

CHAPTER 2

TRANSFIGURED BEFORE THEM

On Tabor With the Three Apostles

“JESUS TOOK WITH HIM PETER AND JAMES AND JOHN”
Let us begin the first ascent of our spiritual Tabor right now. Six days after receiving Peter’s profession of faith and announcing his Passion in Caesarea Philippi (see Mark 8:27—9:1), Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and went “up a high mountain apart, by themselves” (Mark 9:2). Through these three descriptors (“high,” “apart,” “by themselves”), the event is detached from the natural realm and the rhythm of ordinary life and moves into a different dimension—one of solitude, silence and distance from everything.

The first stanza of the poem “The Ascent of Mount Carmel” by Saint John of the Cross helps put us in the frame of mind of someone who leaves everything behind and, while it is still the middle of the night, leaves the house on tiptoe, so as not to be detained, to follow the call of the beloved:

On a dark night,
Kindled in love with yearnings—oh, happy chance!—
I went forth without being observed
My house being now at rest.¹

The “house” we must leave consists of the material things and preoccupations from which we need to free ourselves. Each of us will easily know what that means. There must be a detachment, a break, just like the one Jacob made when he was about to wrestle with God. He sent his wives, his concubines, his herds and everything else across the river Jabbok, remaining alone on the other side (see Genesis 32:23–24).

Jesus, the Gospel says, “was transfigured before them” (Matthew 17:2). He was not transfigured before all the people indiscriminately in the midst of a bustling crowd but only before those who had left behind relatives, friends, work—everything—and had accepted his invitation to come aside with him. These are the ones who can say with the psalmist, “Your face, LORD, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me” (Psalm 27:8–9), or “My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready” (Psalm 57:7).²

Let us read as we proceed: “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Matthew 17:2). What can be clearly deduced from the text is that the light does not envelop Jesus from without, but comes forth from within him. His face is not simply “illuminated” but “shines forth.” The same is true for his clothes: They become “dazzling white.” This highlights the essential difference between the Transfiguration and similar theophanies in the Old Testament. Jesus is shining with his own—not reflected—light; his face reflects not merely the glory of God, as was the case with Moses’ face (see 2 Corinthians 3:13),

but also his own glory. More precisely, he is resplendent with his own glory, the very glory of God, because he is the radiance “of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Hebrews 1:3).

This point also expresses the essence of what the Transfiguration means for our understanding of the person of Christ. Jesus is not part of the series of famous personages in the Old Testament who saw the glory of God and received a theophany, even if he would head that list. He stands apart. He does not see God but rather is seen as God. A new kind of theophany is inaugurated on Tabor, a “Christophany.”

The Fathers expanded on this Gospel fact. Saint John Chrysostom asks, “What does it mean that ‘he was transfigured’? It means that he revealed something about his divinity and showed them the God which dwelled in his flesh.”³ Saint John of Damascus specifies, “He was transfigured, not taking on something that he was not, but demonstrating to his disciples exactly who he was.”⁴

“WHILE HE WAS PRAYING, HIS FACE SHONE LIKE THE SUN”
 We cannot, however, reduce the Transfiguration to this objective, revelatory aspect that would benefit others but not Jesus himself. The Transfiguration, like the Resurrection later, is not primarily a subject for apologetics but a mysterious event. It is above all a gift that the Father gives to Jesus, a way of showing him his favor. On Tabor Jesus is not so much a master who imparts teachings or furnishes proofs of his divinity to his disciples as he is the Son who allows his friends to share a moment of intimacy between himself and the heavenly Father so that they can be witnesses to and participants in his glory.

Jesus is not “performing” a part before his disciples. Everything here is real, just as everything that will soon occur in front of these same three disciples at Gethsemane will be real and not merely pedagogical. On that day Jesus, in his humanity, went into ecstasy! That is perhaps the least inadequate way of describing what was happening in Jesus—a special ecstasy. Jesus, in fact, is the only person who does not need to “go out of himself” to enter into God. There is a kind of short circuit in him (if I can use that image) between divinity and humanity. The “insulation,” which was his human flesh, is “fused” with divinity and itself becomes light and energy.

