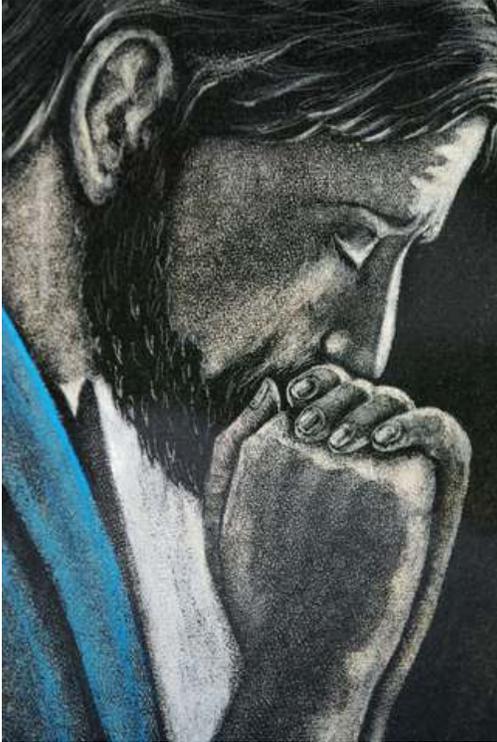


STUDENT ESSAY

Jesus, the Human Face of God



“The human face (or visage) of God,”¹ is a characterization of Jesus employed by many theologians in various formulations;² it is but one expression of the doctrine of the Incarnation, of Jesus the man as the Self-Revelation of God. It represents one of several “models” of Christology, historically and contextually conditioned ways in which our understanding of the phenomenon of Christ is articulated. The very idea of models was notably used by Avery Dulles, first as a way of identifying different perspectives from which the Church could be viewed and its truth apprehended,³ and then as a methodological lens for doing the same thing for Christology.⁴ John O’Grady and others have used that lens to analyze post-Vatican

II Christological exercises by prominent theologians.⁵ “At this point in the history of Christianity people find it acceptable to maintain different models of the church without detriment to the unity of belief. Believers should also be able to accept a similar position with regard to Jesus” (O’Grady, *Models* 12). It is O’Grady’s insights and categories that serve as the springboard and structure for this essay.

¹ “The Human Face of God” was used as the title of the work by J.A.T. Robinson, but it is a common figure in Christology. It expresses an attempt to explore the uniqueness of the manner in which Jesus reveals the divine. “He (God) shows us his face in Jesus. In what Jesus does and wills, we come to know the mind and will of God himself” (*Jesus of Nazareth* 128).

² Some of the theologians who have explored this facet of Christology, implicitly or explicitly, include Karl Rahner, Hans Kung, Edward Schillebeeckx, John O’Grady, Roger Haight, Rudolf Schnackenburg.

³ *Models of the Church*.

⁴ “Contemporary Approaches to Christology: Analysis and Reflections.”

⁵ O’Grady, “Jesus, the Revelation of God;” *Models of Jesus Revisited*. Clarke, “Current Christologies.” Chirico, “Hans Kung’s Christology.”

It is not my intention to assess the viability of models per se: in my opinion their usefulness and fertility have been amply demonstrated. The use of models “breaks down” the enormity of the Christ event into smaller, more comprehensible or manageable components, making either a theological enterprise or a spirituality-centered approach to the mystery of the Incarnation more defined, perhaps more personal. Models allow for an historical or cultural specificity of emphasis, drawing believers into the mystery through the highlighting of a particular aspect or the offering of a particular viewpoint. Of course, the strengths of the model paradigms can also be their weakness: if the particular viewpoint adopted, the aspect of Christ emphasized, distorts the whole reality, or so dominates as to seem to be the whole truth, we have strayed into falseness. If it leads us to lay claim to having that whole truth, if we think by our construction we have captured the Truth, we have constructed an idol. The theologians whose work I am referencing are critically aware of the imperfect, partial nature of even the most faithful model,⁶ and yet they continue to assert our responsibility to clarify and interpret dogmatic statements and understandings in the light of new times and circumstances, our call to re-discover Jesus in order to understand just how he reveals God to our contemporary world.⁷

