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BEHOLDING THE HOLY FACE

By Fr. Joseph Sergott, O.P.

It has been said that “the eyes are the windows to the soul,” but I believe that the face reveals the secrets of the heart. We can often tell the inner emotions of a person whether they are happy, sad, angry, afraid or even in love by the “look” upon their face. There are some who can hide their emotions by displaying a “poker-face,” while others cannot veil their faces from what’s in their heart.

We first get to know someone by beholding their face. Then it becomes recognizable when we see them again. Over time their face becomes symbolic of who they are. Even for someone who is blind, they can get to know a person by the shape and curve of their face because each face is unique.

For thousands of years people have longed to see God. No doubt, many people have said throughout human history, “If I could only see God then I would believe.” There is something in our human nature that needs to see and to be looked upon by another.

In this world we cannot see God face to face; we have to encounter him and come to recognize and know him through the eyes of faith. This happens as we encounter Jesus in the sacraments of the Church, in the Holy Scriptures, through the power of the Holy Spirit, through the mysteries of the Rosary and in other prayer, in various life experiences and through the faith of others.

For those of us who pray the *Liturgy of the Hours*, we are familiar with the striking passage from the Book of Revelation that we read every Sunday at night prayer: “They shall see the Lord face to face and bear his name upon their foreheads. The night shall be no more. They will need no light from lamps or the sun, for the Lord God shall give them light, and they shall reign forever.” (Rev 22:4-5)

This vision from Revelation foreshadows the fulfillment of the longing of the human heart repeatedly captured by the psalms, e.g., “My soul thirsts for God, the living God. When can I enter and see the face of God?” (Ps 42:3), and “The LORD is just and loves just deeds; the upright will see his face” (Ps 11:7), and “O LORD of hosts, restore us; let your face shine upon us, that we may be saved” (Ps 80:4). There is

something prophetic in these divinely inspired psalms that speak of the Face of God and of the light and countenance it bears upon all who are blessed to feel his gaze.

It’s difficult for us to imagine what eternal life in heaven will be like, but it *will* mean seeing God face to face. As Our Lord says, “Angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father.” (Mt 18:10) One of the most ancient blessings known to man is from the Book of Numbers. When we wish this blessing

upon another, we pray that God in all of his glory will shine upon them through his *Face* because when God’s face shines upon us it manifests his benevolence, approval, blessing, and his grace and peace: “The LORD bless you and keep you! The LORD let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you! The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace!” (Num 6:25) Perhaps the real truth is that once we see God face to face there will be nothing between us that is unknown.

If you think about it, the Blessed Virgin Mary was the first human being to behold the physical Face of God as Jesus Christ came forth from her womb. Up until the Incarnation, the Blessed Trinity, that is, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, were pure spirit. In the Incarnation, the *Logos* or the Word assumed our human nature, body and soul, and became man. Thus, at the monumental event that was the Birth of Christ, God, for the first time revealed his human face! Thus, we can say that Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). (Continued on page 4)



Assumption of Mary

Detail from the ceiling of Santa Maria Immacolata a via Veneto (Rome)

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The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

Our Tainted Nature's Solitary Boast

By Fr. Brian Mullady, O.P.

In 1822, the poet William Wordsworth wrote a sonnet called *The Virgin* in which, though a Protestant, he called Our Lady "our tainted nature's solitary boast." The place and mission of the Blessed Virgin in the world has been a puzzlement to many Protestants. Yet Luther held her always in high esteem. Her place in our hearts is expressed well in the *Magnificat* from the Gospel according to St. Luke in which she says: "All generations will call me blessed for he who is mighty has done great things for me." Why?

In the book of Revelation, Mary is portrayed along with the Church as "the woman clothed with the sun with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars." (Rev 12:5) She brings forth her Son but the dragon is ready to devour him. This text is used for the Assumption of Mary; but it can well serve to express the fact that the love which moves all the heavens and the earth to return to God is encapsulated in she who in the name of creation weds heaven again by bringing forth her Son. She is the New Eve. As the original Eve was a virgin who became a mother and fell into disobedience when she received a wicked Annunciation from a wicked angel, so Mary is a virgin who is also a mother. She began the return of the human race to union with God when she expressed her loving consent at the invitation of a good angel in a good Annunciation.