He was happy. The Transfiguration is a mystery of divine happiness. The whole stream of joy that flows between the Father and Son, which is the Holy Spirit himself, “overflowed” the vessel of Christ’s humanity on this occasion.

How do we know this subjective aspect of the Transfiguration? Luke was deliberate in specifying one point: Jesus ascended the mountain “to pray,” and it was “while he was praying” (Luke 9:29) that his countenance changed. The Transfiguration is a direct effect of Jesus’ prayer. To whom was Jesus praying, and with whom was he conversing, if not the Father? The Gospels are unanimous that all of Jesus’ prayers begin with the filial cry of “*Abba!*” and consist of open and loving conversation with the Father. Jesus came close to ecstasy one other time when he was praying—when he “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father’” (Luke 10:21).

What occurs in the Transfiguration is exactly what occurred at the baptism in the Jordan. There too it was Jesus’ prayer that opened heaven and called down the Spirit: “When Jesus also had

been baptized *and was praying*, the heaven was opened” (Luke 3:21, emphasis added).

Jesus did not climb Tabor that day to be transfigured. He was not thinking of that in the least. This was a surprise that the Father had in store for him. As we heard, he climbed to pray, to respond to a compelling call to conversation with the Father.

“*And while he was praying*, the appearance of his face changed” (Luke 9:29, emphasis added). This is not simply an insignificant addition by Luke; it is the key to understanding the whole event. And it is also what instantly brings the Transfiguration close to us, not just as a mystery to contemplate but also to imitate. If the aim of contemplating Christ, as Paul told us, is to be transformed and become like the one we contemplate, if we too are called to be transfigured, then prayer is the foremost path to achieve that.

In all the Gospels there is not one image or scene that is more compelling than that of Jesus praying to the Father—whether it is evening or night or early dawn when it is still dark, on a mountain or on the shore of a lake. This is a striking image that has the power to attract the mind and heart, to catalyze our thoughts and desires. It entralls us.

The Gospels do not tell us the content of those long nights or hours of Jesus’ prayer. But one thing is certain: A vortex was established between the place on earth where the Son of God was praying and heaven, a direct communication. These were the times when Jesus’ words to Nathaniel had their fulfillment: “You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (John 1:51). All the love and life of the Trinity passed through that vortex. And we were not absent from that place. “I will pray for you,” Jesus tells his

apostles. “I have prayed for you,” he says to Peter (Luke 22:32), and he prays “on behalf of those who will believe in me through their [the apostles’] word” (John 17:20)—precisely for us, today’s disciples.

There is a miniature from the eleventh century on Mount Athos in Greece that shows Jesus in prayer on the slope of a mountain. In front of and above him, we see the figure of the Father in a semicircle. Behind Jesus the apostles are exchanging silent glances, as if to say, “See how he prays!” Perhaps it was during a similar instance that they were impressed and asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). We, too, before going any further, need to direct that same request to Jesus: “Lord, teach us to pray!”

“THERE APPEARED TO THEM MOSES AND ELIJAH”

The meaning of the Transfiguration that I have called “objective”—its significance for salvation history and for understanding the person of Christ—is especially revealed through the presence of Moses and Elijah. From early on they have been seen as representatives of the law and of the prophets, respectively. But perhaps they are here to recall the occasion when each of them had a revelation of God on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19; 33—34; 1 Kings 9:9—13). The parallel between Sinai and Tabor is readily seen, so much so that when the church of Saint Catherine’s monastery on the slope of Sinai opened in the sixth century, it is said that a mosaic depicting the scene of the Transfiguration appeared spontaneously in the vault of the apse, and this became the model for all the icons on the Transfiguration. An ancient Father explains the connection between the two mountains this way:

Mount Tabor surpasses Sinai: on Sinai there was a flame of fire (Ex 3:2), but on Tabor the light of divinity (Mt 17:2); on Sinai a bush, on Tabor a cloud; on Sinai, Moses, the glorious servant, on Tabor, the very Lord of glory himself; on Sinai the figure, on Tabor the reality. No longer the law given through Moses, but grace and truth given through Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 1:17).⁵

