

THE VEIL OF VERONICA

From Concealment to Revelation

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Introduction

The cult of the saints, at the height of its popularity in the 15th century, was an integral component of western Christianity. And, a popular story concerned St. Veronica, keeper of a miraculous cloth known as the Veil of Veronica (“the Veronica”). According to tradition, the cloth was miraculously imprinted with Christ’s image after the woman, Veronica, gave it to him to wipe his face on the road to Calvary. So, like the Shroud of Turin, the Veronica is a miraculous image made without human intervention. But, unlike the Shroud, which has a full-body image, the Veronica bears Christ’s face only.

Although the Veronica story is not in the New Testament, it was written down beginning in the 4th c. and later recorded in artistic representations, including the *Sixth Station of the Cross*. Art historian Neil MacGregor notes that images of the Veronica eventually outnumbered written texts so much so that “by the end of the fifteenth century there was an agreed likeness of Christ” that most Europeans could recognize.

But what was the motivation to set down this “legend,” thereby ensuring its popularity and longevity? Perhaps, it was because the Veronica contained truths about humanity’s being created in God’s image and the revelation of the invisible God in Christ. But, the most fundamental argument, however, was the Incarnation. Because images of Christ in his human form showed the historicity of God made man, it was therefore appropriate to make images of him as a man. And, as humanity’s image reflects God’s, images of the incarnate Christ show his divinity and humanity and therefore teach the doctrine of the Incarnation. The Veronica’s primary doctrinal significance is as a symbol of Incarnation, which reveals God’s continuing presence in the world.

Presentation

Every year on August 16, the Orthodox Church celebrates the transfer in 944 of the Icon of our Lord Jesus Christ from the Kingdom of Edessa to Constantinople. Like the Shroud, this icon belongs to the tradition of miraculous images described as “not made by hands” (Gr. *acheiropoieta*). The office of the day includes the following text: “After making an image of Your most pure image, You sent it to the faithful Abgar, who desired to see You. / You sent letters traced by Your divine hand to Abgar, who asked for salvation and health which come from the image of Your divine face.”¹

These texts refer to the multi-faceted legend of Abgar, King of Edessa, which was recorded by the biblical scholar and historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, in his monumental work of the 4th century, *Church History*. Intriguingly, Eusebius added that he had actually translated the correspondence between the King and Jesus from Syriac to Greek.

In response to Abgar’s letter requesting help for a serious disease, possibly leprosy, Jesus replies that he cannot visit, but will instead send a disciple. The disciple (Thaddeus or Addai) cures Abgar in Jesus’ name, Abgar is baptized and Jesus’ letter is used as a talisman to protect the city. In later versions, the letter either includes or is replaced by an image of Jesus. Known as the *Image of Edessa* or *Mandyllion*, the image was discovered in 6th century above one of the city gates, but disappeared when the Crusaders’ sacked Constantinople in 1204.

¹ Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 195.

While this ancient story seems favourable to holy images, some early Church Fathers argued against them. For example, Clement of Alexandria (150 to c. 215) warned that images were distracting and deceptive, while Origen of Alexandria (184 to c. 253) encouraged the faithful to behold God with “spiritual eyes,” rather than focus on Jesus’ human limitations.

Throughout Christian history, controversy around holy images has resulted in iconoclasm – the early 8th century to the mid-9th century featured at least two major periods that required a defense of sacred art. Iconoclasts argued that the second Commandment prohibited icon veneration:

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. (*Exodus 20:4-5*)

While iconoclasm can be understood in light of this prohibition, disagreements often occurred in areas of heterodox interpretations of Christ’s nature and person.

A widespread early heresy was Arianism, which asserted that the Son (Christ) was a creature brought forth by the Father, and therefore not equal to the Father. At the First Council of Nicaea (325), Athanasius of Alexandria defended the orthodox view that Jesus is of one substance (*homoousias*) with the Father. The *Nicene Creed*, which emphasizes Christ as “consubstantial with the Father ... Begotten not made, one in being with the Father,” rejected Arianism and established clear teaching on Christ’s divinity.

In 431, the Council of Ephesus opposed Bishop Nestorius who seemed to argue for two persons in Christ: divine and human, rather than a single person. The Bishop could not reconcile a divine nature with Jesus’ humanity (human deeds and suffering). But, when Cyril of

Alexandria argued that Jesus was one person with one human and one divine nature, the Council agreed.

