

# EMBODIED LIGHT, INCARNATE IMAGE: THE MYSTERY OF JESUS TRANSFIGURED

• José Granados •

“The flesh of Christ constitutes the place where transcendence can be most properly shown. The body and the concrete time frame of Jesus’s life are not only ways of making the *imago Dei* shine through, but are themselves the structure that allows the image to appear.”



According to Irenaeus of Lyons, the Transfiguration of the Lord on the mountain was an ascent toward a higher grace not only for the three disciples who were granted the favor of witnessing it, but also for the two other witnesses: Moses and Elijah. This was indeed the fulfillment of an old promise that was made to them when they saw the glory of God on Mount Sinai. Here on Tabor they were finally able to converse with their Lord face to face.<sup>1</sup> The scene is linked with the vision of God and thus with the most profound desire that moves our life until we are able, as Augustine says, to rest and see, see and love, love and praise.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* IV, 20, 9 (SC 100, 654–656).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XXII, 30, 5.

Other branches of the Christian tradition also associate the Transfiguration with this divine vision. According to Origen, it is at Tabor that the Logos appears in his inexhaustible richness, adapting himself to the capacities of the disciples and opening to them the mysteries of the Father: “The Logos has different forms, and he appears to each as is expedient for the beholder . . .”<sup>3</sup> For the blind he is Light; for the hungry, Bread; for the one who is lost, he is Shepherd.<sup>4</sup>

Origen’s commentary evokes another topic which the Fathers often connected with the Transfiguration scene: the light of God adapts itself to the eyes of the seer in order to transform him. As Luke notes, Peter, James, and John do not remain outside the cloud, but rather enter into it (cf. Lk 9:34). The Transfiguration becomes an icon of man’s ascent toward his own configuration to the vision he enjoys. If man is created in the image of God, this image is now fulfilled by looking at Christ, the one who is himself the Image. In addition to the radiance of God’s glory, then, we also have here the transformation of the one who sees.<sup>5</sup>

The Transfiguration is thus connected with crucial theological topics. First, with the *imago Dei*, which is the core of the Christian definition of man according to the way he was fashioned at the beginning. Second, with the vision of God, which is the center of the Christian promise of happiness at the end of time. This mystery touches the beginning and expands out toward the end.

Given the richness of these topics, it is not surprising that their core cannot be fully grasped or comprehended.<sup>6</sup> The Fathers comment that the vision of God never totally enters into the seer, but only to the degree that the seer is capable of receiving it.<sup>7</sup> We

---

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Origen, *In Matthaëum* XII, 36 (PG 13, 1068). On the Transfiguration in Origen, cf. Matthias Eichinger, *Die Verklärung Christi bei Origenes. Die Bedeutung des Menschen Jesus in seiner Christologie* (Vienna: Herder, 1969).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Origen, *In Iohannem* XXI, 125–XXIII, 150 (SC 120bis, 124–135).

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Josef Hermann Sieben, “Transfiguration,” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1991), 1148–1160.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Christian Schütz, “Die Verklärung Jesu,” in Johannes Feiner and Magnus Löhner, eds., *Mysterium Salutis. Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik III/2. Das Christusergebnis* (Einsiedeln, 1969).

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Chromatius of Aquileia, *In Matthaëum*, Tractatus 54 A, 3 (Corpus Christianorum Latinorum 50A).

are dealing, as St. Paul says, with what eye has not seen, nor ear heard: what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor 2:9). And we can exclaim with St. Ephrem: “Be glad that you are overwhelmed, and do not be saddened because he has overcome you. . . . [L]et this spring quench your thirst, and not your thirst the spring.”<sup>8</sup>

And yet, if the Christian Gospel is to illumine man’s path, the understanding of the beginning and end needs to be able to be anchored in our human experience. If heaven is to be present on earth, we need to be able to imagine it; this infinite richness must have a clearly determined content, its inexhaustible beauty a concrete countenance.<sup>9</sup>

It is here that the importance of the Transfiguration emerges. This scene situates the *imago Dei* and the vision of God in the concrete framework of Jesus’s life, thus connecting it with our own daily existence. It is no wonder that Peter, in his Second Epistle, refers precisely to this mystery to encourage the Christians in their trials (2 Pt 1:15–16). Moreover, the glory of God shines here in the face of Christ (cf. 2 Cor 4:6), which places the consideration of image and vision in a christological context. And it is in Jesus that the *alpha* and *omega* of man’s existence find ultimate clarity and fulfillment (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 22).

Let us ask, then, the following questions: What does the Transfiguration tell us about man as *imago Dei* and about the vision of God? How does this mystery come together with Jesus’s concrete path on earth, and with the Church’s own path? We will start by gathering the primary biblical data that refers to the Transfiguration (1). Our findings will prompt us toward a philosophical reflection that will remove some of the obstacles that stand in the way of our entering further into the mystery (2). Finally, we will consider the Transfiguration and its meaning for the life of Christ and of his Church (3).

---

<sup>8</sup>Cf. St. Ephrem, *On the Diatessaron* 1, 18–19 (SC 121, 52–53).

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Julián Marías, *La perspectiva cristiana* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1999), 89: “The expectation of an everlasting life is the essential core of the Christian perspective. . . . However, along the course of history, an element that I have always thought to be crucial has been neglected: how to imagine this life. If there is no imagination of this life, then it cannot be desired in a concrete way, but only in a very abstract and weak way.”

1. 'We saw his majesty on the holy mountain':  
the voice of the witnesses

Let us begin by listening to the voices of those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus's majesty on the holy mountain (cf. 2 Pt 1:16–18). How do the gospels understand this event in the life of Jesus?

1.1 From glory to glory

Among the synoptics it is Luke who uses the word "glory" to refer to the Transfiguration (Lk 9:32). In this way he connects the scene with the manifestation of Yahweh's glory in the history of Israel. Without using the word, Matthew and Mark share in the same theological perspective. Jesus is identified with the divine Wisdom, with the Shekinah that accompanied the People in the desert.<sup>10</sup>

How does the glory of Tabor relate to that of Sinai? Luke provides us with the answer through his insistence on Jesus's prayer. What happens to Jesus is the same thing that was made visible in other holy men whose personal dialogue with God was made apparent in their faces.<sup>11</sup> The difference is that now the one who prays is the Son of God, the only one who knows the Father and who reveals him to man (cf. Lk 10:22). In this light the Son appears as the real foundation of the glory of the Old Testament. If Yahweh was able to be present to the People without losing his transcendence, if he was able to accompany them on their path and dwell in their midst, it is because he is in himself a dialogue of love between Father and Son, a dialogue into which the world can be invited. Since this dialogue belongs to God's own mystery, the glory of Jesus, who is Light from Light, has its roots in God's eternity.

To this first connection between the Transfiguration and the glory of old, we must add a second perspective. This event is not

---

<sup>10</sup>Cf. A. Feuillet, "Les perspectives propres à chaque évangéliste dans les récits de la Transfiguration," *Biblica* 39 (1958): 281–301.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Luc*, Études bibliques (Paris: Victor Lecoffre, 1927), 273: "l'effet de la prière se voit parfois chez les saints au rayonnement du visage."

only rooted in the past manifestation of Yahweh: it also points toward the future, toward the glory of the Risen One.

This is clear through the comparison that all the evangelists draw between the Transfiguration texts and those describing the Resurrection. In Mark, the white garments of the Transfiguration are related to the white vestments of the angel who announces the joy of Easter; the disciples' fear is also experienced by the women before the empty tomb, because in both it is a question of a divine epiphany.<sup>12</sup> In Luke, Moses and Elijah could be viewed in connection with the two men at the Resurrection (cf. Acts 1:10).<sup>13</sup> There is also a link between Jesus's death and their special status (their own deaths are mysterious). This relationship between the Transfiguration and the end of time is confirmed by the Second Epistle of Peter, where the scene appears as a sign of the future transformation of Christians in the world to come (2 Pt 1:16–21).

From this point of view, the event of the Transfiguration is an anticipation of Jesus's glory, and not only the manifestation of something possessed from the beginning of time. The glory of the Transfigured One is, on the one hand, the glory of old, and, on the other hand, the glory of the one who is to come. Is there a contradiction between the two?

Any discordance disappears when we consider the dynamic character of the concept of glory. Matthew makes this point by giving particular importance to the voice of the Father: "listen to him."<sup>14</sup> For him, the disciples' fear is connected with these words. Vision here is inseparable from the voice and is thus linked with obedience, with carrying out the command of God by becoming

---

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Enrique Nardoni, *La transfiguración de Jesús y el diálogo sobre Elías según el Evangelio de San Marcos* (Buenos Aires: Editora Patria Grande, 1977), 209: "Marcos relaciona el blanco radiante de los vestidos de Jesús transfigurado con el blanco de la túnica del joven anunciador de la resurrección de Jesús (16, 5). En el fondo, lo que causa el miedo en ambas escenas es lo mismo: es el misterio del poder glorioso de Jesús que ha sido exaltado a la Gloria del Padre en la resurrección."

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Jindrich Manek, "The New Exodus in the Books of Luke," *Novum Testamentum* 2, no. 1 (1957): 8–23, 11. According to Manek, the "exodus" Luke speaks about in the Transfiguration is Jesus's coming from death to life, his going out of the tomb.

<sup>14</sup>It is at this moment that the disciples are filled with fear before the divine presence. In Matthew the cloud is connected with the Shekinah. In this connection, cf. Feuillet, "Les perspectives," 294.

doers of the word. This is in accordance with the manifestation of God in the Old Testament: what the People saw was not only a face, but also the voice that commanded obedience and desired to establish a personal covenant with the People.<sup>15</sup> God's manifestation is thus connected with the concrete history of man; it is rooted in the redeeming actions of Yahweh and opens up the future of the covenant.

