

# Seeing the Face of God

## Icons and the Unity of Christians

*by Fr. Elias L. Rafaj*

The past ten years have seen a flurry of conciliatory gestures between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. These events are often occasions for theological homilies, documents, photos, and even the restitution of relics of different saints.

Efforts such as these have been very important in helping breach the divide that has separated Eastern and Western Christendom since A.D. 1054. But there is another element—much more visible at the grass-roots level—that can be a very powerful force for unity. In fact, you have probably experienced it yourself: It is the desire to see the face of God.

### **Lord, Show Us Your Face!**

My own journey to see the face of God began some twenty years ago, when I was a teenager living in the “Ukrainian Village” neighborhood of Chicago’s North Side. As I visited Roman Catholic churches, I noticed that the pictures and statues of Jesus made him look rather like the people in the pews. He seemed very life-like, and in some cases he was even smiling and laughing.

Then I would go back to my Byzantine Catholic parish with its many icons. There, Jesus would be very somber. He always looked somewhat Semitic and olive-skinned—not German, Italian, or Slovak. He always wore the same clothing and colors; he held his right hand the same way and had a big book in his left.

Although this Byzantine Jesus seemed distant and unvarying, there was something about him that beckoned me. His gaze transfixed, his eyes following my movements, his lips pursed shut, his form slender and long. His mysterious way of being drew me—I wanted to discover who he was.

The journey begun so many years ago is by no means ended. Like all believers, I seek the face of God every day. But now, icons of Jesus help me to come into his presence. As I contemplate his face, learn more about icons, and even “write” (paint) them myself, God helps me to understand, in my own limited way, his plan for humankind and for me in particular.

### **A Long Line of Seekers.**

Our common desire to see God’s face may well go back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve walked and talked with God, felt his presence and heard his voice. Yet despite their unique intimacy with the One who had breathed life into them, Scripture does not say that they ever truly saw his face.

Later, God continued to reveal himself in different ways. He spoke to Moses through a burning bush. He led his people as a column of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. He spoke to the prophet Elijah in the gentle breeze. He gave his word through the law and the prophets. Still, he never revealed his face.

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ changed everything. The God who has no body took on a body through the Virgin Mary. The God who has no beginning was born in space and time. The God who is timeless became an infant and grew into adulthood. The God with no

recognizable face now has the face of a Jewish man, Jesus of Nazareth.

The Incarnation is the great mystery that we cannot fully fathom or comprehend, but it is also an invitation to see and meet God in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself told his disciples: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

But what about us, who come so long after the disciples and apostles? Can we also see the face of God?

### **Images of Jesus.**

Of course, we have no photographs from the first century. But ancient traditions speak of early images of Jesus. One story—collected by Eusebius, a fourth-century bishop and historian—says that Jesus himself made the very first icon (icon is the Greek word for image). As the story goes, a certain king wrote to Jesus, asking him to come and cure him of an illness. Instead, Jesus pressed a cloth to his own face—thereby imprinting his likeness on it—and had the apostle Thaddeus take it to the king.

This account gave life to stories like the one about Veronica and her veil. Other stories from the first centuries of Christianity credit the evangelist Luke as having painted an actual portrait of Mary with the child Jesus. Today, Luke’s name is associated with over seventy icons!

Such stories may not be historically reliable, but neither should we dismiss them as merely fairy tales. They reflect an authentic and continuous tradition of depicting Jesus—and in a certain style that has elements in common. We can see it in the images painted on the musty walls of the catacombs of Rome, Southern Italy, and Greece.

These ancient icons are not trying to capture a photographic moment. Rather, they seek to represent something of the mystery of the Incarnation—the whole Person of Jesus, in whom two natures, human and divine, are one.

### **Reading an Icon.**

Ancient catacomb paintings, like the icons of Christ throughout the ages, depict the Eternal Word incarnate, with no separation between humanity and divinity. Jesus has a human face, but it reveals heavenly realities. His gaze and expression are solemn and sober, yet not sad; they speak of a heavenly joy that surpasses human emotions. The icon radiates a certain quiet and energy. Jesus’ deep and large eyes glow with light that comes from within because they are filled with the light of God. His lips are small and tightly closed, for in God’s presence, nothing is hidden and words are unnecessary.

In these icons and paintings, Jesus wears the clothing of philosophers, who were considered the wisest men of ancient times. But the colors Jesus wears show that he is much more than a philosopher. His tunic is red—the color of fire, blood, and sun—and signifies divinity. The cloak he wears over it is blue, the color signifying humanity. And so, his very clothing makes a theological statement: Jesus, who is God (red), took upon himself our humanity (blue).

The book that Jesus holds in his left hand is the Gospels, which present his words, teachings, miracles, and example. The fingers of his right hand, which is raised in blessing, are formed into a representation of the Greek letters IC XC; these denote the abbreviation of the name Jesus Christ. Everything points to the great truth: Jesus is God indeed!

### **Windows into Heaven.**

Whether in ancient catacombs or modern churches, icons of Jesus witness to our faith in him. We pray before the icon and venerate it, sending our prayer and veneration not to the painted surface but to the person or event represented.

Icons do not attempt to recreate what they depict. Rather, they offer these depictions as a manifestation of God, who has transformed the person or the event to become a conduit of his presence. By venerating the icon and praying before it, we come into the presence of God. What is visibly depicted in colors and forms directs us to the invisible reality of God's saving plan for humankind. The icon brings us to see through the eye of God.

An icon is therefore not meant to be viewed as a painting in an art gallery. It calls for prayer, meditation, and a response of faith. Study is required, too, but the first priority is taking time to pray, to gaze upon the icon without imposing words. Then our prayer and meditation will help us to see the face of God and feel his presence.

Prayer is crucial not only to praying before icons but also to "writing" them. Like the evangelists who listened to God as they wrote the Gospels, the iconographer looks to God as the ultimate Writer of the icon. Only after prayer, fasting, study, and spiritual guidance does the human icon writer set to work. He or she prepares a wooden panel with gesso or powdered alabaster mixed with an animal glue; then the icon is sketched and painted, using natural earth colors mixed with the yolk of an egg (symbol of resurrection) and water. Finally, the icon is gilded with gold, varnished, and blessed solemnly in church.

Through the church's sanction and blessing, the icon becomes a kind of gospel for believers, a theological treatise, a catechetical experience. It is truly a window into the Divine.

### **The Road to Unity.**

It has been many years since I first picked up a pencil and wrote an icon of the Mother of God of Perpetual Help (another icon traditionally attributed to St. Luke)—to the great delight of Sr. Herlinda, my sixth-grade teacher. I have kept at it and now lead workshops where others, too, can discover the joy of writing icons.

There is great peace in realizing that God is working through my hands to reveal his face—to me and to those who will see him through the icons I write. At the same time, writing icons is an exercise in humility. It challenges me to accept that I will never fully comprehend the God who became flesh in Christ. I count it the greatest honor to be a humble student and continue drawing closer to God through the icons of the church.

Icons naturally draw me to pray for Christian unity. After all, iconography has always been an expression of the theology, spirituality, and faith of all the Eastern Churches, both the Orthodox Church and those churches in communion with Rome. In recent years, the Western Church, too, has rediscovered this ancient treasure.

Because of this, I believe that the hope of unity is to be found in the face of Jesus, as expressed in icons. This treasure, shared by Orthodox and Catholic Christians alike, exhorts us to overcome our divisions and to seek unity. As we gaze on the face of Jesus, may we seek him together through prayer, fasting, charity, and the rediscovery of our common spiritual roots in ancient Christianity.

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