

“Seeking the Face of Christ: A Christmas Time Pastoral”

Bishop William Murphy

Christmas Day, 2003

My Dear Sisters and Brothers of the Diocese of Rockville Centre,

Blessings to you in this joyous time of our Savior’s birth! May the newborn Child of Bethlehem fill you with the comfort of his divine presence. I am finishing this, my second Pastoral Letter to you, on Christmas morning before I celebrate the 11 A.M. Mass at Saint Agnes Cathedral. Christ is among us today! The Savior comes, as he always does, to invite us once again into the conversation of love that forms the very heart of his mission as the One sent by the Father of mercy. On this third Christmas of the new Christian millennium, my special prayer for you as your Bishop and brother is that throughout this holy season and beyond, you will gaze upon the face of Christ and reflect the radiance of his love to all our fellow Catholics in this local church, and to all our neighbors here on Long Island as well.

My second pastoral letter to you focuses on our faith in Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God made man. At the beginning of this new millennium our Holy Father invited all Christians to devote themselves to the contemplation of the face of Christ for the sake of deeper personal conversion, but also to place all our pastoral life of praise and service in the proper spiritual context.

The Jubilee Year of 2000 gave us Catholics on Long Island a special time to open our hearts to Christ. Many of us took advantage of parish retreats, Eucharistic hours, diocesan pilgrimages, and opportunities for spiritual healing through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. God's Kingdom indeed took hold, in a special way, of our young people who are the future of our Church, often bearing in their lives the fruits of holiness, joy, and renewed dedication to building up our local faith communities.

Throughout the Jubilee Year we were called to see the world from the vantage point of the One who came not to condemn it but to save it (Jn 3:17). Gazing upon his face, the face of the Incarnate One—who becomes “for our salvation” the Crucified and Risen One—we undergo the most profound transformation into his divine life. All of our service on behalf of the Church must have this ultimate renewal of the human person in view. The Holy Father is right: “unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose.”¹ Renewal in our Church can never be about mere changes in organizational structure or style of leadership. We, the ordained ministers, consecrated religious, and laity of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, must allow ourselves to be changed “from within.” Otherwise our instruments of reform and growth become mere “mechanisms without a soul.”²

Through this letter I wish to share with you the fruits of my own prayerful reflection on the faces of Jesus, confident in the words of Saint Paul: “For God

who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:6)

The Human Search for God

Human beings cannot live without God. The suppression of the religious consciousness has been one of the great disasters of modern times. In order for human beings to be truly human, they must raise their eyes to the heavens and seek the Almighty One, the Source of all, the Creator of all, the Lover of us all. The search for the Absolute One springs from the depths of the human heart which remains restless until it rests in Him.³

The Catholic Church looks with deep respect on all the ennobling aspects of the search for God outside of Christianity. She honors the faith traditions that are represented here on Long Island, in a special way the Jewish community who are our elder brothers and sisters, and the Islamic community which acknowledges the One and True God. The Church also looks with esteem on the spiritual traditions of Asia whose followers gather for prayer, meditation, and study in various temples and schools throughout our two counties. Indeed the spiritual yearning of all the great religions of the world represents "that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute."⁴

The Church stands always ready to enter into dialogue with persons who profess other faith commitments. With absolute respect for the freedom of others to assent to the truth as they understand it, Catholics cannot refrain from speaking of Christ, proclaiming his saving gospel, or showing his countenance to those who inquire after the truths of our faith. The Church “rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these [other] religions.”⁵ Rather she promotes a dialogue of love with them that forms an integral part of her mission of witnessing to Christ “in whom people find the fullness of religious life and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself.”⁶