This intertwining of God's glory and the People's history is also seen in the preaching of the prophets, in which it takes a new turn: God's glory is now placed in the future; it is the eschatological glory of the new Temple in which God will finally dwell with his people. Matthew takes up the heritage of the Old Testament; in his gospel, Jesus appears as the Incarnation of Wisdom who instructs man with the divine message.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, he is presented on Mount Tabor as the revealer of the word of God, the new prophet, greater than Moses, who was promised to Israel (cf. Dt 18:15).

This dynamic character of the vision's glory is stressed by the connection between the Transfiguration and the rest of Jesus's life, which we find in all the synoptic accounts. Indeed, each of them places the scene in a dynamic context: Christ's journey toward the Cross. Jesus has made the decision to climb to Jerusalem (cf. Lk 9:51). His mission, so to speak, has taken the decisive turn in which he will speak openly about his suffering and future glory.

Luke stresses this point by using the word "exodus" to describe the topic of discussion between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.<sup>17</sup> In this way he broadens the horizon: he is referring to Jesus's death and Resurrection against the background of Israel's history. The figures of Moses and Elijah are important in this regard: both are men of vision, they are the two who were attentive to the manifestation of the Lord on the mountain. But both are also men who were continually underway, who followed the voice of the Lord in the

---

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life. Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston, Ill.: 2001), 236–238. Jonas quotes Philo's remarks on Ex 20:18 ("All the people saw the voice"): "Highly significant, for human voice is to be heard, but God's voice is in truth to be seen. Why? Because that which God speaks is not words but works, which the eye discriminates better than the ear" (*De Decalogo*, 47)" (*The Phenomenon of Life*, 238).

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Feuillet, "Les perspectives," 297–299.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Manek, "The New Exodus," 12.

desert in order to approach his glory.<sup>18</sup> Aquinas grasps this dynamic character when he comments that on Mount Tabor Christ acts like the archer who points the bow toward the target before shooting.<sup>19</sup>

Not to understand the dynamic character of this glory, its revelation in time, was the mistake that Peter made. The disciple wanted to enjoy the moment as if it were already the goal of history, without understanding the need to undergo the Cross. But, as Hilary of Poitiers says: *nondum enim ut in hac gloria consisteretur erat tempus*. “It was not yet the time to be established in this glory.”<sup>20</sup> We can only see the Transfiguration’s glory if we do not stop it; if, unlike Peter, we let it run toward its goal. The image can be grasped only in its movement from the Father toward the Father through the Paschal mystery. This means that the glory of Mount Tabor is not yet a saving glory. It is not enough to see the radiant face of Christ; in order to be healed, we must also contemplate his radiant wounds.<sup>21</sup>

We can conclude that the life of Jesus, in the broader context of the People’s history that goes back to creation and is thus open to universality, is the place where the glory of God is manifested. Let us see how the gospel of John confirms and deepens this statement.

---

<sup>18</sup>It is interesting to note that the concrete time of the event is connected with the liturgical calendar of Israel. This allows us to see again that the Transfiguration offers the concrete revelation of God, patterned according to the same structure we find in the Old Testament. It is an epiphany of his glory in the midst of the history of the People. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 306–307: “the great events of Jesus’s life are inwardly connected with the Jewish festival calendar. They are, as it were, liturgical events in which the liturgy, with its remembrance and expectation, becomes reality—becomes life. This life then leads back to the liturgy and from the liturgy seeks to become life again.”

<sup>19</sup>Cf. *ST* III, q. 45, a. 1.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Hilary of Poitiers, *In Matthaeum* 17 (PL 9, 1013–1015).

<sup>21</sup>The glory of the Transfiguration is different from that of the Risen One before the Ascension; cf. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God (Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 3)* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2003), 604: “The brilliant light of the transfiguration is significantly absent, which does rather upset the old theory that it is a misplaced resurrection tale. (So too is the fact that the disciples have no problem recognizing Jesus, despite the radiance),” as is also the case with Paul and with John in Revelation.

### 1.2 John: the Transfiguration of the entire life of Jesus

A further step in the reflection of this mystery is taken in John's gospel, where we do not find an account of the Transfiguration. But this does not mean that the evangelist ignores the scene. John does something similar with other moments of Jesus's life: even if he omits the account of the institution of the Eucharist or the Baptism in the Jordan, the topics appear in other places and the evangelist reflects deeply on their theological meaning.

In fact, the scene seems to be evoked in chapter 12 of the gospel, where both God's glorification and the Father's voice are mentioned: "'Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again'" (Jn 12:27–28). We see here how John has linked the scene of the Transfiguration with his own Gethsemane account, with the suffering and anxiety of Jesus before his hour. The link between glory and Cross is thus stressed and moved very close to the beginning of Jesus's Pasch (cf. Jn 13:1). The whole scene is placed within the conversation between Father and Son: God's glory is seen as a dynamic reality given by the Father to the Son and then communicated to the world in the life of Jesus.<sup>22</sup> John condenses the synoptics' vision of the Transfiguration into a few verses.

But together with the concentration of the mystery we also find its expansion, so to speak. It has been said, indeed, that the whole gospel of John is a Transfiguration.<sup>23</sup> The Beloved Disciple has transposed the significance of the scene to discover its presence in every single action of the Master. The life in the flesh of the Logos is the place where the glory of God is manifested. As the Shekinah's glory was present to the People, so "the Word became

---

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Jacques Dupont, *Essais sur la christologie de saint Jean; le Christ, parole, lumière et vie, la gloire du Christ* (Bruges: Éditions de l'Abbaye de Saint-André, 1951).

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967): "Saint John does not record the Transfiguration: the glory which in the Synoptics flashes into the story on the mountain is perceived by Saint John to pervade all the words and works of Jesus" (123); "the Transfiguration—like the Baptism of Jesus and the Institution of the Eucharist—was omitted not because John did not know of it but because he understood its meaning so well" (124).



flesh, and dwelt among us . . . we have beheld his glory” (cf. Jn 1:14). John’s incorporation of the Transfiguration thus allows us to emphasize a theology of the entire life of Jesus as a mystery, thereby avoiding its absorption within the two poles of Incarnation and Cross.<sup>24</sup>

John’s reflection on the glory that appears in Jesus is placed in the context of Jesus’s signs—which the Beloved Disciple calls “*semeia*.”<sup>25</sup> The meaning of the “*semeia*” has been explained by some exegetes with recourse to the distinction between sign and symbol. Whereas a sign represents a reality that is alien to it, in a symbol this very reality is already present in some fashion.<sup>26</sup> The “*semeia*” in John are not just prodigious portents worked by Christ: they have a symbolic character. They are events in which the beginning, the Logos through which the universe was made, becomes visible; they are also anticipations of the final fulfillment of the one who is the omega of creation.

This distinction implies an understanding of visible and material reality as able not only to point toward the divine, but also to embrace and contain it. This is already apparent in the way Jesus uses different images taken from the material creation: water and

---

<sup>24</sup>Cf. P. Lamarche, “Transfiguration du Seigneur. Les récits évangéliques,” in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1991), 1148–1151: “Aux diverses christologies qui s’appuient d’abord sur le devenir eschatologique de Jésus (résurrection et glorification) ou sur son origine, il convient d’ajouter, en partie grâce au récit de la Transfiguration, une christologie qui, sans négliger l’avant et l’après, n’essaie pas de passer à côté de l’existence humaine de Jésus mais qui voit aussi et d’abord en elle la révélation de sa divinité” (1150).

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Peter Riga, “Signs of glory: the use of “*semeion*” in St John’s Gospel,” *Interpretation* 17, no. 4 (1963): 402–424, 415: “What is interesting here is the relationship between the synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of St. John. St. John does not speak of a transfiguration explicitly, but the theme is there just the same. First a certain relationship between St. John and the Synoptics does not exist merely by chance . . .” Riga connects the ideas of glory and form. To be transfigured could then be translated: to assume glory.

<sup>26</sup>Xavier Léon-Dufour, “Autour du *semeion* Johannique,” in *Die Kirche des Anfangs: Festschrift für Heinz Schürmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Rudolf Schnackenburg, Josef Ernst, and Joachim Wanke (Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag, 1977), 363–378, 376: “Dans le *semeion* se récapitulent les éléments épars de la révélation. Il n’est pas indifférent que Jésus ait rendu la vie à un mort, fait couler à nouveau le vin de la fête, donné à manger un pain merveilleux, plutôt que d’accomplir n’importe quel tour de passe-passe légitimant son autorité: l’action même est révélation, elle est Parole . . .”

wine, vine and oil; each can be assumed to pronounce the Christian mystery because in their created structure they are already open to it.<sup>27</sup> But the most basic framework in which John places his signs is that of Jesus's flesh.<sup>28</sup> The flesh is symbolic because it is the place where the glory shines and is manifested in time, making present its origin and anticipating its fulfillment. The flesh is the new Tabernacle (cf. Jn 1:14), the Temple of his body (Jn 2:21) in which man is able to see the Father (Jn 14:9).

Precisely because it appears in the flesh, in the visible reality that is shared by the entire human family, the glory of Jesus can be communicated to his disciples, can be touched and seen by them (cf. 1 Jn 1:1–4). At the same time, this participation requires the freedom of those who see, their internal acceptance of the revelation. The “semeia,” as the flesh in which they appear, both reveal and conceal the mystery, because they are an invitation for the disciple freely to enter into them.<sup>29</sup>

Since they are the manifestation of God's glory in the face of Jesus, as well as the offer made to man to share in this glory, these “semeia” are the natural expansion of the Transfiguration to the rest of Jesus's works. In this light this mystery is the summary and fulfillment of all of Jesus's earthly activity.<sup>30</sup> John follows the synoptics in seeing God's glory appear in the concrete path of Jesus, while also bringing more precision to the statement: Christ's humble

---

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Ratzinger-Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 238–286.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Dorothy A. Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbol, Gender, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 2002); cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 2: *Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 219–280.