Twenty years later, the Council of Chalcedon confronted the Monophysite heresy, which held that Christ's nature remained divine even though he had taken on human flesh. Chalcedon declared that Christ was one person, or *hypostasis*, "known in two natures [divine and human] without division or separation."² In the late 7th century, the second Council of Constantinople (680 – 681) condemned Monothelitism, which accepted that Christ had two natures, but taught that he had no human will, only a divine will.

In 726, Emperor Leo III proclaimed image use as idolatrous and ordered the removal of Christ's image from the imperial palace in Constantinople. Three decades later, the Eastern Roman Emperor, Constantine V (718 – 775), convened the Council of Hieria, which asserted that Christ's *hypostasis* could not be captured in an image because his divine nature cannot be circumscribed.

John of Damascus (676 – 749), however, took the opposite view. In *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, he wrote: "I am emboldened to depict the invisible God, not as invisible, but as he became visible for our sake ... I depict God made visible in the flesh." And, neither did he make "a likeness of God [who is uncircumscribable], nor of anything else as God" nor did he "worship the creation [image] instead of the Creator."³

² "Chalcedonian Creed," accessed February 24, 2019, <http://www.grbc.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/The-Chalcedon-Confession.pdf>

³ John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), III, 6 and II, 9.

Christ, the Incarnation, redeemed humanity and creation (matter) – both of which were made by God. Therefore, John argued, matter can lead the faithful to the “immaterial God.”⁴ (II, 22). John based his theology of images on the doctrine of the Incarnation, the revelation of the image of the invisible God in the human form of Jesus Christ.

And, in 787, the second Council of Nicaea concurred – because Christ was revealed in the flesh, sacred images were part of the unwritten tradition going back to apostolic times.

So far, I’ve discussed images and related controversies in the Greek East. In the Latin West, the *acheiropoieta* motif was associated with Veronica, the woman whose name, some believe, is a combination of the Latin word, *vera* (true) and the Greek word, *eikóna* (image).

There are several versions of the Veronica story, the most familiar being the meeting with Jesus on the road to Calvary. In the story, Veronica wipes Jesus’ face with her veil and then his image miraculously appears on the cloth. Veronica goes on to use the cloth to heal disease. While this version dates to the late medieval period, there is an earlier tradition of Jesus, a woman and images. In Book VII, Chapter XVII of *Church History*, Eusebius wrote about the woman of Paneus who commissioned a bronze statue of herself and one of Jesus.

“[T]here stands upon an elevated stone ... a brazen image of a woman kneeling, with her hands stretched out, as if she were praying. Opposite this is another upright image of a man ... extending his hand toward the woman ... They say that this statue is an image of Jesus ...”⁵

⁴ *Three Treatises*, II, 22.

⁵ “Church History,” *Documenta Catholica Omnia*, accessed February 24, 2019, http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0265-0339,_Eusebius_Caesariensis,_Church_History,_EN.pdf

In the apocryphal *Acts of Pilate (Gospel of Nicodemus)*, from the 4th century, a woman named Berenice testifies for Jesus during his trial, and when Jesus enters the *praetorium*, the tops of the standards bearing the image of the Emperor bend down and adore him. In the early medieval *Curing of Tiberius*, the facially disfigured Emperor is healed by Veronica's miraculous cloth; and, in the *Vengeance of the Saviour*, dated to the early 8th century, Veronica's cloth cures King Titus' facial cancer and the Emperor's leprosy. In the *Golden Legend* from the late 13th century, Veronica is walking to an artist's workshop to commission a portrait of her beloved friend, Jesus. On her way there, she meets Jesus; he takes her cloth, presses it to his face and imprints his image on it. And, as in the other stories, the cloth goes on to cure illness.

So far, Veronica and Jesus meet in an urban setting. But, in several late medieval French narratives, including Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Arimatee* and the *Bible en François*, the Veronica legend is transposed onto the road to Calvary.

While the Veronica story has similarities with the Abgar legend, Veronica's later link with Christ's Passion highlights a difference between the Greek East and the Latin West. In the East, salvation is understood in terms of unifying the human and the divine, with the divine vanquishing human frailty and exalting the human person. In the West, however, the emphasis is on Christ's sacrifice on the cross, which was required to redeem humanity from sin and death. Theologian Ulrich Fabricius refers to the Eastern model as "the visible blessing of Christ's humanity" and the Western as "the blessing of Christ's death."⁶

⁶ Ulrich Fabricius, *Icons: Portrayals of Christ*, trans. Hans Hermann Rosenwald (Recklinghausen: A. Bongers, 1967), ix.

