

DEPRIVED OF THE SACRAMENTS

Why God hides his face

CULTURE

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There are evaluations and reactions to Covid-19 based on our common human experience that Christians also share, according to the rule laid down by Saint Paul: “Test everything and hold fast to what is good” (1 Thess 5:21). Then there are evaluations of faith that can only be made by Christians, for example living through this time of Covid-19 as an opportunity to put into practice the words of Jesus: “If anyone

wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross every day, and follow me" (Lk 9:23), in the faith that Jesus Christ will redeem every Cross and make solidarity, service, and justice towards the weakest flourish.

This is the context in which we must consider the enigma and pain of having no opportunity during this time for public Masses. And we may distinguish various perspectives on this matter: one is to think about it while staying at home and following the celebrations and prayers on TV or the internet, while another is to consider it as a priest or religious (as I am) going often into the quiet church and seeing it empty day after day, hour after hour.

Seeing the nave empty every day and the pews empty, a disturbing question often rises from my heart: *Is God hiding his face?* Yes, the priests can go into the church whenever they want and celebrate Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours, but what about "the others"? The question is disturbing only for those who have faith and confidence in the Bible and require some explanations.

Let's start from human wisdom with an aphorism by Cicero († 51 B.C.): *«Imago animi vultus, indices oculi / the face is the image of the soul and the eyes are certain indicators»* (*De oratore* 3,59,221), which echoes Sirach 13:25: "The heart of a man changes his face, whether for good or ill." And so in the Bible the face reveals a person and his deepest choices: "I perceive from the face of your father that he is not disposed to me as he was before" (Gen 31:5); "I too can die now that I have seen your face" (Jacob to his son Joseph Gen 46:30); "All the earth sought the face of Solomon" (1 Kgs 10:24); etc.

It's true that God said to Moses: "You shall not see my face, for no man can see me and remain alive" (Ex 33:20), and no one can fully understand God except God himself. But it is also true that God in the language of the Scriptures has assumed the human image of a face in order to speak to us of himself and of the relationships he establishes or truncates with us. First of all the relationships of friendship and protection: "My face will walk with you" (Ex 33:14), God assures his people in the desert. Then "The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex 33:11), and not only with Moses but with all the people: "The Lord spoke to you on the mountain from the fire face to face" (Dt 5:4), and finally prescribing this form for blessing the people: "May the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; may the Lord show his face to you and give you peace" (Nm 6:25-26).

And yet man's sin can make God withdraw his face from him. This is how God

expresses himself in speaking to Moses and prophesying the sins of the people in the promised land he was about to enter: "I will abandon them, I will hide my face from them and they will be devoured [...] I, on that day, will hide my face because of all the evil they have done in turning to other gods (Dt 31:17-18). There are numerous verses in the Bible with the same sense: "I will turn my face against you" (Lv 26:17); the Lord "will hide his face from them" (Mi 3:4); the Lord "became very angry against Israel and turned his face away from him [...] he chased them from his face" (2 Kgs 17:18,20); etc.

All this is also true for the New Testament. In a positive sense, if we now see in a confused way, when what is perfect comes "we will see face to face" (1 Cor 13:12) and in the heavenly Jerusalem the elect "will see his face," that is the face of God (Rev 22:4). In a negative sense, at end of time Jesus Christ will return to punish those who do not recognize God and do not obey the Gospel "with an eternal destruction, far from the face of the Lord and from his glorious power" (2 Thess 1:9).

The face of God took flesh in the face of Jesus, which in the Transfiguration "changed in appearance and shone like the sun" (Lk 9:29; Mt 17:2). But, since it was "also" a human experience, just like all human things it passed away with time, and at the time of the Ascension Jesus "was lifted up on high and a cloud took him from their sight (Acts 1:9), and today it is no longer possible to physically see the face of Jesus at it was during his earthly life. But this is not a loss; it is a beatitude linked to faith: "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed" (Jn 20:29).

However there is still something to see today: "The mysteries of the life of Christ are the foundations of what He would henceforth dispense in the sacraments, through the ministers of his Church, for "what was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries – *quod Redemptoris nostri conspicuum fuit, in sacramenta transivit* (Saint Leo the Great, *Sermon 74,2*)" (CCC 1115). In this sense the Second Eucharistic Prayer says: "We give thanks *that you have held us worthy to be in your presence* and minister to you," in Latin "*astare coram te*" which means "to stand close to you" or "to stand before you." The Liturgy of the Hours for Thursday of the Second Week of Easter contains a sermon by Saint Gaudentius of Brescia († 410) which says that the sacraments, in particular the Eucharist, will be celebrated until the return of Christ because "the priests and all the people alike have daily before our eyes the living representation of the Passion of the Lord (*exemplar passionis Christi ante oculos habentes cotidie*)." Saint Thomas Aquinas explains that the Eucharist is a sacrifice because "it is in a certain way a representative (*repraesentativa*) image of the passion of Christ that is a true immolation" (III, q 83, a 1) and the Council of Trent repeats almost to the letter that Jesus Christ in the Last Supper

left a visible sacrifice (the Mass) that “re-presents the bloody sacrifice of the Cross (cf. Denz. 1740).

