
The Image of God in Humanity

**“If you know not yourself, beautiful one among women, go in the footsteps of the flocks, and feed the kids by the shepherds’ tents.”
(Song of Songs 1:8)**

In order that you do not suffer misfortune, watch over yourself as the text says. For this is the surest way to protect your own good; realise how much more than the rest of creation you are honoured by the Creator. He did not make the heavens in his image, nor the moon, sun, the stars’ beauty, nor anything else you see in creation.

You alone are made in the likeness of that nature which surpasses all understanding, the image of incorruptible beauty, the impression of true divinity, receptacle of blessed life, seal of true light. You will become what he is by looking at him. By imitating him who shines within you [2 Cor 4:6], his gleam is reflected by your purity. Nothing in creation can compare to your greatness.

All of heaven is contained in the grasp of God’s hand, and the earth and sea fit in the palm of his hand. Although he holds all creation in his palm, you can wholly contain him. God dwells in you, penetrates you, and is not confined in you. He says “I will dwell in them, and walk with them” [2 Cor 6:16].

If you consider this, you will not let your eye rest on any earthly thing, nor will you consider heaven as marvellous. How can you admire the heavens, O man, seeing that you are more enduring? They pass away [Mt 24:35], but you remain for eternity with him who always exists.¹

“Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8)

And it seems to me that the incarnate Logos incorporated the following advice in those brief words. He might say, You human beings, who desire to contemplate what is truly good, do not despair of beholding the object of your desire just because you have heard that the divine majesty is exalted above the heavens, so that his glory is unsearchable, that his beauty is indescribable, and that his nature is incomprehensible. For that which is accessible, the measure of the comprehension of God, is within you. Thus you share essentially in this good thing, in your very nature, with him who made you. For God has stamped the image of the good properties of his own essence in your makeup, as when a sculptor carves in wax the image of a sculpture he intends to cast.

Nevertheless, by sully over the divine imprint, evil has made useless to you the good now hidden by the shameful deeds that overlay it. Therefore, cleanse yourself of the filth caked over your heart by paying close attention to your conduct, and your godlike beauty will again shine forth. Just as the sun's rays shimmer on a piece of steel once a whetstone has removed the rust from it and it produces a luster, so the true splendor of the inner person, which the Lord calls the heart, reappears when it has rubbed off the unsightly blemish that arises from the mold of evil. Once again it apprehends its similarity to its archetype and is good. For that which is similar to the good is assuredly good itself.

¹ *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 2* (McCambley, pp.70-1)

Therefore, he who sees himself sees in himself that which he desires. This is the way a person who is pure in heart becomes blessed; beholding his own purity; he beholds the archetype in the image. One can see the sun without actually looking into the sky by viewing its reflection with a mirror, and see it no less genuinely than those who view its circular form in the sky. In the same way you yourselves, if you strain toward the perception of the light, if you return to the grace already prepared for you in the image, will possess in yourselves the object of your search.²

Sin is like rust or mud spoiling the image

But in the way I have described, the whole procession of sin entered into man's life for his undoing, and from a tiny source poured out upon mankind an infinite sea of evil. The soul's divine beauty, that had been an imitation of its archetype, was, like a blade, darkened with the rust of sin; it no longer kept the beauty of the image it once possessed by nature, and was transformed into the ugliness of evil.

Thus man, who was so *great and precious*, as the Scriptures call him, fell from the value he had by nature. It is like people who slip and fall in the mud and get their faces so smeared that even their relatives cannot recognize them. So man fell into the mud of sin, and lost his likeness to the eternal Godhead. And in its stead he has, by his sin, clothed himself in an image that is of clay and mortal; and this is the image we earnestly counsel him to remove and wash away in the purifying waters of the Christian life. Once this earthly covering is removed, the soul's beauty will once again shine forth.³

Rediscover & attend to your image-likeness

Now the removal of what is foreign is a return to what is connatural and fitting; and this we can only achieve by becoming what we once were in the beginning when we were created. Yet to achieve this likeness to God is not within our power nor within any human capacity. It is a gift of God's bounty, for He directly bestowed this divine likeness on our human nature at its creation. By our human efforts we can merely clear away the accumulated filth of sin and thus allow the hidden beauty of the soul to shine forth.

This lesson is taught, I think, in the Gospel, where our Lord speaks to those who have ears for the mysteries that Wisdom teaches us: *The kingdom of God is within you* (Luke 17:21). I think that the text here points out that the gift of God is not separated from our nature nor is it far from those who choose to look for it. It dwells within everyone of us, ignored and forgotten, *choked with the cares and pleasures of life* (Luke 8:14), but is rediscovered when we turn our minds to it.⁴

² Gregory of Nyssa, Sermon on the Sixth Beatitude in J. Patout Burns (ed.), *Theological Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p.34

³ *On Virginit* (*From Glory to Glory*, pp.113-4)

⁴ *On Virginit* (*From Glory to Glory*, p.114)

**“I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine” (Song of Songs 6:3)
The transformation of the bride into an image of the archetype’s
beauty**

The following words come from the pure, unsullied bride: “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine”. Such is the measure and bond of perfection in virtue. We learn here that the purified soul must have God alone and never look at anything except him. Thus it must cleanse itself of every material deed and thought and be transformed into that which is spiritual and immaterial, a splendid image of the archetype’s beauty.

When a person sees a picture upon a board which accurately conforms to its model, he exclaims that one form exists in both: the model’s beauty is in the likeness and the archetype is clearly seen by the imitation. Similarly, the bride says, “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine.” In her conformity to Christ she receives her proper beauty, that primal blessedness of our nature, according to the image and likeness of the original beauty which alone is true and worthy of adoration. This resembles a mirror expertly fashioned by hand which accurately reflects the image of a face.

Thus, when the soul has prepared itself and has rejected every material stain, it represents the image of that pure, unstained beauty. The soul, a living mirror possessing free will, says, “when I look at my beloved’s face, the beauty of his form is reflected in me.”⁵

⁵ *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 15* (McCambley, p.264)