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"Your Face, Lord, Do I Seek": Faith in a Personal God

What does it mean that God is a “person” who has a face? A new article in the series "Light of Faith."

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You have said, “Seek my face.” My heart says to you, “Your face, Lord, do I seek” (Ps 27:8). This verse from the psalmist conveys a theme that runs through all of Sacred Scripture, from *Genesis* right to the book of

Revelation.^[1] It is a theme that spans the entire history of God's dealings with mankind. This yearning is also found – in a more or less explicit way – in the hearts of the men and women of the 21st century. Despite the flight from the Creator that many in today's world seem so intent on, the search for God and for a transcendent meaning for each person's life is still very much alive.

However mankind's search for the sacred has undergone a clear qualitative change in recent times. The array of beliefs today is more complex and fragmented than before. The practice of the faith has decreased in the Catholic Church, and many who say they are Catholics no longer accept some of the Church's teachings on faith or morals. A tendency to indiscriminately mix different beliefs (for example, Christianity and Buddhism) can also be seen. The

number of people who claim to believe in an impersonal force and not in the Christian God has increased, as have the members of non-Christian religions, especially the Eastern religions, or the New Age movements. For many, the image of the divine has been obscured under the contours of a cosmic force, a source of spiritual energy or a distant and indifferent being. In short, today it has become more difficult *to recognize the face of a personal God*. Many no longer accept as truly credible the Christian message of a God who became visible in Jesus Christ, and who is near to us in our daily life.

In some cultures this impersonal view of God is due to the Christian faith having had as yet little influence there. But in the Western world it reflects a complex cultural environment in which “a strange forgetfulness of God” reigns, and “it

seems as if everything would be just the same even without Him.”[2] This forgetfulness, which cannot avoid a certain “feeling of frustration, a sense of dissatisfaction with everyone and everything,”[3] is reflected in the tendency to view religion from an individualistic perspective, as an offering of religious experiences that can vary in accord with each person’s spiritual needs. This view of religion makes it difficult for someone to understand that God is calling them to a personal relationship with Him, as did a widespread viewpoint in past ages that saw religious practice as merely an obligation or an external duty towards God. Blessed John Henry Newman once said: “Every century is like every other, and to those who live in it seems worse than all times before it.”[4]

Despite the complex cultural situation for the faith today, it is

possible now – just as in the past – to rediscover the attractive force of a faith offering a Face, a faith that declares: you are not alone in the world. There is Someone who has wanted you to exist, who has told you “live!” (cf *Ezek* 16:6), and who wants you to be happy forever. The God of Jesus Christ, who has been criticized for “diminishing the full meaning of human existence and stripping life of novelty and adventure,”^[5] really wants us to have life, and life in abundance (cf *Jn* 10:10); that is, a happiness that nobody and nothing can take away from us (cf *Jn* 16:22).

The mystery of a Face and a faceless idol

Especially in the West, some people today view spirituality and religion as antagonistic. While in “spirituality” they perceive authenticity and closeness (as

measured by their experiences and feelings), in religion they see above all a body of external rules and beliefs. Religion thus often becomes an object of historical and cultural interest, but not an essential component of personal and social life. Along with other factors, this may be due to certain deficiencies in catechesis. The Christian faith is meant to be experienced personally, as are other interpersonal encounters such as human love and friendship. “If interior life,” wrote Saint Josemaría, “doesn’t involve a personal encounter with God, it doesn’t exist.”[6] And Pope Francis wrote: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting Him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her.”[7]

This personal encounter however does not happen automatically, like accessing a website by simply clicking on a link; nor does one truly discover a person the same way one encounters objects. Even when it seems that the discovery of God has been sudden and unexpected, as happens with some who convert to the faith, those same conversion stories tend to confirm how that step had been in preparation for a long time, on “low heat” as it were. The path to faith, and the very life of the believer, entails a lot of patient waiting. “We must live in anticipation of this encounter!”[8]