Mary is not only a model of creation returned to God since both her soul and her body now reflect the glory born of divine love, but she is also a model member and indeed the first member of the Church of believers. This is clearly witnessed in *Lumen Gentium*, the document on the Church in Vatican II. The first four chapters express the nature of the Church as to her structure as a society of God and culminates in what Pope Benedict calls the Church of Peter. This Church is both a sacrament and an institution. But this Church has as its purpose enlivening the human race in the holiness of divine grace. This is the Church of Mary. Reflection on her role as virgin and mother represents the holiness of the Church and the final chapter is dedicated to her as a summary of the document and a final flourish. The Church of Peter or hierarchy exists for the Church of Mary or grace.

The love of Mary is demonstrated in her acceptance of marriage with the Trinity at the invitation of the angel. The angel calls her "full of grace" and invites her to be the Mother of God. He venerates her, a human being, in the complete reversal of all that occurred in the human race up to that point regarding human-angelic relations. He venerates her because she is greater in familiar association with God and greater in the splendor of divine grace. Our Lady surpasses the angels in these things. So, Gabriel says "Hail" to her. The angels know that she is perfectly disposed to all the virtues by the integrity in her soul because she will never experience any sin, either

original or actual. Each individual saint excels in one or another of the virtues depending on their character and their weaknesses. Mary excels in them all. She does this not on her own but always in union with her Son and her grace of soul will overflow to her body to make it a fitting place for her to conceive her Son.

This does not remove her from redemption but she is among the redeemed in advance in light of her personal participation in all the actions and sufferings of her Son beginning with his conception until his passion and resurrection. She receives this grace not only for herself but she is also full of grace because her grace overflows to all the members of the Church both present and future.

She is troubled by this greeting and the invitation of the angel to be the Mother of the Messiah because she is a humble person. When she asks how this can be, it is not because she doubts, but she wants a clearer understanding so her consent may be fully informed. The words of the angel are specific and beautiful: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you (The Holy Spirit) and the power of the Most High will overshadow you (the Father) and so the holy offspring to be born of you will be called Son of God (the Word)." (Lk 1:35). The whole movement of the Trinity, begun in creation is completed in Mary as a human being. When she consents in fully informed faith and love, she becomes the sign of the completion of the movement of the heavens and the earth in God. She also reverses the disobedience of Eve born of a lack of love in the annunciation of Satan. She first conceives in her mind through faith and charity and this is so strong that she then conceives in her body without need of human seed. Therefore, she was called the Holy Triclinium, which was a couch designed for three people to lay on while eating, because it is said that the Holy Trinity reclined upon her. Because of this threefold blessing, she is both Mother and Virgin. She is Mother because Christ comes from her body as to his human nature.

Because Mary is morally united with everything he does in her soul, divine grace radiates forth from her. Thus, her purity is not just for herself, but the divine life of grace and purity is also communicated through her to the members of the Church. Her faith must be our faith; her charity must be our charity; her constant intimate life with her Son must be our life. What occurs physically in her conception of Christ and her fiat ("Let it be done to me.") must occur spiritually in each of the members of his Church at every moment of every day.

Mary found the cure for all the spiritual and physical ills of the world in Christ. She shows that the power to become like God, which surely our creation with a spiritual soul demands of us, does not come from a domineering grasping but from surrender to divine providence. "Let it be done to me." She discovers the sweetness of life to

be in divine love. Thus, we say, “our life, our sweetness and our hope”. She becomes a model of the brightness of the divine glory which man shall experience in the resurrection in her luminous faith in her Son. Though she is blessed among women this is because of the blessed fruit of her womb, Jesus.

Mary exemplifies all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. She shows piety because as a bride she cries “Abba, Father” an expression of love to her spouse. She shows wisdom because the angel reveals the final completion of the mystery of creation to her. Since she is married to the Trinity, she searches the depths of intimacy with them. She knows as God knows and loves as God loves. She shows knowledge because the angels instruct her in her own catechesis before her consent. She shows understanding because she has a right estimation of the things of this world including suffering. She demonstrates counsel when her first act on conceiving Christ is one of practical charity, taking care of an old pregnant lady. Her courage is manifest in the flight into Egypt and in her compassion with Christ culminating in her standing at the foot of the cross and offering herself with him. Finally, she shows us fear of the Lord because she preserves her chastity whole and inviolate not only in body but also in her soul throughout her life.

