



ADVENT LETTER - 2020

THE FACE OF JESUS:

THE FACE OF GOD AND OF ALL HUMANITY

Dear brothers and sisters,

May the grace and peace of Jesus be always with us!

The year 2020, marked with so much suffering, anxiety, and fear and the prognosis of an enormous increase in poverty throughout the world, particularly because of COVID-19, is drawing to an end. Before us, the new year 2021 is dawning.

In the present situation of distress, as in all the moments of our lives that are accompanied by suffering with various degrees of intensity, there is Somebody who lives in us, whose Spirit fills every corner of our being. He is with us always, wherever we go, whatever we do, every second of the day, waiting to come forward when we let Him. He is always ready to bring us hope where there is no hope, peace where there is no peace, meaning where there is no meaning, renewed faith where our faith has faltered, love where hatred takes possession of us. His name is Jesus.

We know that the person of Jesus is at the heart of Vincent the Paul's identity as a Mystic of Charity and of the Vincentian charism and spirituality. Jesus is the reason for our lives and the person whose way of thinking, feeling, talking, and acting becomes our life goal, so His proximity to those who suffer is the model for Vincent's way of life and that of those who follow him. Never turning away from situations of suffering and those who were wounded, Vincent saw Jesus in those who are poor and those who are poor in Jesus:

*I must not judge a poor peasant man or woman by their appearance or their apparent intelligence, especially since very often they scarcely have the expression or the mind of rational persons, so crude and vulgar they are. But turn the medal, and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, who willed to be poor, is represented to us by these poor people... O Dieu! How beautiful it is to see poor people if we consider them in God and with the esteem in which Jesus Christ held them!*¹

To help us reflect more deeply on Jesus present in what is disfigured, this Advent I would like to propose a meditation on the icon of the Savior of Zvenigorod based on the reflections of Father Henri Nouwen. Andrei Rublev wrote the icon, also called "The Peacemaker," in 15th century Russia. The icon had been lost but was found in 1918 in a barn near the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin in the city of Zvenigorod, Russia. Its original enchantment and the detailed perfection of the author's work were lost; in fact, it was found in a very serious state of deterioration, damaged and in ruins.

Henri Nouwen, in his meditation on the icon, mentions the terrible state in which it was found.

¹ Vincent de Paul, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume XI, page 26; conference 19, "The Spirit of Faith." Future references to this work will be indicated using the initials CCD, followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD XI, 26.

When I first saw the icon, I had the distinct sense that the face of Christ appears in the midst of great chaos. A sad but still beautiful face looks at us through the ruins of the world... To me, this holy face expresses the depth of God's immense compassion in the midst of our increasingly violent world. Through long centuries of destruction and war, the face of the Incarnate Word has spoken of God's mercy, reminded us of the image in which we were created, and called us to conversion. Indeed, it is the face of the Peacemaker.²

It is precisely the present state of the icon of the Savior of Zvenigorod, Jesus's damaged and ruined face, which I would like to propose for this year's Advent meditation. I am attaching the image of the icon, which I invite you to place before you as a means of entering more deeply into reflection and contemplation.

Meditation on the icon of the Savior of Zvenigorod

- To see the face of Jesus is to see the face of God and of all humanity.
- **What do I see?**
 - a) **I see a very damaged image.**
 - b) **At the same time, I see the tenderest human face.**
 - c) **I see eyes that penetrate the heart of God as well as the heart of every human being.**

a) Seeing a damaged image

- The beautiful face of Jesus looks at us through the ruins of our world.
- He asks, "What have you done to the work of my hands?"
- The icon expresses God's deep compassion in the midst of our violent world.
- It reminds us of the image in which we were created and calls us to conversion.
- It is the face of a peacemaker.
- "Where there is peace, God abides."³
- Looking at this damaged image, we hear a call: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves" (Matthew 11:28-29).

b) Seeing the tenderest human face

- Among the ruins, the splendid face of Jesus emerges.
- We realize that Jesus is fully facing us.
- Jesus notices us and looks directly into our eyes.
- We could be reminded of the encounter of Jesus and Peter after Peter's denials. "... the Lord turned and looked at Peter; and Peter remembered the word of the Lord" (Luke 22:61).
- Like Peter, we need to be reminded of:
 - Our self-confident promises
 - Our failure to keep them

² Nouwen, Henri. *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, Ave Maria Press, 2007, pages 68 and 70.