The multiplicity of authors and models clearly requires some limitation, as does the sheer quantity of possible Biblical supporting detail. I have chosen, therefore, to restrict my range to one model, the human face of God, to one

⁶ “I would caution against reducing New Testament christological evidence to symbols and models which are already a step or more removed from the immediacy of the texts” (Rausch 201). While O’Grady believes that “an image used theologically, reflectively, and ontically deepens the theoretical understanding of a reality, and becomes a model,” he quotes E. Cousins to the effect that such models “only approximate the object they are reflecting” (*Models* 21). Furthermore, “no complete harmony is possible, since the symbol is forever limited in expressing the reality it contains” (23). “All understandings of Christ are interpretations, inasmuch as all are partial views of him from limited perspectives.... There is a recurring tendency in Christian theology to identify God’s revelation of himself with some limited understanding of that revelation” (Chirico 266).

⁷ “The Tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on” (*Dei Verbum*” 8). The most celebrated writer on the issue of doctrinal development, John Henry Newman, said, “From the necessity then, of the case, from the history of all sects and parties in religion, and from the analogy and example of Scripture, we may fairly conclude that Christian doctrine admits of formal, legitimate, and true development, that is, of developments contemplated by its Divine Author” (Newman 100). “This fullness of revelation in Christ does not exclude growth and development in our appropriation of the Christ event” (Lane 68).

manifestation of that divine self-revelation, that of intimacy with the Father as exemplified in the prayer of Jesus and his claim to knowledge of that Father, and, primarily, to the Gospel of John as the Biblical arena of demonstration. By accepting the Incarnation, the believer confesses the Chalcedonian formulation. What that means is forever a tantalizing mystery, unavailable to us in its completeness, but increasingly accessible as we enter into it by conforming ourselves to the model Jesus set for us. "In his service, love, and compassion – in his total humanity – Jesus reveals to us the fullest face of God as we can know it" (Newman 14). While we can list the many discrete behaviors of Jesus that bespeak his divine mission, the works we his disciples are commissioned to perform – healing, preaching the Kingdom, praying, obeying, etc. – all flow from the bedrock of his unity with the Father, an intimacy into which we are invited as the definition of our salvation. "Jesus is the personal revelation of God, not in virtue of this or that particular deed, but in virtue of the truth that Jesus is personally the Son of God made flesh in history" (Lane 64). His face is the face of reconciliation with the Father, a closeness he personifies and exemplifies for us.

How do we get a handle on "the reality that is within," where "the human expresses the divine," where, in Jesus, "the human becomes the localization of the divine" (*Models* 175)? The Christology "from above, from below" controversy seems self-defeating, since in even the most exalted Christology, where the connaturality of the Son with the Father is emphasized, it is through the man Jesus that we know God. Joseph Ratzinger, demonstrating the unique way the "Anointed One" is of God, describes an "arc" that begins with Jesus' childhood, stretches through Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea, and curves down again to the Cross (*Jesus of Nazareth* 300). The same image can be employed to describe the intimacy with the Father that is never broken, as Jesus comes from, and returns to, the unity of the Godhead. Although this Christology begins and ends with the Father, it includes humanity in its "arc" by means of that middle passage, the earthly sojourn. So, "from below" depends on "from above," since divinization of man relies upon, is dependent on, and is the rationale for the prior humanization of Christ.