<sup>29</sup>This participation in Jesus's glory appears also in the Synoptics: Luke notices that the three chosen enter into the cloud. In Matthew the Transfiguration has an ecclesial significance: the authority of Jesus's words is now to be transmitted to the Church, able to teach also with authority (cf. Feuillet, “Les perspectives,” 298–299). There is a connection between the teaching Lord in heaven and the teaching Church on earth, united in his name.

<sup>30</sup>Each miracle is, in this perspective, a small transfiguration, a moment in which the glory of God appears in the time of man. Cf. Riga, “Signs,” 416: “The miracles are a continuous transfiguration—a continuous manifestation of glory—to those who could read their deep and profound significance. They become the testimony which gives credence to the mission of Christ on earth. To recognize this is to see his glory, the glory which the Son has received from the Father.”

flesh is the most appropriate place for the splendor of the Father to shine.

At this point we may ask: What is the connection between flesh and glory? And how can this help us to reflect on the mystery of God's vision and of his image in man? What follows is an attempt to enter, with the disciples, into this luminous cloud.

## *2. Seeing God with the body*

Is the light that shines forth from the Transfiguration able to illumine our understanding of God and man? What does this mystery tell us about the image of God, in which man was created at the beginning of time, and about the divine vision that is promised to him at the end of his journey?

### *2.1 The power of vision*

One thing is clear from our previous analysis: at the Transfiguration both image and vision are linked with the life of Jesus and his concrete journey in time; they are linked with his flesh, which is the true protagonist of the path of history through which the glory of God shines. But how are we to connect the image and vision of God, on the one hand, and the flesh, on the other? Is it not the immortal, intelligent soul that most resembles God in the human being, and that distinguishes man from the animals?

Let us start our discussion with a basic inquiry. Since it is a question of seeing God and being his image, what better departure point than the sense of sight and man's capacity to form images? As we will see, far from simply being a useful metaphor for explaining the vision and image of God, the sense of sight provides us with the structure for a correct understanding of these realities.

Sight was regarded by the ancients as the king of the senses.<sup>31</sup> What constitutes its particular place of privilege? We will follow the reflections of the German philosopher Hans Jonas in order better to understand the power of vision.

---

<sup>31</sup>Cf., for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, 1.

In the first place, it is characteristic of sight that it provides simultaneity in the presentation of its objects.<sup>32</sup> A comparison with the senses of hearing and touch is helpful in understanding this distinction. Both hearing and touch need time in order to be informed by their object. If I close my eyes I can still perceive the form of a cup by touching it with my hand; but I must patiently follow the surface of the object with my fingers and retain it in my memory. The same can be said of music: only by listening to a melody in time can we grasp its form.

Touch and hearing can be further differentiated. Touch needs time to acquire the form but not to represent it once it has been acquired. After having traced the surface of the object, I have the image in my mind and can evoke it instantaneously. This does not happen in hearing: time is necessary both to acquire the form and to preserve it. The form of music is inseparable from the sense of time.

This is then the privilege of vision: whereas touch and hearing are dependent on time, vision seems to be atemporal. Time is absent both from the process of acquiring the information and from the way we retain it. We contemplate a picture by Velázquez merely by opening our eyes. Vision offers a total isolation from time, and it is therefore the sense most proper for expressing eternity, the absence of Chronos.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty has illustrated the same point with the example of people born blind who are able to have their vision restored to them. Their first reaction at the surprise of the new world that lies before them is to try to incorporate it into their old habits of listening and touching. They use their eyes as if they were hands, patiently following the borders of the object they see in order to grasp its form, until they realize the simultaneity that vision offers them: then they learn to use their gaze as a gaze, not as a hand.<sup>33</sup>

Let us turn now to a second characteristic of vision. The one who sees is able to do so without modifying the object of his

---

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 136: “1) simultaneity in the presentation of a manifold; 2) neutralization of the causality of sense-affection; 3) distance in the spatial and mental senses.”

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 259: “To distinguish by sight a circle from a rectangle, he has to run his eyes round the outline of the figure, as he might with his hand . . . .”

contemplation. The cause-effect relationship that is manifested in touch is neutralized here. This specific characteristic of sight is connected with a third, noted by Jonas: sight provides distance both in the spatial and mental senses; it makes the separation between the seer and the world possible.

With this description of sight we can now understand St. Augustine's statement: "For this bodily sense [sight] . . . , is nearer to the sight of the mind."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, in these prerogatives of vision we see the seed of man's capacity for thought. First, vision's isolation from the flux of time prepares for the emergence of the concept of eternity. Second, the instantaneous way of grasping the form points already toward man's capacity to conceive the universals. Third, by creating a distance between the subject and the object, sight paves the way for the mind's reflexive look at itself. Of course, there needs to be a qualitative step from vision to thought, but Jonas is right when he notes: "Mind has gone where vision pointed."<sup>35</sup>

Let us dwell a bit more on this connection between sight and thought. The intermediate step is taken precisely in the possibility of forming images: among the animals only man is able to paint.<sup>36</sup> This capacity is a crucial step forward with respect to other living beings: it entails the possibility of separating form from matter, of abstracting the universal from the concrete. Once this is done, the conditions are right for the growth of intelligence. The man who paints, *homo pictor*, is ready to become *homo sapiens*, able to talk and think.

In this way the process has begun that leads man to raise the question of his own image: Who am I? The forming of the image takes an important turn here: it is directed now toward man himself and his mystery. In the words of Hans Jonas: "True man emerges when the painter of the bull and even of its hunter turns to concerning himself with the unpaintable image of his own conduct and the state of his self."<sup>37</sup> It is the Augustinian *magna quaestio*, the question that man becomes for himself. In what follows we will refer to this question in all its depth as the "image of man."

---

<sup>34</sup>Cf. St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* XI, I, 1.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 152.

<sup>36</sup>For the following, cf. Hans Jonas, "Image-making and the Freedom of Man," in *The Phenomenon of Life*, 157–182.

<sup>37</sup>Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 185.

Now, the boundlessness of the question of man, the fact that no concrete image in the visible world matches his own image or answers his search for meaning, makes it a question about God as well. From the outset of the human experience, there emerges the need for transcendence. Once the capacity of making images becomes focused on man himself, it becomes a search for the image of God.<sup>38</sup>

At this point, we have returned to our topic: the *imago Dei* present in man, which is connected, in his search, with the image of man and with the question of his own transcendence. We are now in a position to evaluate the process that makes it so difficult for us to conceive of any connection between the image of God and the body. Is not this entire process a further retreat from matter and the body, a further abstraction that leads us from the material image to the image of man, and from there to the transcendent image of God?

Note that this process of disconnection is based on a primordial break: the break between sight and the body. This disconnect emerges whenever we consider sight as completely different from the other senses and as capable of exercising its power without them. The eternity of sight is then viewed as opposed to the time of hearing and touching; the seeing subject is isolated from his world of causes and effects. It is not difficult to see what could result from this perspective if followed through to its final consequences. Since mind goes where vision points, what we have here is the seed of idealism, a philosophy that tends to oppose subject and object and, after having created this chasm, is then obsessed with the problem of a bridge that would permit one to cross it.

Even if this opposition is not exaggerated, as long as vision is conceived as independent of man's material constitution, it remains difficult to connect the image that man forms of himself (related to the *imago Dei*) with the human body. It is true that the eyes need the body to produce an image, but once the image is produced, it seems to enjoy a privileged independence from the material processes that gave rise to it. Matter and the body can be seen as a symbol of a higher reality and a ladder by which we arrive at the contemplation of what is divine in man, as in the philosophy

---

<sup>38</sup>This connection is made by Jonas: "To be created in the image of God means to have to live with the image of man" (*ibid.*, 186).

of Plato, but they do not constitute an essential part of man's definition.<sup>39</sup>

This has been influential in the Christian conception of the image of God, as well. Of course, the Christian theologian has had to dispense with any negative judgment of matter and the body. Christian theology, inasmuch as it understands man as a unity between body and soul, has attempted to give an account of how the body, too, belongs to the *imago Dei*. A common explanation states that the dignity of the image is given to the body through the mediation of the soul. In this account, the image is proper to the soul and not to the body; since the soul is the form of the body, however, this image is also communicated to the latter.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with this explanation, inasmuch as it follows the Aristotelian-Thomistic account. The statement, however, can be misunderstood, if we do not raise the question about the exact contribution of the body to this picture. In a word, given that body and soul are two co-principles of the human being, what does the fact that the soul is always the soul of a body mean for our understanding of its being the image of God? If this question is not raised, then body and matter do not seem to contribute anything proper to themselves to the *imago Dei*. We then tend unwittingly toward a more Platonic vision, for which the body is like a veil that permits the light behind it to be revealed, but does not as such have any intrinsic connection with this light. The veil is necessary for our weak eyes to see the light, but it would always be preferable to see face to face if our eyes could bear it. The fact of our being in the flesh, on this reading, does not itself enrich the possibilities of a new understanding of image, nor does it provide new possibilities for vision.

We can ask, however, whether this view does justice to the richness of Christian revelation such as it emerges in the Transfigured Jesus. The flesh of Christ constitutes the place where transcendence can be most properly shown. The body and the concrete time frame of Jesus's life are not only ways of making the *imago Dei* shine

---

<sup>39</sup>For a positive reading of Plato's understanding of the body, similar to what we have sketched in this paragraph, cf. Giovanni Reale, *Corpo, anima e salute. Il concetto di uomo da Omero a Platone*, vol. 49, *Scienza e idee* (Milan: Cortina, 1999); Cornelia J. de Vogel, *Rethinking Plato and Platonism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986).

through, but are themselves the structure that allows the image to appear, the receptacle that is proper to its manifestation.

