

## THE HOLY FACE OF JESUS

ANSELME LONGPRÉ

In his study on the glory of God, (*La Gloire et la Croix*, II, 3, pp. 408-10.) Hans Urs von Balthasar considers the "face" in the light of Scripture. He wrote that "face" signifies the whole person, and is indeed that person's self-expression manifest to others, offering itself to be discovered. In the Face of God the glory is so intense that a direct vision of it would be fatal to man, and yet we see in the Old Testament how ardently Israel yearned to see God's Face. The suppliant seeks the Face of God and begs him not to hide it (Psa 27:8).

Now, the glory of God shone in the face of Christ (II Cor 4:6); "Who sees me, sees the Father" (Jn 14:9). And if, at present, we "do not yet see Him as He is" (I Jn 3:2), it is not because Jesus' human face conceals the divine, but because we see only imperfectly; we cannot yet see God as we are seen by Him (I Cor 13:12).

### **The Holy Face of Jesus and the Holy Spirit**

"In principle," von Balthasar continues, "there is no longer a veil between our face and the glorious face of God." This is explained by St. Paul ((I Cor 3:6, 4:6), who contrasts the glory of the Mosaic Law, which was letter and stone, to that of the Gospel, which is Spirit. The "letter and the stone" were an intermediary, a veil, preventing the Face-to-face between God and man. But the veil falls every time one converts to the Lord, who is Spirit (II Cor 3:16-17).

Every intermediate disappears when the Father becomes visible in the Son, and it is thus that the Spirit of God directly illuminates hearts. In God's human face, the face-to-face is already essentially attained (I Cor 13:12); and faith, hope and charity, virtues that endure eternally (I Cor 13:13), are already the way, conformable to the Spirit, to contemplate the Spirit of God and his love, and to share in it.

The foregoing exegesis from Urs von Balthasar's monumental opus reveals to us the inseparability and the unity of the great Catholic devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to the Holy Spirit, to the Holy Face of Jesus, to the Eucharist. To progress in one is to progress in the others; to reject one is to reject the others; to concentrate on one is to be absorbed in the others.

The surest mark of false spirituality is the attachment to one devotion in disdain of others. If it is important-and to the Church it is-to respect the precise and distinct purpose of the great Catholic devotions, then it is equally important to recognize the relationship existing

between them, as well as their inseparability in a balanced pastoral and spiritual life.

### **The Holy Face of God and the Old Testament**

The Old Testament speaks repeatedly of the Face of God. A list has been compiled of more than 600 direct references to the Face of God in the Old Testament.

The "Face of Yahweh" signifies God himself, recognized in the communication he makes of himself. The "Face of God" is the glance He turns upon us, his creatures, whom he loves to the point of interesting himself in a concrete way, even to the least details of everything that concerns us. It is the perfect knowledge God has of us and of our hearts' most secret thoughts (Si 39:19). It is the imagery preferred above all others to express his multiform activity in the world: "My Face will go with you," God said to Moses (Ex 33:14).

Still, man cannot look upon the Face of God (Ex 33:20, Jud 13:22), not only because man is a sinner, but also because no creature can bear the majesty and the brilliance. In Isaiah's vision, even the seraphim cover their faces in the presence of the Lord (Isa 6:2).

Nevertheless, nothing could snatch from the heart of Israel the nostalgia for that vision of the Face of God: "Make your Face to shine upon us and we will be saved" (Psa 80). Longing to contemplate his Face, the Israelites present themselves in the Temple, where He resides: "When will I come and see the Face of God?" (Psa 42:3).

All the Old Testament waits and prepares for the day when the glory of the Lord will be reflected in an unveiled face, and when man, advancing from light to greater light, will be transformed to the resemblance of the only Son and will see God face to face (II Cor 3:18).

### **The Holy Face and the New Testament**

The New Testament brings the response to the universal aspiration of mankind; as foretold by the Holy Spirit, the desire of Israel became reality when the Face of God was made manifest by the mediation of the Incarnate Word, by the intervention of the Son, the perfect image of the invisible God (Col I:15). The Face of God visible in the flesh.

One must praise the ancients, especially the great theologians of the Middle Ages, for their recognition of the profundity of the word "face" in Holy Scripture, and for being sensitive to the affinity between the face and the person. Commenting on Psalm 27, St. Thomas Aquinas resumed the tradition: "Consider the divine Face as the model on which the soul is created in the image of God. The soul is fascinated by the divine Face, nor can she find her perfection as image except by a resemblance, always more intimate and more perfect, to the divine model." Likewise, the great mystics, especially St. Bonaventure, St. John of the Cross, Ruysbroeck, Eckhart, Tauler, propose to the Christian soul that the unique object of her efforts and of the divine operations in her, is the restoration of the image of God within her, even to



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the highest summit of similarity, rendering the "face-to-face" possible and beatific.