God’s Turn Toward Humanity

Humankind’s spiritual history enters a wholly new phase when the human search for God is met with a gesture that comes from the “opposite” direction. God takes the initiative by a personal word in order that he might be known by human beings as their creator and redeemer. The call of Abraham introduces the period of special revelation whose principal aim is “to gather together scattered humanity.”⁷ Abraham, to whom is promised a paternity “of a multitude of nations” (Gen 12:1-3), enters into something new, radically new. God sets in motion his perfect plan through his word, his call to Abraham. “The people descended from Abraham would be the trustees of the promise made to the patriarchs, the chosen people, called to prepare for that day when God would gather all his children into the unity of the Church.”⁸

Israel serves God, and indirectly all of humanity, by becoming the people chosen to hear the word that Moses delivers from Mount Sinai. Through the Exodus and the establishment of the covenant, the people enter into a life of holiness in which worship and the ethical commands of the Law reinforce one another. Yet always the adherence to the word of the Lord evokes an ever deepening desire to know the God of the covenant. “When can I go and see the face of the living God?” (Ps 42:3) becomes the plea of the devout Jew across the span of Old Testament history, and continues today and beyond.

God Shows Us his Face

The final phase of the human journey to know the Lord of life begins with what we celebrate in this holy season. As the Word becomes flesh (Jn 1:14), God is no longer totally invisible. No longer do we know God merely from the creative and saving word he speaks to fashion the world and enact his plan of salvation within history. No longer is the Lord hidden within a “mystery cloud” or the dramatic forces of nature. Now by means of a human face God reveals his identity as the One who joins us human beings in our struggle to live in holiness and win victory over the age-old enemies of sin and death. The second Christmas Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer, which I prayed last night and today, proclaims:

“Today you fill our hearts with joy

as we recognize in Christ the revelation of your love.

No eye can see his glory as our God,

yet now he is seen as one like us.”

Today we greet the Child of Bethlehem who appears “as one like us.” The Eternal Son comes to earth not only as the *word* of the Father (Jn 1:1), but also as the *image* of the invisible God (Col 1:15). We gaze at the infant Jesus and see the human face of the divine Son of God. We behold his beauty, full of grace and truth. This beauty of Jesus Christ, as one theologian puts it, “cannot be limited to the content of his message but must reach beyond it to his person.”⁹ In a particular way, only the face of Christ can mediate his personal identity as the One in whom the fullness of divinity dwells (Col 2:9)—something that human language, even when found in sacred texts, alone would be incapable of fully rendering.

The face of Christ, more than any other human image, remains inexhaustible and always open to further penetration by the artist as well as the believer. The ancient Eastern practice of praying with icons has much to commend to all of the faithful who seek the face of Christ. I would recommend the use of these devotional aids to the prayer groups and religious education programs of our parishes.

Yet there is a parallel “door” that leads with even more certainly into God’s household. In Sacred Scripture we encounter the witness of the Apostles who had first-hand experience of the Lord: they saw him with their eyes, heard him with their ears, and touched him with their hands (cf. 1 Jn 1:1). Come with me to a deeper contemplation of this mystery, as together we examine three luminous

moments recorded in the Gospels that reveal the face of Christ, that face who will transform us who gaze upon it with open hearts.

The Face of the Child of Bethlehem

What delight the face of the Infant Jesus evokes from his Holy Mother and the righteous Joseph, the poor Shepherds and the angelic host who announce his birth. Yet it is left to Simeon the elder, who would “not taste death before seeing the Messiah” (Lk 2:25), to capture in the most eloquent prayer the import of this child’s entrance into the world: “for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all the peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel” (vv. 30-32). *Who* is this Infant Jesus? His very name (“God saves”) refers to the saving mission he will undertake on behalf of “*all* the peoples.” Not only will he bring “glory” to the Jews who long awaited a messiah to liberate them from the bonds of oppression and bring about lasting peace. Christ will lead multitudes of Gentiles “who lived in darkness” (Is 9:1) into the luminous truth about the merciful Father who “wills that all be saved” (1 Tm 2:4).

