

JP II Selections from his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (January 6, 2001)

“Your face, O Lord, I seek” (Ps 27:8). The ancient longing of the Psalmist could receive no fulfilment greater and more surprising than the contemplation of the face of Christ. God has truly blessed us in him and has made “his face to shine upon us” (Ps 67:1). At the same time, God and man that he is, he reveals to us also the true face of man, “fully revealing man to man himself” (*Gaudium et spes*, 22).

Jesus is “the new man” (cf. Eph 4:24; Col 3:10) who calls redeemed humanity to share in his divine life. The mystery of the Incarnation lays the foundations for an anthropology which, reaching beyond its own limitations and contradictions, moves towards God himself, indeed towards the goal of divinization. . . . The Church has no doubt that the Evangelists in their accounts, and inspired from on high, have correctly understood in the words which Jesus spoke the truth about his person and his awareness of it. Is this not what Luke wishes to tell us when he recounts Jesus’ first recorded words, spoken in the Temple in Jerusalem when he was barely twelve years old? Already at that time he shows that he is aware of a unique relationship with God, a relationship which properly belongs to a “son.” When his mother tells him how anxiously she and Joseph had been searching for him, Jesus replies without hesitation: “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s affairs?” (Lk 2:49). It is no wonder therefore that later as a grown man his language authoritatively expresses the depth of his own mystery, as is abundantly clear both in the Synoptic Gospels (cf. Mt 11:27; Lk 10:22) and above all in the Gospel of John. In his self-awareness, Jesus has no doubts: “The Father is in me and I am in the Father” (Jn 10:38).

However valid it may be to maintain that, because of the human condition which made him grow “in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man” (Lk 2:52), his human awareness of his own mystery would also have progressed to its fullest expression in his glorified humanity, there is no doubt that already in his historical existence Jesus was aware of his identity as the Son of God. John emphasizes this to the point of affirming that it was ultimately because of this awareness that Jesus was rejected and condemned: they sought to kill him “because he not only broke the sabbath but also called God his Father, making himself equal with God” (Jn 5:18). In Gethsemane and on Golgotha Jesus’ human awareness will be put to the supreme test. But not even the drama of his Passion and Death will be able to shake his serene certainty of being the Son of the heavenly Father.

In contemplating Christ's face, we confront the most paradoxical aspect of his mystery, as it emerges in his last hour, on the Cross. The mystery within the mystery, before which we cannot but prostrate ourselves in adoration.

The intensity of the episode of the agony in the Garden of Olives passes before our eyes. Oppressed by foreknowledge of the trials that await him, and alone before the Father, Jesus cries out to him in his habitual and affectionate expression of trust: "Abba, Father." He asks him to take away, if possible, the cup of suffering (cf. Mk 14:36). But the Father seems not to want to heed the Son's cry. In order to bring man back to the Father's face, Jesus not only had to take on the face of man, but he had to burden himself with the "face" of sin. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).

We shall never exhaust the depths of this mystery. All the harshness of the paradox can be heard in Jesus' seemingly desperate cry of pain on the Cross: "'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mk 15:34). Is it possible to imagine a greater agony, a more impenetrable darkness? In reality, the anguished "why" addressed to the Father in the opening words of the Twenty-second Psalm expresses all the realism of unspeakable pain; but it is also illumined by the meaning of that entire prayer, in which the Psalmist brings together suffering and trust, in a moving blend of emotions. In fact, the Psalm continues: "In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you set them free ... Do not leave me alone in my distress, come close, there is none else to help" (Ps 22:5,12).

Jesus' cry on the Cross, dear Brothers and Sisters, is not the cry of anguish of a man without hope, but the prayer of the Son who offers his life to the Father in love, for the salvation of all. At the very moment when he identifies with our sin, "abandoned" by the Father, he "abandons" himself into the hands of the Father. His eyes remain fixed on the Father. Precisely because of the knowledge and experience of the Father which he alone has, even at this moment of darkness he sees clearly the gravity of sin and suffers because of it. He alone, who sees the Father and rejoices fully in him, can understand completely what it means to resist the Father's love by sin. More than an experience of physical pain, his Passion is an agonizing suffering of the soul. Theological tradition has not failed to ask how Jesus could possibly experience at one and the same time his profound unity with the Father, by its very nature a source of joy and happiness, and an agony that goes all the way to his final cry of abandonment. The simultaneous presence of these two seemingly irreconcilable aspects is rooted in the fathomless depths of the hypostatic union. . . .

As on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, the Church pauses in contemplation of this bleeding face, which conceals the life of God and offers salvation to the world. But

her contemplation of Christ's face cannot stop at the image of the Crucified One. He is the Risen One! Were this not so, our preaching would be in vain and our faith empty (cf. 1 Cor 15:14). The Resurrection was the Father's response to Christ's obedience, as we learn from the Letter to the Hebrews: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Son though he was, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (5:7-9).

It is the Risen Christ to whom the Church now looks. And she does so in the footsteps of Peter, who wept for his denial and started out again by confessing, with understandable trepidation, his love of Christ: "You know that I love you" (Jn 21:15-17). She does so in the company of Paul, who encountered the Lord on the road to Damascus and was overwhelmed: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21).

Two thousand years after these events, the Church relives them as if they had happened today. Gazing on the face of Christ, the Bride contemplates her treasure and her joy. "*Dulcis Iesus memoria, dans vera cordis gaudia*": how sweet is the memory of Jesus, the source of the heart's true joy! Heartened by this experience, the Church today sets out once more on her journey, in order to proclaim Christ to the world at the dawn of the Third Millennium: he "is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8).



St. John Paul II (1920-2005), actor, poet, philosopher, and exemplary priest, was known for his deep mystical attachment to Christ and his unquenchable faith in God's providential care for his people.