

**“The Cross, Charity, and the Holy Face of Christ”**  
**Sermon for the Salutations to the Holy Cross with His Eminence, Metropolitan Gerasimos**  
**Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church**  
**April 4, 2019**

### **Introduction**

This past January, during a visit to Rome and other parts of Europe, I had a rare and truly privileged opportunity that I will never forget for the rest of my life: a face-to-face encounter with Jesus Christ. Now, before you start thinking that I’ve lost my mind and am given to hallucinations – or even more unlikely, have acquired such a degree of sanctity as to become a visionary who sees God directly and doesn’t die! – allow me to explain.

### **The Holy Face**

The vision was not mystical, although it was spiritual: it was mediated by the cloth that covered the face of our Lord as he lay the three days in the tomb. I had learned of the Holy Face of Manoppello a few years before, after reading about it in the landmark work by the world’s expert, Paul Badde. Its antiquity is well documented as it was kept in Rome from ancient times, but then was removed in 1527 right before the sack of Rome in order to preserve it, and was kept in safe keeping in the small mountain village of Manoppello (thus, how the veil receives its name) about two hours outside of Rome, where it is enshrined to this day. I received an invitation from Mr. Badde himself to join him in Manoppello to venerate the holy relic.

Its miraculous qualities are also well attested. It is made from an unusual substance taken from the inside of a type of giant mussel that grows in the Mediterranean Sea, and made into fibers which are then woven together, and thus is known as mussel silk, or, its more technical name, byssus. It is an extremely meticulous process, and an all but lost art form (there is only one person left in the entire world who knows how to do it). Given the demanding intricacy of the process, a piece of byssus the size of the Holy Veil is almost unheard of, and extremely valuable.

But it is not the size that makes it miraculous. Byssus is incapable of holding color; if one attempts to paint it, the paint will evaporate. And yet, this image is full of color, full of life. I had the great privilege of praying immediately before the image in private for a half hour. The eyes especially are very vivid and piercing; the expression changes depending on the direction of the light and the angle from which one admires it, ranging from sad to serene. And so in antiquity it acquired the name of “the true icon of Rome”, the *vera icona Romana*. Later in the Middle Ages the story circulated of a woman by that name, Veronica, who wiped our Lord’s face as he carried his Cross to Calvary. In our Roman tradition we meditate on this scene in our devotion of the Way of the Cross, which is the sixth of fourteen different stations marking the journey of Jesus’ Passion from condemnation by Pilate to his being placed in the tomb.

### **Personal Relationship**

It was, for me, a deeply personal experience. I was, in effect, looking at a picture of the very first instant of the Resurrection. I was looking straight into the face of our Lord, and my personal relationship with him became very real, intense. The Psalm verse came to my mind, repeatedly in my mind like a refrain: “Lord, this is the people who longs to see your face.”

We often hear that phrase in Christian circles, “personal relationship to Jesus Christ.” Explaining lived discipleship of the Christian this way did not originate in either of our traditions, but rather comes to us from our Evangelical Protestant brothers and sisters. And while this exact phrase is not explicitly found in Scripture, it is certainly very consonant with the spirituality of both of our Churches. Just like the quality of the true icon of the Holy Face itself, this spirituality is sacramental, God’s presence being mediated by the physical, and through this a spirituality which places emphasis on the mystical. The Christian’s call to a personal relationship to Jesus Christ is certainly modeled to us by the mystics who abound in the histories of both of our Churches.

### **Communal Context**

It is, therefore, certainly not inconsistent to speak of a “personal relationship to Jesus Christ.” What would be inconsistent would be to speak as if there were nothing more to it than that. If such were the case, then our Lord could be whatever anyone wanted to make him out to be. Taken to its logical conclusion, this would turn our Lord and Savior into nothing other than an imaginary friend. Even worse, it would give each individual the authority to determine what our Lord teaches and what he demands of us. Thus, we would be no different from our early ancestors in the faith in the one, true God: the ancient Israelites in the Sinai Desert, who built a molten calf and then worshipped the work of their hands. How, then, can we be sure that our relationship to Jesus Christ is authentic and not imaginary?

I think a clue to the answer to this question can be found in a passage from St. Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy, where he exhorts his spiritual son with the following words:

... all who want to live religiously in Christ Jesus will be persecuted....  
But you, remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it, and that from infancy you have known [the] sacred scriptures, which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

The phrase “from whom” here is in the plural: that is, what Timothy learned came not only from Paul but also from his own family members. Which means that the faith is learned and discipleship is lived out in the context of the community of faith. This is also reflected in what Paul says here about living “religiously in Jesus Christ.” This word is also translated as “godly”: it is related to verb *Ευσεβέω* (*efsebeo*), which specifically means “to carry out one’s religious duties toward one’s family.” This corresponds to the

Roman concept of “*pietas*,” which is not quite what we mean in English by the word “*piety*.” Indeed, for some people, who misunderstand it, that word even carries a negative connotation, as it conjures up the image of someone who loves frequenting religious services to the exclusion of love of neighbor and any involvement in the world or putting faith into action. Of course, correctly understood *piety* is a positive quality, but the specific sense of “*pietas*” is attentiveness to carrying out one’s religious duties with the proper interior disposition, and not just for show or to fulfill an obligation in a minimalistic way (something our Lord certainly condemns frequently in the gospels). Perhaps the word can be more accurately translated into English as “*devotion*.”