The Babe of Bethlehem radiates hope in every time and place in which his countenance is discovered. Just as every mother and father behold in the face of their child the hope of a brighter future, so humankind turns to the Son of Mary and sees in his face the dawn of a new age of freedom from every fear and hatred. In this child is placed a well-founded hope, because veiled beneath his tiny

physical features lies the power to overcome the death-dealing forces of evil that plague our present age. The shepherds and magi come in search of a Jewish messiah who would fulfill ancient promises, but what their eyes discern exceeds the deepest aspirations of any people or religion. It is only with the accumulation of wondrous encounters with the Child, and of expressions of joy-filled praise about him, that the biblical accounts of Christ's birth make evident that he is indeed Emmanuel—"God with us"—the personal presence of the living God.

This first glance at the human face of Christ reminds us of the divine humility. He came veiled as a child in poverty! (cf. Lk 2:7) He submitted to the weakness of our human condition! He plunged into a sinful world to reveal the heart of mercy that summons all humankind back into communion! What can be our response to this most gracious gesture of God's self-surrender? Christ provides us with a pattern by means of his deeds and words. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." (Mt 5:7) As human beings we know through conscience the obligations of acting with the justice that fulfills the moral law. But this mystery of incarnate love calls us to go beyond mere justice, to "go out of ourselves" in imitation of Christ who fed the hungry, comforted the sorrowing, visited the sick, and welcomed the stranger—so much, we might acknowledge in humility, of what the faithful and Catholic agencies of this diocese seek to do in fulfillment of our mission as a local church. The Child of Bethlehem beckons all of us to look for him among the suffering, to trace the contours of his tender face hidden beneath the scarred and wearied faces of the poor, the lonely,

the newcomer, the marginalized and the frightened in our midst here on Long Island (cf. Mt 28:31-40).

The Face of Christ Transfigured

The Child grows “in wisdom and grace,” answers the call of his heavenly Father, and undergoes a baptism that inaugurates his public ministry. His mission consists in proclaiming the Kingdom of God and demonstrating its immanent approach through miraculous cures (Lk 11:20) and the extension of God’s mercy to sinners (Mt 9:13). Wherever Jesus goes, his disciples and the crowds that follow him encounter the compassionate face of God. Yet the entire thrust of the Son’s incarnate life aims at a time of self-disclosure, when the glory “of the only Son” (Jn 1:14) is revealed through the resurrection. In anticipation of that fully “public” disclosure, Jesus one day takes the Apostles Peter, James, and John up a mountain and reveals to them his glory (Mt 17:1-8). The story of the Transfiguration captures the intent of the divine plan: humanity healed and elevated by grace to share in God’s very own life.

In Saint Matthew’s Gospel, the revelatory incident follows Peter’s confession of Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” (Mt 16:16) and the Lord’s first prediction of his passion (vv. 21-23). On the mountain in Galilee the face of Christ radiates a blissful, otherworldly light, disclosing his divine glory and “confirming Peter’s confession.”¹⁰ The presence of Moses and Elijah, who had both been witnesses of God’s glory (Ex 33:21-34:8; 1 Kgs 19:36-39), links the

impending passion and resurrection with the Law and Prophets of the Old Testament. God's plan is one, and the Son comes as Servant who perfectly fulfills the Father's will. Peter speaks for the other Apostles when expressing delight in beholding Christ's transfigured face, but then falls prostrate in fear when he hears the voice of the heavenly Father from behind the bright cloud attesting that Jesus is his "beloved Son" who must be listened to.

No one can see the face of the living God and live (Ex 33:20), for its splendor overwhelms the finite eyes of human beings. Yet the face of Jesus becomes through the Incarnation a medium through which finite eyes can withstand—and even adoringly gaze upon!—God's astonishing beauty. The touch of Jesus and the assurance that his disciples need not be afraid affords Peter, James, and John a precious memory on which to draw as a means of fortifying themselves against the perils that lie ahead in Jerusalem.

