



CONTEMPLATING THE FACE OF CHRIST

A WAY OF THE CROSS

MARKO IVAN RUPNIK, SJ

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FOREWORD

Mosaic reigned throughout the Mediterranean as Christianity's highest art form for almost a thousand years. Apses, chapels, tombs, and reliquaries were adorned with the dazzling effect of tiny tiles united to form images. The small parts becoming a beautiful whole, the time-consuming care and the loving craftsmanship that comprise the art of mosaic, rendered the very medium itself an expression of man's cooperation with the divine. However, the effect of these shimmering skins of glass or stone was its greatest power, evoking for rich and poor alike a transcendent vision of beauty. The majestic figures standing against their eternal backgrounds could be prayed before by aristocrat or slave. Neither status nor

wealth mattered in front of the glorious saints robed in color and light, which reminded everyone of those who were always listening beyond the church walls.

Despite many centuries of mosaic masters before him, Father Marko Ivan Rupnik has succeeded in infusing new contemporary energy into this ancient artistic language. His essential forms with their clear outlines lend the immediacy of the Baroque without the distraction of ornamentation. The tiles, assembled and chosen with the same care as the craftsmen of Ravenna and Constantinople, alternate between broad and minute, creating a poetic cadence to his surfaces, and Rupnik's colors shift from the calm matte of stone to the kinetic hues of enamel. Within the simplicity of the forms, the detail of the work allows for an even deeper level of meditation on the scenes before us.

But it is the holy faces portrayed by Rupnik that captivate the viewer. Large, round heads with enormous eyes, which seem to be truly all-seeing, translate the power of modern cinema to this most

antique art. Rupnik's faces fill the frame; Jesus' massive, dark eyes seem to absorb everything around them, even when he is crushed by his giant cross. When Christ's eyes close at his death, the energy leaves the scene and the viewer feels bereft.

Father Rupnik's revival of the art of mosaic comes at a critical moment in cultural history. The dense compositions of the Renaissance are hard for the modern faithful to follow: the complicated histories and myriad artistic references no longer resonate as they once did. But by enhancing the ancient pious practice of the Stations of the Cross with images that draw us alongside Christ—Godlike in his luminosity, yet vulnerable in his humanity—Father Rupnik opens a window into Christ's passion where art becomes comprehensible and engaging for all and clearly at the service of prayer.

ELIZABETH LEV

INTRODUCTION

The Way of the Cross is the most familiar and popular form of devotion there is to the Passion of Christ. We pray the Way of the Cross to contemplate Christ's suffering and to move ourselves to compassion. The stations are the last link in a long series of devotional practices that have developed over time. Pilgrimages to the Holy Land began as early as the fourth century. Calvary and the Holy Sepulcher became the destinations of special processions which, over time, spread to other places made holy by the Lord's sufferings.

In the Middle Ages, Saint Francis' live crèche* gave a strong impetus to a spirituality of the image

* Saint Bonaventure recounted that Saint Francis, a few years before his death, set up a live manger scene in a village town square in Italy and preached about the miracle of Christmas and the poor king who was born in a manger.

and, consequently, to evangelization. Francis saw the nativity scene as a way for the faithful to identify with the moods, feelings, and thoughts of the characters involved in the birth of Jesus. This produced a much more integral and complex approach than that of mere verbal proclamation. Because salvation is brought about by the Word Incarnate, the Son of God made man, it must necessarily involve the whole person. Only then can it fully propose and produce a way of life that makes us contemporaries of Christ and of the events of salvation. Therefore, a scene is not simply a representation, because even at the Passion of Christ many people were present, yet they did not recognize Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of humanity.* Instead the scene is an image formed by the Word of God and by a great theological tradition.

A few centuries later, well into the modern age, Saint Ignatius of Loyola reaffirmed the importance of spiritual imagery. In the *Spiritual Exercises*,

* In other words, the scene is not simply a snapshot of a moment in time, but a way of proclaiming the Gospel through art so as to draw people to faith.
—Ed.

Ignatius encourages retreatants to use their imagination for spiritual benefit. Within the essential theological framework, retreatants engage more fully with all their capacities and are set on fire for the Lord. For Ignatius, spiritual gain does not come from developing fanciful imaginings but from the intimate knowledge of God, who inflames us with His own love.

Our day seems especially suited to reclaim this tradition, which combines theology, art, and spirituality. Art makes visible the reality—the flesh—of the Word and of our faith. It also makes us partakers of the mystery that Gregory Nazianzen reminds us is like “drops of blood” that fall into the large chalice of the earth, “renewing the entire universe.”

The images in this book are from a Way of the Cross outside the church of Santa Maria in Tolmin, Slovenia, on the crest of the Julian Alps. The stations were originally constructed after World War I, a war that caused so much suffering in that area. The suffering did not end but continued during World War II and later under communism, when the town, which borders Italy,

became part of Yugoslavia. During that era, the Way of the Cross was destroyed. Years later the parish priest, Father Milan Sirk, wanted this mountain, which had seen so much violence, to have the Stations of the Cross once again. He commissioned Father Marko Rupnik and the artists from The Atelier of the Aletti Center for this work. They completed it in 2008.

In these mosaic portrayals of the Way of the Cross we see only glimpses of faces and flashes of eyes. All of the art's spiritual intensity is concentrated in Christ's face and gaze, since the face reveals the person. Excerpts from Sacred Scripture and ancient Christian writings accompany the images.

One might imagine that the Way of the Cross, with its unique richness, is a devotion typical of the West. However, the liturgical and theological roots of this devotion spring from the heart of the Christian mystery. The quotations highlight how Christians have contemplated this mystery from the very beginning.



FIRST STATION

JESUS IS
CONDEMNED
TO DEATH



- ℣. We adore you, O Christ,
and we bless you.
- ℟. Because by your holy cross
you have redeemed the world.



Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Matthew 27:11-14

After the first sin, which contaminated everything, human reason was wounded and subject to ignorance. We can fully grasp the truth only in communion with the One who is truth. Truth is sought in communion, because Truth is Communion (see Jn 14:6). We can't know truth without love, but sin destroyed love—that is, truth—in us. As a result, we created our own truth—the fruit of our own imaginations. Enclosed in our own little world, we became slaves of our own passions, leaving no space for God.

Thus, the face of Christ is hidden. Pilate looks into the eyes of Christ, but he does not see the truth (see Mt 4:12). The high priest Caiaphas directs his gaze elsewhere. He follows his own religious schemes, which prevent him from recognizing the Lord in that face so close to him. But neither thought, nor the law, nor human strength can see or recognize God, because God is love. Love is personal; it has a face. And it's not enough to just recognize a face. We need to see in it the face of God—the God who loves every man and woman.



This meek face of Christ becomes a place of encounter for those who are judged and condemned. In it they welcome the meekness and compassion of the One who was judged unjustly. Since judgment belongs to God alone, those who judge separate themselves from God. But if they contemplate this meek and good face, the gaze of the Judged One will embrace them too. He takes upon Himself even their condemnation.



The Mighty One remained mute, the Word without words. Had he raised his voice, he would not have been conquered and he would not have ended on the cross, but neither would he have saved Adam. Thus, to suffer, he who confounded the wise with his wisdom conquered by not opening his mouth.

Romanus the Melodist,
Kontakion on the Passion

... He had no form or majesty that we should look
at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should
desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with
infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no
account.

Isaiah 53:2b-3



*At the cross her station keeping
stood the mournful mother weeping,
close to Jesus to the last.*