This seems to be the understanding of an important branch of the Christian tradition, which counts Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian among its members. For these Fathers the real image of God is inscribed in the human body.<sup>40</sup> Thus Tertullian speaks of “that very flesh, which the Divine Creator formed with His own hands in the image of God, which he animated with His own afflatus, after the likeness of His own vital vigor . . . .”<sup>41</sup> And Irenaeus refers to “the flesh, molded according to the image of God.”<sup>42</sup>

Following this ancient tradition, could we not say that the image of God has to do in a special way with the body? Is this understanding of the Fathers still a possibility for us? And if so, what does this consideration of the body imply for our conception of man as the image of God?

## 2.2 Sight and bodiliness

We set out by saying that a correct understanding of the image of God in the body of man must refer back to the phenomenon of vision. Let us recall briefly the results of our analysis. Vision offers, first of all, an initial taste of eternity. The seer emerges from

---

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Antonio Orbe, “La definición del hombre en la teología del siglo II,” *Gregorianum* 48 (1967): 522–576: “El cuerpo, no el alma racional, específica al hombre. El cuerpo, con tal disposición concreta de miembros, hecho en lo exterior a imagen de Dios, y en lo interior (=en su vida específica) a semejanza Suya. Plasmado a imagen de Dios, es instrumento apto para la vida ‘a semejanza de Dios’ y la inmortalidad divina” (564).

<sup>41</sup>Cf. Tertullian, *De Resurrectione carnis*, 9, 1. Cf. also Justin Martyr, *De Resurrectione*, 7: “It is evident . . . that man made in the image of God was of flesh. Is it not, then, absurd to say, that the flesh made by God in His own image is contemptible, and worth nothing? But that the flesh is with God a precious possession is manifest, first from its being formed by Him, if at least the image is valuable to the former and artist.” This treatise was written by Justin Martyr or one of his close disciples: cf. Alberto D’Anna, *Pseudo-Giustino. Sulla Resurrezione. Discorso cristiano del II secolo*, Letteratura Cristiana Antica. Testi (Brescia, 2001).

<sup>42</sup>Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* V, 6, 1 (SC 153, 72): “caro quae est plasmata secundum imaginem Dei” (“the flesh was formed according to the image of God”); cf. also *Adv. haer.* V, 36, 3 (SC 153, 464–466).



the flux of things into the realm of timelessness. Sight is also immune from the relation of cause and effect. In this way vision is the sense of distance and detachment, both temporal and spatial. This primordial separation between vision and the body, when exaggerated to the point of rupture, is at the root of our incapacity to connect bodiliness with the *imago Dei*.

But is the independence of vision in fact so radical? Is it true that sight does not stand in need of the other senses after all? The point we want to make in what follows is that vision—and consequently the image that is derived from it—cannot be isolated from the body. The bodily form of man is necessary not only for the acquisition of the visual data but for the very constitution of the image that is formed. Given the path that leads from vision to the image of man—and from the latter to the *imago Dei*—once vision has been shown to be rooted in the body, it will appear as the link between the image of God and bodiliness.

Let us start with an important connection Hans Jonas makes in an appendix to his description of the sense of sight: it is the link between vision and movement. Jonas notices that we are able to see only because we are endowed with mobility: to move in space is the precondition of visual perception.<sup>43</sup>

In fact, when we walk through a room the images given by our eyes constantly vary, providing forms that change their location and dimensions. How is it that we are able to recognize that these objects are the same, notwithstanding the change in form and position? This identification, Jonas notes, would not be possible if all the information we had came from the eyes. The eyes, by themselves, remain mute about depth perception and perspective. They supply only a sequence of two-dimensional images that succeed each other in time.

The possibility of the constancy of the objects perceived is explicable only if we assume an intrinsic connection between movement and sight. It is because we have moving bodies, because we are able to explore the room and measure the distance between our body and objects, that we are able to see as we do. Vision thus is not dependent on the eyes alone, but rather on a synthesis between sight and movement. As Jonas writes: “We may therefore say that the possession of a body in space, itself part of the space to

---

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 152–156.

be apprehended, and that body capable of self-motion in counterplay with other bodies, is the precondition for a vision of the world. We have thus the paradox that it is something dynamic, a process, by which the framework of static experience is constituted . . . .”<sup>44</sup>

This interplay between movement and sight reveals a deeper connection: that between vision and the perception of cause and effect. The eyes do not give us information about the interaction of two objects, about the way they exert force on each other. But this relation is actually perceived by vision: I see a heavy body in a different way than I do a light one; I perceive the force of the wind moving a person’s hair. How is this possible? The relation between cause and effect is grasped by the eyes due to their connection with the body, a body that actually interacts with the objects and suffers their action.<sup>45</sup>

What these observations suggest is that the mechanistic account that supposes the senses to be isolated receptors of qualities needs to be replaced with a more adequate one. For Jonas, the key to an elaboration of a different perspective is the singular existence of the organic body. The living body possesses a primordial inwardness, a living form that is irreducible to the movement of material particles and their mechanical interaction. It is in this unity that all the data of perception come together: by themselves they are nothing; only when they are integrated in the organism’s self do they become what they are.

Now, the inwardness of the organism is a bodily one, that is, one that cannot do without a continuous dependence on its material particles. This means that within it coalesce identity and otherness,

---

<sup>44</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 156.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays. From Ancient Creed to Technological Man* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974), 227: “The acquaintance with enduring bodies and stubborn substance stems from the commerce of action, from its experience of resistance, inertness, etc. It can be doubted whether without prior handling of actually rigid bodies the mere ocular presentation of a series of deformations would suffice to yield the abiding solid shape, which presupposes rigidity”; cf. also Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 149: “Vision, however, is not the primary but the most sublime case of sense perception and rests on the understructure of more elementary functions in which the commerce with the world is maintained on far more elementary terms. A king with no subjects to rule over ceases to be a king. The evidence of sight does not falsify reality when supplemented by that of the underlying strata of experience, notably of motility and touch: when arrogantly rejecting its sight becomes barren of truth.”

freedom from the environment and dependence on it, individuality and relationship. If this is so, then it becomes clear that the radical separation between object and subject that vision seems to provide is only a mirage, an illusion. In fact, this separation is possible only because of a prior rootedness of the person in the world through his body. Thus, this covenant with the body seems to deprive sight of its independence. In exchange, however, the alliance enables vision to “see” much more than can be expressed in visual forms and colors. Sight inherits the capacity of perceiving cause and effect, repose and movement. Because of this connection with the body, the human eye qualitatively surpasses the possibilities of a video camera.

This interplay between sight and the rest of the senses has also been highlighted by Merleau-Ponty. He takes as an example the experience of patients who were able to recognize the color shown to them, even if—because of the short duration or weakness of the stimuli—they were unable to identify this color on the basis of their vision alone. As one patient says: “there is in my body a sensation of slipping downwards, so that it cannot be green, and can be only blue but in fact I see no blue.” And another: “I clenched my teeth and so I know that it is yellow.”<sup>46</sup>

Merleau-Ponty connects these observations with his understanding of the human body as our way of having a world and being present to it. To perceive a color is not to acquire an isolated quality that the mind associates only afterward with the input from the other senses. Through my body I enter into a communion with the world that enables me to feel it in its colorful variety. Therefore perception is from the beginning incorporated into a complex set of relationships that includes the person’s whole existence, his memory, his experience, and his situation in the environment.

This union between sight and the body is important not only in order to elaborate a theory of perception. Given the unity of the human being, and especially the link between sight and thought, a different notion of vision leads to different conceptions of human existence. In this regard it is interesting to note the distinction drawn by Gabriel Marcel between the spectator and the contemplator.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup>Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 244–45.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being. I: Reflection and Mystery* (South Bend,

The spectator, like someone who watches a movie or a play, is one who looks on from the outside, as though the vision by itself sufficed to provide him access to reality. In this way he is separated from life, thinking that he understands reality without entering into contact with it. Marcel opposes this *homo spectans* to *homo particeps*, the man who is situated in the midst of the world. The participant is always engaged with reality and is able to understand it only by actively participating in it. For Marcel, the possibility of being *homo particeps* is given by the body: it is my body that places me in a concrete situation inside the world. When I say: "I am my body," I imply: I am a manifest being, who exists by going out of myself, by interacting with the surrounding world.

Who is then *homo contemplans*? This is the man who sees, as the spectator does; but unlike the latter his vision is rooted in his participation in the world: the *homo contemplans* is also *homo particeps*. "Contemplation is a possibility only for somebody who has made sure of his grip on reality . . ." <sup>48</sup> The contemplator does not live under the illusion of seeing things from the outside, as if he did not belong to them and them to him. On the contrary, to contemplate means to ingather, it is a conversion to oneself to which one brings, along with oneself, the world to which one belongs.

Marcel's point is that the contemplator is able to see much more and more deeply than the spectator. The acceptance of the body allows him to see reality from the inside, even if he must renounce the illusion of being able totally to comprehend the world and to grasp it with his eyes. We can speak in this regard of a certain pride of vision. Vision is tempted to sever the links that unite it with the humbler senses, like hearing and touch, which must take their time and enter into commerce with the world of things. If sight renounces this arrogance and accepts its connection with the lower senses, it emerges having been enlarged by what it inherits from them: it is allowed to participate in the world and to see it in a different light. Vision, by being bodily, becomes much richer than the abstract, pure gaze of *homo spectans*.

How does all of this change our understanding of vision and the image of man, which is related, as we have seen, to the *imago Dei*?

---

Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), 121–24.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 123.

### 2.3 *What the body adds to vision*

Let us now recall Jonas's statement: "Mind has gone where sight pointed."<sup>49</sup> The question is then: Where does sight point when it remains rooted in bodiliness? Let us articulate an answer in several steps.