The epiphany on the mountain entails not only a change in the appearance of Jesus, but also the transformation of our very nature as human beings. If the Baptism of the Lord symbolizes our first regeneration—our "coming to life" through the waters of rebirth and by becoming his witnesses to the world—the Transfiguration points ahead to our "second regeneration" when we receive through the outpouring of the Spirit the capacity to participate in his new resurrected life.¹¹ Our contemplation of Christ in glory is self-involving: we gaze at him transfigured, and soon find ourselves being reconfigured as "other Christs"; like beholds like; finite human persons share in the life of infinite divine Persons.

On the mountain the disciples witness a “Trinitarian event,” as the Father speaks, the Son radiates glory, and the Holy Spirit illumines the setting with his light from the cloud. The same Blessed Trinity, in whom we are baptized, effects a rebirth that goes beyond what human nature can achieve on its own. Christ dies and rises in order to bestow upon us a new life that makes of us sons and daughters *in the Son*. What belongs to Christ by virtue of his being God becomes ours through grace, namely, communion with the Father and Son in their eternal giving and receiving of love which *is* the Holy Spirit!

To dwell on the mountain with the Lord and contemplate his radiant countenance becomes a foretaste of our future reunion with the Bridegroom of our souls, the beloved of our heart’s longing. When he comes again in glory at the end of history, he “will change our lowly bodies to be like his own in glory” (1 Cor 15:53-54). One is hard pressed, therefore, to find any other place on earth to experience the deep reassurance of God’s promises than on this holy mountain. We go there on a pilgrimage of our hearts to contemplate the glorified face of the transfigured Jesus.

The Face of the Crucified One

Above all, the Transfiguration reminds us that the passage to glory runs through Calvary. What becomes of the face of Jesus when he is arrested, tried for treason, and sentenced to death by crucifixion? The early Christians invoked Isaiah’s image of the Suffering Servant to describe the hideousness of the dying

Jesus' visage: "There was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him, nor appearance that would attract us to him. He was spurned and avoided by men, a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity, One of those from whom men hide their faces, spurned, and we held him in no esteem" (Is 53:2-3). Can this human face still be the One that veils divinity? Are we to find beneath such scarred and tortured flesh the life-giving power that made the stars and that heals hearts hungering for forgiveness?

Christians ought not be surprised that after nearly two millennia the cross of Jesus continues to be the stumbling block for the large segment of humanity which cannot accept the fullness of the gospel. Only Christians see in the cross of Christ an instrument of atonement for the sins of all humanity. Only Christians paint, sculpt, and carve images of the Crucified One and hang them in museums, on classroom walls, or around their necks as an article of devotion. Only believers who live in the light of Easter look upon the blood-stained face of Jesus and see the sacrificial love that conquers death, restores lost friendship with God, and causes a rebirth to righteousness (cf. Rom 5:6-11).

Jesus of Nazareth goes to his death with eyes totally fixed on his Father, and with the confidence that he is fulfilling his mission (cf. Jn 10:18). His cry of abandonment may sound to many ears like the anguishing cry of a man who has lost hope (cf. Mk 15:34; Ps 22:1); yet from the standpoint of faith we know it to be the consequence of his identification with the sins of those whom he came to save. In the very moment of being "abandoned" by the Father, John Paul II observes,

Christ “abandons” himself with love into the hands of the Father.¹² More than from the physical pain of crucifixion, the face of Jesus reveals an agony of the soul that anguishes over our sins, our failings, our lack of love. He sees us as the ones who have separated ourselves from the God who created us for communion. “He alone, who sees the Father and rejoices fully in him, can understand completely what it means to resist the Father’s love by sin.”¹³ Thus the visage of Christ Crucified expresses at one and the same time an incomparable grief, a spiritual pain because of his love for us, and the deepest satisfaction that comes from clinging to the Father who loves him for offering his life as a gift (cf. Jn 10:17), just as he has loved him from all eternity.