The ups and downs of the history of salvation – both those related in Scripture and those we see today – reveal that God knows how to wait. God waits because He is dealing with persons. And yet precisely because of that, because He is a Person, we too need to learn how to wait. “Faith by its very nature demands renouncing

the immediate possession which sight would appear to offer; it is an invitation to turn to the source of the light, while respecting the mystery of a Countenance which will unveil itself personally in its own good time.”[9]

The episode of the golden calf in the desert (cf *Ex* 32:1-8) is a perennial reminder of the danger of being impatient with God. “While Moses is speaking to God on Sinai, the people cannot bear the mystery of God’s hiddenness, they cannot endure the time of waiting to see his face.”[10] Thus we can understand the insistent warnings about idolatry[11] by the prophets in the Old Testament, still so relevant today. Certainly, no one likes to be accused of idolatry; the word has a connotation of submission and irrationality that makes it offensive. However the prophets directed this term above all to a believing people. Idolatry is not

only or principally a problem of “the nations” who do not invoke the Name of God (cf *Jer* 10:25); it is also found in the life of believers, as a “backup plan” in case God does not meet the expectations of our heart, as though God were not enough for us. “Before an idol, there is no risk that we will be called to abandon our security, for idols ‘have mouths, but they cannot speak’ (*Ps* 115:5). Idols exist, we begin to see, as a pretext for setting ourselves at the centre of reality and worshipping the work of our own hands.”[12]

This indeed is the temptation: the guarantee of a face, even if it is no more than ours, as in a mirror. “In place of faith in God, it seems better to worship an idol, into whose face we can look directly and whose origin we know, because it is the work of our own hands.”[13] We think it is impossible to search for a personal God, for the Face that wants

to be welcomed, and we opt for faces of our own choosing: “personalised” gods – with the bittersweet taste that this adjective sometimes leaves. We seek *gods of silver and gold, of bronze and iron, of wood and stone, who neither see nor hear nor know* (Deut 5:23), who lend themselves to our wishes.

We can live clinging to these sources of security for a while, even for years. But a professional setback, a family crisis, a problem child or a serious illness can undermine that security. *Where are the gods that you made? Let them get up, if they can save you* (Jer 2:28). Then each of us realizes that we are alone in the world; like Adam and Eve in paradise after sin, we realize that we are naked, without any support (cf Gen 3:7). “In every man’s life there comes a time sooner or later when his soul draws the line. He has had enough of the usual explanations. The lies of

the false prophets no longer satisfy. Even though they may not admit it at the time, such people are longing to quench their thirst with the teachings of Our Lord.”[14]

A personal God

How can Christianity overcome the inadequacies of these idols and satisfy this deep longing in the human heart? While for other religions or spiritualities “God remains very distant and does not seem to make himself known, He does not make himself loved,”[15] the Christian God “has shown Himself: in the Face of Christ we see God, God has made himself ‘known.’”[16] The Christian God is *Someone* for whom the human heart longs. And He himself has come to show us his Face: *that which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning*

the Word of life ... we proclaim also to you (1 Jn 1:3). When all human certitudes fail, when life and its meaning become unclear, the “Word of life” enters the scene. Whoever rejects Him remains imprisoned in his longing for love.[17] But when we open the door to Him, when we refuse to cling to our own security and admit we are sick and blind, we can discover God’s personal face.

What does it mean that God is a “person” who has a face? Does this question even make sense? When Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father, our Lord answers: *he who has seen me has seen the Father (Jn 14:9).* The fact that God has become man in Jesus and has manifested Himself to us in person through his humanity is at the very core of the Christian faith.

But if God has a personal face which has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ, why does He hide himself

from us? “What wouldn’t we give to hear the accents of his voice, to see him cross a street? What immeasurable assurance it would be to catch his eye and feel his power surge through us, to know with every cell of our being who he is?”[18] If God came into the world, why has He now returned to hide in his mystery? The book of Genesis (which not only deals with the origins of the world and man, but also with the very axes around which history revolves) shows us that it is not God who hides from man, but rather man who hides from God through sin (cf *Gen* 3:9-10).

