

THE FACE OF JESUS

*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up to heaven?*¹ The apostles have kept their eyes fixed on Jesus' point of departure. An angel has to remind them that life goes on.

The messenger of God was not trying to turn their attention from their Master. Most likely he wanted to remind them that from then on they would have to learn to see him in another way, to find him in others and in daily happenings.

St. Paul understood what the apostles were thinking, because he too longed to be with Christ and see him face to face.² But, given the choice, he preferred to continue for as long as God wished contemplating him as in a mirror dimly,³ if thus he could help others to live in that Light.⁴

He advised the recipients of his apostolic mission, with the strength of his example and his word, to keep their gaze here on earth fixed on heaven, where Christ is: *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*⁵

*Quae sursum sunt quaerite!*⁶ Seek the things that are above! We want to make this cry our own, but we have to learn how to do so. So often we find our eyes turned downwards, excessively focused on passing realities.

We sense we need greater acuteness to detect Christ's presence in every moment of our life. We love this world that is ours, the place where we encounter God,⁷ and we want to acquire a greater facility to perceive Christ's look while occupied with our daily tasks. We also want others to be able to see Christ in us; we are moved by the marvelous possibility of making Jesus' face present to our friends.

*Vultum tuum, Domine, requiram!*⁸ Lord, I long to see your face! Lord, we say to him, may I seek your face, may I learn to find it and to show it to others. May I know how to discover you in the ordinary happenings of my life, to recognize that it is really you.

Perhaps we will hear St. Josemaría telling us: "That Christ you see is not Jesus. It is only the pitiful image that your blurred eyes are able to form... Purify yourself. Clarify your sight with humility and penance. Then...the pure light of Love will not be denied you. And you will have perfect vision. The image you see will be really his: He himself!"⁹

¹ *Acts* 1:11.

² Cf. *Phil* 1:23.

³ Cf. *1 Cor* 13:12.

⁴ Cf. *Phil* 1:25.

⁵ *Col* 3:1.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Cf. St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 113.

⁸ Cf. *Ps* 26:8 (Vulgate).

⁹ St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 212.

The Gospels allude on various occasions to Jesus' look. A warm and affectionate look, moved and moving, a profoundly knowing gaze that penetrates to the depths of a person's heart; a look that teaches and corrects, that moves to repentance, that provokes a sudden impulse to generosity.¹⁰

Perhaps we have often tried to picture it in our prayer, in order to learn how to find it and make it present in our daily life. Some of the people who crossed Jesus' path in the hour of his passion can help us to carry out this desire.

Along the way of the Cross three people had a special closeness to Christ's face. Only two of them sought him out, but all three found him. We can learn from all three; each teaches us a different way to channel our eagerness to see the face of Jesus.

With our Lady, a Single Heart

"No sooner has Jesus risen from his first fall than he meets his Blessed Mother, standing by the wayside where He is passing."¹¹ The Gospel does not tell us anything about this meeting, but Scripture's silence has only served to spur the imagination of Christians throughout the centuries. St. Josemaría presents it in this way: "With immense love Mary looks at Jesus, and Jesus at his Mother. Their eyes meet, and each heart pours into the other its own deep sorrow."¹²

Their love is so intense that it is enough for their eyes to meet to know that they can rely on each other, pouring out their immense sorrow, because each one's heart is capable of receiving it. In the midst of that suffering, they had the deep consolation of knowing themselves to be accompanied and understood.

"Mary's soul is steeped in bitter grief, the grief of Jesus Christ."¹³ The anguish that fills Mary's soul is that of her Son, just as Mary's anguish fills the soul of Jesus. So strong is the union of their hearts that the sorrow of one is made up of the suffering of the other; thus they support and sustain one another.

If only we had that much identification with Christ's feelings! We are certainly very far from this, but we ardently desire to attain it. We know that if we advance along this path we will not be spared sorrows in this life, because every human life entails them. But we will always have the light needed to confront them, the firm ground never to succumb to them, but to face them with serenity.

Simeon had prophesied that a sword would pierce our Lady's soul.¹⁴ From the moment of the announcement of the Passion, the wound of the sword will never be absent from Jesus' Mother. Mary will always realize that she can only be offended through affronts to her Son; she knows that all suffering, and also all joy, can only find its cause in relation to him.

¹⁰ Cf. *Mk* 10:21, *Mk* 12:41; *Mt* 4:18-22, *Jn* 1:42; *Mt* 19:16; *Mk* 3:5; *Lk* 22:61; *Jn* 1:38-47.

¹¹ St. Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*, Fourth Station.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Cf. *Lk* 2:35.

Our Lady teaches us that in sorrows and small annoyances—whether caused by professional, family or social problems—we can seek and discover the face of Christ. And, as a result, we can be filled with peace even in the midst of sorrow.

Veronica, a Good Heart

A tradition in the Church holds that, a little further on, a woman went out to meet our Lord with the intention of cleaning his face. This is all we know about Veronica, as she is called.

Perhaps she had never consciously harbored the desire to see Jesus' face; and even if she had, the reason why she now sought his face could be something much simpler: she only wanted to help a Man who was suffering. Nevertheless, this woman, who does not even appear in the Gospels, has given a proper name to the desire to contemplate God's face.