These gifts are also the source of virginity as a mother. As Christ is conceived through her faith by the Holy Spirit, but takes flesh from her body, she is intimately involved in all he does in his body. This includes approving of both his power and his teaching. Mary stands as the simple answer to all heretical teachings. Her virginity is one of the intellect as she believes completely and shares completely in all the acts of her Son. A favorite title for her in the Middle Ages is the “hammer of heretics”. Simplicity defeats complexity every time.

It is an attractive thought that because she does not have original sin, she does not suffer in anything natural. She experiences no pain in childbirth and if she did experience a kind of death, it would not be a painful one involving suffering. It would be like a gentle sleep such as occurs in the fairy tale Snow White. But, of course, she does suffer intensely in life and so she can sympathize always with us. All her sufferings are connected with the Passion of her Son which is the origin of the famous teaching of the Seven Sorrows. It is always good to remember that the flesh of Jesus which was so wounded in the terrible death on the Cross came from her body. Each wound of Jesus wounds her spiritually. Each rejection and false accusation affects her tremendously.

She also shares in the resurrection of the body which is reserved to the rest of the human race until the end of time. It would be unfitting for her pure body to be corrupted. So the ancient source simply says that she was buried, and then Thomas after three days arrived and wanted to see the body, and the tomb was empty. This teaching is reflected in the Eastern Church when the feast which celebrates this is called the “Dormition” or “Sleeping” of Mary.

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What Does the Blessed Virgin say in the Gospels?

By Fr. Brian Mullady, O.P., STD

Mary speaks only four times in the Gospels but each is wrought with meaning both for her role in the Church as Virgin and Mother and for us as her children. Each time she speaks she addresses some common experience of the members of the Church of Christ.

Growth in prayer is a constant issue for all baptized Christians. The foundation of all growth in prayer is the grace a Christian receives in baptism and makes each a member of the Church. This grace involves the forgiveness of sins because it is actually a change in the nature of the soul of the Christian. By this change, man receives union with the Holy Trinity, all the virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit. We can know as God knows and love as God loves but this demands our cooperation. We live in a culture today that grasps at being God by sheer human power seen in everything from abortion to the denial of truth. To this Mary says: “Let it be done to me according to your word.” (Lk 1:38)

Human beings are often smitten and mesmerized by their own desire to run the world. Instead of: “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” they are tempted to say: “my will be done in heaven as it must be done on earth.” St. Augustine says that all of concupiscence is contained in: “the desire to dominate”. Human beings can seek manipulation and domination in the simplest things like the placement of the furniture or the color of the walls. Pride leads people to assign blessedness to all kinds of things, awards, positions and experiences which cannot bring it. When Elizabeth calls Mary blessed, she simply gives the lie to this by saying: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” (Lk 1: 46)

God can seem hidden to people at times, especially in suffering. People question where he can be found. Dryness in prayer can lead a person to believe they have lost their souls and think prayer is useless. Some abandon all hope and reject religion and the life of virtue. Mary and Joseph sought Jesus for three days and when he was found in the Temple, she said: “Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have sought you sorrowing.” (Lk 2: 48) Jesus does not reprove them for seeking him but for wasting three days doing it. They know who he is. Where should they seek him but in the Temple?

Ordinary actions of daily life do not have to become the stuff of which high virtue is made. Yet, Mary’s final statement has to do with saving a couple from embarrassment over their lack of wine at a party. Mary shows her compassion for them and her confidence in her Son by interceding for them: “Son, they have no wine.” Everyday actions are the place where the more necessary virtues like integrity, generosity and humility should be practiced. Mary speaks here to each of us and shows her complete contemplation of Christ in faith: “Do whatever he tells you.” (Jn 2:5)

Holy Face... (Continued from page 1)

As I imagine the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph gazing upon their child in the manger, the lyrics of *Silent Night* (by Fr. Joseph Mohr) come to mind, "Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love's pure light; radiant beams from *thy holy face*, with the dawn of redeeming grace . . ."

