

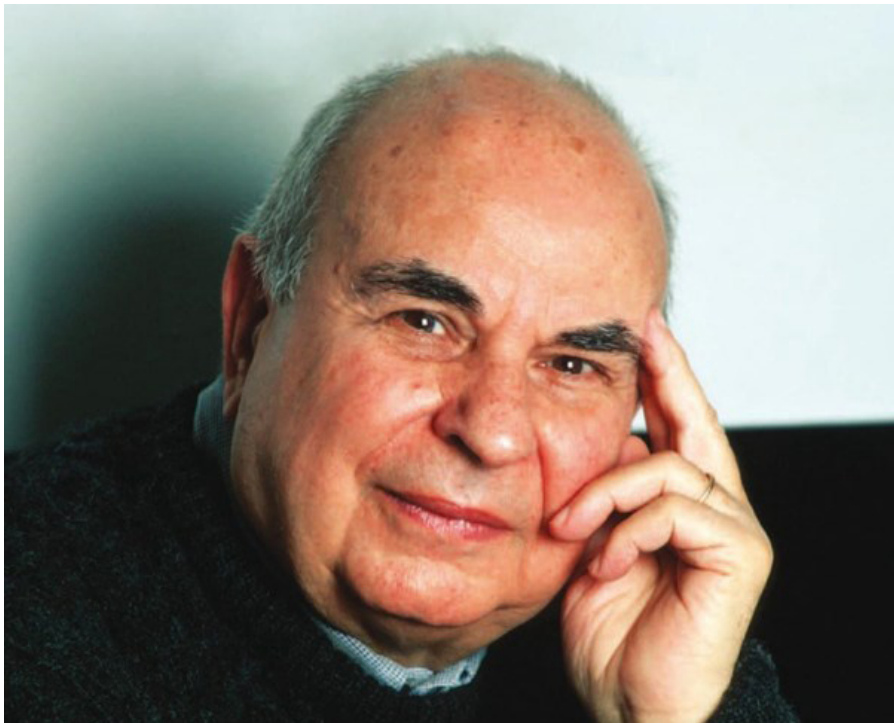
Le Visage: The Theological Contribution of Olivier Clément

Micah Hirschy

The French theologian Olivier Clément was born in France in the region of Languedoc into a family that was, in its apparent atheism, far removed from his future life of faith. Despite this upbringing and Clément's early self-identification as a Mediterranean pagan, his early life was illumined with brilliant flashes of a light from another Sun. He wrestled with the deep questions of death and existence. He wondered at the breathtaking beauty of the world in which he lived. He even wrestled with Christ, whom he encountered in his reading of the Gospel. What had the most profound influence on his life was the aching and mysterious beauty he

witnessed in the human face. A fascination with faces, or rather his vision of the face, is woven throughout all of his subsequent writings and remained central to his thought. At the heart of Clément's extraordinary theological offerings to the Orthodox Church are his deep exploration of the mystery of human faces and his vision of the divine-human face.

Faces are filled with life. Life at the same time imprints itself upon the face. People speak of a person as having her mother's eyes or his father's nose. Faces have wrinkles from years spent in the sun. Lines are drawn upon faces from decades of smiles



Olivier Clément

and laughter. Pain also leaves its mark upon the face, and despair can dim the eyes. Clément reminds us that a face is “Something that can be heavy and brutal, but which can suddenly light up with the twinkling of the eyes, with a smile.”¹ In his spiritual autobiography he reflects upon many experiences that he had with faces in his adolescence. All of these experiences seemed to hint at a hidden face, a revelation discovered in the peace of someone recently departed or seen in the beauty of an elderly and tired peasant. This revelation was reflected in the face of a sleeping child who, Clément would later write, “sleeps as only the saints know how to pray.”² Even in his own face he recognized a mysterious power that was able to touch the hardest of hearts:

After a fairly harsh interrogation, the young German officer at last really saw my face: the thin face of an adolescent darkened by hunger. And his eyes woke up; he smiled, gave me back my identity card which he knew was false, and let me go.³

After many years (his baptism did not occur until he was thirty), this growing sense that came from the mystery of people’s faces came into focus: a vision of the face of Christ. “Little by little, these revelations came together in a way that seemed to center around a face and also around a message: the face and the word of Christ.”⁴

Olivier Clément believed that “Christianity is the religion of faces.”⁵ The Son of God who remained hidden in his pre-incarnate facelessness acquired a face through the free consent of the Virgin Mary, “Because God does not only make Himself heard; He makes Himself seen; He becomes a face.”⁶ He now faces the faceless and



gathers them together, the faceless not only of first-century Palestine but of every generation: the sinners, the sick, and the strangers. He even condescends to look upon those whose faces have suffered the dissolution of death, that their faces and every face taken into His gaze might be impressed upon eternity:

Clots of blood fall from the face of God and the Man of sorrows is resurrected. He and everything. Him in everything. Everything in Him. The children of Rachel are resurrected, Lazarus leaps out of the tomb for good, the smell of roasted fish on the shores of the lake, the long hair of the harlot, that moment when he makes them lie down on the grass to receive from the five loaves, where Peter was forgiven, and every second of your wretched life where your veins were full of life: all is risen. Everything begins; one can try to love, since there is no more death, since death itself is full of God.⁷

Clément taught that the face of Christ is simultaneously revealed and hidden. In the Incarnation the Lord is heard, seen, and touched, yet “He

The Crucifixion (Extreme Humility). School of Simeone and Machilone da Spoleto, 1250–60. Detail.