And now we come to the painful point: the face of God is revealed in the Sacraments and above all in the Eucharist, but it is precisely the Sacraments that are now inaccessible to the majority of the people and thus, because of what has happened and is happening, it seems that God has withdrawn his face by preventing Baptisms, Chrismations, - I know it is called Confirmation but permit me to use the term I prefer, which recalls “Chrism” – the Sacrament of Penance, Holy Orders, Matrimony, and even exorcisms (I know for certain that a certain number of exorcists are respecting the lockdown!).

I can already hear the objection: “Let’s not talk nonsense, it’s not God who has withdrawn his face; we are the ones who simply cannot come to church because of the contagion.” Indeed, there is more – it seems that the old adage has been turned upside down that says “God writes straight on crooked lines.” No, here the lines all seem to be straight: the contagion exists and since there are no certain proofs that it was produced in a laboratory, it seems to be a normal contagion and the State has the normal right to take precautions (which are collectively valid even if each individual one may be debatable); Italian Catholics and other Catholics are assured by the bishops and the pope that they ought to comply with the above provisions regarding liturgical celebrations. Yes, the lines are all straight, but the conclusion is crooked: the sacramental face of God is no longer accessible!

At this point whoever has faith is faced with a mystery that hides two questions: “How can God have permitted this? And then isn’t it the case that the devil has somehow had a hand in it all, admitting the autonomy of natural factors and human persons, or isn’t he at least enjoying all this chaos? The answer to the second question is easy: “Yes, the devil enjoys this.” The answer to the first question is more complex. Certainly even if God has only permitted this situation and not positively willed it, according to the Biblical texts the withdrawal and depriving of his face is always related to forgetfulness and abandonment; that is, sins against him and against others.

Everyone is invited to reflect by taking a step back: we think of the social injustices that are the first context – even though not the only one – around which Saint Paul wrote that whoever does not recognize the Body of the Lord “eats and drinks his own condemnation” (1 Cor 11:29), we think of the charity and acceptance that is sometimes lacking even within the ecclesial structure; we think of the way so many people stopped receiving the Sacraments and attending Sunday Mass either because of entertainment

or work or simply neglect; we think of sexual deviations that are no longer considered “disordered” and of an insane mastery over life (abortion and euthanasia); we think of so many doctrinal distortions; we think of a certain number of sacramental absolutions and communions that “were not done;” we think of liturgical abuses and the style of certain Masses that do not evoke the experience of Moses before the burning bush but rather the parish office, the oratory, the chair of a professor having fun, a forum for doing politics, and in the face of all this God has said: “Enough!”

And here there arises a further objection: granted that this may be true, the ones who are left destitute by the cancellation of Masses are not those for whom Sunday Mass was merely an (unexercised) optional choice but rather those outstanding people who went to Mass and truly wanted to go and who are now deprived of it. How can God permit such an injustice? Let’s be very specific: as in the Biblical texts cited above, the privation of the sacramental face of God regards a people or a community and cannot be ascribed to the fault of this or that person, who, if they are holy, will continue to be flooded with divine grace, even while experiencing social damage, at least in the external form. I could adduce complex philosophical and theological considerations, but I prefer to stop at just one simple, mysterious, and profound consideration: perhaps God permits the suffering of these holy people because they are the people most disposed to pray that God will convert our hearts and turn to us and show us his benevolent face. And their prayer, beginning with the exhortation, “Seek the Lord and His power, always seek His face” (Ps 105:4), will say: “Do not hide your face from me, O Lord, that I may not be like one who goes down into the pit” (Ps 143:7); “God have mercy on us and bless us, may He make His face shine upon us” (Ps 67:2). Indeed, we should all pray chorally in these words: “For your sake, O Lord, make your face shine upon your sanctuary, that is devastated” (Dn 9:17), simply replacing “devastated” with “empty.” In short, “Let the perverse one continue to be perverse, the impure one continue to be impure, and let the just man continue to practice justice and the holy one still be holy” (Rev 22:11): this applies also to the time of Covid-19.