

A RESPONSE TO ORMUND RUSH

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First I want to thank Rick Gaillardetz for inviting me to give this response, and thank you to Dr. Rush for the thoughtful analysis of what conversion on an ecclesial scale entails, and what it might look like. I was especially moved by Dr. Rush’s echo of the conciliar acknowledgement that the face of the church is not always resplendent with the light of Christ, and that this constitutes a fundamental concern in the overall pastoral and reform agenda of the Council. He reminds us that the goal of the council was at least in part that the face of the church would faithfully mirror the genuine face of the God the church proclaims.

In my remarks here, I would like to consider the notion of the face—and what it means for the church to reflect God’s face in genuine encounter—by facing facts and facing the poor. Given the time constraints, I can only point toward avenues for conversation that I hope will animate our discussion later.

To begin, I would like to bracket the notion of the face-as-surface (the “face of the earth”) in favor of the more biological notion of the face. Our faces are the most visible and most naked part of our bodies. They are a primary way in which we interact with the world and with each other in relationship. The face is intimate, even as it is exposed; it is rarely fully covered (and even when it is, this points to the powerful intimacy of the face), though we may embellish it with makeup or with paltry attempts at putting on a good face, or *al mal tiempo, buena cara*, as was said frequently in my own family. Our faces reveal our emotions, our moods, our age, our confusion or understanding, our empathy or hardness of heart. Much of our humanity resides there, in our faces. This gives power to the face-to-face encounter—the meaningfulness of eye contact with a child, or a lover, or an enemy, or, as Immanuel Levinas thought, the face-to-face encounter with the Other that brings us into subjectivity. For Levinas, the face [of the Other] “denudes, undresses and disarms the subject,”¹ and the face-to-face encounter with the Other exacts a demand on the subject to enter into relationship with that Other, an uneasy relationship where the subject must “care for the other in non-totalizing ways,”² including gestures of justice, generosity, and sacrifice. Ultimately, the ethical demand of the face-to-face encounter with the Other is a kenotic one, inviting the subject to divest itself of prestige and power in favor of a posture of seeking justice.

If the church were to embody this somehow—genuinely have a face-to-face encounter or get its house in order in terms of dialogue, to use Dr. Rush’s image—how would it do so? If there were to be this perichoresis of hierarchical magisterium, theological insight, and *sensus fidelium*, what would it look like? My hope, and the Council’s is that there would be a genuine face-to-face encounter, within the church, of these three realities. In effect, however, we leave that encounter to chance—or, more realistically, we have relegated it to an eschatological hope. While it is true, as Orlando Espín reminds us, that the *sensus fidelium* is an intuition and intuitions

¹ Michele Saracino, *On Being Human: A Conversation with Lonergan and Levinas* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1993), 97.

² Saracino, 96.

require interpretation,³ the *sensus fidelium* further requires avenues for expression, and dialogue also requires structures that don't presently exist.

My question is not merely "what are the mechanisms by which the *sensus fidelium* is expressed" but more importantly "are there mechanisms for the reception of the *sensus fidelium*?" I tend to think not. If there were mechanisms for listening, perhaps the church would look different. Perhaps theology would less frequently seem suspicious to the hierarchy. Perhaps women's experience beyond motherhood would be taken into account. What are the venues for a face-to-face encounter between the hierarchy and the laity, where the laity speak and the power structure listens kenotically? Who is listening to the *sensus fidelium* on sexism? Racism? Heterosexism?

We all know the church's failings when it comes to this justice-seeking posture, that the church has turned away from the Others in its midst, or worse, dismissed or erased the Other in totalizing, colonializing ways. The church is indeed sinful—and as Rush reminds us, its sinfulness goes beyond the sins of individuals. The patriarchy, the racism, the colonialism, the homophobia, is embedded in the structure and thought-patterns of the church. Our history is littered with it. It is inescapable for us. We must face that reality. In addition to facing the fact of the sin in, of, and by the church, I would invite us as church to face the demographic reality—the pull of the global south that, though somewhat reflected in the Argentine/Italian pope, has yet to be reflected in the hierarchy and the power structure of the church, and even in our own academy—the racial and ethnic reality of the majority of American Catholics, who are Latino/a, and how this reality stands in contrast (sometimes silently/invisibly) to the way the story of American Catholicism is told (originating from the northeast expanding west and south). The sins of commission and omission, and of invisibility-making, are rampant. We must face this with honesty, compassion, repentance, and forgiveness. Many believed that the election of a Latin American pope would remedy the problem of the Eurocentric hierarchy and the Eurocentric vision that pervades the church. This young pontificate has shown promise. However, the fact of the sin is not erased by the face of the pope—in fact, if anything, this pope might begin to highlight the ways in which we can face the sins of the church.

The image that has been most present in my mind as I thought about the face of the church and God's own face is that of Pope Francis on Holy Thursday, with his face quite literally at the feet of a young Muslim woman. The posture and the positioning, the intimacy of that image and its radical nature, are for me what the Council meant when it talked about reflecting the genuine face of God to the world, about the church as a sacrament or as leaven in the world. The notion of "facing" as a posture or positioning—a preferential option—is the final aspect of "God's face" that I want to highlight this morning. In exegesis of the story of the widow's mite, Gustavo Gutiérrez highlights the importance of perspective—Jesus' perspective, or point of

³ "The main problem with the study of the *sensus fidelium*... is its being a sense, an intuition. This sense is never discovered in some kind of pure state." Orlando Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 66.

view, in the parable.⁴ Jesus sees the woman giving her disproportionately large gift because he chooses to sit outside a particular door of the temple. His decision to place himself outside the treasury allows him to see things that others might miss. This is the crucial notion of the word face: that the central mission of the church, the way in which it is a reflection of God's own face, is that it must face the poor, the rejected, the excluded, the ones who cannot take life tomorrow for granted. Though no one has ever seen God, we know the posture of God toward the destitute, toward the Other. God loves the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and all the poor.

As I conclude, I would like to highlight these words from a sermon of Augustine on First John:

[But] do not imagine God according to the lust of your eyes. If you do, you will create for yourself a huge form or an incalculable magnitude which (like the light which you see with your bodily eyes) extends in every direction. Your imagination lets it fill realm after realm of space, all the vastness you can conceive of. Or maybe you picture for yourself a venerable-looking old man. Do not imagine any of these things. If you would see God, here is what you should imagine: God is love. What sort of face does love have? What shape is it? What size? What hands and feet does it have?⁵

The notion of ecclesial conversion must contain these three aspects—venues for face-to-face encounter, kenotic repentance for and continual uneasy relationship with ecclesial sinfulness, and a genuine justice-seeking posture and positioning. Though we cannot know how God looks, we can and should work to have the sort of face that love has (no more scowls!), and tearfully work to wipe the tears from our broken church and the broken world in which it journeys.

⁴ Olle Kristenson, *Pastor in the Shadow of Violence: Gustavo Gutiérrez as a Public Pastoral Theologian in Peru in the 1980s and 1990s* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala Universitet, 2009), 3.

⁵ Augustine, *Sermon VII on 1 John IV. 4-12*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* at <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf107.iv.x.html>>, accessed on June 28, 2013.