

SIN, INTIMACY, AND THE GENUINE FACE OF THE CHURCH: A RESPONSE TO ORMOND RUSH

NATALIA IMPERATORI-LEE

ALMOST FIFTY YEARS AGO, the Second Vatican Council acknowledged that the face of the Church is not always resplendent with the light of Christ. This constitutes a fundamental concern in the council's overall pastoral and reform agenda. Ormund Rush reminds us that the goal of the council was at least in part that the face of the Church would faithfully mirror the genuine face of the God that the Church presents. My goal here is to consider the notion of the face of the Church, along with how the Church might more authentically reflect God's face in genuine encounter by facing reality, and particularly by facing the poor.

Our faces are the most visible and most naked part of our bodies. They are a primary way in which we interact with the world and with one other in relationship. The face is intimate, even as it remains constantly exposed. It is rarely fully covered, and even the practice of veiling points to the powerful intimacy of the face.¹ Though we may embellish our faces with makeup or with paltry attempts at "putting on a good face," or vow "al mal tiempo, buena cara," as was frequently said in my family, the face is a locus of disclosure. Our faces reveal our emotions, our moods, our age, our confusion

NATALIA IMPERATORI-LEE received her PhD from the University of Notre Dame and is currently associate professor of religious studies at Manhattan College, New York. Specializing in ecclesiology, feminist theology, and US Latino/a theologies, she has recently published "Hombres, Hembras, Hambres: Narration, Correction, and the Work of Ecclesiology," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 17.1 (November 2011); and "Mother Superior, Mother Inferior? Mary in the Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Listening Journal of Religion and Culture* 44 (Spring 2009). In progress is a book on the intersection of narrative theology and US Latino/a ecclesiology.

¹ I do not wish to oversimplify the veiling of women as a religious practice, but rather to indicate that the impulse to cover the face has been rooted in the very power or intimacy of the face, and in the desire to confine this power or intimacy whether within the institution of heterosexual marriage or some other social, often patriarchal, construct. However, the practice of veiling, particularly in Muslim communities, is not viewed monolithically even in feminist circles. One example of feminist theological insight on the wearing of the hijab can be found in Bahar Davary, "Miss Elsa and the Veil: Honor, Shame, and Identity Negotiations," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25.2 (2009) 47–66. On veiling, women, and the face, see Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Right in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (New York: Addison Wesley, 1991).

or understanding, our empathy or hardness of heart. Much of our humanity resides there, in our faces. This confers power on the face-to-face encounter—the meaningfulness of eye contact with a child, or a lover, or an enemy, or, as in the thought of Immanuel Levinas, the face-to-face encounter with the Other that brings us into subjectivity.² For Levinas, the face [of the Other] “denudes, undresses and disarms the subject,”³ and the face-to-face encounter with the Other exacts a demand on the subject to enter into relationship with that other, an uneasy relationship where the subject must “care for the other in non-totalizing ways,”⁴ including through “gestures of justice, generosity, and sacrifice.”⁵ Ultimately, the ethical demand of the face-to-face encounter with the Other is a kenotic one, inviting the subject to divest itself of prestige and power in favor of a posture of seeking justice.

If the Church were somehow to embody this ethical demand—to genuinely have a face-to-face encounter or to “get its house in order in terms of dialogue,” to use Rush’s image—how would it do so? If there were to be this perichoresis of hierarchical magisterium, theological insight, and *sensus fidelium*, what would it look like? My hope, and the council’s, is that there would be a genuine face-to-face encounter, within the Church, of these three realities. But in effect we leave that encounter to chance—or, more realistically, we have relegated it to an eschatological hope. While it is true, as Orlando Espín reminds us, that the *sensus fidelium* is an intuition, and that intuitions require interpretation,⁶ the *sensus fidelium* further requires

² The notion of the face is thematic in Levinas’s phenomenology and ethics. See, e.g., his *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (London: Athlone, 1990); “Philosophy and Transcendence,” in *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University, 1999); “Meaning and Sense,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1996); *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1998). A secondary source, to which I am greatly indebted here, is Michele Saracino’s *On Being Human: A Conversation with Lonergan and Levinas* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1993).

³ Saracino, *On Being Human* 97.

⁴ *Ibid.* 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “The main problem with the study of the *sensus fidelium* . . . is its being a sense, an intuition. This sense is never discovered in some kind of pure state” (Orlando Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997] 66). US Latino/a theologians have pioneered the study of popular religious practices as sources of theological reflection. In addition to Espín’s work, see Roberto Goizueta, “The Symbolic Realism of US Latino/a Popular Catholicism,” *Theological Studies* 65 (2004) 255–74; Mark Francis, “Popular Piety and Liturgical Reform in a Hispanic Context,” in *Dialogue Rejoined: Theology and Ministry in the United States Hispanic Reality*, ed. Ana Maria Pineda and Robert Schreier (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995) 162–77; and most recently

avenues for expression, and authentic dialogue also requires structures that do not presently exist.

