

A Woman's Prayer: Praying the Veronica as Imago and Imago Dei

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Last month, and with great love, Madeline invited us into the silence of peace. Citing Thomas Merton's description of a contemplative as one who has "transcended divisions to reach a unity beyond vision", she invited us to awaken the homely, welcoming, peace of the unity that in exists in the silence of our hearts. In this reflection we will continue with this theme by exploring the feminine mystical wisdom held in the tradition of the Veronica - the icon of the cloth imprinted with the Face of Christ. We will see how this icon holds insight for our understanding of vision, that transcends the unhelpful di-visions that can be created between image and imageless prayer. How we see the place of images in our prayer is especially important at a time when we are awash with images in social media, which can make us feel exhausted at the thought of integrating more images and words in our prayer. The visionary Gertrude of Helfta will be our guide, inviting us to behold and see the Face of Christ imprinted as imago and Imago Dei in our hearts.



Behold, and imprint my heart with the seal of your heart.

Eia et sigillum coris tui cordi meo imprime

Gertrude of Helfta, *Spiritual Exercises*, 1:249

During the late Middle Ages, attitudes towards the use of images in prayer underwent a profound transformation.¹ Divisions between earlier monastic ideals of imageless prayer as the 'highest' form of contemplation and the use of images, which had traditionally been reserved for the illiterate or, at best, as aids to support 'lower', more visual forms of prayer considered incapable of penetrating the mysteries of the Word, began to dissolve.²

One of the less well-known wisdom streams flowing at this time, one that was not part of these theological debates, was the feminine devotion to the Veronica (from the Latin *vera* "true" and *icon* "image"), which recalls the cloth given to Jesus by a woman named Veronica to wipe his face as he

¹ Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998) 111.

² *Ibid.*

carried his cross to Calvary.³ Quietly, mostly unnoticed, and trusting their prayer, monastic women and the laywomen who supported them, were being drawn into deeper and deeper intimacy with Jesus through their prayer with the Veronica. A natural assimilation of image and imageless prayer into an embodied contemplation flowed freely from their desire for face-to-face vision in union with God



This unnamed painting of the image of Jesus' face imprinted on a linen cloth, from around 1395, provides a beautiful example. Jesus' gaze is tender, constant and penetrating, drawing our own desiring gaze into the most delicate, reciprocal exchanging of love. As we behold, and are drawn more and more deeply into a mutual beholding, the quiet, still, constant light of his face illumines. The light source shining through his face is alluring, irradiating our own gazing with endless loving.

Often these paintings depict Veronica holding the veil with Christ's face imprinted on it. So the absence of the feminine figure of Veronica standing behind Christ's face and holding the cloth is important. Veronica becomes silently present, suggesting that she has become the cloth itself, impressed with his luminous face. The linen cloth is fleshy coloured, inviting us to sense Jesus pressing his face into the linen of our body, into

the cloth of our lives and inviting us to press our face into his fleshy radiance. Interestingly, this particular icon is painted on the right side of a two-piece panel that depicts God the Mother/Father supporting their beloved son in his death. This implies that the the Divine Face is both within and beyond time and space. The image has a feeling of permanence to it.

I invite you to pause for a while and open your heart in beholding of this image.

Among the earliest and most extensive commentaries on the Veronica can be found in the writings of Gertrude of Helfta (1256-1301). Gertrude offers a loving contemplation of the image grounded in a phenomenology of unity that is less a methodology of prayer and more an apprehending of a movement of oneness within the image to form a coherent whole. For Gertrude, the Veronica is not simply a symbol, or representation of the face of Christ: it is the living presence of Christ, an expression of the Word. It is full of capacity for transfiguring awareness of our shared identity face-to-face in Christ. Consequently, the Veronica and the one praying it is understood to be a coherent whole. Uninterested in whether the face of Jesus is "real" or "not real", Gertrude invites us into a mutual beholding of our Beloved. The image of face of Jesus (*imago*) dissolves in an eternal movement of spiritual seeing, where all is the Divine Face. This mutual beholding quietly restores us to our true image in Christ (*imago Christi*). The wisdom of William of St Thierry is encouraging: "Since it is impossible that true love, pining for truth, should long rest content with images, it very quickly passes by a path known to itself, into that which was imagined".⁴ Gertrude takes us into this path known only to itself. It is a path that unifies the image and that which is imagined through what Racha Kirakosian describes as a "'the sweetness of Jesus' (*Iesu dulcissime*).⁵ This "sweetness" is a form of embodied understanding which 'one person instils (*instillat*) into another".⁶ Literally, Gertrude

³ Ibid. In the Byzantine East, the Veronica is known as the "mandylion", which is believed to be a cloth into which Jesus impressed his image in response to a request from King Abgar of Edessa to see him in person.