What then do we glean from the suffering face of Jesus? Of course his unwavering devotion to the Father. But we also discover that Christ Crucified—in this ultimate reach of his self-emptying as God (Phil 2:4-8)—sees each one of us who would ever come to life in our own struggles with sin and death. The philosopher Blaise Pascal expressed the heart of this suffering Jesus: “In my agony I thought of you. I shed those drops of blood for you.”¹⁴

The surprise that awaits all of us who come to Calvary in order to contemplate the face of Jesus is that the Lord already holds in contemplation the faces of human beings, the faces of us all. Moreover, his sorrowful eyes, bruised mouth and nose, and blood-soaked hair invite us to mount the cross with him, and gaze out upon wounded humanity with the vision that he possesses. The transformation that Christ’s Incarnation seeks to effect, now through the union

with his Passion, reaches deep into our hearts and imaginations to make us capable of *seeing* our fellow human beings as he sees them, which is to say, with the suffering love that enables us to lay down our lives for the beloved (Jn 15:13).

Whether our vocation is to marriage, priesthood, diaconate, consecrated life, or the single state, the underlying call is always the same: to become self-gift in imitation of Christ Crucified, for our own salvation, yes—but for our neighbor’s well being and for our neighbor’s growth in holiness as well. I pray that we as yet see one another through the eyes of Christ who on the cross saw us and embraced us all in his forgiving and merciful love.

Training the Eyes of Faith

“All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). This insight from Saint Paul suggests that our contemplation of Christ as Child, Transfigured Son, and Crucified Lord involves our undergoing a deeper conversion, in fact, a lifetime of turning to the face of Christ and allowing its mysterious power to reshape us from within. Moving from glory to glory, our hearts become increasingly open to the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and love that keep the divine flame alive in our hearts. Our vision becomes clearer, and we see better the role we are to play in God’s plan for the small part of the world we inhabit, and for the local Church in which we live out our faith.

“Such are the people that love the Lord, that seek the face of the God of Jacob,” the psalmist tells us (Ps 24:6). With the increase of our love comes an expansion of the power to see—not with the ordinary eyes, but with the eyes of faith. Saint Augustine’s motto was “faith has its own eyes.” Jesus himself identifies this kind of spiritual “seeing” ironically in some persons who lack the power of physical sight. Conversely, he equates among his adversaries “not seeing” with “not believing.” The blind persons of the Gospels typically recognize the power of God working in Christ because their faith has grown eyes, whereas the arrogant remain stubbornly myopic (cf. Mk 10:46-52; Jn 9:39-41). Regardless “of how much [Jesus’] body was seen or touched,” John Paul II points out, “only faith could fully enter the mystery of that face.”¹⁵ That is why the Risen Lord tells the Apostle Thomas that the truly blessed are the disciples of every age who *see* Christ present in our world, without having experienced him in the flesh (Jn 20:24-29).

How then are we to “grow” the eyes of faith? Can our interior vision be trained so that we not only see Christ in the face of others, but also look at others the way the Lord sees them? As your Diocesan Bishop, one of my primary tasks is to be a Teacher for all the Catholic people of this region in matters of doctrine but also in matters pertaining to the practice of the faith. In the spirit of my role as a Shepherd, I exhort all of us in the coming year 2004 to renew our devotion to two powerful instruments for furthering our contemplation of the face of Christ: the Holy Eucharist and the Holy Rosary.

In my first Pastoral Letter, *Rediscovering Sunday* (2003), I wrote about how the Lord's Day **Eucharist** holds out the most eminent means of spiritual transformation for our churches, our families, and ourselves. Sunday worship has as its aim precisely the same interior renewal that characterizes the fruits of contemplating the face of Christ. "The 'I' of selfishness, sin, and egotistically looking out for 'number one,'" I suggested, "is transformed into the 'we' of the Kingdom of God, where we selflessly live in union with God and with each other, giving our lives to each other in sacrifice." Keeping holy the Lord's Day in fact invites moments of recognizing God's face in the needy whom we serve, in our loved ones with whom we enjoy wholesome leisure, and in the Eucharistic species that makes present on the altar the Body, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ.

