

The Face of the Faces of Christ

Report on the Seventh Annual “Volto di Volti” Congress in Rome, October 2003

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Although one could safely assume that a congress on the Holy Face of Christ -- or any conference for that matter -- could not hold a candle to the multi-tiered events in Rome during the third week of October 2003, one could also imagine that were Pope John Paul II not celebrating the 25th anniversary of his Pontificate during that week and were Mother Theresa, who was beatified on October 19th, still on this earth, they would have both been seated at the dais behind their respective bottles of Pelligrino mineral water attentively listening to the theological papers of the presenters or, considering their gifts of humility, like Senator Giulio Andreotti, settled in the audience with the “commoners”.

Fiorenzo Angelini was born in Rome on August 1, 1916. He was ordained in February 1940 and, during the period following WWII, he established the Secretariat for People's Assistance, an organization founded to assist Italians in need during the postwar years. After becoming a Bishop of the Catholic Church, he began to devote himself to the field of health, providing spiritual assistance to clinics and hospitals in Rome. He gained recognition for his pastoral work with Italian hospital chaplains and, in 1989, Angelini became the President of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Health Workers, the Vatican's Health Ministry. He was elevated to the rank of Cardinal in June 1991, four months prior to our first encounter with him in the corridors of his inner-city monastery.¹

We first met Cardinal Fiorenzo Angelini in 1991, when, during the course of a Jewish-Catholic ecumenical tour to Rome, we sat in on an audience with His Eminence in which the issue of a possible move towards the Vatican's recognition of The State of Israel was discussed. When we mentioned that we were seriously involved in the study of the Holy Shroud, Cardinal Angelini proudly pointed to his ring on which a picture of the Holy Face was engraved. In 1995, we were re-united, once again, with Cardinal Angelini, this time at the invitation of the late Benedictine “Shroud priest”, Fr. Hilary Conti, at the Holy Face Monastery in Clifton, New Jersey. On that occasion, we expressed our hopes, based on the first successful stages of our Shroud research and education outreach in Moscow, that the Shroud could encourage dialogue and bring about unity between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches in that country. In 1997, Cardinal Angelini, inspired by the devotion to the Holy Face of the late Benedictine Abbot Gregori (1894-1985), started what was to become a mid-October tradition at the Vatican's Universita Urbaniana, a yearly Congress on various aspects of the Holy Face of Christ and the annual publication -- by His Eminence's Istituto Internazionale di Ricerca Sul Volto di Cristo -- of a glossy, full-color volume containing the proceedings of that year's congress.

¹ Italian Cardinals, Inside the Vatican Website, www.insidethevatican.com.

Considering that the theme for the October 2003 Congress was “From The Face of the Creator to the Face of the Redeemer”, most of the presentations were meticulously focused on the theology of the Face of Christ. Cardinal Angelini, in his opening remarks, referred to his yearly congresses on the Holy Face as “opportunities for learning”. He emphasized the significance of the Old Testament and expressed his own personal desire to return to an even more intensive study of the Five Books of Moses. Educators, he said, are of particular importance and it is important for a teacher to know how to talk about concrete facts. Cardinal Angelini announced that on October 24, 2003 a new course on the Face of Christ is to be given at Gregorian University.

The first presenter, *Fr. P. Stephen Pisano*, a US-born Jesuit and rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, spoke about reconciling Old Testament Judaic prohibitions against making images with the new order to be found in Christianity in which symbols can draw man closer to Christ. While the Old Testament warns explicitly against the showing of The Face of God, the New Testament encourages it. The symbol of the face is “elegant”, noted Fr. Pisano, and helps bring out the mysterious Presence of God. “To break the idols also allows symbols to speak,” he remarked.

