

## Encountering the Master

Things have been hectic around here, to say the least. Paris has been abuzz with events commemorating the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Order of Preachers – i.e., the Dominicans – by St. Dominic. (Happy Birthday to us!!!) Even secular Paris has jumped on the bandwagon, allowing exhibits and programs to take place in government buildings where *laïcité* – i.e., the French anti-clerical version of our separation of Church and state – reigns supreme, buildings like town halls and the Mazarin Library. The *Couvent St-Jacques* where I live has seen a constant parade of visitors and dignitaries, including more bishops than you can shake a stick at.

So there I stood, in the midst of this maelstrom, taking advantage of the relative calm offered by a sort of note nook next to the mailboxes; as you might guess, I was busy jotting a note to put in one of the slots. Suddenly, I felt someone touching my back as if to attract my attention. With a cheery “*Salut!*” (“Hi!”), I proceeded to finish my note and then turned around to see who was seeking my attention. To my great surprise, it turned out to be the Master of the Order, the successor of Holy Father Dominic, our “big guy in Rome” despite his small stature – which, as I know reflect, is why I was poked not on the shoulder but rather in the back. Suddenly realizing whose presence I was in, I yelped – less from surprise than from embarrassment at having greeted “the Master” so informally. This, of course, elicited howls of laughter from the friars observing the sorry spectacle; the Master, however, merely smiled and greeted me *à la française* with a kiss to the cheeks – but then I told you all about that foreign custom in a previous article. Blushing, I told him that I was in Paris due to his intervention: “What you see is what you get!” With a chuckle and a “*très bien!*”, he moved on. Whew!

This, of course, reminds me of an image I use to describe God's way of getting our attention. Imagine you're at the supermarket concentrating on reading the ingredients of the product you have in your hand. Someone sneaks up behind you and just stands

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there. Is that person present to you? Physically yes, but that's as far as it goes – at least until the person says “Boo!”, at which point the person's presence becomes so real that the clean-up crew needs to scrape you off the ceiling. In a certain sense, this is how the sacramental mysteries and the liturgical cycle function: making us pay attention to the God Who was present all along, but to Whose presence we were oblivious.

Isn't that the purpose of the Great Fast, of Lent? Alas, along with the realization of God's presence comes the recognition of our lowly position with regard to God's greatness – a relationship which is potentially very uneasy. Some spiritualities have played up this discomfort. Jonathan Edwards' sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” comes to mind.

My mind wends to Baroque architecture. Why? Allow me to make an excursus stemming from my college art history class. While Gothic cathedrals like *Notre-Dame* use height and light to draw the faithful upward, and while Constantinople's *Hagia Sophia* did the same by its openness and warmth, the Baroque is very different: Baroque overwhelms viewers with the glory of God, seemingly crushing them beneath its grandeur. In effect, Baroque architecture and spirituality belittle the very humanity that the Incarnate God has chosen as a vessel, embodying the words of Psalm 22:6 and using them as a cudgel: “But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people.” Beaten down, don't we then take up the cudgel and use it on others? The enslaved Jews heaped their anger and resentment upon Jesus; the Roman soldiers, relegated to dismal distant Palestine, beat Jesus the Master Who, in becoming the Suffering Servant, chose to share Psalm 22:6 with us.

Back to my own existential angst. In my story, the frairs laughed while I blushed, but not the Master. Aware of my all-too-obvious foolishness, I reminded him of his responsibility for **my ending up in Paris**: “What you see is what you get!” In this year of mercy, I

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didn't get an eye roll; instead I got a smile and a "*Très bien!*" My interpretation: "Don't worry. St. Paul claimed to be a fool for Christ; you can be St. Paul for us." Instead of Baroque dread, I got Gothic lightness and luminosity which spoke to my Byzantine expansiveness and warmth. They still can't wipe the smile off my face!

During this Great Fast, we are all invited to an encounter with the Master Whose face is displayed on "the Icon not Made with Human Hands", perhaps known by Westerners as Veronica's veil. Many of us were not raised to see God as the serene loving Jesus pictured on the veil, the Friend Whose loving invitation led the apostle John to rest his head on his loving Master's heart. More likely, our upbringing accustomed us to the image of a fearful judge à la Jonathan Edwards. Lent's invitation thus became a frightening obligation which we endured only because we were told we had to.

Pope Francis, good shepherd that he is, has declared a Year of Mercy, thus showing us an image of the original Good Shepherd Who cares for His flock - an image less likely to scare us away. Let us heed the welcome spoken by prophets of old. Joel urges the fearful sinner (2:13) to "return to the Lord, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting in punishment." And Hosea (6:1-2) can be our response: "Come, let us return to the Lord, for it is He who has torn, but He will heal us; He has struck down, but He will bind our wounds. He will revive us after two days; on the third day He will raise us up, to live in his presence." Resurrection is already in the air!