Imagine for a moment that Jesus had stayed on earth. Would our relationship with Him really be more personal? Each of us would probably have at best a few moments in this life to be with Him – a bit of small talk, a selfie... just as with other celebrities. Even if God indeed does “hide” from us, He does so precisely

because He wants to establish a personal relationship with each man and woman – heart to heart. In our relationship with God something that is proper to all personal relationships takes place in the most intense way possible. We never really get to know the other person completely: we need to strive to get to know them ever better. “Yes, behind the people I look for you. / Not in your name, if they say it, / not in your image, if they paint it. / Behind, behind, beyond.”[19]

He who has seen me has seen the Father (Jn 14:9). The Incarnation of God makes the human personality a suitable path to approach the mystery of a personal God. In fact, it is the only path, since we have no direct experience of any other mode of personal existence. In following this path, however, we need to avoid any type of “anthropomorphism”: the tendency to describe a God

tailored with human characteristics, a human being envisioned as perfect. The very fact that God is a Trinity of Persons shows how his personal Being exceeds the boundaries of our own experience. But despite these limitations, we should strive to draw ever closer to His Mystery, raised up on the wings of faith and reason.[20]

Let us return, then, to this question: What does it mean to be a person? A person, as distinguished from non-personal beings, “perfectly *possesses* itself through the will and perfectly *knows* itself through the intellect; it is the transcendence of a being who can say ‘I.’”[21] A person is a “transcendent” being because the “I” of each person – even those who cannot say “I” – is a unique and unrepeatable reality, irreducible to the rest of the universe. As Saint Augustine said when confronting the mystery of the human person, each person is an abyss: *Abyss calls unto*

abyss (Ps 42:7).[22] To call God a person means that He is an “I” who is the master of Himself and who is distinct from me, yet whose closeness to me exceeds that of any other human person. God is, as Saint Augustine also said with an expression of unsurpassed depth and beauty, *interior intimo meo*: He is closer to us than we are to ourselves. [23] He is at the deepest origin of my being. It is He who has thought of me, and who will never stop doing so.

Here we have to draw a decisive border between our personal being and that of God. Our existence is radically dependent on God: we are *because He has wanted us to exist*; our being is in His hands. “At the beginning of Western philosophy, the question of the *arche*, the origin of all things, arose repeatedly, and various profound answers were given. But there is only one truly satisfactory

answer: to acknowledge that my origin is in God. Or to put it better: in God's will, directed towards me, that I must exist, and be who I am.”[24] God has decided that I should exist, and precisely as I am. Hence I can accept myself and consider myself good. This is what happens every time a child discovers that he or she is loved by their parents, every time a look, a smile, a gesture tells them: “How good for me that you exist!”[25] We realise that we are entirely dependent, and at the same time unconditionally loved.

He made us and we are his (Ps 100:3). Is this radical dependence on God a form of domination? To answer in the affirmative would be equivalent to saying that when a mother smiles at her young child she does so with a desire to control him or her. Is domination the only form of relationship between persons? Is it even the main one? A more powerful

logic than the *logic of domination* immediately arises: the *logic of love*. In opposition to someone who says to another person: "You have to be as I want," there arises the deeply personal cry: "How good it is that you exist... as you are!" That is the message addressed to the person who is loved, to the sick child, to the elderly father, when they are affirmed as they are, and told they are loved.

If saying that '*I am not my own origin*' signified nothing more than accepting my own finitude, we would remain on the surface of things. Actually, it means opening myself to the infinitude of God; it means recognizing that "since my existence began, we have been two. My existence is in its very essence a relationship. I only subsist insofar as I am uttered by another. To acknowledge this fundamental dependence is simply to ratify what I

am. I do not exist except insofar as I am loved. For me, to exist will be to love in my turn, to answer through grace to the action of grace.”[26]

Christian revelation helps us to know a God who is governed by this logic. A God who creates out of Love, out of a superabundance of Love. Or even better, a God who is Love. And it is through our own encounter with Him that we discover our personal face: we discover who we are.

The face of God

“We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution,” Benedict XVI remarked when he was elected to the see of Peter. “Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”[27]

This reality is not simply the object of an “intellectual” enquiry. In other words, it is not enough to say: “All right, I understand it.” It should

become a “spark” that enkindles our entire life. It gives us a much higher vision than any intellectual system, and transforms the deepest aspects of our life.

