



Sunday, September 9, 2012

“He who sees Me sees also My Father.” (John 14:9).

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The very recent revelation—just two weeks ago--of the weeping icon of the Savior, “Not Made by Hands”, at the St. Nicholas parish in Columbus, Ohio, has prompted me to say some things about this particular icon “type” and, in general, the Holy Face of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

While in the Roman Catholic Church there is a devotion to a tradition called “Veronica’s Veil,” according to which the Savior wiped His bloody face on the veil of one of the holy women of Jerusalem on His way to Calvary to be crucified, in Orthodoxy we have another tradition altogether different and it is worthwhile to revisit this tradition.

In brief, during the lifetime of the Savior, the King of Edessa (in Syria), Abgar, was suffering from leprosy. He had heard reports of the miraculous healing being performed by Jesus in nearby Judea and, desperate for a cure, he sent a messenger to the Lord asking Him to come to Edessa and heal him. Receiving this request, Christ asked for water and a towel and, wiping His divine Face, He left on it the imprint of His holy Image. This was the very first icon, and it is therefore one of the sources for our use of icons.

This particular image has been copied literally thousands and thousands of times and called the Holy Face “Not Made by Hands” since the original was not painted by an iconographer. The Lord sent the image to Abgar and he was indeed healed of his leprosy. So grateful was he that he had this miraculous image framed and enshrined over the main gate to his capital, Edessa, and for many years it was venerated by those who passed through the gates. Later it was bricked up by a non-believing descendant of the King, but in the 6th century the Theotokos appeared and commanded that the image be uncovered once again in order to save the city from an attack by Persians. In the year 944 the Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus commanded that the Image be brought to Constantinople and, on August 16 of that year, the original Image of the Savior Not Made by Hands was enshrined in one of the great churches of the city. Sadly, it was lost—either stolen or destroyed—at the time of the Crusader conquest of Byzantium, when many holy relics were pillaged or taken back to the West, but the original image never surfaced again anywhere, although I have wondered if it might be the same as the mysterious Holy Face of Manepollo, in Italy.

We Orthodox Christians have only its many copies today, one of which, as I said, began to weep recently here in Ohio.

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Fr Ambrose Young

Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple Skete



I have a particular interest in and veneration for this icon because 53 years ago, when I was 17 and living in Europe, I had my first experience of Orthodox Christianity when I glimpsed a print of this very icon in a shop window. I was so strongly attracted to it that, knowing nothing about Orthodoxy or iconography, much less the history of this particular icon “type”, I saved up my allowance and bought it. (You see how creative the Holy Spirit is in drawing souls to Christ?) This icon has remained the main icon in my icon corner all through these decades. In fact, in any and all icons that show Christ, whether alone, on the Cross, or with other figures, I am still always immediately drawn to the Holy Face of the Lord, and especially the eyes.

But why? Why would this have such a powerful effect on a teenage boy, or *anyone* for that matter—for remember, Orthodox around the world have a great veneration for the Holy Face of the Lord. The veneration is there, but we seldom talk about it, even though our hearts are filled with sorrow when we read in the Gospels that the haters of Christ spat in His Holy Face.

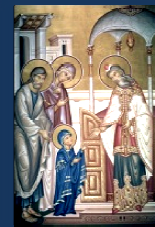
We need to speak about these things more than we do.

I was raised to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, and my Savior. And so, long before I was Orthodox I already saw Him as the Great Physician of souls and an important comfort and strength in times of difficulty and trial. Though the saints and extra-liturgical devotions of my childhood and youth were of interest to me, of course, it was always the *Lord Himself* who was the center of my spiritual life, such as it was, so that no matter what wrong paths and forks in the road I was to take through the years until I finally embraced Orthodoxy in 1970, I never betrayed the Son of God, never turned my back on Him, and never denied Him or ceased to believe. The icon of the Holy Face that I had bought as a teenage boy went with me all over the world, to college, and later into marriage and family life, and eventually into Orthodox Christianity.

You know, a human face can reveal many things concerning the inner person. What we call a “long face” shows gloominess but a “shining face” reveals a sense of happiness or contentment. If I “put on a bold face,” I am trying to appear confident, but a “false face,” shows that one is hiding one’s feelings.

The Holy Face of Christ, however, shows complete acceptance of the person who is looking at it, and the eyes penetrate the soul of the beholder with a realization that in this life, and before I die, *Christ is still the God of mercy and not yet my Judge.*

In Psalm 26 we read this verse: “One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, *to behold the beauty of the Lord...*” It is this very “beauty” that



shines forth in icons of the Holy Face Not Made by Hands. And later, in that same Psalm: “Hide not thy face far from me...” In Psalm 105 we are commanded to do the following: “Seek the Lord and His strength: seek His face evermore”!

Very famous is this blessing or benediction from the Book of Numbers: “The Lord bless you and protect you; the Lord make His *face* to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His *countenance* upon you and give you peace” (Num. 6:24-26)

It is the ardent hope and desire of every Christian to be able one day to see Christ “face to face” and, well, we will indeed see Him when we die, won’t we, perhaps as a stern judge—for which reason St. John the Theologian wrote in the Book of Revelation, “Fall on us and hide us from the *face* of the one who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!” (Rev. 6:16). We sinners hope, rather, to see the Lord as the merciful, compassionate, and forgiving lover of our soul. And because God is righteous (Deut. 32:4), we believers are required to live righteous and faithful lives, looking to Him in order to be upright in his sight, as we also read in Psalm 34: “Those who look to him are radiant; their *faces* are not ashamed.”

We speak of practicing the presence of God in our everyday lives, which means trying always to live, to speak, to act in His presence...that is, before His All-Holy, All-Pure, and All-Radiant Face, because, as still another Psalm (11) tells us. “The upright will see His Face.” This is why King David said that we can experience “absolute joy in you before Thy Face” (Psalm 16), and: “as for me, because I am innocent, I will see Thy face; when I awake, Thou shalt reveal Thyself to me” (Ps. 17:15).

St. Paul wrote: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then [that is, after death] *face to face*: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” (I Cor. 13:12) Brothers and sisters, through miraculous holy icons like the one of Christ, Not Made by Hands, we see Him already, “through a glass”, and not yet perfectly. But we *do* see Him! And if we are paying attention, we can be like Job in the Old Testament, of whom it was truly said, “He sees God’s face with rejoicing” (Job 33:26)

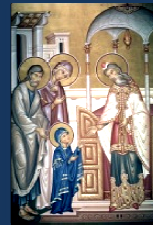
So, it is in Scripture verses like this, and in many others, that we find the biblical justification for our love for and veneration of the Holy Face of Jesus as exemplified in the Icon of the Face Not Made by Hands and in other icons of Christ as well. These icons remind us of so much; they have so much to tell, so much to teach us. If only we will open our minds and our hearts!

As we sing in one of the hymns for the Feast of the icon Not Made by Hands:

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“Thou art comely in beauty above all the sons of mortals, O Savior; for although Thou hadst neither form nor comeliness at the time of Thy Passion, Thou hast truly enlightened all things, and the sight of Thy Face maketh this plain; imprinted upon a cloth, its likeness is given to us as a treasure...”

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.