1. According to our analysis so far, the body, by being open to the world, constitutes the primordial place of my participation with what is different from me. If I am my body, then I am also the world that surrounds me and surprises me with its manifestation. In this sense we could say that the body is the space where otherness and transcendence come to be part of my very identity. Thus, to connect vision with the body means that sight destroys the illusion of its isolation from the contemplated object. If vision is rooted in bodiliness, then commerce with the concrete world makes up a part of the act of vision: it is the soil in which sight is nurtured.

This means that I do not see mere objects that are isolated from the subject who sees; thanks to the body I actually envision the way the world interacts with me and determines my being. To see means to enter into contact with the world that is seen, to allow oneself to be transformed by its vision and to transform it with one's own gaze.

This can be expressed also by saying with Merleau-Ponty that to see and to be seen imply each other.<sup>50</sup> In fact, sight is rooted in the body, and the body is in itself manifestation, visibility in the midst of the world. Thus, I can see only inasmuch as I am manifest and visible. The primordial receptivity of a universal gaze that looks upon us belongs to the very structure of sight and to the very possibility of seeing.

2. Now, in the human being the transcendence manifested in the body has a greatness that exceeds the dimensions of this earth: the horizon in which man encounters the world points always to an ever-further beyond. As the place where otherness enters into our life, the body is also a witness of man's relationship to transcendence and, ultimately, to God. In the body this relationship takes the form

---

<sup>49</sup>Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 152.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 134–35.

of our coming from a transcendent beginning and our walking toward a final encounter with transcendence. By being born, the body attests to our coming from a mysterious, divine background; by being bound to die, it tells us that we need to face the question of our destiny as an encounter with the ultimate.

Let us insist on this point, which is crucial for our understanding of the vision of God. We showed before—following Hans Jonas—that sight, because of its rootedness in the body, is able to see things not conveyed in visual form: such as the weight of objects, their movement, and their interaction. All of these are conveyed to sight because of its covenant with the other senses, particularly the sense of touch. Now we add: there is something else that the body conveys to sight: it is our openness toward otherness, toward surprise and wonderment, toward a transcendent horizon. The greatest gift brought to sight by bodiliness is not the perception of cause and effect in the world, nor the ability to see the forces that move the objects we see; it is, beyond that, the capacity of seeing the world as open to transcendence, as the place where the totally other can be manifested.

Saint Peter Chrysologus has described this in one of his sermons, in which he asks whether it is possible to see God with our bodily eyes. If the whole world is not enough to contain God, how could he be contained by the human gaze? The answer seems to be: this is impossible; man should not try to see God in the flesh. Peter Chrysologus says, however, that human vision is not satisfied with this, precisely because it is a vision that loves. Even if their desire seems absurd, our eyes continue to look for God, trying to find him in the midst of the world.<sup>51</sup> We can now explain this dynamism of vision by way of its rootedness in the body. Sight inherits from the body its openness toward transcendence. Embedded in bodily vision is the desire to contemplate God.

Thus, because of its connection with the body, vision is open to the mystery, toward a greatness that surpasses the seer. Using the distinction forged by Marcel, we can say that bodiliness forces us to envision reality as a mystery and not merely as a problem.<sup>52</sup> While the problem can be situated before me and analyzed in all its terms,

---

<sup>51</sup>Cf. Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* 147, PL 52, 594–96.

<sup>52</sup>Cf. Marcel, *The Mystery of Being. I: Reflection and Mystery*, 211–12.

the mystery is greater than I am and its horizon exceeds any possibility of my grasping all its dimensions.

In this regard it is interesting to consider the way in which the concrete configuration of the human body gives form to the act of vision. Unlike the rest of the animals, the human figure is characterized by its upright posture. Now, this bodily structure transforms the way man sees. Whereas animals move in the direction prompted by their digestive tract and focus their gaze on the food they need to survive, man follows a different path, which is expressed by the upright position of his body. This permits him to look continually, as St. Augustine said, “to the things in heaven.”<sup>53</sup> He is not only born to see but also bound to behold.<sup>54</sup>

Let us now link these remarks with our first point regarding the reciprocity that vision entails. To see, we said, is possible only if we are seen, that is, if we are manifested to the world. Now we understand better what this “being seen” is. It refers not only to an abstract “being visible,” but also to the vision that God has of us, to a gaze that embraces us from the outset and that, by doing so, enables us to see.

We can now understand what St. Irenaeus had in mind when he wrote that man’s vision of God through the works of creation is what gives him life.<sup>55</sup> This is understandable only if we connect sight and body: to see God with our eyes is possible because our bodiliness places us from the outset in a dimension of transcendence, inside a horizon in which the divine can enter and surprise us with his presence. Since without this dimension human life would not be itself, the openness of this horizon constitutes man’s very possibility of being alive, of continuing to be a human being. Were God to hide his face, man would perish (cf. Ps 104:29).

---

<sup>53</sup>Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XXII, 24, 4: “you see the other creatures have a grovelling posture, and look toward earth, whereas man’s upright form bids him continually look to the things in heaven.”

<sup>54</sup>Cf. Erwin W. Straus, “Born to See, Bound to Behold: Reflections on the Function of Upright Posture in the Esthetic Attitude,” in *The Philosophy of the Body: Rejections of Cartesian Dualism*, ed. Stuart F. Spicker (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 334–61.

<sup>55</sup>Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* IV, 20, 7, 648: “Si enim quae est per conditionem ostensio Dei vitam praestat omnibus in terra viventibus, multo magis ea quae est per Verbum manifestatio Patris vitam praestat his qui vident Deum.”

3. Among those things that man's gaze explores in the world, there is a particular point at which the horizon of transcendence opens up: it is the gaze of another. If the upright posture allows man's body to look into the horizon, it does so by allowing him to behold the gaze of his neighbor.

When we see the eyes of the other, said Max Scheler, we are not only seeing a pair of eyes: we are seeing a gaze. And it is the possibility of seeing the gaze that differentiates the human act of vision. In this gaze an entire path is opened up for us, a path of relationship and engagement, a path full of risks and promises.<sup>56</sup> As Emanuel Levinas has shown, this is the place where the vision of God becomes ultimately available to us.<sup>57</sup>

It is only here, in the interpersonal encounter, that we understand what we said before, that to see implies a prior "having been seen."<sup>58</sup> In fact, we learn to see in truth and depth only when we receive upon ourselves this first gaze of love, through which we know that God's gaze embraces us. The capacity of contemplating, of this seeing that grows from our participation in the world, can mature only here.

4. A final consequence of the relationship between sight and the body is the inclusion of time within vision. We said above that vision seems to offer us an eternity freed from the course of time.

---

<sup>56</sup>For St. Augustine, the vision of our neighbors was helpful to understand the bodily vision of God: cf. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* XXII, 29, 6: "But even as, so soon as we behold men, amongst whom we live, alive and performing vital motions, we do not believe that they live, but we see that they live, and though we cannot see their life without bodies, yet do we clearly behold it by the bodies, all ambiguity being removed: so wheresoever we shall turn about these spiritual eyes of our future bodies, we shall likewise by our bodies see the incorporeal God governing all things."

<sup>57</sup>On vision, cf. also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

<sup>58</sup>Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 193: "If the transcendent cuts across sensibility, if it is openness preeminently, if its vision is the vision of the very openness of being, it cuts across the vision of forms and can be stated neither in terms of contemplation nor in terms of practice. It is the face; its revelation is speech. The relation with the Other alone introduces a dimension of transcendence, and leads us to a relation totally different from experience in the sensible sense of the term, relative and egoist."



We now realize that, because vision is rooted in the body and connected with the other senses, it is never detached from time. Vision is indeed rooted in movement and touch, and thus in the concrete time of the body that constitutes the fabric of our existence. The simultaneity enjoyed by vision does not consist in the silencing of time, but in its fulfillment. In vision we have a model of eternity that has assumed movement and time into itself.

This means that with my eyes I always see more than the present moment. Sight always provides me with a vision of past, present, and future, with the duration of a movement. This connection between image and time appears more clearly in the vision of the face of a beloved person.

The Spanish philosopher Julián Marías notes the way in which an old man perceives the beauty in the face of his aged wife. This face is beautiful because in it he sees her whole past, the whole history of the love that unites him with his spouse. And in the face we also grasp the beauty of the future, of its expectation, of the promise it makes to us. Were we to look at a face with no future, we would look at a different face, at the face of death. The seer, then, is the one who sees the future and, in it, a prospect of happiness, the blessings of God (cf. Num 24:4).

#### 2.4 *The body and man's image*

Having described the new features of vision, we now ask about the consequences for man's understanding of himself. We said with Hans Jonas that the mind goes where vision points. If the horizon opened up by sight has changed, what is the new form that the mind acquires, what is the new image man has of himself? It will suffice to follow the same points developed in the preceding section.

1. If the act of vision is based on the body's primordial receptivity toward the world, then the image that grows from it can never be complete and perfect in itself, that is, without intrinsic reference to otherness. Like the *symbolon* used by the ancients, a token broken into two halves that allowed for mutual recognition, the image of man also points beyond himself. The image of man cannot be conceived as the image of a separate essence, of an isolated individual; it remains, thanks to the body, an image that is already in relationship, an image that needs to be shared in order to be formed and perceived.

2. Just as vision inherits openness to the divine from its

bodily structure, so does the image that grows from it. By being connected with the body, this image of man is in relationship to God. We see then how the image of man is connected with the *imago Dei*. Let us note an important consequence: it is not by detaching itself from the body that the image of man, his *magna quaestio*, continues to be open to God, but rather by being rooted in this primordial receptivity of the body, which is the real place of encounter with the divine. The human being can bear the image of God in his body precisely because it is the body that reveals man's openness toward transcendence. In its bodiliness, the connection between the image of man and the *imago Dei* takes the form of receptivity and dependence, and not of power and competition: that is, it takes the form of filiation.