Somewhere between the 8th and 10th centuries, a cloth that tradition linked to Christ's Passion was venerated at Old St. Peter's Basilica. Called a *sudarium* (sweat cloth), it was allegedly stained with Jesus' sweat and blood, but was not considered a likeness of his face. By the early 13th century, however, the cloth began to be revered as a portrait of the Saviour ("a true icon ... a true image"). In 1245, Matthew Paris' *Chronica Majora* included a reproduction of the Veronica and stated that Pope Innocent III had written the prayer, *Salve sancta facies* (*Hail Holy Face*) that when recited in front of the Veronica (or a replica) would reduce a person's time in Purgatory. The introduction of prayers attests to the cloth's representation in word and image, and its ontology as legend and object.

Innocent III's Holy Office of the Veronica opens with Psalm 66.2: "May God have mercy on us and bless us: may he cause the light of his countenance to shine upon us," and quotes Psalm 4.7: "The light of thy countenance O Lord is signed upon us." But then, art historian Jeffrey Hamburger writes, the Pope added his own prayer: "O God, who didst will to leave to us, who are sealed with the light of Thy countenance, Thine image as a memorial of Thee, impressed on a handkerchief at the insistence of Veronica."⁷

The light of God's countenance refers to the *imago Dei* (image of God), the unique seal that God placed on humans to identify their special place in creation. Hamburger suggests that Jesus' imprinting his face on the cloth is similar to human flesh's malleability, into which the *imago Dei* was stamped and to which it will be restored at the end of time. And, for Joseph Leo

⁷ Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 355.

Koerner, the Veronica “resembles the original divine signature on the face of man, as being made in the image and likeness of God.”⁸

The *imago Dei* appears in the first book of the Bible, Genesis:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ...

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.” (Gen 1:26–28)

In the New Testament, the primary word for “image,” *eikōn*, is used within the context of humanity’s relation to the image of Christ or God, and is linked to salvation via the doctrine of the Incarnation: “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” (Rom. 8:29) This meditation articulates the ontological basis for the *imago Dei* – God made humanity in his image because he planned to assume human flesh and enter into history to restore his image. The *imago Dei* allowed Jesus’ human nature to accommodate Christ’s divine nature, thereby resulting in his being both God and fully human in a single person.

In *Against Heresies*, Bishop Irenaeus (140 – 202) stated that the Incarnation returned the salvation “lost in Adam” and restored the *imago Dei*, while Bishop Athanasius (296 – 373) believed the Incarnation dissolved death, resurrected life and allowed humans to know God and his Word.

⁸ Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 88.

Earlier, I spoke about iconoclasm in the East and its relation to heterodox interpretations of the Incarnation. While cases of iconoclasm in the West were sporadic, debates about the Eucharist also challenged Incarnational theology.

As early as 110 CE, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch warned about people who did not believe that Christ was incarnate in the Eucharist. Then, around forty years after the second council of Nicaea, the Carolingian theologian Radbertus asserted that following the consecration, the Eucharistic bread and wine were literally transformed into Christ's flesh and blood, while the monk, Ratramnus, argued that the consecrated elements were more symbolic. Then, in the 11th century, Archdeacon Berengar of Tours claimed that Christ's presence in the bread and wine was figurative and that the words of consecration should be interpreted metaphorically.

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council, convened by Veronica's advocate, Innocent III, described the bread and wine as "transubstantiated" into Christ's body and blood. The Lateran Council could trace the belief to the gospels and to Paul's letters that describe the relationship between the Incarnation and the Eucharist.

Starr Hoffman's study of the Veronica notes that around this time, the laity received the Host only on specific days of the liturgical year, and within time, the chalice was withheld. These changes resulted in the faithful's separation from the Incarnate Christ in the Eucharist – to compensate, Veronicas were placed throughout the sanctuary and displayed on rood screens, which eventually resulted in their incorporation into the Eucharistic liturgy.⁹

⁹ J. Starr Hoffman, *Passionate Transformation in Vernicle Images*, Masters thesis, University of North Texas, 2004 (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2004), 17.