Indeed, at the birth of Christ, for the first time the world was introduced to the Face of God, but most of the world did not know it; only a few recognized him. Simeon, a righteous and devout man, had waited his entire life to behold the face of the Messiah, and Anna, the prophetess, who never left the temple but worshipped night and day with fasting and prayer, saw the face of Christ, and they recognized the light to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel (Lk 2:25ff.)

In one of the key events in Jesus' life on earth, he took the disciples to the top of a mountain where he was transfigured in glory before their eyes. This glorious manifestation revealed him as the only begotten Son of the Father and as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. He knew they needed to see him in this way because of the suffering that he would soon endure. "And he was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light." (Mt 17:2) This image of the glorified face of Christ reflects the glory of the Father. As Jesus says, "If you know me, then you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (Jn 14:7ff.) Thus, in the Transfiguration, Jesus reflects the refulgence of the Father's glory and the very imprint of his being (Heb 1:3). In this incident we recall the words of St. Paul, "For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of (Jesus) Christ." (2 Cor 4:6) On the top of that mountain the glorified Face of God was revealed to the three disciples and they were overcome with wonder. Indeed, they received a mere snapshot of what the faithful behold in heaven.

However, soon thereafter, they would see a very different face of the Lord. That same face that shown brightly from the mountaintop would soon be slapped, spit upon, and punctured with thorns.

As the Old Testament prophesies about the Face of God shining down upon the faithful in heaven, it also foresees and envisages the face of the Suffering Servant who does not run from his tormentors, but stands and faces them: "I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting. The Lord GOD is my help; therefore, I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame." (Is 50:6-7)

There is something magnificent in the face of Our Lord as he gazes upon his saints and angels in heaven, yet there was poignancy as he faced sinners on earth who despised him. You can even say that he turned his face openly toward evil and death and defied them. It speaks of

his love for all people, of the sacrifice that he endured and the salvation that he procured: "For it is on your account I bear insult, that disgrace covers my face." (Ps 69:8)

There is only one face of Jesus Christ. The infant face that emanated beams of joy matured into the God-Man who stood on the mountaintop with eternal light shining forth *from* his face. That same face turned and looked upon his detractors as they ridiculed and beat him. There is an irony in the scourging of Our Lord: the same face that millions have hoped would one day gaze upon them in heaven was blindfolded, struck, and spat upon (Mk 14:65). In masking his face, they tried to veil his own sight; but, what he envisioned was beyond their understanding. Perhaps what they were doing unbeknownst to themselves was trying to shroud the glory of his face because they could not look upon the face of the One who felt nothing but love for them.



THE HOLY FACE OF JESUS

Based on the Shroud of Turin

How many times must the Blessed Virgin Mary have contemplated the face of Jesus? She beheld his face in his infancy, after she and Joseph found him in the temple after three days of searching, in his preaching and through his miracles, and as he entered into the depths of his Passion. As Jesus walked the road to Calvary, his Mother met him upon the way and she looked upon his face in its agony—not only from his physical suffering but as he took upon himself the sins of the world.

Then from the Cross as he cast his eyes down upon her, she looked up to him until he died. Then, only a few hours later, as she held his dead body in her arms, she took one last look upon the Holy Face. She would have to persevere in faith through three agonizing days until she beheld him in all of his glory on the morning of his Resurrection. Finally, as she was assumed into heaven, she beheld his Face and would never have to say goodbye again.

Now, because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, we carry the hope of St. Paul and all the faithful, "At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known." (1 Cor 13:12) It seems to me that the very first thing that we will "see" if we are blessed to gain eternal life, is the Face of Jesus welcoming us home. "May God be gracious to us and bless us; may his face shine upon us." (Ps 67:2)

Tainted Nature's Solitary Boast

(Continued from page 3)

So when people point to the errors or sins of people in the Church and say that this shows that the Church is not holy, one can counter with Mary and her life. She is the beacon which reflects the light of Christ and shows us how to live a truly human life. She is the great sign in heaven of what God created the world to be. So she is happy! "Daily, daily sing to Mary, sing my soul her praises due. All her feasts her actions honor with the heart's devotion true. Lost in wondering contemplation, be her majesty confessed. Call her mother call her virgin, happy Mother virgin blest!"