



Christ in the Face of the Other

Richard Rohr

St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) brought attention to the humanity of Jesus. Prior to St. Francis, Christian paintings largely emphasized Jesus’ divinity, as they still do in most Eastern icons. Francis is said to have created the first live nativity. Before the thirteenth century, Christmas was no big deal. The liturgical emphasis was on the high holy days of Easter.

But for Francis, incarnation was already redemption. For God to become a human being among the poor, born in a stable among the animals, meant that it’s good to be a human being, that flesh is good, and that the world is good—in its most simple and humble forms.

In Jesus, God was given a face and a heart that we could see. God became someone we could love. While God can be described as a moral force, as consciousness, and as high vibrational energy, the truth is, we don’t (or can’t?) really fall in love with

abstractions or concepts. So, God became a person *“that we could hear, see with our eyes, look at, and touch with our hands”* (1 John 1:1).

The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–1995) said the only thing that really converts people is “the face of the other.” He developed this idea at great length and with great persuasion.

When we receive and empathize with the face of the “other” (especially the suffering face), it leads to transformation of our whole being. It creates a moral demand on our heart that is far more compelling than Ten Commandments written on stone or paper. Just giving people commandments doesn’t change the heart.

In the end, Christianity is not a moral matter until it is first and foremost a mystical matter. Commandments and laws may steel the will, but they do not soften the heart—or create soul—the way one authentic I-Thou encounter will do. Thus, we have

produced an awful lot of “mean” Christians, which we must admit is Christianity’s present public image.

So many Christian mystics talk about seeing the divine face or falling in love with the face of Jesus. I think that’s why St. Clare (1194–1253) used the word “mirroring” so often in her writings. We are mirrored not by concepts, but by faces delighting in us—giving us the face we can’t give to ourselves. It is “the face of the other” that finally creates us and, I am sorry to say, also destroys us. It is the gaze that does us in!

Now surely you see why a positive and loving God-image is absolutely necessary for creating happy and healthy people. Without it, we will continue to create lots of mean Christians who have no way out of their hall of negative mirrors. □

Richard Rohr is the director of the *Centre for Action and Contemplation* in Albuquerque, New Mexico.