3. The fact that the gaze of the other person opens up the visibility of transcendence has consequences for our understanding of the *imago Dei* in man. It means that man finds his own image only when he is looked at with love and is able to look with love in his turn. It is here that this image is open to God, to transcendence, to the presence of God's gaze in the gaze of the other. Thus, man's concrete relationships with his fellow men are the way in which the image of God appears in him.

4. As the act of vision is always temporal, so is the image. There is no static image of man, but always an image in movement, an image underway. It must always take into account man's path in time toward God and toward his fellow men. The image consists, first of all, in the recognition of our origin, of our beginning. Second, the image is an image of the future, inasmuch as it is an invitation to love, to acknowledge the beginning and to respond with generosity to the primordial gift.<sup>59</sup> This is the way in which the image of man, his *magna quaestio*, becomes the *imago Dei*. This means that the image is never complete. It awaits its proper time of fulfillment, to which we now turn.

---

<sup>59</sup>It is in this sense that we can describe the family as the image of God, inasmuch as here we find revealed both the beginning (in the relationship between parent and child) and the present of love (in the relationship between husband and wife) that is opened toward the future of fecundity. It is only in this dynamic way, which takes into account rather than suppressing the whole of humanity's time, that we are able to see the image of God in the family. On this topic, cf. Marc Ouellet, *Divine Likeness. Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006).

### *3. Transfiguration: the path of the image*

This analysis of human experience provides us with a richer understanding of vision and image. If sight were to be isolated from the body, the eye would grasp only the forms and colors offered by the visible world. But because of its corporeality, sight is opened in its very constitution toward a further fulfillment. The upright figure of man enables sight to behold the distant horizon; in this way vision tends always toward transcendence. The eye never wearies of seeing (cf. Eccl 1:8) for it desires to grasp the invisible and remains open to a greater revelation. It is this revelation, in its double form of promise and fulfillment, that we now wish to consider.

#### *3.1 The old image*

If we ask about the presence of God's image in the Old Testament, we find first of all the prohibition against portraying his face. This is understood as a token of God's transcendence: Yahweh cannot be confused with the gods of the pagans, whose images are patterned according to animals or plants and made of gold, silver, or some other element.

The consequence of this prohibition, however, does not imply a dissociation between God's face and his concrete presence in the world. In the Bible we do not find an abstract God who avoids intermingling with the history of Israel.

In fact, the prohibition against making images can be read not only as a caution against materializing God, but also against excessively spiritualizing him. Let us recall what we said above about the human capacity to form images: it is based precisely on the separation between form and matter. If this capacity is absolutized, according to what we have called the pride of vision, the painting creates a split that isolates its object from the concrete world.

From this point of view the images of God are criticized in Scripture because they mistake the divine face for the abstraction of a painting. To paint the figure of the divinity means to make him alien to our reality and thus to transform him into an abstraction, a God of ideas who can neither hear nor see. God cannot be depicted because the image, when it is separated from the body, loses its truth and becomes a static abstraction: the idol of the concept. An image is not valid for representing the God of Israel, not because it

connects him too much with the world, but precisely because it connects him too little.

Indeed, in the Old Testament, the prohibition against representing God's image is simultaneous with the presence of this very image in Adam, a bodily creature formed from the dust of the ground.<sup>60</sup> It is because he bears the divine image within him that man rules over the material world as God's representative. This means that the image must refer to man precisely inasmuch as he is a bodily creature, who is able to mediate God's activity to the material world.

The link between God's image and the body is given not only in man's capacity to work, but also in the transmission of life to his children. And, indeed, "Adam . . . became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image . . ." (Gn 5:3). Again, it is the body that communicates the divine image, which is thus understood in terms of filiation. The body appears as the place that is able to receive sonship and to mediate it through its generative capacity.<sup>61</sup> The body is the image of God, not because the Creator has any concrete visible figure, but because it is in the human body that God can be present to the world and active in it.

Let us note that it is precisely because God gives himself to be seen in this mysterious link between man and his body that he is ungraspable and always surpasses man's expectations. It is man's being in the body, indeed, that makes the human being point beyond himself, toward the otherness of the world. Through his body man is open to always surprisingly new encounters. Therefore, within the horizon of man's bodiliness, God is free to manifest himself without losing his sovereign freedom, without ceasing to be unfathomable. God appears and acts in history as transcendent precisely because he appears in the space opened up by the human body.

---

<sup>60</sup>Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 13–32.

<sup>61</sup>Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* II, 389: "Für unsere besondere Frage besagt die Stelle Gn 5, 3, dass man sich die Weitergabe der Gottesebenbildlichkeit in der physischen Folge der Geschlechter, also doch offenbar in leiblichem Sinn vorgestellt hat. Wenn nur ferner das Verbot des Mordes in Gn 9, 6 durch den Hinweis auf die Gottesebenbildlichkeit begründet wird, so wird man wieder auf denselben Gedanken geführt. Wer sich am Leib des Menschen vergreift, der tastet in ihm Gotter Ehre an."

In this view, the image of God is ungraspable not because he is far away from us, but because he is too close, as the light is to the eye; he encloses us with his gaze and it is from inside this gaze that we are able to see him. As Theophilus of Antioch puts it: “As, therefore, the seed of the pomegranate, dwelling inside, cannot see what is outside the rind, itself being within; so neither can man, who along with the whole creation is enclosed by the hand of God, behold God.”<sup>62</sup>

In this way, the topic of God’s image goes together with the vision of his glory throughout the history of Israel. This is connected in the Old Testament with both man’s desire for God and his fear of seeing him. On one hand, man needs to see God in order to live, because the face of God gives life to the one who is made in his image. On the other hand, the fulfillment of this vision is impossible; indeed, it means man’s death. God’s glory cannot be contained by the fragile human body, the only space in which man is able to receive it. And thus Moses’ desire on Mount Sinai could not be fulfilled.

This very movement of attraction and fear appears in Mark’s gospel in his depiction of Peter’s fear after the Transfiguration. According to Mark, the apostle’s fear is connected precisely with his words: “It is good for us to stay here.” The French exegete A. Feuillet remarks that we have here at the same time the two contradictory movements of attraction and fear, typical of the manifestation of the divine in his mystery.<sup>63</sup> Peter is in movement toward God and at the same time realizes that he cannot go, that he is afraid to encounter the face of the Lord.

Here we see how the Old Testament points toward the Transfiguration scene. On the mountain, Moses and Elijah, the men who followed the path of God’s glory and contemplated his passing, appear in conversation with Jesus. Irenaeus of Lyons sees in this scene the fulfillment of what God promised to Moses on Mount Sinai. There he was told: “then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen” (Ex 33:23). This

---

<sup>62</sup>Cf. Theophilus, *To Autolytus* I, 5, English trans. in A. Cleveland Coxe and others, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, 10 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 90.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. Feuillet, “Les perspectives,” 288, who adds: “le récit du second évangile est tel que seul pouvait le faire de cette façon quelqu’un qui avait été spectateur de l’événement et avait été ensuite intimement mêlé au drame affreux du Calvaire . . .” Feuillet refers here to the studies on the sacred by Rudolf Otto.

“back” refers to the vision Moses is granted on Tabor. It is the back because it comes at the end, when the time is fulfilled, in the Incarnation of the Logos.<sup>64</sup>

Something similar happens with Elijah and his vision of God on Mount Sinai. Again, Irenaeus sees here a prophecy of the manifestation of God in Christ.<sup>65</sup> In the last times he will not appear in the thunderstorm or in the fire but in the peaceful breeze, in the serene gaze of the Incarnate Logos. Let us consider now the way in which this face was shown in Jesus Christ.

### 3.2 *The new image in the new Adam*

What happens in Jesus, according to the proclamation of the Christian Gospel, is that the real Image of God, the refulgence of his substance (cf. Heb 1:1) becomes flesh. The preexistent Image enters into time precisely in this space where his image was already present. It is manifested precisely in the body, true to the bodily structure in which man encounters the world and enters into contact with God. As Chrysologus says: “What God made on earth similar to himself, was it not able to have a place of honor in heaven?”<sup>66</sup> The image is present now in the face of Christ (cf. Cor 4:4).<sup>67</sup>

On the one hand, this presence was to be expected: the human body was the only place for God to be manifested if he were to respect the structure of human experience. On the other hand,

---

<sup>64</sup>Cf. Chromatius of Aquileia, *In Matthaëum*, Tractatus 54 A, 3 (Corpus Christianorum Latinorum 50A).

<sup>65</sup>Cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* IV, 20, 10 (SC 100, 656–58).

<sup>66</sup>Cf. Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* 147, PL 52, 594–596: “Let us make, he says, man in our image and after our likeness. A perfect devotion owes to the image the same that it owes to the king. Had he assumed an angel from the heavens, he would have remained invisible; had he assumed something lower than man from the earth, it would have been an offense to his divinity; moreover, this would have lowered man, not raised him up . . . .”

<sup>67</sup>Cf. Gerhard Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* II, 393–396: “[the image of God] ist dem Paulus ohne allen Zweifel eine in Gn 1, 27 gegebene Grösse; wenn er sie, die dort auf Adam bezogen ist, auf Christus überträgt, so kann dies wohl nur auf Grund einer ihm geläufigen Gleichsetzung Christi mit dem in Gen 1, 27 gemeinten Adam geschehen sein (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; cf. Rom 8:29; cf. Col 3:10).”

precisely because this dimension of man's existence is the place constituted by the encounter with otherness, the realm of wonderment and surprise, this manifestation could not have been deduced from below: it surpassed all possible expectations of human reason and of prophetic hope.