So, just as Christ was the invisible God in the flesh, the Veronica was the visual equivalent of Christ's invisible presence in the Eucharist. By representing Christ's body, the Veronica gave the faithful the opportunity to connect with God's physical presence in the consecrated elements. And, in turn, both the Veronica and the Eucharist would evoke reflections on the Incarnation and the redemptive meaning of human suffering.

The *Mass of St. Gregory* depicts the interrelationship of the Veronica, the Eucharist and the Incarnation. In a textual version from the 7th century, St. Gregory is saying Mass when the Host suddenly turns into a bleeding finger. In the 14th century, however, text and image were standardized: the piteous Christ, accompanied by the Veronica, miraculously appears in place of the Host on the altar. This image directly connects Christ and the Veronica with the transformation of the Eucharistic elements, allowing the Veronica to be understood in relation to the Real Presence of Christ on the altar, and the Eucharist as the center of the Mass.

Although Veronica is not mentioned in Scripture, tradition associates her with the unnamed woman in the Synoptic gospels with the chronic blood flow, later called the *Haemorrhissa*, who was cured after touching the hem of Jesus' garment. For example, Eusebius' story about the Paneus statues is titled *The Statue Erected by the Woman with an Issue of Blood*, in *Acts of Pilate*, Berenice testifies that Jesus healed her of a flow of blood after she touched his hem. Likewise, the *Curing of Tiberius* features the keeper of the cloth, Veronica, whom Jesus cured of a blood disorder. And, in the *Vengeance of the Saviour* the king is told about "Veronica, who suffered twelve years from an issue of blood."¹⁰

¹⁰ The Avenging of the Saviour," www.pseudepigrapha.com.
http://pseudepigrapha.com/apocrypha_nt/avsav.htm (accessed November 27, 2018), 474-475.

The meeting on the road to Calvary has similarities with the Synoptic accounts of the healed woman, which may explain why early writers connected the two. For example, both accounts include an unaccompanied woman approaching Jesus; an immediate miracle that arises from touching cloth; a foreshadowing of future miracles; and, elements of discipleship. Finally, both texts are part of a larger, coherent narrative, which is the story of faith and salvation.

The meeting between Jesus and Veronica is honoured in the Sixth Station of the Cross, which follows an episode from the Synoptic gospels, *Simon the Cyrene helps Jesus to Carry the Cross*. While Simon is strong-armed into helping, Veronica voluntarily puts herself in danger to help Jesus. Simon's forced obedience is therefore contrasted with Veronica's unconditional love, for which she receives the miraculous image.

Even though Veronica is not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament, possibly the truths about humanity's being created in God's image, and the revelation of the invisible God in Christ, were so compelling that early writers, and later, artists, connected her with the *Haemorrhissa* of the Synoptic gospels and inserted the story into the visual narrative of Christ's Passion.

A veil is a piece of material that covers the face or head – so the notion of concealment is built into the meaning. But, rather than conceal, the veil of Veronica displays the miraculous image and reveals the Face of God in Christ, the Incarnation.

In *The Art of God Incarnate*, Aidan Nichols writes that St. Paul communicates Christ's universal significance via a theology of the image: “[F]or St. Paul, the man, Jesus, fulfilled the

spoilt promise of Adam and renewed the image of God in the human.”¹¹ When St. Paul calls Christ “the image of the invisible God / the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15), he confesses the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son (i.e., they are of one essence). And, Jesus himself says “Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father” (John 14:9). So, what was formerly concealed has been revealed in Christ.

But, what of Veronica herself? In the narratives, she is neither wealthy nor famous. Her story begins with a nameless woman defined by illness – the *Haemorrhissa* – who becomes Veronica the image bearer – she is each of us, created in God’s image, and exhorted to reveal the Face of God through lives of faith, grace and courage.

St. Paul’s words give meaning to the story of St. Veronica: “We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). When the veil is lifted, we are able to see and reflect the glory of the Lord and be transformed into his image.

The Veronica shows us the Face of God, the True Image, and facilitates the restoration of the *imago Dei*. Abgar, Tiberius and Titus in those early stories had disfigured faces – but they were cured and transformed by looking upon the face of Christ – the perfect image of God and man.

¹¹ Aidan Nichols *The Art of God Incarnate* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1980), 36.