As creatures we are "made in the image and likeness of God," and so represent our maker: "a human being is the image of God in his or her concrete reality which is as a relationship" (*God of Jesus Christ* 23). "Understanding Jesus as the human face of God depends first upon believing that every person is created in the image of God and can thus reflect the same" (*Models* 177-8). "The locus of God's revelation . . . the medium of revelation . . . is human experience" (Lane 53). The life experience of coming-to-be our most authentic selves in and through relationships of love is a universal one; the relationship of Jesus to his Father, his Abba, resonates with our human experience as it exemplifies and

ratifies that truth. Our human experience of reality prepares us to recognize the divine revelatory relationship, to open ourselves to its invitation. Jesus is the apotheosis of what it means to be a human being, a man raised to the power of God, to speak mathematically. Perhaps the most challenging, and most fruitful, expression of just how Jesus images the Father is found in John's Gospel. Of the many concrete manifestations of that relationship, two are particularly powerful. The importance of prayer in Jesus' life and his claim to knowledge of the Father are unique ways in which the face of God shines forth from the life of Jesus.

God is revealed in the human Jesus by means of that mysterious unity that exists between the Father and Jesus as his Son. That intimacy of love is what he shows us in his earthly life – the face of God is the Sonship of Jesus. “Only through the Son could we learn what a Father truly is. . . . God establishes his own standard of measurement. If it were not for Jesus, we would not know what a ‘Father’ truly is. This becomes clear through his prayer” (*God of Jesus Christ* 26). In addressing the question, “What does it mean to think of Jesus Christ as the self-revelation of God?” William Placher, along with many others, refers to the purpose Jesus himself gave for his advent – to glorify the Father (Jn 17:1-5) – which he often does by *showing* us how to be in relation to the Father, rather than by *telling* us (114). It is in the narrative of the Gospels that we see the unity of the Father and the Son, described in John's Prologue, and acted out in the prayer of the Son to the Father. For Joseph Ratzinger, “In Jesus' prayer the inner nature of God becomes visible. We see what God is like. Faith in the triune God is nothing but the explanation of what takes place in Jesus' prayer. . . . Communication with God through prayer is essential to Jesus. Prayer is what establishes him.” Prayer is what Jesus *does* in turning to the Father, and who he *is* in living in relation to the Father; praying people, people in relation to the Father, are who we are called to be. “In Jesus' filial communion with the Father, his human soul is also taken up into the act of praying. He who sees Jesus sees the Father (John 14:9). The disciple who walks with Jesus is thus caught up with him into communion with God” (*The God of Jesus Christ* 27, 8).

This “filial communion,” this description of the relationship between the Father and the Son, is both a definition of the Godhead as relational and an example of the mutuality to which the followers of Jesus are called. “Already in the Prologues (which can be seen as a proleptic summary of major elements of the Johannine plot) the relation between the Father and the Son as well as the revelatory dynamics toward the world are expressed” (Frey, “Love Relations” 183). Those dynamics of revelation include the *dynameis*, the “powerful deeds” or “signs” by which Jesus manifests the presence of God's Kingdom (Kereszty 111), but in Johannine language they also refer to the showing forth of the nature of God by the utterance of His Word. In Jesus, “the Word appeared in the

human story to be the light of the world" (Moloney 3); in Jesus, the revelatory dynamic is expressed as light, as seeing, hearing, and knowing, as clarifying and exposing the Real. The human face of God is the incarnation of the Logos. The Word as an expression of the Father in a human being is somehow in an intimate relationship with him, the most intimate possible.

Jesus as "the historical theophany of the eternal being of God" (Okorie 490) appears to us united in this closest of intimate relationships with his Father, a paradigm of intimacy. "In the Johannine text, the network of love relationships is gradually built. (Those relationships are) implicitly included in the prologue in the loving oneness of the Logos and God . . . or in the only begotten Son 'in the bosom of the Father'" (Frey, "God is Love" 211). The words of the Prologue look forward to explicatory synonymous words later in the text. The Incarnate Word is described throughout as "knowing the Father," a pregnant word that expresses personal intimacy, supra-intellectual, ontological comprehension from within, and as "abiding," which expresses an interior residence with a different emphasis, a voluntary remaining from a consonance of being. The words "bosom" and "enfolding" describe a relationship of physical closeness to the heart, with psychological overtones of hearing, protecting, caring. "Turning to," "pitching his tent," "tabernacling," connote orientation toward, attention, commitment. In the ancient world, one's utterances were understood to extend one's very self out into the world, to share that self with the recipient of your communication; the "Word of God" bespeaks a relationship of interpenetration, of connaturality, of identity without loss of individuality. All of this points to the dynamic between the Sender and the Sent, the Communicator and the Message, the Revealer and the Revelation. This is the paradigmatic relationship of the Prologue and the Gospel. In this relationship, which we observe in action in the prayer life of Jesus, we see that the essence of the face that God shows us is love. Far from being inward-turned or solipsistic, the "knowing" explicit in the mutuality between the Father and the Son implies the self-communication that flows outward from that intimacy, as love implies outreach and fruitfulness, and the Father and the Son imply the Holy Spirit.⁸