The manifestation of this image also includes a judgment on man and his works. The body, indeed, if it is the place where the image of God can appear, is also the place where it can be manipulated or distorted. By appearing here, the image is at the mercy of man, because the body can also become the place of mistrust and diffidence, of the first refusal and the continuous suspicion. Thus the image, in the end, could not take any other form than the form of the Cross, inasmuch as it accepted its risk from the outset.

How is this face of God, this image, available to us? The gospel accounts confirm our philosophical explorations, bringing them to unexpected fulfillment.

The image is visible, first of all, in the relationship between Jesus and his Father. We said above that the human body is the space in which the Father can be revealed as primordial origin and ultimate fulfillment of man's existence. We added that the body determines vision, thus allowing the eye to perceive God in the form of its ultimate horizon. How was this visual structure lived out by Jesus? In his case, the body, the space of filiation, the space in which God as Father is manifested, is now assumed by the eternal Son. As our body determines our vision precisely by placing our sight within the horizon of transcendence, so the filial body of Jesus determines his vision of God by placing it within the horizon of the eternal Son's love for the Father.

By linking Jesus's vision of God with his body, we are able to preserve the singularity of his knowledge of God while allowing for a real growth in his vision of the Father. Since his flesh is totally filial because of its being united to the Son of God, Jesus sees the Father in an immediate way, and can be the Revealer of God's image to man.

At the same time this very link with the flesh tells us that this vision needs to grow in time. We are speaking here, indeed, of Jesus's bodily vision of God. Such a vision would seem absurd in terms of a consideration of human sight that took only colors and visible forms into account, but the previous section has opened up a different horizon. Because of the connection between sight and the body we see much more than can be recorded with a video camera:

our eyes perceive transcendence as an invitation to pursue the way, as a call to enter into the divine gaze and to be illumined by it. The presence of the divine in our visual field is not opposed to our need to grow in vision: on the contrary, it makes this growth necessary by calling us to go beyond the surface into the depths.

The same can be said of Jesus: he has an immediate vision of the Father because his body refers to him, the Father, in a singular way. But this does not eliminate the need to grow in bodily vision, to see the meaning of the path toward his hour in the light of the Father's gaze.<sup>68</sup> Jesus's fulfilled vision of God, inasmuch as it is rooted in the body, will be accomplished only on the morning of Easter, when the body will be made perfect in its relationship with the Father.

Once the special character of Jesus's vision of God has been stated, we can pose another question. How is it that the glory of God shines in the face of Jesus? As we know, vision and image correspond to each other. Vision is not the neutral contemplation of an object, which leaves us and the world unchanged; the bodily character of vision reveals that sight is rooted in participation, that it transforms the seer. As Moses returned from Sinai with a shining face, so the one who converses with God and sees him bears God's image in his own face. It is thus by contemplating the Father in the body that Jesus's flesh receives the image of God.

We said above that the image of God in man has a temporal dimension, and that it cannot be conveyed in a static way. The growth of Jesus's vision corresponds to the growth of the image in his face. Therefore, in order to contemplate its fullness we need to consider Jesus's journey in time.

### *3.3 The growth of the image*

It is precisely the Transfiguration that opens the way to this temporal understanding of the image. As the study of the scene in the gospels has shown us, the glory of the Transfiguration is a

---

<sup>68</sup>The consideration of the body is thus important for solving the question of Jesus's knowledge of God and self-consciousness. It is normally absent from the common approach to the problem. For a good synthesis of the question, see Olegario González de Cardedal, *Cristología* (Madrid, 2001), 458–472.



manifestation of Jesus's preexistence, but it is also the anticipation of the glory of the fulfillment. It can be described as a glory rooted in the hypostatic union and the preexistence of the Son, but also as a glory that comes from the final stage of history, from its ultimate goal.<sup>69</sup> We need to ask how the preexistence of Christ and the glory of Easter find their confluence at this point of the life of Jesus.

First of all, if the glory of the Transfiguration comes from the Preexistent Son, how is it possible that this refulgence does not eclipse the humility of the flesh? What else is able to appear, which is not given in the glory of the beginning?

Some theologians have answered that the Transfiguration is indeed the normal state of Jesus on earth. The real miracle, according to this view, is that the radiance of Tabor did not appear during the rest of Jesus's life.<sup>70</sup> Aquinas was right, however, when he related the glory of the Transfiguration to the risen body, describing it as an anticipation of a glory not yet present.<sup>71</sup> In this way he highlighted the dynamism of the mystery toward its goal.

The question, then, remains as follows: What is the connection between the Son's possession of glory and his appearance on Mount Tabor? Does it allow for a real growth of the image? A similar question can be posed from the point of view of Easter: Is it

---

<sup>69</sup>Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Behold The Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology* (San Francisco, 1986), 20: "Thus he [Luke] makes it plain that the Transfiguration only renders visible what is actually taking place in Jesus's prayer: he is sharing in God's radiance and hence in the manner in which the true meaning of the Old Testament—and of all history—is being made visible, i.e., revelation. Jesus's revelation proceeds from this participation in God's radiance, God's glory, which also involves a seeing with the eyes of God—and therefore the unfolding of what was hidden. So Luke also shows the unity of revelation and prayer in the person of Jesus: both are rooted in the mystery of Sonship. Furthermore, according to the evangelists, the Transfiguration is a kind of anticipation of Resurrection and parousia (cf. Mk 9:1). For his communication with the Father, which becomes visible in his prayer in the Transfiguration, is the true reason why Jesus could not remain in death and why all history is in his hands. He whom the Father addresses is the Son . . . . But the Son cannot die. . . ."

<sup>70</sup>Cf. Georges Habra, *La transfiguration selon les pères grecs* (Paris: Éditions S.O.S., 1974), who tries to defend the view that, according to the Greek Fathers, the Transfiguration did not have any effect on Jesus, but only on the disciples. Jesus himself could not become transfigured because he was transfigured from the beginning of his earthly life.

<sup>71</sup>Cf. *ST* III, q. 45, a. 1.

possible that what takes place before the eyes of the disciples at Tabor draws its strength and its substance from the future? Does time flow in the opposite direction as well, from the future to the past?<sup>72</sup>

The answer to both questions has to consider the connection developed above between vision and time. If vision seems to escape from the flux of time, we said, this is only an illusion. In fact, by being rooted in the body, sight is also tied to movement and to the course of time. There is no vision of the present if it does not embrace the past and the future; there is no image that does not represent in some way both the origin and the goal. This, we said, is especially true whenever we contemplate a human gaze, full of memories and rich in promises.

What is new and surprising in Christ is that in him we see not only a fraction of the past, but the ultimate origin from which everything comes; that he foreshadows not only a slice of the future, but the ultimate goal of the universe. In the life of the Son, time encounters its own truth by making visible the depths of eternity. Now the glory of the one who eternally comes from the Father and eternally returns to him in love enters into the flesh, into the space where past and future, coming from and walking toward, memory and promise, are joined in the density of the present. We see then how Christ can fulfill the human experience of time beyond what is imaginable while faithfully preserving its structure.

These reflections allow us to see in the Transfiguration a key to understanding the rhythm of salvation history. That the glory of Easter is anticipated on Mount Tabor is no exception, but rather a witness to Christ's dominion over time, including the past and future. The second epistle of Peter tells us, indeed, that the Transfiguration validates the Old Testament in retrospect.<sup>73</sup> From this point

---

<sup>72</sup>Cf. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles. A Preliminary Study* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 231: "It is a miracle of reversal when the dead are raised. Old Nature knows nothing of this process: it involves playing backwards a film that we have always seen played forwards. The one or two instances of it in the Gospels are early flowers—what we call spring flowers, because they are prophetic, although they really bloom while it is still winter."

<sup>73</sup>Cf. 2 Pt 1:16–21; cf. Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, 126: "'Peter' is making a point of great importance. If the narratives of the Transfiguration in the Gospels shew that the Old Testament bears witness to Jesus the Messiah, 'Peter' is concerned to shew the converse truth: that the Transfiguration bears witness to the permanent validity of the Old Testament. It

of view it is possible to see how the prophets and the just of the Old Testament were justified by the Spirit of Christ.<sup>74</sup> We can glimpse also the meaning of Tertullian's sentence, quoted in *Gaudium et spes* 22, in which he sees in the image of man a prefiguration of Christ's image: "Thus that clay, already putting on the image of Christ who was to be in the flesh, was not only a work of God but also a token of him."<sup>75</sup>

Notice that, because this image appears in the body, the future takes the form of wonder and surprise, of otherness at the core of identity, and therefore it can never be deduced in advance: it remains in the form of a promise, waiting for its ever-greater fulfillment.<sup>76</sup> The Transfiguration anticipates the glory of Easter, but is not yet the saving glory that would radiate from Jesus's wounds. The disciples are allowed to see the face of Christ on the holy mountain, but they cannot hold on to this image, lest it cease to be such.

As we have seen, it is John who has expressed the continuity of this process by expanding the Transfiguration to the rest of Jesus's life. In this way the evangelist gives the correct interpretation of the synoptic accounts: the Transfiguration is not to be seen as a unique exception on Jesus's path, but rather as the summit of his public ministry that gives us the rhythm of his time and of salvation history.

This could be also an adequate point of view from which to interpret Jesus's miracles. What is shown in the miracles is not

---

is a distortion of the truth to say (like Marcion, and many moderns) that the Transfiguration shews the supersession of the Old Testament by the Gospel, for 'the fulfilment of the Old Testament' means not its abolition but its vindication as a perpetual witness to the supremacy of Christ."

<sup>74</sup>Cf. *Dominus Iesus*, 12: "In the New Testament, the mystery of Jesus, the Incarnate Word, constitutes the place of the Holy Spirit's presence as well as the principle of the Spirit's effusion on humanity, not only in messianic times (cf. *Acts* 2:32–36; *Jn* 7:39, 20:22; *1 Cor* 15:45), but also prior to his coming in history (cf. *1 Cor* 10:4; *1 Pt* 1:10–12)."