My question is not merely what mechanisms exist through which the *sensus fidelium* is expressed, but more importantly, do mechanisms for the reception of the *sensus fidelium* exist at all? I tend to think not. If there were mechanisms for listening, perhaps the Church would look different. Perhaps theology would less often be viewed with suspicion by the hierarchy. Perhaps women's experience beyond motherhood would be taken into account in discussions of baptismal dignity and full humanity. Where are the venues for a face-to-face encounter between the hierarchy and the laity, where the laity speak and the power structure listens kenotically? Moreover, who is listening to the *sensus fidelium* on sexism? racism? heterosexism?

We all know the Church's failings when it comes to this justice-seeking posture, that the Church has turned away from the Others in its midst, or worse, dismissed or erased the Other in totalizing, colonializing ways. The Church is indeed sinful, and, as Rush asserts, its sinfulness goes beyond the sins of individuals. The patriarchy, racism, colonialism, homophobia, remain embedded in the Church's structure and thought-patterns; our history is replete with such "isms." They seem inescapable for us. This is a reality we must face.

In addition to facing the fact of the sin in, of, and by the Church, I would invite us as church to face the demographic reality. This includes the pull of the Majority World that, though somewhat reflected in the Argentine/Italian pope, has yet to be reflected in the Church's hierarchy and the power structure, and even in the theological academy. It also must include the racial and ethnic reality of the soon-to-be Latino/a majority of American Catholics and how this reality stands in contrast (sometimes silently or invisibly) to the way the story of American Catholicism is told, originating from the Northeast and expanding West and South.⁷ The sins of commission and omission, and of invisibility-making, are rampant. And we must face this failure with honesty, compassion, repentance, and forgiveness. Many believed that the election of a Latin American pope would remedy the problem of the Eurocentric hierarchy and the Eurocentric vision that pervades the Church. This young pontificate has shown promise. However, the

Timothy Matovina, *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2012).

⁷ According to the Instituto Fé y Vida Research and Resource Center, in 2012 approximately 41% of US Catholics were Hispanic. The majority of millennial Catholics and younger Catholics are also Hispanic. For a full picture of their studies see <http://www.feyvida.org/research/>. Research from The Pew Research Center supports the notion of a coming Hispanic majority in the US Catholic Church: see <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/02/13/the-global-catholic-population/#know>. (All URLs cited herein were accessed August 28, 2013.)

fact of the sin is not erased by the face of the pope—although this pontificate might begin to indicate ways we can face the sins of the Church.

The image that has been most present in my mind as I thought about the relationship between the face of the Church and God's face is that of Pope Francis on Holy Thursday, with his face quite literally at the feet of a young Muslim woman. The posture and the positioning, the intimacy of that image and its radical nature, signify for me what the council meant when it talked about reflecting the genuine face of God to the world, about the Church as a sacrament or as leaven in the world.

The notion of "facing" as a posture or positioning—a preferential option—is the final aspect of "God's face" that I want to emphasize. In exegeting the story of the widow's mite, Gustavo Gutiérrez highlights the importance of perspective—Jesus' perspective, his point of view in the parable.⁸ Jesus sees the woman offering her disproportionately large gift because he chooses to sit outside the Temple's door to the treasury. His decision to place himself precisely there allows Jesus to witness things that others might miss. This is the crucial notion of the word *face*: that the central mission of the Church, the way it is a reflection of God's own face, is that it is obligated to face the poor, the rejected, the excluded, the ones who cannot take life tomorrow for granted. Though no one has ever seen God, we know the posture of God toward the destitute, toward the Other. God loves the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and all the poor. To conclude, I offer these words from a homily of Augustine on 1 John:

But let no one imagine God for himself in keeping with the concupiscence of his eyes. For he makes a huge shape for himself; or he stretches out some immeasurable vastness through space, as though spreading across open places—as much as he can—the light that he sees with these eyes; or he makes for himself some old man of, as it were, venerable aspect. Do not think of these. This is what you should think of if you want to see God: *God is love*. What sort of countenance does love have? What sort of shape does it have? What sort of feet does it have? What sort of hands does it have?⁹

The notion of ecclesial conversion must contain these three aspects—venues for face-to-face encounter, kenotic repentance for and continual uneasy relationship with ecclesial sinfulness, and a genuine justice-seeking posture and positioning. Though we cannot know how God looks, we can and should work to have the sort of face that love has (no more scowls!), and sorrowfully work to wipe away the tears from our broken Church and the broken world in which it journeys.

⁸ Olle Kristenson, *Pastor in the Shadow of Violence: Gustavo Gutiérrez as a Public Pastoral Theologian in Peru in the 1980s and 1990s* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2009) 3.

⁹ Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century III/14, intro., trans., notes by Boniface Ramsey, ed. Daniel Doyle and Thomas Martin (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2008) 111.