The obedience of the Son to the Father serves as a paradigm for his disciples. The overall intimacy between the Father and the Son, in which the Son serves the Father's will in perfect obedience from the intimacy of the Father's

⁸ Pope John Paul II's Ash Wednesday homily of 1985 calls for a conversion, a turning toward God that resonates with echoes of the Son's turning toward the Father as to his lodestar (John Paul II). Moloney states further that there is a "dynamism of the relationship... a mutuality involved.... While it is legitimate to translate 'and the Word was turned toward God,' there may also be an intent on the part of the author to hint that there was a corresponding turning of God toward the Word" (Moloney 28).

bosom, springs from a community of love between them. "The intimacy of the mutuality...(means) that the two parties of the relationship are so close that what one is, the other also is" (Moloney 28). That love relationship of interpersonal knowledge, communication, and commitment spills over to include the disciples the Father gives the Son, who eventually gives them back to the Father and sends them out into the world.

The paradigm of the intimacy of Jesus with his disciples is modeled on and reaches toward that first paradigm of the intimacy of the Son with the Father. First, of course, Jesus loves "his own in the world" and asks for a faith response from them. As they continually fall short (in an obvious but significant example, compare their failure to join in Jesus' prayer to his Father in Gethsemane), fail to "love him back," fail to understand, they suffer the loss of potential intimacy with God. In John's theology, to fail to respond, or to respond partially, is to stumble around in darkness (1 Jn 1:11), to miss the divine revelation in the face of Jesus. Jesus is always seeking a fully fleshed-out faith response. Although Jesus' mission is not fulfilled in that he cannot present a community of perfect faith to the Father, he can claim victory because he has perfectly obeyed, he has "loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1b). It is clear that a perfect faith response is a perfect love response, that the apostles' dim or partial declarations of belief represent dim or partial declarations of love, based not only on human weakness but on imperfect apprehensions of the Word Incarnate.

The divine model of unity like the one he has with his Father is the one into which Jesus invites them (and us). Such unity depends on "walking in the light" (1 Jn 1:17). That fellowship with each other, that intimacy within the community of disciples is the fruit of the intimacy that Jesus shares with his followers; it introduces them into the unity he shares with his Father. In John, "To those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name" (Jn 1:12): the entree into the intimacy with God as his children is clearly dependent on belief in the Word. What is being offered is a familial intimacy. Belief as an entree into the paradigmatic love relationship between Father and Son is a movement in grace that requires an acceptance of the Word. Spoken in love for his broken creation by the Father, the Word courts acceptance among men by the very loving service that defines the nature of God: invitation into the relationship is a participation in its essence – the followers of Jesus are called to "wash each other's feet" both as an earnest of their belief and as the fruit of that very intimacy. The God of love is a loving God. To rest in the bosom of the Father as does the Word is to serve your fellows, as did Jesus. The closer the intimacy with the Father, the greater the love for men; the greater the fellowship among believers, the more intimate the relationship with the Father.

Prayer and knowledge of the Father are but two manifestations of that intimacy but they lead to and are the fruit of the recognition of Jesus as the face of God.

“Only those who can recognize the presence of the glory of God in the ordinary life of Jesus, including his death, accept the revelation.”

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