



SIEBENQUELL

Lay open my face



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A few days again I made a sick call. While I was in the room, a young woman stood at the edge of the bed and spoke with the patient. She leaned on the bed barrier and gazed down on the woman lying there while conversing with her. I sat at the window and looked up. I glimpsed the warm, loving, attentive, radiant and gentle face of the woman. My soul was bathed in the warmth and light that radiated from this tender face. Tears sprang into my eyes and a story into my heart.

For this face simply would not leave my soul. I was reminded of a story by Giovanni Guareschi, the Italian author of the Don Camillo stories. When I got home, I began to peruse my collection of his books until I found the story. Then I sat in a chair and read the tale »Landscape with a female figure«.

A young man enters Don Camillo's village and begins to paint a leafy arcade, which the villagers do not find particularly attractive. When he is finished, the mayor, Peppone, comes and remarks, »You see, that is art! For nearly fifty years I have seen this arcade day after day and only do I notice that it is beautiful!«

Don Camillo offers the artist room and board for a month. In return, the artist is prepared to paint a portrait of the Madonna in a side chapel, but with one provision: »But I must be able to work undisturbed. You will see the painting when it is finished. It is a torture for me when someone looks over my shoulder while I work.«

After a long search for an inspiration for his Madonna, he meets a girl at an inn. He sketches her face for days on end while she does her needlework at the doorway. After a month, he reveals his »Mother of God of the River« to Don Camillo. »It was a wonderful painting; Don Camillo stared at the wonder with an open mouth. However, his heart was suddenly gripped by a cold hand, his forehead was covered with sweat, and then an appalled cry escaped him: ‚Celestina‘.«

His outrage is explained when he declares to the young artist, that Celestina is »the most fanatic of all the communist women far and wide«. The face of an excommunicated woman cannot serve as the face of the Madonna.

When Celestina hears the rumors, she goes to the Church and angrily chides the young artist. »The young man stared in disbelief, yes with dismay, at Celestina. There it was, the vulgar, flat, repugnant face of which Don Camillo has spoken! Perturbed, he asked himself how he had gleaned anything spiritual or anything to be spiritualised in his countenance.« However, when she sees the portrait itself, a transformation takes place. »The features of Celestina’s face began to smooth out by and by, her hate-filled eyes gradually became gentler and ever fairer. Everything vulgar disappeared from her features and Celestina’s face grew ever more similar to the one of the portrait. The young man grasped Don Camillo’s arm. ‘That is how I saw her’, he whispered into his ear.«

Lent begins with a word about faces. »And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites... But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others...« (Mt 6, 16-18)

The young woman at the hospital had more than enough reason to make a face contorted by pain, full of sorrow, etched with fear, full of grief and suffering. She is accompanying this patient on a very long way of suffering. I, however, saw the »Madonna«. Therein lays the deepest meaning of Lent, to again grant the artist of all humanity the time and space to restore our faces. So that our faces with smoothen by and by from the hardness that often besets them, our hate-filled eyes will gradually grow softer and more fair, that all vulgar features will disappear and we will grow ever more similar to the face that God originally gave us. So that we all might hear the words of God that heard in that hospital room: »That is how I saw her!«

Huub Oosterhuis writes: »Lay open my face, make me beautiful«. At the end of the 40 days of the Lenten spring-time, may we see his masterpiece anew and be able to say of ourselves and of others, what Celestina says, when she finally finds her voice again: »How lovely she is!«

Erik Riechers

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