⁴ William of Saint Thierry, *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, trans Mother Columba Hart (Cistercian Publications, 1970), 18.

⁵ Gertrude the Great of Helfta, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis (Cistercian Publications, 1989), 90

⁶ Racha Kirakosian, *From the Material to the Mystical in Late Medieval Piety: The Vernacular Transmission of Gertrude of Helfta's Visions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 4-5.

instills, drips and pours like honey, mystical awareness into her texts and so into their companions and communities.

We will now taste three drops of wisdom from Gertrude's prayer recorded in the *Herald of God's Loving Kindness* for the feast of Veronica. Gertrude begins this prayer by inviting us to enter into the silence of contemplation:

1. Behold with desire the image of the most loving face of the Beloved.
(*Imaginem amantissimae faciei Domini videre desiderantium.*)

Like a triptych, that is, a panel of artwork that is divided into three sections hinged together so that the outer panels can be folded over the central one, Gertrude invites us to pause and to behold her words simultaneously. This helps us to sense the overall thematic, rhythmic and compositional unity of the words in light of the Veronica, allowing both to reveal layers of wisdom as word and image enfold and are enfolded into the other in a movement of oneing.

Beholding, Gertrude's choice of the word "image" (as distinct from words like painting or portrait) evokes for me the words from Gen 1:26, "We have made (wo)man to our image and likeness"⁷. This is a foundational text in Cistercian mysticism and allows Gertrude to emphasise that we are already made in the image of Christ in the image of the Trinity. Thus, we share the same face we have chosen to behold. Implicitly, anything that separates us from this truth begins to come into the light, as we shall see.

Gertrude's intention for us is that we might see the Christ face-to-face and or, as Kerrie Hide explains "face-in-face",⁸ words that capture the depths of truth of the experience when the veil of separation between lover and beloved dissolve. Here we no longer look *at* each other, so much coincide within one another in the light of oneing love. As William of St Thierry writes so beautifully, "He in whom all things are, easily sees all things at the same time and sees all beings in himself".⁹ Gertrude might rephrase this as, "You in whom all things are, easily sees all things at the same time and sees all beings in yourself". Gradually, as we behold the Veronica, this veil of separation becomes more and more thin, as the image on the right suggests. Our face and our seeing becomes so infused with the Face of Christ that we cannot really differentiate between the two. Thus, in beholding Jesus' face, our heart melts as it is imprinted with the radiance of the Divine Face.¹⁰



Further, Gertrude often couples the word *videre* (meaning "to behold", "to see") with another word in order to emphasise a special dimension of contemplation. In this prayer, the words *videre desiderantium* tell us this is a contemplation of desire. It is helpful to recall that Gertrude's theology of desire would have been steeped in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, that the divine desire for

⁷ From William of Saint Thierry, see *William of Saint Thierry, Exposition of Song of Songs*, trans, Mother Columba Hart (Ohio: Cistercian Publications, 1968), 3.

⁸ Kerrie Hide, *Love's Oneing: A Book About Contemplation* (London: Austin Macauley Publishers, 2022), 17.

⁹ William of Saint Thierry, 125.

¹⁰ Gertrud the Great of Helfta, *The Herald of God's Loving Kindness* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2018), 4,7,1-4.

face-to-face vision of Jesus is our desiring.¹¹ The Divine Face desires to behold its Trinitarian self in our face, and Gertrude invites us to awaken in the divine desire we behold. Further, the divine desire is embodied, fleshy and intimate, not separating our bodies off from this contemplation, instead inviting quiet attunement to the ways in which the image affects our physical and spiritual senses. Gertrude's prayer from the *Spiritual Exercises* affirms:

Let me see you as you are; let me see you face to face. There dear Jesus, satiate me with yourself; there, in the fruition of your honey-sweet (mellifluous) face, let there be rest for me forever.¹²

*I invite you to pause, choose an image in this reflection, and to notice Gertrude inviting you to ground your awareness in a loving, gentle, beholding of Jesus' face; to enflame your desiring-seeing-knowing to be satiated in and by the light of his face; to sense with your body the drawing energy birthing in mutual gazing; to taste and drink the most loving, "honey-sweet" face of Jesus (*amantissimae faciei Domini*); to rest face in face in the infusing and penetrating light of fruition.*

