplated his face*. The Great Jubilee has certainly helped us to do this more deeply. At the end of the Jubilee, as we go back to our ordinary routine, storing in our hearts the treasures of this very special time, our gaze is more than ever *firmly set on the face of the Lord*" (NMI, 15:16).

I have asked myself why the Holy Father wanted to direct this letter to the contemplation of the Face of Christ, and the Lord has helped me understand that to contemplate His Face is nothing more than to contemplate His Heart. Our face is a mirror of the heart; it is the photograph of our heart; it is the expression of its most intimate sentiments and loves; it is the manifestation of all that is carried in the heart.

The Old Testament

After the fall, man hid from the Face of God. Paradoxically, his eyes were opened to evil, but he wanted to hide from God. This is so because sin caused him to lose sight of the love of God, and therefore, he was now afraid of being seen by Him. From that moment on, he was no longer able to see the Face of God.

The face of God is not physically known in the Old Testament, but nonetheless, there is a great desire to seek and know it: "Lord, I seek your face" (Psalm 27:8); "When can I go and see the face of God?" (Psalm 42:3). All of this shows that man was created for God.

Moreover, to seek the Face of God (His presence, will, and sentiments) is a clear *call* in the Old Testament. Psalm 105:4 says, "Seek Yahweh and his strength, seek his face constantly." Furthermore, "Look to the Lord in his strength; seek to serve him constantly" (1 Chronicles 16:11).

These two similar passages reveal the longing for the Face of God.

However, in the Old Testament it was impossible for man to look upon the face of God and stay alive: "Then Moses said, 'Do let me see your glory!' He [God] answered...'But my face you cannot see, for no man sees me and still lives'" (Ex 33:18-20)

This is why the Jews did not allow images of God and rejected all forms of representations of God (Exodus 20,4) even though the neighboring nations adored images of idols in different temples.

It was also understood that if God were to make His Face shine upon them, Israel would receive peace and blessings (Numbers 6:25). This was the blessing that was adopted by Saint Francis of Assisi: "May the Lord bless you and keep you. May He let His face shine upon you and be gracious to you! May He look upon you kindly and give you His peace."

The hidden face of God signified that God had retracted his grace from the sinner (Is 59:2; Is 64:6; Ez 39:24). Furthermore, both the wrath and the goodness of God were revealed with symbolisms concerning the face - His wrath was abated and his countenance softened when sacrifices were offered. (Mal 1:8; Psalm 119).

In the epiphanies of the Old Testament, more value was given to the actual words proclaimed than the manner in which they were proclaimed. Even though the ancient Jews considered it impossible to see the face of God, they still desired it. They desired to see it because it was a sign of being close to Him, of benefiting from His presence. This face, however, *would* one day reveal itself in the fullness of time - by becoming man and taking on a body, a heart and a human face.

New Testament

"And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son" (John 1,14). The Word took on a human face.

The indescribable Word of the Father became descriptive, becoming Incarnate in the womb of Mary. "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation" (Col 1:15).

Saint Athanasius: "He has become man so that we could become divine-like; He has become visible, in human form, so that we could have an idea of the invisible Father." How many times did Jesus not tell us, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9)?

"What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and touched with our hands... for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it" (1 John 1:1-2).

The face that was so long desired by the Israelites manifested itself; they saw it; they touched it. That inaccessible Face - that brought death to those who saw it - stripped itself of its glory so that man could see it. He took on a face similar to our own; in Christ, the Face of our God became visible. It is the Face of God, hidden in the Old Testament, and now manifested in Christ. He took on a Face so that He could be close to man, so that He could be seen and known by the human person. Furthermore, this Face of God-made-man, who humbled Himself to the point of becoming one with us, was also transfigured, thereby revealing His glory and shining as the Sun on Mount Tabor (Mt 17, 2). There Christ manifested His Face and His glory, brilliant as the sun, before entering into His Passion in which His Face would become disfigured.

A Disfigured Face

In the fullness of time, man, who so desired to see the Face of God, would contemplate it for the first time as the face of a small child - the face of humility, poverty, and total self-forgetfulness. This is the same Face that, in the supreme hour, would eventually reveal itself to men as scorned, beaten, wounded, flogged and disfigured.

His look was marred "beyond that of man and his appearance beyond that of mortals...He was spurned...and we held him in no esteem" (Is. 52:14; 53:3).

"In order to bring man back to the Father's face, Jesus not only had to take on the face of man, but he had to burden himself with the "face" of sin. 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5:21)" (NMI, 25).

The agony that we see in the face of God was caused by the sins he assumed upon Himself. Through this face, we are able to see the face of sin and all its reality. He who did not sin took on our sins as if they were His own. He assumed them freely, and He bore them upon His body.

"Yet it was our infirmities that He bore, our sufferings that He endured. While we thought of him as stricken, as one smitten by God and afflicted" (Is 53,4).