Every time our priests and faithful offer up the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the Eternal Word again becomes "flesh" for us. The invisible face of Christ appears in the simplest and, at the same time, the most exalted manner possible. Our eagerness to enter into this Mystery of the Lord's dying and rising in a sense responds to the inquiry of the Greek pilgrims to Jerusalem who wanted "to see Jesus" (John 12:21). Every time we "break the bread" of our Eucharist, in imitation of what the Lord did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the eyes of all of us who ardently listen to Christ's word are opened (cf. Lk 23:27-32). Our Holy Father points out that in the Eucharist "the intuition of the heart recognizes Jesus and his unmistakable love lived 'to the end' (Jn 13:1). *And in him, in that gesture, it recognizes the Face of God.*"¹⁶

How might we enrich our devotion to this manifestation of the Lord's countenance? Many of our parishes on Long Island have begun to open their doors for Eucharistic Exposition, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and other devotions before the Holy Eucharist. Other of our parish communities have longstanding traditions of some of these practices. What is clear is that they are all signs of ecclesial vitality, and a sure way of cultivating the ground for future vocations to the priesthood, diaconate, consecrated life, and generous lay service in our local church. As your Bishop, I can only pray fervently that these devotions continue to spread and bear the fruits of holiness that lead to building up the Body of Christ.

Second among these instruments for enhancing our contemplation has been a special theme given to us this past year by Pope John Paul II. Our gratitude goes out to the Holy Father for offering us the "Year of the Most Holy Rosary" and in a special way for expanding on this centuries-old devotion by introducing five new "Luminous Mysteries."

Let me propose a simple way of engaging this beautiful prayer form, especially for those who have not yet integrated it into their personal prayer life. Devote a decade of the Rosary to each of the three "faces" examined in this Pastoral Letter—the Face of the Child, the Face of the Transfigured One, and the Face of the Crucified One—and allow the rhythmic sound of the prayer to create the interior space in which the Lord can speak to you about the Mystery of his daily life among us, the Mystery of his divine life as the Eternal Son, and the

Mystery of the path of suffering love that he has made the means of our redemption. Repeating the words of the Hail Mary, especially in an unhurried manner, may allow for a deeper penetration of each of the three holy images. Catholics of our diocese may even want to meet in prayer circles in which such variations on the standard form of recitation of the Rosary find fruitful application.

It is fitting for another reason that we pray with the Holy Mother of God in turning our gaze toward her Son. “No one,” John Paul II insists, “has ever devoted himself to the contemplation of the face of Christ as faithfully as Mary.”¹⁷ She is an “incomparable model” and instructor in this spiritual art: “It was in her womb that Christ was formed, receiving from her a human resemblance which points to an even greater spiritual closeness... When at last she gave birth to him in Bethlehem, her eyes were able to gaze tenderly on the face of her Son, as she ‘wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger’ (Lk 2:7). Thereafter, Mary’s gaze, ever filled with adoration and wonder, would never leave him.”¹⁸ Can we ever “leave him,” if like Mary we keep our gaze fixed on his beautiful visage? Can we ever “leave him” if we listen attentively to Mary’s words and actions in scripture—or pray the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary that highlight moments of her joyful response to God’s presence? Can we take our eyes off Christ if we allow our Mother to sit beside us, throughout this season and beyond, in order that she might share with us the wondrous fruits of her own contemplation (cf. Lk 2:19)?