2. She fell at his feet.



In this next excerpt, we are told by the sister recording Gertrude's prayer (sister N, a beloved and trusted companion of Gertrude), that upon entering into the silence of contemplation in the Divine Face, Gertrude became so overwhelmed by a sense of unworthiness and ugliness that "she fell at his feet". The word *fell* is very important, for it indicates Gertrude is in movement, and does not get stuck in these overwhelming feelings. Rather, in the midst of her anguish, she remains in contemplation, falling, descending, and sinking into the ground of her heart into the vulnerability of her wounds that have caused such self-criticism, anxiety, depression, and self-doubt. The Latin word for falling, *processit* (from *pro* meaning "forward" or "forth, and *cedo* "to move", or "to yield") emphasises how Gertrude's falling has a kenotic quality of yielding into the very face she is beholding, even amidst her pain.

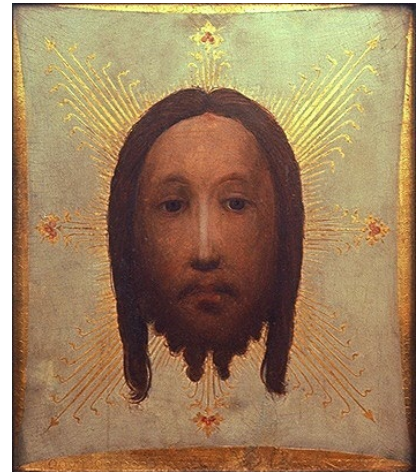
Further, in falling at Jesus' feet, Gertrude quietly and naturally places herself as the beloved spouse Mary Magdalene. As the first person to see Christ's transfigured face in face, Magdalene teaches the love that falls to the feet of Jesus in suffering, even descending into hell, which for Gertrude is this terrible agony of old patterns that limit intimacy and love. In the loving gaze of the Veronica, Gertrude sinks to the wounds of Jesus' feet, sharing and kissing her own pain and mental anguish through placing herself into the well-established Cistercian devotion to the wounds of Christ. As Gertrude moves from the wounds of Jesus' feet (*ad pedes*) then hands (*ad manus*) and finally the mouth (*ad aris*), she shares with us the most tender conversation in which Jesus tends, embraces, kisses and blesses her wounding.¹³

¹¹ Kerrie Hide, "The Beloved's Desire", Silent Retreat, 6-12 June 2024, teachings with Bernard of Clairvaux, Gertrude of Helfta, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Cloud of Unknowing, Teilhard de Chardin and Ilia Delio, www.contemplatio.com.au.

¹² SE 1: 229-234.

¹³ We know part of Gertrude's prayer includes the physical and spiritual kissing and caressing of the image of Jesus (see Herald, 3, 45) and such exchanges of love are implicit in this prayer, inviting us participate in our contemplation in whatever way feels necessary to truly participate in this transfiguring exchange of our wounding.

In this sharing of wounds, we could say the conversation itself takes place mouth in mouth, as each satiates the other with the reality of Gertrude's life, including her deepest sorrow. Importantly, Gertrude is stable enough to remain in this transfiguring conversation, modelling what Eva Natanya describes as "non-conceptual concentration".¹⁴ It is non-conceptual because it is not birthed in her conceptual mind, but from the silence of shared wounds. Fresh new wisdom flows for Gertrude as Jesus settles her senses and heals all that otherwise might intrude on the intimacy she longs for. As her personal pain dissolves, Gertrude then turns her heart to the wounds of her community, where she sees Christ dressing her sisters "in a dazzling white garment, that is, in his innocence, adorned all over with precious jewels with the appearance and scent of violets".¹⁵ In the light, gaze and aroma of the Divine Face, personal and communal wounds are erased and dissolved in ways that are reminiscent of the words from the Gospel of Mary Magdalene:



That which oppressed me has been slain; that which encircled me has vanished; my craving has faded, and I am freed from my ignorance. I left the world with the aid of another world; a design was erased, by virtue of a higher design.¹⁶

I invite you to recall your image, to behold and see Jesus' face, sensing Gertrude inviting you ...