It is a fundamental teaching of the New Testament that "No one has ever seen God; but the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known to us" (Jn 1:18). Jesus said, "Who sees me sees my Father. Philip, how can you say, Show us the Father? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me?" (Jn 14:9-10).

On this point — as on all other points of Christian doctrine — St. Paul gives us the definitive formula when he says that Jesus is the effulgence of the glory of the Father and the image of his substance (Heb 1:3), the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). "From this moment," St. Paul teaches, "we are all called to reflect the glory of God in such a way that we will be transformed into the image of the Lord, who is Spirit" (II Cor 3:18).

In the Apocalypse it is revealed that those who serve God and the Lamb will see his Face (Rev 22:4). And, in his first epistle, John declares: "We shall be like Him because we shall see Him as He is" (I Jn 3:2).

### **The Devotion to The Holy Face of Jesus**

The first contemplatives of the Holy Face of Jesus were Mary, Joseph, the Apostles and the disciples — those who saw him on this earth and believed in him. They believed even when the adorable Face was covered with spittle and blood, as is witnessed by the Good Thief.

The archbishop of Tours wrote (11 October 1968): "From Bethlehem until our own days, the Holy Face of Jesus has been the object of contemplation and the rapture of all the saints. It is impossible to enumerate the riches of science and of piety offered to us by the Church Fathers, the great teachers, the lives of the saints and by tradition, in favor of the devotion, so rightly due, to the Face of our well-beloved Redeemer. Suffice it to say that the sacred cult has been preserved by an uninterrupted tradition and has been practiced publicly in the Basilica of St. Peter in Vatican from time immemorial."

Devotion to the Holy Face has spread far and wide since the early years of the XIX century, largely due to communications made to Sister Marie de St. Pierre, Carmelite of Tours (1816-1848); St. Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face (1873-1898); Marie-Marthe Chambon, Visitandine (1841-1907); Theresa Helen Higginson (1844-1905); as well as the apostolate of Leon Papin-Dupont, "the holy man of Tours" (1797-1876), for more than forty years known to the Church as a great apostle of devotion to the Holy Face.

Since 1898, when the first photographs were made of the Shroud, scientific discoveries have aroused worldwide interest in the relic, and an ever-expanding devotion to the Holy Face.

### **Reparation**

I cannot conclude these brief notes without signaling the particular

characteristic of devotion to the Holy Face of Jesus: Reparation. Pius XI and Pius XII, in their masterly encyclicals on the Sacred Heart of Jesus, exposed, with all desired profundity, the "serious duty, enjoined upon every person, to make amends and expiation"; "the duty to commiserate with the Christ covered with outrages and opprobrium"; "the duty to unite our satisfactions to those of Jesus for the innumerable sins, offenses and negligences of men." The Church has praised and approved numerous congregations dedicated to reparation, and many confraternities and associations whose members propose "to offer themselves incessantly as living victims, holy and agreeable to God" (Rom 12:1). Pretending to be unaware of these teachings, reiterated a thousand times by the Magisterium of the Church, would be of extreme gravity and would cause incalculable damage to the Mystical Body of Jesus. With the wisdom distinctively his own and in the supernatural light which led him to "penetrate the profundities of God" (I Cor 2:10), Paul VI spoke of the devotion to the Holy Face, of the Holy Shroud, and of the importance of reparation.

On 29 March 1983, His Holiness John Paul II signed a decree of the heroic virtues of Leon Papin-Dupont, the "holy man of Tours", and declared him Venerable. This Act was of great significance because the whole spiritual and apostolic life of M. Dupont focused on reparation. Everything which offends God: pride and irreligion, scandals, sarcasm and blasphemies, the profanation of Sunday, the apostasy of nations, the neglect of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist—all these and endless other things profoundly wounded his heart and inflamed in him an ardent desire to make reparation. And this mission of reparation took form from his extraordinary devotion to the Holy Face of Jesus.

The desire of the Israelites to see the Face of God was realized in Jesus Christ; and the devotion to Christ's Holy Face, perpetuated through the ages, has received new impetus from the majestic Image on the Holy Shroud. Truly it is the devotion of our times.