

GOD'S SHINING COUNTENANCE

Each year for the ten years I was in the Seminary at the beginning of each new school year we would have a five-day retreat—in silence. There would be a Retreat Master who would give conferences and hear confessions. Some were excellent and some not so much. We had two or three who were pretty well known as spiritual writers or famous for publications. One was Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. He was eighty years old and at the end of a long and famous life. He would walk up the aisle of the chapel and I remember wondering if he would make it. He seemed so weak. He would kneel on the marble step and pray and then move slowly to the pulpit. But once there he was transformed. He came alive and would preach the word for forty-five minutes without a note or piece of paper. His whole countenance would be so vibrant and strong and full of conviction and truth.

But it was his eyes. I was able to be very close to him and I can say that for the only time in my life I was in the presence of someone who looked me in the eye and I felt that he could see into my soul. I never saw eyes like that before. He knew there was something there because he attributed it to a holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament every day for over fifty years. He looked at the Lord and the Lord looked at him.

Something I have become more aware of because of the corona-virus is that I am looking at and noticing people's eyes much more than usual. I often look people in the eye when speaking to them or listening to them. It is part of the concentration of my gaze. But recently I have begun to concentrate much more on people's eyes because that is often all I can see. And the eyes are beautiful. And they are expressive. They speak without using words. They present the person to me in a more profound manner and even in a more intimate way.

There is something so very appealing to a person's countenance when the eyes are all that is visible on their face. Today's feast of Mary as Mother of Jesus the Son of God and thus of Mary as the Mother of God speaks to me about her countenance. I wonder what her eyes said at Bethlehem, at Jerusalem, at Nazareth, at Cana in Galilee, at Calvary. All different times in Jesus' life. The joy in those eyes. The surprise. The sheer delight. The look of contentment and even pride in her beautiful Son. And then as she watched him hanging in agony with his life

slowly seeping out as his blood drained through all the cuts and wounds. What of her eyes then?

What was her countenance? This Mother of the divine Son of God. In John's Gospel Mary is mentioned only twice. One at the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee which is the only instance in John's gospel where Mary speaks. Her few words echo down through the century as the very best motherly advice: "Do whatever he tells you." The second is at Calvary when Jesus looks down upon his mother from his crucified position and says to all: "Behold your mother." Notice he does not say: "Behold my mother." "Behold your mother."

In that moment his countenance is veiled in pain and wounds and cascading rivulets of blood. His countenance so marred and disfigured. This is the same Jesus who loved the little ones and who looked at the rich young man with love and asked him to follow after him. The countenance of Jesus is the countenance of Mary. The eyes say it all. On this feast when we honor her as the Mother of God at the beginning of a New calendar year and deep in the midst of a terrible worldwide scourge let us pray for the grace to look up on her who has been entrusted to us as mother by the very Jesus we both love so much. Let us seek her countenance. Let us look at her beautiful eyes and know that she looks at us as does her Son, with the most beautiful countenance. Mary, Mother of God.

May the Lord bless us today and give us their peace.