To My Brother Priests

As I conclude this Pastoral Letter, I wish to say a brief word to my brothers with whom I share the grace of priestly ordination and special bonds of affection. You, the priests of this Diocese of Rockville Centre, behold the face of Christ in ways that our people deeply appreciate, and for this I am in awe of you. Each time you celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours, offer the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and absolve penitents of their sins, the image of your Master and Friend stands before you. Your sacramental ordination has already configured you to Christ, Head and Shepherd of the Church. Your immeasurable dedication to prayer, teaching, and caring for the people and institutions of this local church make you an even more evident sign of the Lord's presence. Brothers, together we bear the Person of Christ to our people through a common ministry in order that they might bear the face of Christ to the society in which they live and work. The laity, as the Catechism points out, are the "front line" of the Church in the modern world.¹⁹ Their participation in Christ's mission calls for an interior life that can only be developed through constant attention to the face of Jesus. Our daily task as pastors of souls and celebrants of the Sacred Mysteries is to hold before them his adorable face.

Allow me to express a deep desire that I have. I pray for a true interior reform of the Diocese of Rockville Centre that begins with those of us in sacred orders—Bishops, Priests, and Deacons. My special plea to the Lord for the coming year is that the personal renewal suggested by this Pastoral Letter begins

with us who are ordained for service: the transformation of our own interior life; the healing of our own “eyes”; a deepening of our own identification with the Person of Christ. In recent years, so much of what is harmful to the faith of Catholics and the unity of the Church has focused on the clergy. Yet now a new year begins in which we, the ordained, can resolve to be ever more true signs of Christ-like compassion and trustworthy guides in addressing the problems that affect ecclesial life and the wider society. Together, my priest-brothers, our hope must be not only to see the face of Christ in the people we serve, especially in those victimized by poverty, violence, or abuse, but to see them, each of them, all of them, as he does—with unconditional, unlimited mercy and love.

Conclusion

In this Christmas season we marvel at the joyful news that the Eternal God has the face of a human child. The Infinite dwells in the smallest among us. Our loving gaze at the Child of Bethlehem restores our conviction in the dignity and worth of every human life. We come to the crib to see an Infant, and he who holds us in existence looks back with solicitude for our eternal welfare. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux says it so well for each of us: “I am but a poor little thing who would return to nothingness if your divine glance did not give me life from one moment to the next.”²⁰

Yet God is the Giver of Life, and God gives and gives, because it belongs to the divine nature to do so. Let the countenance of this gracious divine Child

evoke from us this year a deep and abiding gratitude. From crib to cross, from the Mount of Transfiguration to the Mount of Calvary, from earthly meekness to heavenly glory, may his countenance transform us so that we may live in humble joy and lasting communion now and forever.

“O Come let us adore Him. O Come let us adore Him. O Come let us adore Him. Christ the Lord!”

Yours in Christ,

+William Murphy
Bishop of Rockville Centre

Notes

¹ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 43; in *Origins* vol. 30 (January 18, 2001): pp. 489, 491-508, at 503

² Ibid.

³ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 1, chap 1, art 1. Trans. J. G. Tilkington (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1882), p. 1.

⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, no. 7; in *Origins*, vol. 30 (September 14, 2000): p. 213.

⁵ *Nostra aetate*, no. 2; in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. William M. Abbott (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), p. 662.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church [hereafter CCC], no. 59; second edition (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), p. 21.

⁸ Ibid., no. 60.

⁹ Bishop Rino Fisichella, “The Face of Christ” in *L’Osservatore Romano* [English edition] (September 5, 2001), p. 4.

¹⁰ CCC, no. 555.

¹¹ CCC, no. 556.

¹² John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, no. 26.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1961), p. 212 [my translation].

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, no. 19.

¹⁶ John Paul II, General Audience of Wednesday, December 19, 1999; cited in *L’Osservatore Romano* (English edition) (December 22, 1999), p. 11.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, no 10 [Apostolic Letter of October 16, 2002]; in *Origins*, vol. 32 (October 31, 2002): p. 347.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ CCC, no. 899.

²⁰ Cited in Jean-François, *Light of the Night: The Last Eighteen Months in the Life of Thérèse of Lisieux* (London: SCM, 1996), page 87.