### **Spiritual Ladder**

Which brings us to the Cross: both of our traditions are marked by devotion to the Holy Cross – we venerate the Cross, we exalt the Cross and celebrate its being found by St. Helena and brought to her son Constantine, as we sing in our service tonight; we both, in fact, sing hymns to the Holy Cross, which is the point of our service tonight, the title of which refers to the Cross as a “*spiritual ladder*.” But how does the Cross become such a ladder, lifting us up to spiritual heights, helping us to make progress on the path to holiness of life?

This happens by authenticity in our personal relationship to Jesus Christ: that is, fulfilling our religious duties in the household of the faith with the proper interior disposition. For our relationship with our Lord to be authentic, then, it must be lived out in the context of the communion of the Church. This also includes the reading of Scripture, as alluded to here: Scripture is able to offer true instruction, but only if read in the context of the faith of the Christian community. It is, after all, the first and foundational testimony to the faith of the Church. This, then, introduces an element of objectivity: with discipleship lived this way, one cannot settle for what is comfortable and convenient.

The practical realization of this is the practice of charity, thinking of others first, before oneself. This is also a vital force for building up the communion of the Church, that is, for moving us closer to full Christian unity. There are, of course, the three essential practices which must be observed if we wish to realize this vision, what we might call the “*ecumenical tryptic*.” There is, first and foremost, praying together, and that is why we are here tonight – and very happily so, I might add. We also must continue to pursue theological dialogue: not in the sense of an academic exercise, but rather a mutual quest for more perfect conversion to Christ by together seeking to understand more deeply the riches of wisdom Christ has bequeathed his Church in the deposit of faith. Finally, there is carrying out the works of charity together: common service to the poor, advocating for and witnessing to the dignity of human life in all of its stages, teaching and modeling the integrity of marriage and family life, coming to the assistance of those who are most vulnerable and living on the margins of society, and so much else that the Lord will be asking us about on judgment day as he made quite clear to us in the 25th chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew.

**Suffering for Christ**

St. Paul says something more in this passage from Second Timothy: that all those who live with such devotion “will be persecuted.” We immediately think of the unrelenting bloodshed and oppression of Christians in the Middle East, China, Africa and other parts of world. But we are now witnessing a spreading of such violent attacks even in the West on Christians and on members of other faith communities. Charleston, Sutherland Springs, Pittsburgh and Christchurch come immediately to mind. But we in the West must be careful in another way, and this applies to everyone, not only the tragic victims of overt physical violence. There is a much more subtle, insidious, and even more dangerous persecution happening in the West now, what we might call moral, rather than physical, violence. This is the pressure to conform to a sort of a secular orthodoxy at odds with the truth of the Gospel, and the punishments and social stigmatization are very real for those who publicly dissent from it. It is more dangerous because we, in the West, have the luxury of being able to be complacent and get away with it. Without living an authentic relationship to Jesus Christ, laziness imperceptibly creeps in, leading without noticing it to indifference, and before you know it virtue changes into vice: integrity of faith becomes compromising on principle, hope is replaced by the short-sightedness of immediate gratification, and charity turns into self-centered contentment. Voilà: the figure of the disciple disappears, and is no longer distinguishable from a non-believer. The forging of the molten calf is complete, and the compromised disciple bows down in worship.

All of this is the opposite of devotion. True devotion, on the other hand, will always entail suffering: both from without, especially in a society which manifests hostility to so many of the core values of our faith; but also from within, from the temptations to mediocrity to which every believer is subject. The great Catholic orator Archbishop Fulton Sheen used to say that when we appear before our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ for judgment, he will say to us: “show me your scars.” Those scars are what we suffer for him, the cost of fidelity to our vocation – our common vocation as Christian disciples, and the personal vocation that God has given to each one of us. Scars are the only evidence of our fidelity to him, that we have taken him at his word, and have picked up our cross and followed after him.

**Conclusion**

Such suffering is also a work of charity, for it, too, manifests the love of Christ in action. I mentioned earlier our Catholic devotion of the Way of the Cross, marked by fourteen stations on the walk to Calvary, with the sixth station being that of Veronica wiping the face of Jesus. In his meditation on this, Pope John Paul II teaches that any truly altruistic act of charity always leaves the imprint of the face of the Savior. This, then, is how the Holy Face of Jesus can be seen in our midst. It is not necessary to travel to a small mountain village in the middle of Italy. “Lord, this is the people that longs to see your face.” Let us show that face to the world through an authentic personal relationship to him who is the Savior of the world.