¹ Olivier Clément, *Taizé: A Meaning to Life* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1997), 6.

² Olivier Clément, *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000), 54.

³ Clément, *Taizé*, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ Clément, *On Human Being*, 53.

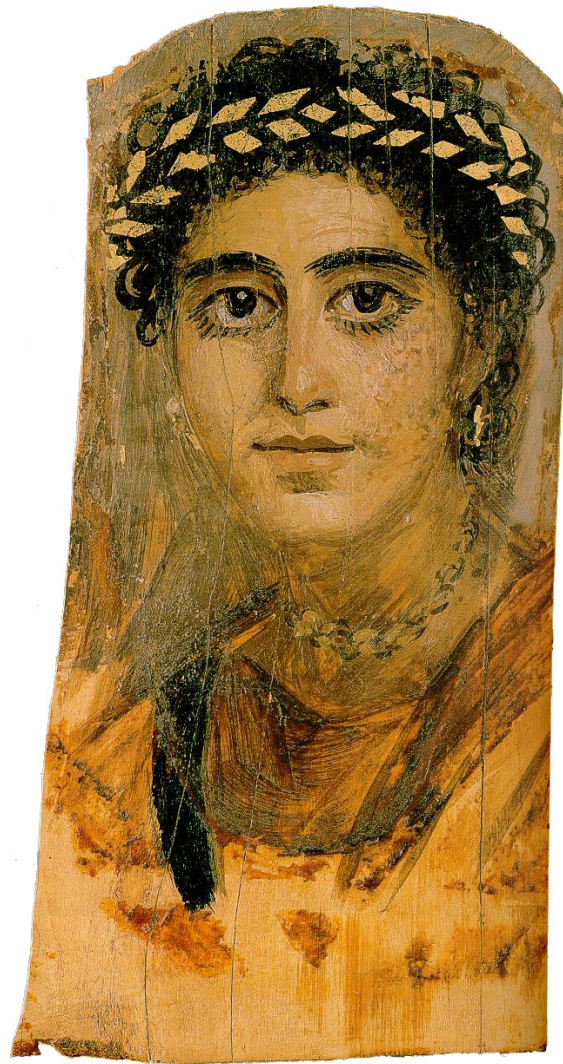
⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷ Olivier Clément, *L'Autre Soleil* (Paris: Stock, 1975), 109. Translation by author.

Mummy portrait,
Imperial Roman
period.

expresses His natural hiddenness in such a way that He makes it the more hidden through the revelation.”⁸ It is only in faith and love that he could “be recognized in a crucified slave, defiled with blood and spittle.”⁹ Clément teaches that Christ continues to go unrecognized after the resurrection. In the gospel accounts of the resurrected Christ, the Lord does not return to his pre-incarnate facelessness, yet a new hiddenness can be discerned. His face is now recognized and revealed in the intimacy and mystery of relations, particularly *in the blessing, breaking, and sharing of bread.*

For Olivier Clément, the vision of the neighbor’s face is inextricably connected to this Eucharistic event. It is here that Clément has much to contribute to the conversation on Eucharistic theology. The sacrament of the neighbor cannot be separated from the sacrament of the Eucharist. This belief has been identified, and rightly so, with the teaching and thought of Saint Maria Skobtsova, but the identification of the body of Christ as both Eucharistic communion and the ecclesial community has apostolic as well as patristic precedent. Saint Paul’s well-known admonition, “any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself” (1 Cor 11:29), is most often understood as being about those who deny the Eucharistic reality. Clément would certainly agree with this. He would also say—and scriptural context supports this—that those who receive the Eucharist without discerning Christ in the face of those with whom the bread and cup are shared also eat and drink without discernment. The patristic foundation to this reasoning on the relationship between the sacrament of the Eucharist and the sacrament of the neighbor is most clearly articulated in the



homilies of St. John Chrysostom. One of innumerable examples is found in his fiftieth homily on the Gospel according to Matthew. In this homily, Chrysostom says, “Would you do honor to Christ’s body? Neglect Him not when naked; do not, while here you honor Him with silken garments [a reference to the wealthy who donate silk altar coverings], neglect Him perishing without of cold and nakedness. For He that said, *This is my body*, and by His word confirmed the fact, *This same said, You saw me hungry, and fed me not.*”¹⁰

⁸ *The Philokalia*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 166.

⁹ Clément, *On Human Being*, 36.

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, vol. 10 of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, ed. Philip Schaff et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1983), 313.