Mons. Bruno Forte, professor of Theology and a member of the International Theological Commission spoke on the hidden Face of God, emphasizing the concept of the plural Face of God that was typical of the leitmotif of plurality that could be found over and over again in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, there is no single face, but many faces. The Hebrew word for *face* is the plural noun “panim”.² In the New Testament, the Son is the Embodiment of God’s Power and the Face is the symbol of that Power. The desire for the Hidden Face is within us. Revelation is the removal of the veil and the ensuing thickening of that veil. “Offenbarung” – the German word for Revelation – tells us that what was created is revealed. When one meditates on the word, one contemplates the Face. Beyond the revealed Face, we must study the Hidden Face.³

Contemplating the Face of Christ requires us to go more and more into silence. According to Mons. Forte, we must show obedience to the revealed Face of Christ.

Following *Fr. P. Stefano De Fiores’s* discussion of the Incarnation and the School of St. Thomas, *Fr. P. Bruno Moriconi* spoke on the Face of Christ in the Psalms and *Fr. P. Edoardo Scognamiglio* spoke on the dynamics of speaking and maintaining silence. According to Fr. Scognamiglio, whenever there is language, there is revelation. Silence is the origin of words. In Christ there is The Word. In Christ there is The Face. *Mons. Gianfranco Ravas* returned the audience to the Old Testament in his study of the Face of

² It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for water is the plural noun “mayim” and the Hebrew word for sky or heaven is the plural noun “shamayim”. One might surmise that the tendency to use the plural for many Hebrew words in the Old Testament stems from the Jewish tradition of “twinning”. For more details, see Rebecca S. Jackson’s paper “A New Approach to Jewish Studies on the Shroud” in the Proceedings of the 1999 Richmond Conference on the Shroud.

³ St. Ambrose, he noted, had his own quest for the hidden Face of Christ.

God in the *Song of Songs* and Prof. *Michelina Tenace* spoke on the Face of God in the Old Testament. P. *Stefano Manelli* gave an interesting presentation entitled: “The Annunciation: The Face of Christ and The Face of Mary.” Abbot *Simon Tonini*, Cardinal Angelini’s assistant and our longtime friend, spoke on the “Face of Christ in Monastic Theology”.

The second day of the conference offered an exciting potpourri of presentations on the theology of the Holy Face of Christ by Fr. *Franco Imoda*, P. *Bonifacio Honings*, and Fr. *Thomas Spidlik*. One of the show-stoppers of the congress was a presentation by Prof. *Hmida Ennaifer*, a professor of Dogmatic Islamic Theology at the University of Tunis, on the Image of Christ in the Koran entitled “La Figura Emblematica Di Cristo Nel Corano”. In his presentation, Prof. Ennaifer spoke on the importance of Jesus and Mary in Islam and the commonalities that are to be found in both religions. Fr. *P. Marko Ivan Rupnik* spoke on the Face of Christ in the Parable of the Prodigal Son and Fr. *P. Heinrich Pfeiffer*, professor of Christian Art History at Gregorian University, enlightened the audience on the Creation and the Incarnation as seen in the paintings of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. As a change of pace, *Italian Senator Giulio Andreotti*, in his presentation entitled “The Middle East Peace Process” tackled an issue that is relevant not only for our times, but for the future of Holy Land-based Biblical research. Senator Andreotti stressed the importance of self-control and compromise on the part of all parties in the Middle Eastern conflict if a lasting peace is to be realized.

The final presentation of the Congress, entitled “Studying the Relics of Christ” co-authored by us asks the following question: “Is science the enemy of religion?” In this presentation, we explored the possible benefits that science can bring to the spreading of the Christian faith – through the comparative scientific study of Relics of Christ such as the Shroud of Turin as well as those Relics unearthed in Jerusalem by St. Helena, the first Christian archaeologist.

The Congress concluded with a concert by renowned Italian tenor, Massimo Puccini and the children’s choir of the Istituto S. Cuore di Poggio a Caiano and the rousing words of Cardinal Angelini whose praise for Pope John Paul II was without bounds. At the finale of the program, Cardinal Angelini informed the audience that he was already at work on next year’s congress and the preparation of the new volume that will be published on December 15th of this year.