³ CCD IX, 207; conference 27, "The Practice of Mutual Respect and Gentleness."



- Our lack of faithfulness
- Our powerlessness when we are on our own.
- But, like Peter, we are also reminded of:
 - The love that does not leave us
 - Compassion that has no limits
 - Forgiveness that always is offered to us.
- When Peter felt the eyes of Jesus penetrating his innermost being, he saw his own weakness and Jesus's love: "He went out and began to weep bitterly" (Luke 22:62).
- They were tears both of repentance and of gratitude for such deep love.
- "If we're determined to make ourselves like this divine model, and feel in our hearts this desire and holy affection, it's necessary, I repeat, it's necessary to strive to model our thoughts, works, and intentions on His."⁴
- The icon was not written after any human model, not as a result of Andrei Rublev's own invention. It was written in holy obedience to a way of painting handed down from generation to generation.
- The most striking color in the icon is the rich blue of the mantle that covers the shoulders of the Savior. In Greek and Russian icons, Christ is painted with a red tunic and covered with a blue mantle.
- Red is the color that represents the divinity of Jesus.
- Blue is the color that represents the humanity of Jesus.
- Andrei Rublev's blue is much brighter than normal, accentuating Jesus's humanity even more.
- It makes us see more clearly the human face of God, Jesus's irresistible charm.
- Looking at this icon does not have the effect of other icons of Christ that strictly emphasize the splendor and majesty of God. In this icon, Christ comes down from His throne, touches our shoulder, and invites us to look at Him.
- His face does not evoke fear, but love.

c) Seeing the eyes that penetrate both the heart of God and the heart of every human being, the heart of every one of us

- What makes this icon such a profound experience are the eyes of Jesus.
- Jesus's eyes look directly at us and confront us.
- The eyes are the center of the icon.
- They bring to mind the words of the psalmist:

*LORD, you have probed me, you know me:
you know when I sit and stand;
you understand my thoughts from afar.
You sift through my travels and my rest;
with all my ways you are familiar (Psalm 139:1-3).*

- They are the eyes of God who sees us in our most hidden places and loves us with divine mercy.
- "Where shall we hide ourselves at the sight of so much kindness from God? We shall

4 CCD XII, 67-68; conference 195, "Purpose of the Congregation of the Mission."

place ourselves in the wounds of Our Lord.”⁵

- The eyes express the desire to look into the heart of every person and understand him/her.
- This face-to-face experience leads us to the heart of the great mystery of the Incarnation.
- Looking at the eyes of Jesus, we know we are looking at the eyes of God.
- “To have seen me is to have seen the Father” (cf. John 14:9).
- “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me?” (John 14:10).
- Jesus is the full revelation of God.
- Jesus is the image of the unseen God.
- Through the ruins of the world, we see Jesus’s face that can never be destroyed.
- Jesus’s eyes penetrate God’s own interiority as they penetrate the hearts of every human person, the hearts of every one of us.
- Seeing Jesus leads us to the heart of God and to the heart of every human being.
- “Let us see one another in Him and conform ourselves to His Will, which is to be preferred to any other good.”⁶
- **CONTEMPLATION AND COMPASSION BECOME ONE.**

On Sunday, 6 December 2020, the worldwide Vincentian Family will gather virtually for a prayer service, “One in hope for the Poor.” I invite all members of the Vincentian Family, as well as all others who would like to join us, to this moment of prayer. Please share this invitation within your own branches, as well as among your family members and friends.

Reflection on and contemplation of the icon of the Savior of Zvenigorod, so intertwined with the theme of the prayer service, can help us to participate even more deeply in the prayer encounter.

May the Advent experience lead us to the inner joy of Christmas.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tomaž Mavrič'.

Tomaž Mavrič, CM,
*President of the
Vicentian Family Executive Committee.*

⁵ CCD II, 119; letter 475, to Bernard Coding, in Annecy.

⁶ CCD IV, 467; letter 1554, to Gerard Brin, in Dax.