Moses truly finds himself now before the “burning bush”; now he hears the great “I AM” speak; his desire to “see the glory of God” is satisfied (see Exodus 33:18–23). No longer does he contemplate only God’s “back” as he lies hidden in the cleft of a rock; the “hand” that protects Moses’ eyes now is the flesh of Christ, in which God has veiled himself.⁶

The commonalities and differences between Tabor and Sinai will appear more clearly in the rest of the account, when the Father’s voice is heard. For now let us pause for an important detail. Mark and Matthew simply say that Moses and Elijah “were talking” with Jesus, but Luke specifies what they were talking about: “his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31).

Moses and Elijah are not instructing Jesus about the destiny of his Passion because he had already announced it shortly before to his disciples (see Luke 9:22, 44). Instead they serve as a confirmation from heaven of Jesus’ word. After the Resurrection, Jesus, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets,” explained to the disciples at Emmaus how he “should suffer these things and enter into his glory” (Luke 24: 26, 27). Something similar implicitly occurs here before those events take place.

The Passion is found at the very heart of the mystery of the Transfiguration. The glory of Jesus cannot be separated, even for

one instant, from the cross. The Transfiguration is completely different from pagan apotheoses. It is the revelation of a new kind of glory and power that springs forth precisely from the renunciation of all power and glory. He “emptied himself.... He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death.... Therefore, God also highly exalted him” (Philippians 2:7–9, emphasis added).

Luke implicitly completes the reference to the Passion, noting that “Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep” (Luke 9:32). This very detail foreshadows what will happen at Gethsemane. It is worth pausing a moment with this picture of the three disciples, who are distracted and full of sleep at such a time, in order to open our own eyes and realize how many times we ourselves are those sleepy and distracted disciples. We were at the altar receiving the Eucharist; Jesus was present, not merely transfigured but transubstantiated in the bread and wine before us. Along with Moses and Elijah, hosts of angels were there without daring to “look upon” him, but we were distracted and our minds were wandering. Or perhaps someone was preaching the Word of God and our eyes were heavy with sleep, and we were barely able to stifle a yawn.

There is a saying from Saint Francis that often comes to mind when I also find myself in that state: “It is a great misery and a miserable weakness that when you have Him present with you in this way, you concern yourselves with anything else in this entire world.”⁷

“MASTER, IT IS GOOD (*KALON*) FOR US TO BE HERE!”
The use of the word *kalon* in the context of the Transfiguration is not accidental. The Hebrew term can mean *beautiful* or *good*;

the Septuagint translated it as *beautiful*. At the end of the week of Creation, God saw that everything was “good” or “beautiful” (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Now, with the manifestation of the new man, of the true and perfect image of God, the true beauty that was lost through sin reappears. The Transfiguration is also the most fitting mystery, with its exultation of light, to introduce us to the contemplation of beauty. This occurs especially in the spirituality that is linked to the art of icons.

According to a famous exegete,

Her [Israel's] most intense encounter with beauty was in the religious sphere, in the contemplation of Jahweh's revelation and action; and because of this concentration of the experience of beauty upon the *credenda* [“the object of faith”], Israel occupies a special place in the history of aesthetics.⁸

It is especially in describing the apparition of God, the theophany, that the biblical authors developed an aesthetic sense. Such descriptions “contain what are probably the most intensified statements about beauty in the whole of the Old Testament.”⁹ Everything that has come in contact with God's presence is beautiful. Mount Zion is “the perfection of beauty” (see Psalm 50:2) precisely because it is God's dwelling place. Everything that is connected to God, even the feet of his messengers, becomes beautiful (see Isaiah 52:7).

It is not a surprise, therefore, that the new theophany on Tabor became for Christians the subject par excellence for aesthetic representation and the occasion for the celebration of beauty. According to Anastasius of Sinai, “Today on Tabor he renewed and transformed the image of earthly beauty into an image of heavenly beauty.”¹⁰