... to recall you are the spouse of Jesus, whose divine face penetrates your gazing; to notice the energies, thoughts and feelings of your vulnerability that arise in this gazing; to fall, yield, sink into the wilderness of the wound that is here, sharing it with Jesus; to hear the silent voice of Jesus tending, healing, melting, liquifying and irradiating your heart; to centre your awareness in the erasure of suffering as you become the "dazzling white garment" of his Divine Face, face in face, one in pure, kind love.

3. On all those who, attracted to me by the desire for my love, shall frequent the memory of the vision of my face, I will imprint (*imprimo*) by the grace of my humanity, the vivifying splendour of my divinity. Its clarity shall shine through them perpetually with an interior light and in the eternal glory will make illuminate all the court of heaven with the special likeness of my face.¹⁷

Gertrude's prayer concludes with these words from Jesus who affirms his desire for each of us to frequent and dwell in the Divine Face. Evoking the scriptures, "set me as a seal upon your heart" (Cant 8:6), Jesus promises to imprint (*imprimo*) the image of his face in a reciprocal, desiring and loving exchange. What is so beautiful is that in sharing her wounds with Jesus, Gertrude's heart has liquified, melted like wax, and is now ready for the imprint of the seal of the vivifying, gentle light of Jesus' face in her heart. Gertrude's contemplation of the Veronica has thus attuned us to the ways in which the living presence of the Christ (*imago Dei*) in the Veronica, restores us to our true shared identity or, we might say, our true image (*imagine*) as both reflection and embodiment of the Divine Face (*faciei Domini*).

Further, and so naturally, the imprint of Christ face within Gertrude becomes communal, as Jesus tells her that the clarity of "the special likeness of my face" in all who dwell in his face, shines with an

¹⁴ Eva Natanya, *Love Never Ends: How to Stabilize the Trajectory to Enlightenment*, Ghatika Monthly, June 2024.

¹⁵ Herald, 4, 7, 4.

¹⁶ Jean-Yves Leloup, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2002) 36-38.

¹⁷ Herald, 4, 8, 1

interior light that illuminates “all the court of heaven”. In other words, all creation is imprinted by the image of Jesus Face. Kerrie Hide writes poignantly of this transfiguring moment:

We recognise that imprinted within us is a profound I-I gaze that sees from the luminous trace of the divine light within us. We participate in the radiant light of divine transcendence, just as the divine participates in our finite humanity. We partake of the Beloved and experience the Beloved’s eyes within us as subject, in an instantaneously grasped whole that is self-luminous. We see from oneness.¹⁸

This restoration of, and participation in, our true image and likeness which Kerrie describes is crucial for us individually and communally, especially at this time of collective forgetting of the beauty of our original Divine Face. Through the Veronica, Gertrude helps us to reclaim and to attain the Divine Face, the source of All, so that we might actively participate in the healing and restoration of the world to its Original Divine Face, both as *image* and as *imago dei*. Through the simplicity and daily prayer of own lives, the Veronica become communal. Free from the cognitive mind that separates creation into categories such visible or invisible, image or imageless, material and immaterial, the vision and clarity of our prayer shines through our own face as the Divine Face infusing all.

Further, this transfiguring movement becomes available in images of decimated and violated bodies, fractured human psyches, overturned homes, destroyed landscapes. As Jean Yves Le Loup writes, “His Face is manifest in the face of the transfiguration and in disfiguration.”¹⁹ In all the war-torn, suffering and poverty struck places in our world ... “I will imprint the vivifying splendour of my divinity”. Through the Veronica, we know and feel the face of Jesus pressed into the cloth of our being. We press our faces into the cloth of our lives, and into the cloth of the creation. Impression becomes expression, an expression of the infinite peace of loving kindness. We utter with our Beloved to each other, to all who ache and weep with terror and despair, and to all creation, “Peace be with you. Peace be in you. May you be peace”. We hear resounding throughout creation: “Behold, and imprint my heart with the seal of your heart.”

I invite you to recall your image, to behold and see Jesus’ face, sensing Gertrude inviting you ...

... to centre your awareness in the original memory of the divine face imprinted in the innermost depths of your heart; to sense the delicate energy and light of love imprinting, pressing, penetrating, fixing itself in your heart; to continue to yield into the radiance of Jesus’ face settling all your senses, drawing you into repose; to rest in the light of his face; to know the warmth and vision of peaceful loving kindness releasing as your face, our face, illuminating all creation, one light, one radiant face. Amen.



¹⁸ Hide, *Love’s Oneing*, 151.

¹⁹ Jean Yves Leloup, *The Gospel of Thomas* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2005), 177, Logion 77.