Jesus was wounded for our rebellion and struck for our sins. In His Face, Christ revealed the sin that disfigured and continues to disfigure the heart of man; for sin robs us of our likeness to God and damages the good in us. The disfigured face of Christ reveals to us the state of the human heart. Nonetheless - even though the blows were able to disfigure His Face and the flogging he received in His Head (according to the Servant of God Ann Catherine Emmerick) caused a hemorrhage of blood in His eyes - *sin was not capable of changing the expression of His countenance*. His flesh and his appearance were marred - nose out of joint, forehead with open wounds, lips burst open, cheeks purple - yet His countenance represented the love in His Heart: serene, prayerful, patient, humble, obedient, meek. Sin did not touch His Heart, and His eyes were able to reveal it. His eyes, like bright lamps, shone powerfully in the midst of the darkness of sin that disfigured His face, manifesting the light of love that was never extinguished in His Heart - regardless of the horror that our sin brought upon Him. "The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light" (Mt. 6:22).

Saint Therese of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face

It was precisely this passage of Isaiah that so strongly moved the heart of St. Therese of the Child Jesus and led her to ask permission (that she later received) to add to her name, "of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face." In a letter to Pauline, she reveals how her devotion to the Holy Face is fundamental for her spirituality of the little and hidden way, a spirituality for which she was eventually proclaimed a Doctor of the Church. She says, "Through you I have entered into the depths of the mysteries of the hidden love in the Face of our Spouse. I have come to understand where true glory is. He whose 'kingdom is not of this world' has shown me that true royalty consists in being 'unknown and not taken into account.' It is in finding 'joy in being forgotten.' I wished that my face, like the face of Jesus, should be, as it were, 'hidden and despised,' so that no one on earth would esteem me. I thirsted to suffer and be forgotten" (*Story of a Soul*, chap. 7).

Saint Therese wore within her habit, very close to her heart, an image of the Holy Face with these words: "Make me to be as you, O Jesus." For St. Therese, to contemplate the Face of the Lord meant to imitate all that she saw in Him - a God that was hidden, humble, meek, and poor; a Heart that was revealed in His Face.

For her this contemplation also necessarily led her to consolation, and she would encourage her sister Celine to be another Veronica that wipes the Face of Jesus that is full of Blood and Tears. This is the same Blood and Water that flowed from His Heart when He was pierced.

St. Therese invited her sisters to console the Face of Jesus by converting sinners. She exhorted them to console our Lord in His Agony, the agony revealed in His Face; but most especially, she wanted them to quench His

thirst for souls. In one of her poems she wrote, "Oh! To console you I want to live unknown on earth! Your beauty, which you know how to veil, discloses for me all its mystery...Your Face, O my sweet Savior, is the Divine bouquet of Myrrh I want to keep on my heart! Your Face is my only wealth. I ask for nothing more. Hiding myself in it unceasingly, I will resemble you, Jesus. Leave in me the Divine impress of your Features filled with sweetness, and soon I'll become holy. I shall draw hearts to you" (Excerpted from "My Heaven on Earth!").

For St. Therese, holiness must be revealed in the face, for the abundance of the heart is reflected in the face. And just as holiness is reflected in the face, holiness also represents the true Face of Christ. Pope John II tells us in NMI, "Holiness...is the living reflection of the face of Christ" (no.7).

On the Feast of Transfiguration, August 6th of 1896, a day on which the Feast of the Holy Face is celebrated in the Carmel of Lisieux, St. Therese, with other two novices, made an act of consecration to the Holy Face. The three of them asked to be "hidden in the secret of the Holy Face" (from the *Act of Consecration to the Holy Face*). With this request they expressed their desire to imitate the hidden life and the suffering love of Christ. In doing so, they aimed to exercise so much love that they would soon be consumed in love, and thus, by not attaching themselves to the things of the world, they would soon see Jesus face to face. In that consecration they expressed the desire to convert themselves into other Veronicas, consoling Jesus in His passion and offering their very souls as consolation. The prayer concludes, "O adorable Face of Jesus! Until that day in which we will contemplate your infinite glory, our only desire is to hide ourselves under your divine gaze and to not be recognized on earth."

Her devotion to the Holy Face was the result of her great desire to spend her heaven doing good on earth. She carried that great desire within her, but she did not know how to unite it to the great reality of Heaven as a place of eternal rest and eternal contemplation of the Face of God. The Lord led her to meditate on the Scripture passage that spoke of the angels who eternally contemplate the Face of God and who also have missions in favor of man. It was there where she was able to find the answer to her desire to remain in eternal contemplation of the Face of God and to spend her Heaven doing good on earth.

Conclusion

To contemplate the Face of Jesus is to contemplate His Heart - the most intimate of part His Heart that is manifested in His Face. In an inspiration the Lord showed me His disfigured and suffering Face, but with eyes full of such serenity that it transmitted strength. In the midst of suffering and great pain, His Heart remained fixed on Love and that was His strength and His serenity

I ask the Lord that we may be able to contemplate His Face and that like Saint Therese, we too may say, "Make us like You, O Face of Jesus."

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