According to Clément, the sacrament of the neighbor should not be separated from the sacrament of the Eucharist because, "God for us has become a face and reveals the other as face."¹¹ The human face of the neighbor is a mystery because "the face of Christ is inseparably the face of God in man . . . the face of faces, the key to all faces."¹² As with that of Christ, every human face is capable of being both a personal revelation and a revelation of hiddenness. "In the knowing-unknowing of the neighbor we never come to an end, we can never have too much."¹³ Clément believed this because he knew that, "The human face of God is inexhaustible . . . and what is true of the face of Christ becomes true of the face of humanity filled by the Spirit."¹⁴

The connection between the Eucharist and the sacrament of the neighbor is not the only insight that Clément has to offer contemporary discussions on the Eucharist. His emphasis on the face saves the Eucharistic event from abstractions. The Eucharist is not a meal shared with a theoretical "other," but with unique persons who have names

and faces. If contemporary Eucharistic theology has been criticized at times for its emphasis on the eschatological at the expense of the historical and material, the face of Christ and the neighbor keep the event rooted in historical and material reality. This rootedness does not negate the "kingdom-orientation" of the Liturgy. It reminds us that the "material" of the kingdom is real people with lives and histories written upon their faces. The coming kingdom "remembered" in the Liturgy is not a kingdom of bodiless spirits. It is a kingdom of faces transfigured and made new, but as Christ revealed in his own flesh, they will bear the marks of our personal history. The Holy Spirit does not create the Eucharist *ex nihilo*. The gifts of humanity offered in and the through the bread and wine, according to all that Christ has done, are indispensable. The word *πρόσωπον* in the thought of Clément does indeed mean person, but it also keeps the etymological sense of face and its embodied reality. In the Eucharist the communion of persons is a communion of seeing and being seen. Here the French *le visage* reveals

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¹¹ Clément, *On Human Being*, 53.

¹² *Ibid.*, 40.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.



The Transfiguration.
Fresco at Visoki
Dečani Orthodox
Monastery, Kosovo,
1327–35. Detail.

a linguistic richness absent in the English, particularly as it relates to the celebration of the Eucharist. *Le visage* has a common root with the words for seeing and vision. Standing before the cup that reflects the face (*le visage*) of the *Pantocrator*, we are truly seen (*vous*) and learn to see (*voir*) Christ in our neighbor.

This relationship between Christ and the neighbor often seems more theoretical than real, or at least seems to go unrealized in daily life. It is indeed difficult at times not to be cynical when dealing with the needy. How often does the face of a spouse convey disappointment instead of unfathomable divine depth? Where is the Eucharistic renaissance of the parish that seems to have never followed the promise of the theologians? How often are those who approach the chalice at best strangers and at worst enemies? Here, too, Clément sees in the face of the other the answer to these questions and every question. According to Clément, a prerequisite for communion is communication, and real communication requires a face-to-face encounter. People speak of love but must first learn to respect one another and not turn away from each other out of disgust, boredom, or self-interest. Our humility is false if we cannot be quiet long enough to listen to the other with whom we might disagree. True humility begins when we remove our self to make space for the other to be—and to be not as we want them to be, as we think they should be, but to be as they are and as God loves them. Clément recognized that building communion on real communication can be a great deal messier and more difficult than trying to build it on abstract ideology. He saw that love is easy when that which is loved is a faceless “humanity.” It is so much more difficult to love the friend,

spouse, child, parent, stranger, or enemy. The necessary humbling will inevitably lead to vulnerability. What if the person, whom we have faced, listened to and loved, rejects us, “If his expression should harden, if his face should close”? Without denying this tragedy, Clément does not lose hope, because “we know that secretly there is an expression that is always welcoming, that the face of Christ is never closed.”¹⁵

In his earliest years, Olivier Clément witnessed a hidden beauty in the faces of those around him. Later in life he recognized in the face of the crucified Christ the transfigured Lord. He never ceased to teach, to write, to pray that all faces would turn to the face from which all life and light flow. For his entire life he struggled “to discern the face of all humankind in God, to decipher, in the communion of the saints, the riddle of the faces that surround us today.”¹⁶ May his memory be eternal, may his message inspire us and reflect upon our faces, and may I on the last day see my teacher face to face in the never-setting light of our Christ.

Sur l’azur, maintenant, s’inscrit un visage, la Face du Pantocrator crucifié, de l’Homme de douleurs transfiguré. Comme ce jour, en Grèce, où, baigné par une lumière encore plus intense que celle de mon enfance, je suis entré dans la fraîcheur d’une église : la coupole reprenait la ronde bénédiction du ciel, mais un visage s’y inscrivait. Entrer dans cette église avait résumé mon chemin: de l’azur vide à l’azur plein, de l’azur fermé sur sa propre beauté, mais au-delà tout est ténèbres, à l’azur rayonnant autour du Visage des visages, et au-delà tout est amour. De la lumière à l’autre lumière.¹⁷ ☩

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 138-9

¹⁷ Olivier Clément, *L’Autre Soleil*, 173.



Emmanuel Zairis, *A Moment's Rest*, early twentieth century. Detail.

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Father Micah Hirschy graduated from Hellenic College in 2004 and continued his studies at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, where he graduated with an MDiv in 2007. He was married in 2011 to Anastasia Hartzes of Mobile, Alabama, and was ordained to the priesthood by Metropolitan Alexios of Atlanta in December 2012. He currently serves as ephemerios at Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Birmingham.