

THE FACE OF CHRIST

PAUL CLAUDEL

Paul Claudel, poet and playwright, was one of the most significant writers of twentieth century French literature. His lyrical works are world-renowned, and all of such force and beauty that critics are divided as to which of his plays can be considered his masterpiece, at least three being so named. For Claudel, Christ gives meaning to everything; everyday life is portrayed in its human realities but completely infused with the presence of God.

Claudel wrote his first play at age 14; he was still writing at age 67. But, what is often forgotten, his creations took form all during his remarkably successful career as a diplomat: consular posts in the United States and China and various European countries; minister to Rio de Janeiro and Copenhagen; ambassador at Tokyo, Washington DC and Brussels. In 1946 he was elected to the French Academy. As might be expected, Claudel's reaction to the Turin Shroud, soon after the photographs of 1898, was a deep and passionate christological understanding, reflected in several of his works. He became a friend of Paul Vignon and other early sindonologists.

The present piece is taken from an introduction to a lecture on the Shroud given by Paul Vignon and published in *Contacts et circonstances* (Gallimard, Paris 1947).

Paul Louis Charles Marie Claudel was born in a small town in the Aisne, France, on 6 August 1868, studied at the Lycee Louis-le-Grand and died in Paris on 23 February 1955.

You have all seen in many churches of France, for example in St. Pierre de Solesmes, one of those statuary groups which the close of the Middle Ages brought down from the church walls and put on the floor, at the disposition of the faithful. All sorts of personages, each one wearing the official costume of a particular role, have gathered around, as have we today; men and women from every walk of life, every calling; one could say an immense multitude stamping at the door, and those who arrive after them. They are gathered around a table, and on this table are not the dishes of a feast, but a corpse. They look at him. He, spectacle, and they, spectators, carved in stone, partaking for all time of the same permanence, the same immobility.

What has united them is not, as in Rembrandt's famous painting *The Anatomy Lesson*, a scientific curiosity about this miserable cadavre which is about to be ripped up by the surgeon's knife. The man who is stretched out there is not one of those anonymous pilgrims who makes a short halt between a hospital bed and that final couch which the shovel of the gravedigger hastens to prepare for him.

This is the preeminent man, the Son of Man. He is there on the table, at our disposition. It is the New Testament and the Testator himself who is placed in our hands. His eyes are closed, but he speaks; and we, in silence, with all there is in us of eyes and intelligence, we listen to him.

If you are really the Son of God, well then! come down from the cross! said the ancient Pharisees, at the head of that long procession of skeptics, of politicants, of the proud and the scoffers, who have not ceased to file past Calvary amongst the faithful, sunk in silence and consternation. It is done! Yes, He has come down from the Cross, but only so that He could be swallowed up by the Tomb. And if He came out again the Third Day, if for all Christians he constantly resides among us behind the golden Tabernacle doors, there have always been in all the centuries immense crowds who have refused to let themselves be convinced, for whom the Tomb had the last word, and who obstinately parrot the words of St. Thomas: *If I don't put my finger in the holes of his hands and his feet, and in the wound of his side, I will not believe!* And yet, before this contumacious mob, there was always a witness subsisting in a written text and the depicted image, and it was over this text and this image that, from the times of the Iconoclasts until today, the fury and stupidity of a double class of adversaries have not ceased to sway, organizing and apportioning, if I might say so, the work of the Second Passion.

First of all, there was hatred. Just as the crews of hangmen worked in shifts around the sacred Body, so the flagging heretics passed their instruments on to all the critics which all the past centuries have seen following in the wake of the cohorts, all these sharp-toothed jaws which the Psalmist compares to the voracity of a sepulchre. Bruises and blows on his face, slashes of the whip, insidious and ferocious, leaden balls, all the devouring arsenal which Monsieur Paul Vignon describes in his book; every means of destruction were spent on him. And so that one look from beneath those eyelids swollen with blood, with tears, one look from those eyes of majesty and reproach, should not perturb the operators at their task, they were careful to blindfold those eyes! And at last a cry of triumph! He is no longer there! *Consummatum est*. We have reached the end! Everything goes on as if He had never come, as if He had never existed!

But it is not only hatred which went to work against the Son of Mary. Ill-will has taken other forms than violence, I mean to say, the forms of laziness, convenience, habit, the distaste for what is severe and the fondness for what is pleasant. The Christ is not destroyed but he has been disfeatured. Christians want Christ, but—unlike St. Paul—they do not want Christ Crucified. They have combed and perfumed his hair, put rouge on his cheeks, all the painters have taken it upon themselves to nourish him with that butter and honey which the Prophet Isaiah speaks of. That way, He will not frighten anybody anymore. He does not discommode us any longer. Under his neutralized gaze, nothing prevents us now from going about our own little business. This sentiment is not restricted to our times. Monsieur Paul Vignon tells us that many centuries had to pass before humanity could accustom itself to the scandalous image of a suffering God, of a dead God, and the Greek Church even today excludes such a representation. You remember those pages of Dostoievsky where he describes

the terror and convulsion in his soul when he saw Holbein's Christ *gisant*, * which is in the museum of Basel. Take it away! Take it away! the people say. It is horrible! It is intolerable! Take down this dreadful picture which not only terrifies us, but accuses us! Let us make a real nice Christ, something amiable, on which our sins have only made a few scratches.

Unfortunately, one has come to a figure so general and flat that one literally no longer sees anything. The canvas absorbed the picture. On the Veronica cloth, the image is effaced. (Effaced is the word we use in current conversation to designate someone who exhibits no particular characteristic trait.) *They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have put Him.*

Well! What is announced to us today is that He is risen from the dead. From the depths of the past, from the ruins of the Byzantine Empire, the perils of plunder, the flames of fire, and, I might add, from the frantic negations of human interests and criticism, has come forth a unique relic. It is a sheet stained with red, on which one can distinguish the vague lineaments of a body. For centuries, it has been honorably preserved in Turin, where it is publicly exposed periodically, and documents permit us to follow its traces to Chambéry and to the moment it emerged from an obscure village in the Franche-Comté. And then in 1898, the lens of a camera focussed on this mysterious document, and from the photographic plate and the print springs forth the terrifying and sublime image which you know, this vision which, 1,938 years ago on Calvary, caused the centurion to cry, *That was really the Son of God.*

Here is His Majesty. Here is God and here is the Man. Here the crown of thorns, here the contusions of the flagellation, literally that spectacle which made Isaiah say that from the top of the head to the soles of his feet, there is not a place intact on this flesh. Here the wounds of the feet and the hands and here the wound in the side. Here the blood and, M. Paul Vignon tells us, here the serum. It is all these terrible traces which one sets before our eyes and in our hands. A photograph, like those we paste in our passport, an irrecusable identity card. More than that: an imprint made of the God-Man between death and resurrection, and testifying to both at the same time! A contact, not only with the fact, but with the miracle! ...

Enough of discussions, enough of words, says the Christ. I have resumed my place on the sepulchral marble. It is I, I myself, of whom you have written and spoken for nineteen centuries. It is I, and here I am. ...

* The sentiments aroused in Dostoievsky at the sight of Holbein's painting are expressed in *The Idiot*, Part III Chapt. VI. Two mentions, in passing, can be found in Part I Chapt. V; and again in Part II Chapt.s IV and V. [Ed.]