

On the Importance of the Human Face, I

A parishioner sent me a bulletin from Holy Ghost Church here in Denver which was written some years ago, on the beauty of the human face. The author made some cogent points. I wrote a little on beauty in general in the past two inserts, but I think that in one sense the specific beauty of the human face is of greater importance in this time of masks; masks which hide this beauty, and replace it with the cold, sterile image of the operating room.

We could start with Sacred Scripture. Consider just a few passages where the face is mentioned:

It came about when Moses was coming down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the testimony were in Moses' hand as he was coming down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because of his speaking with Him. So when Aaron and all the sons of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. Then Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the rulers in the congregation returned to him; and Moses spoke to them. Ex. 34: 29-35

Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam. (Eccl. 8:1)

And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. (Mt. 17:2)

I don't expect my musings on the human face to have any effect on the decisions of either secular or ecclesiastical government; these musings are just for my parishioners. Some who are not parishioners may read these lines though, and may they be useful for reflection.

But everyone ought to admit that there is nothing like the human face in all of creation. This may be known by its loss. There are different kinds of losses in this regard; a statue or work of art can be *defaced*. The almost universal adoption of masks for women in Islamic societies results in the practical removal of women from society. We can imagine the absurdity of producing television shows and movies where all the characters are wearing surgical masks. The acting would be largely negated by the loss of their faces.

And when someone dies, a great and terrible emptiness may be perceived in the face of the deceased, for a person is known through his face, and he directs all his actions from his eyes, which are now closed until the general resurrection of the dead. "The eyes are the window to the soul," as the saying goes.

"A-hah!" A devotee of surgical masks might descry. "See, you just need the eyes!" But if the rest of the face does not agree with the eyes, we suspect something is amiss. Someone can smile, yet if the smile does not agree with the eyes, our natural reaction is to think the smile fake or perhaps malevolent. You need to see the whole face to grasp the meaning. Thus, the human face is a display of virtue or vice; a sign to the world of the inner character of a person.

All our actions within the human community should be contributing in some way to the greatness of the human face. If our actions between one another lead to the celebration of the face, then we can be more certain of the rightness of our actions, just as the actions of Christ led to the celebration of

the glory of God shining forth from the face of Christ. "For God, who told the light to shine out of darkness, has shined a light into our hearts, to illuminate the knowledge of the splendor of God, in the person of Christ Jesus." (2 Cor 4.6) We do not know the splendor of God in the person of Christ by gazing at His shins. We know it by His face.

When we pay attention to someone's face, it is a profound expression of charity. The charity is magnified when the face beholder is flawed. We remember St. Damien of Molokai, upon his first visit there to minister at the leper colony on the island looked at the face of the man stricken with the disease, which moved the man to tears that the priest did not look away. His gratitude was coupled with amazement when he held his hand out to help the priest up to the boat, St. Damien took it without gloves on. The news of this humane contact spread quickly amongst the souls on that island that a priest had arrived who cared for them, and perhaps, even might love them. We can only imagine the immense let-down that would have occurred if Father Damien had arrived armed with a surgical mask and surgical gloves.

Thus, the simple human contact of the face and hand shows and can even ensure that we are interested in a person for his or her own sake, and not just for what they might do for us. For it is in the face that the spirit of a person is manifested, and it is in the hand (an organ filled with nerves and therefore exquisitely sensitive) that we not only see but feel the humanity of the person before us.

The human face displays the true substance of a person; of his or her character, which ought to be the glory of God. And here can we not detect the import of modesty? Modesty in dress focuses the attention of the world on the human face, not in vanity (please God a face not excessively painted) but because that is where the full truth of a person is written. Immodest dress focuses attention to other parts of the body. The immodest person may obtain the attention he or she desires, but it is an attention not focused on his or her person but on a body part or parts. This type of display is deeply offensive to the dignity of a human person.

I've heard the face called "the organ of emotion" and indeed, the face provides vital clues to our own feelings and those of the people around us. Our faces are a dynamic canvas, one in which emotions are drawn vividly, then suddenly erased, only to be redrawn in a new expression an instant later. There is nothing quite like this.

While the face is the "organ" of emotion, it is also much more. The face is an important channel of identity; friends and acquaintances can recognize us before a word is said. Our face develops as we do, from infancy, into adulthood, crossing into middle age, and finally into the senior years; yet always retaining features already prominent in childhood.

And if a baby is deprived of mother's face for a time through a mask, the baby will cry, will be inconsolable. This will continue until mother takes the mask off.