From this new perspective, prayer acquires a central place in our life, as we see in Jesus’ life.[28] Contrary to certain preconceptions that distort its true meaning, prayer does not consist in emptying oneself, or in a servile compliance with the will of another. Pope Francis illustrates this well by describing how he prays: “I feel as if I were in someone else’s hands, as if God were taking me by the hand. I think you have to reach the transcendental otherness of the Lord, who is Lord of everything, but who always respects our freedom.”[29] Prayer means, in first place, discovering that we are *with God*: Someone who is alive and real, who is not myself; Someone in whom

I discover who I really am, in whom I discover my true face.

In realizing that we are created by God, we do not feel *negated* but rather *affirmed*. Someone has said to us: “How good it is that you exist!” And that Someone has ratified this and defined it forever by giving his life for each one of us. Our choices before God are not either to submit or rebel. Rather, we can close ourselves off to love, or instead *let ourselves be loved* and respond in turn by *loving*. Our Origin is Love, and we have been chosen and called by God to share in his Love.

Therefore in heaven, “when we see the face of God we shall know that we have always known it. He has been a party to, has made, sustained and moved moment by moment within, all our earthly experiences of innocent love. All that was true love in them was, even on earth, far more

His than ours, and ours only because His.”[30]

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Suggestions for further reading:

Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, nos. 264-267: “Personal encounter with the saving love of Jesus”).

Francis, Enc. *Enc. Lumen Fidei*, 29 June 2013, nos. 8-39, 29 June 2013, nos. 8-39.

Benedict XVI, Audience, 16 January 2013.

Pontifical Council for Culture, *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life, A Christian Reflection on the New Age*.

[1] “From thy face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive and a

wanderer on the earth” (*Gen* 4:14); “You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live” (*Ex* 33:20); “The LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you (*Num* 6:25); “Why dost thou hide thy face, and count me as thy enemy?” (*Job* 13:24); “When shall I come and behold the face of God?” (*Psalms* 42:2); “I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the LORD” (*Jer* 3:12); “they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads” (*Rev* 22:4).

[2] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 21 August 2005.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church*, London 1838, p. 429.

[5] Pope Francis, Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, 29 June 2013, no. 2.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 174.

[7] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 3.

[8] Pope Francis, General Audience, 11 October 2017.

[9] Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, no. 13

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Cf for example: *Bar* 6:45-51; *Jer* 2:28; *Is* 2:8; 37:19

[12] Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, no. 13.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 260.

[15] Pope Benedict XVI, *Lectio divina*, 12 February 2010.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Cf U. Borghello, *Liberare l'amore*, Milano, Ares 2009, pp. 3-4.

[18] Romano Guardini, *The Lord*, “VI. Mystery and Revelation”, p. 295 (Gateway Editions, Regnery Publishing, Inc., Washington DC: 2002).

[19] P. Salinas, *La voz a ti debida en Poesías Completas*, Barral 1971, p. 223.

[20] The image of faith and reason as two “wings” comes from Saint John Paul II at the beginning of his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (14-IX-1998).

[21] Jean Daniélou, *God and the Ways of Knowing*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2003, p. 65 (highlights are ours).

[22] Cf. Saint Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 41, nos. 13-14.

[23] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, III. 6.11.

[24] Romano Guardini, *La aceptación de sí mismo – Las edades de la vida*, Guadarrama, Madrid 1962, p. 29.

[25] Josef Pieper gives this definition of love in his book *Faith, Hope and Love*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1997, pp. 173-186 [chapter 3 in section “On Love”].

[26] Jean Daniélou, *God and the Ways of Knowing*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2003, p. 78.

[27] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily from the Mass of the Inauguration of the Pontificate, 24 April 2005.

[28] Cf Pope Benedict XVI, Audience, 30 November 2011.

[29] Sergio Rubin and Francesca Ambrogetti, *Pope Francis: Conversations with Jorge Bergoglio*.

[30] C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*.

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