<sup>75</sup>Tertullian, *De Resurrectione carnis* 6 (English translation: *De resurrectione carnis liber. Treatise on the Resurrection*, trans. Ernest Evans [London: S.P.C.K., 1960], 18).

<sup>76</sup>Let us note in passing that this problem of the past is not only an abstract problem about the salvation of those who preceded the coming of Christ. It is the problem of our own past, of how to redeem the time we lived without acknowledging God's continuous coming in Christ, the time before each concrete decision of accepting him in us.

merely a marvelous prodigy, but the image of God that radiates in the bodily actions of Jesus. They are signs that illumine the mystery of time: they make the beginning visible in accordance with the creative power of God, and they anticipate the end by prefiguring the final resurrection of the body. St. Irenaeus illustrates this point in his commentary on the healing of the man born blind. As the Creator formed man from the clay of the ground with the help of his hand (the divine Logos), so Jesus, the Incarnate Logos, takes dust in his hand and makes clay in order to refashion the eyes of the blind. Because Jesus is the image of God, he is able to restore the image in man and bring it to fulfillment.<sup>77</sup>

On Tabor the disciples see the image of God in the face of Christ: they see it as grounded in his Eternal Being from the Father; in the original memory of the Son's preexistence; and as fulfilled in the face of the Risen One on the morning of Easter. By showing us the image as it moves in time, the Transfiguration reveals the meaning of history, between its coming from the Father at the beginning up to its final consummation.

### 3.4 Entering into the gaze

Saint Paul says to the Romans that we are "predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29). How is this process possible?

We said above that the contemplation of our neighbor's face is the concrete point in our human experience at which transcendence becomes visible: it is here that we glimpse its epiphany. The possibility of seeing this is rooted in the covenant between sight and the body. In fact, the body is the space of openness toward the other that makes it possible to envision the *imago Dei* as relationship to our neighbor.

Now, this is precisely the way in which Jesus's gaze becomes the entryway toward our being transformed into the image of God. What seemed impossible, that God might be contemplated with human eyes, has happened in Jesus, the Son made flesh.

Indeed, the image is now available to us in our bodily encounter with this man, Jesus of Nazareth, who totally refers us to

---

<sup>77</sup>Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* V, 15, 2–43 (SC 153, 202–210).

the Father because he lives from seeing him. By looking into Jesus's gaze we are drawn into his relationship with the Father and are transformed in turn into his image. "Who sees me sees the Father," says Jesus (Jn 14).

What does this statement mean? If it refers to the vision of Jesus's body, how can it be that many who saw him in the flesh did not see the Father and in fact rejected Jesus's witness? In order to answer we need to recall our analysis of vision and bodiliness. Vision alone cannot discover the Father in Jesus. But if it is rooted in bodiliness then it inherits the body's openness toward transcendence, which becomes concrete in the gaze of our brother. By participating in the life of our neighbor the horizon of vision is broadened, and in the human gaze we see the gaze of transcendence appear.

Jesus is this neighbor, our brother who ultimately reveals the Father. Because he shared in our body and blood (Heb 2:14), his gaze can concretely embrace us with love (cf. Mk 10:21) and invite us to enter into it. By doing so, we participate in his vision of the Father. This means that to see the Father in Jesus requires our free answer. Precisely because Jesus's vision is given in the flesh, it demands our movement of love toward the one who loved us first. Only by being inserted into his body can we contemplate his glory.

Irenaeus expressed with inspired words this entering into the gaze that unites Father and Son. He concludes his work with the desire "that all things . . . might behold their King; and that the paternal light might meet with and rest upon the flesh of our Lord, and come to us from his resplendent flesh, and that thus man might attain to immortality, having been invested with the paternal light."<sup>78</sup>

#### 4. *The vision of love*

In the Transfiguration the glory of God shines through Jesus's journey in time and expands to the pilgrimage in history of his entire Church.

---

<sup>78</sup>Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* IV, 20, 2 (SC 100, 630): "ut viderent omnia, quemadmodum praediximus, suum Regem; et ut in carnem Domini nostri occurrat paterna lux, et a carne ejus rutila veniat in nos, et sic homo deveniat in incorruptelam, circumdatus paterno lumine."

The importance of this event for the Christian vision of time was grasped by the British historian A. J. Toynbee. Toynbee understood the Tabor scene as the Christian answer to the upheavals of time.<sup>79</sup> When a civilization is in crisis, he says, there are two different options: that of the archaist who wishes to remain in the past and that of the futurist who desires to move quickly toward a different tomorrow. If both fail, the temptation of escapism emerges, of a withdrawal from history that flees to a protected realm of imperturbability. According to Toynbee, there is another option beyond these, the Christian answer he calls transfiguration. It consists of a withdrawal from the course of events only in order to return to them, to find in them the meaning that is able to save time from above by anchoring the instant in eternity.

Toynbee did not explain further the concrete way in which man is able to be at once rooted in eternity and immersed in time. Our study of the Transfiguration has allowed us better to articulate this intuition.

The crucial point is the connection among the body, image, and vision. Both *visio* and *imago* present difficulties to our modern mentality. The act of vision seems to be too limited to represent the whole of human happiness: it conveys the notion of a purely intellectual act that is unable to fulfill the aspirations of the restless heart, the desire to love and to be loved. And this seems also to be true of the concept of image, which is closely connected to the act of vision.

The Transfiguration shows us the crucial importance of the body both for the vision of God and for the meaning of God's image in man. Far from being a mere subsidiary of the soul, a veil admitting

---

<sup>79</sup>Arnold Joseph Toynbee and I. Edward Kiev Judaica Collection, *A Study of History. Abridgement of Vols. I–VI* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958): “Our inquiries into the nature of futurism and archaism have led us to the conclusion that both fail because they seek to escape from the present without rising above the mundane time-stream. We have seen how a realization of the bankruptcy of futurism may lead—and indeed, in a supreme historic example, has led—to an apprehension of the mystery that we have called transfiguration” (526–527); “these four ways present themselves as alternative possible by-passes; and we have found that three of them are culs-de-sac, and that only one, which we have called transfiguration, and illustrated by the light of Christianity, leads right onward . . .” (530).

a light that is not its own, the body has its own proper language that determines the meaning of the image and specifies the act of vision.

Seeing is possible only in a bodily form, that is, by engaging and participating in the world, by embracing its otherness with wonder as part of one's own identity. In this encounter man discovers a higher call, the call for transcendence, which is present in a singular way in the encounter with his neighbor. Thus through its inclusion in the definition of image, the body brings a rich heritage: it makes it possible to understand the image of God in terms of a call to love. It is only in this way that the *imago Dei* is open to being the *imago Trinitatis*.

In this view the dynamism brought to history by the Transfiguration is a dynamism of love. We are able to see because the gaze of the Father embraces us and invites us to enter into his own vision. Time becomes the time of God's call and man's response. To learn how to see means to grasp the meaning of time, its sense, its movement from the bosom of the Father toward his hands that will receive us in the final hour. The image can only be formed in this time of call and answer, of patience and hope; only by walking this path can God's glory be seen.

Justin Martyr saw this accomplished in the body of Christ on Mount Calvary. For him, what distinguishes the human figure is not only the upright position but also the capacity to adopt the form of the Cross. And the Cross is the perfect expression of love, the moment of the embrace between heaven and earth, east and west, in a dynamism that draws everything up toward the Father.<sup>80</sup>

St. Augustine expressed this same connection between vision and love in a famous sermon on the Transfiguration:

Come down, Peter: you were desiring to rest on the mount;  
come down, "preach the word, be instant in season, out of

---

<sup>80</sup>Cf. Justin Martyr, *Apology* I, 55, 4–5; cf. also what we said in José Granados, *Los misterios de la vida de Cristo en Justino Mártir*, *Analecta Gregoriana* (Rome, 2005), 396–398; regarding Irenaeus, Justin, and other Fathers of the second century, cf. Orbe, "La definición," 566: "Aparte hermosura y nobleza [el cuerpo humano] refleja mejor que ningún otro, por la maravillosa armonía de sus miembros: a) las perfecciones armónicas de la persona del Hijo y en su misteriosa real disposición a nosotros escondida; b) la multitud y complejidad de potencias en su dinamismo externo (creativo y salvífico); c) el orden jerárquico de los miembros del Cristo escatológico, Verbo Encarnado e Iglesia, cabeza y miembros, todos ellos con su acto peculiar."

season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.” Endure, labor hard, bear your measure of torture; that you may possess what is meant by the white raiment of the Lord, through the brightness and the beauty of an upright laboring in charity. . . . This Peter understood not yet when he desired to live on the mount with Christ. He was reserving this for you, Peter, after death. But now He says Himself, “Come down, to labor in the earth; in the earth to serve, to be despised, and crucified in the earth. The Life came down, that He might be slain; the Bread came down, that He might hunger; the Way came down, that life might be wearied in the way; the Fountain came down, that He might thirst; and do you refuse to labor? ‘Seek not your own.’ Have charity, preach the truth; so shall you come to eternity, where you shall find security.”<sup>81</sup>

The vision of the image was not to be given on Mount Tabor. Only by descending to earth and living among men, by serving and loving them, by dying and rising again for them, was it to be formed. Only in this act of charity was the image to be perceived by our bodily eyes: *Vides Trinitatem si caritatem vides*.<sup>82</sup> □

**JOSÉ GRANADOS, D.C.J.M.** is assistant professor of theology and philosophy of the body at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

---

<sup>81</sup>Cf. Augustine, *Sermo* 78, 6, PL 38, 492–493.

<sup>82</sup>Cf. Augustine, *De Trinitate* VII, 8, 12.