*But blessed are your eyes, for they see...Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it.*¹⁵ If one can apply these words especially to Veronica, if she fulfilled the aspiration that so many saintly souls throughout history have harbored, it was because of her goodness and simplicity. Her good womanly heart did not allow her to be “be deterred by the brutality of the soldiers or the fear which gripped the disciples.”¹⁶ She refused to miss the opportunity to perform a small act of service. And that “act of love impressed the true image of Jesus on her heart.”¹⁷

The image of the face of God made Man was left engraved on that piece of linen. But above all, it was engraved on her good heart. “The Redeemer of the world presents Veronica with an authentic image of his face. The veil upon which the face of Christ remains imprinted becomes a message for us. In a certain sense it says: This is how every act of goodness, every gesture of true love towards one's neighbor, strengthens the likeness of the Redeemer of the world in the one who acts that way. Acts of love do not pass away. Every act of goodness, of understanding, of service leaves on people's hearts an indelible imprint and makes us ever more like the One who ‘emptied himself, taking the form of a servant’ (*Phil 2:7*). This is what shapes our identity and gives us our true name.”¹⁸

Is this not an accessible way to seek the face of Jesus? And is it not also a way to make Christ's face present to those around us? In our life the opportunity may arise to perform some great service for other people, to renounce something we value highly to help others. But whether such opportunities present themselves or not, we must try to live each day with “a good heart, capable of having compassion for other people's pain. Only with such a heart can we realize that the true balm for the suffering and anguish in this world is love, charity. All other consolations hardly even have a temporary effect and leave behind them bitterness and despair.”¹⁹

¹⁵ *Mt 13:16-17.*

¹⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Via Crucis* in the Colosseum, Good Friday 2005, Sixth Station.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Via Crucis* in the Colosseum, Good Friday 2000, Sixth Station.

¹⁹ St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 167.

Often what helps souls the most to discover the loving look of our Lord is precisely seeing how his disciples, with all their limitations, know how to recognize what others need. They know how to discover the small details that, if omitted, no one would complain about; and yet when those details are offered in service to others, how grateful people are.

If we act in this way with supernatural outlook, we will attain—to the extent possible in this life—our desire to see the face of Jesus. And at the same time we will help others to find him.

It may be that they won't notice him at first and it takes them a while to discover him. But they won't fail to notice from the first moment that there is "something special" about those who are treating them with such goodness and simplicity. If we want to show others the loving countenance of the Master, we need to strive to dispense kindness, serenity, peace, patience, respect, courtesy, affection—even when we don't expect to receive a like response.

If we want to see Christ's face in others, we need to draw close to them with a simple heart, a heart that values and admires and loves parents, children, our friends, one by one; a heart that discovers how each of them reflects, in his or her own way, God's goodness.

Simon of Cyrene, an Encounter with the Cross

The synoptic Gospels mention a third person who encounters Jesus on his path to Calvary. Our Lady and Veronica sought him out; they went to meet him on their own initiative. Simon of Cyrene did not do so. He was forced to carry the Cross.²⁰ The Evangelists' words imply some initial resistance on his part.

This is quite understandable, since no one likes being compelled to take on another person's burden, especially after a hard day of work. St. Mark gives us to understand that the sons of this man were known as Christians.²¹ "It all started with this unexpected meeting with the Cross"²²—a great piece of luck that had its origin in an apparent misfortune.

Simon of Cyrene's change of attitude was probably not sudden but gradual, and it is not rash to suppose that it had much to do with Jesus' face. Simon thought it was a question of a criminal, but Christ's loving, thankful, peaceful look disarmed him. At first he was upset because he merely "saw"; but then he "looked" closely, and he began to realize that sharing the Cross with this condemned man was well worth the effort.

What at first seemed like an unpleasant obstacle to his hard-earned rest was progressively changed by the face of that Man into a unique opportunity that would end up transforming his life. For him, as for all Christians, the Cross became the distinctive sign of his faith, the instrument of salvation, a redemptive reality inseparable from Christ's mission. Down through the centuries Christians have looked with affection and hope to the Cross, which should be at the center of their life and which, for the same reason, "should stand in the middle of the altar and be the common point of focus for both priest and

²⁰ Cf. *Mk* 15:21.

²¹ Cf. *Mk* 15:21.

²² St. Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*, Fifth Station.

praying community.”²³

“At times the Cross appears without our looking for it: it is Christ who is seeking us out.”²⁴ In the face of an unexpected Cross we can experience at first a desire to reject it. This is the normal reaction of our nature, and shouldn’t worry us; but it also shouldn’t stand in the way of a growing acceptance.

We know that in these situations, in which we might feel alone, God does not leave us. He is at our side; we may even “see” him, and turn to him in some way. But let us take a step further: let us seek out his look. If we are not satisfied with “seeing,” if we strive to “look at” Christ who is carrying the Cross with us, if we let him speak to us, what appears at first a misfortune begins to take on a new aspect and ends up changing our life.

Realizing that a setback can mean a more profound meeting with Jesus helps us to face it in another way. And then our cross “will not be just any Cross: it will be...the Holy Cross.”²⁵

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*Vultum tuum, Domine, requiram!*²⁶ Lord, I long to see your face! Three people had a special relationship with Christ’s face on the way to Calvary. Only two sought him out, but all three found him. None of them remained indifferent, or went away empty. We can learn something from each of them, and we want to do so because we desire to contemplate and help others to discover that face in our daily path through the world.

We would like to attain the unity of hearts that existed between our Lady and her Son. We realize that this is beyond our strength, but we don’t give up our desire, because that would be to renounce Love and because we can undoubtedly make progress along this path.

One way of doing so is to take advantage of the teachings of the other two people on the road to Calvary. A good and simple heart will be the occasion for many people—in the first place, ourselves—coming to find our Lord. And seeking out Christ’s look in the adversities and hardships of life will lead us to a gradual identification with God’s will. Then we will be able to reflect *the face of Jesus*.

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²³ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ignatius Press, 2000, p. 83.

²⁴ St. Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*, Fifth Station.

²⁵ St. Josemaría, *Holy Rosary*, Fourth Sorrowful Mystery.

²⁶ Cf. *Ps* 26:8 (Vulgate).