Cardinal Seán O'Malley, OFM Cap.
Introduction to the exhibit: "The Face of Jesus: From that Gaze, the Human Person"

For us as Catholics, there is a long and sacred history of venerating the holy images of our Lord, Jesus Christ. At Christmas time, we incense the Holy Infant in the manger and recall his humility and love. During Lent we walk with devotion through the Stations of the Cross, tracing the steps that lead to our salvation. And on Easter morning we stand before the empty tomb, filled with awe in the presence of the Angels at the wondrous works that God has done. Images of Christ have the power to move our hearts, they can catechize without words and allow us to contemplate the beautiful face of God revealed in His own Son.

Images of Christ are also signs for the Church on pilgrimage. As pilgrims we know that we walk through this world with our eyes "fixed on Jesus" (cf. Heb 12:2) so that He may be for us the "Way, the Truth, and the Life" (cf. John 14:6). Throughout the centuries, Jesus' face has been depicted in a number of different ways. At times He is depicted as the one who suffers in His Passion, out of love for humanity. At other times He is shown as the one who teaches and who invites disciples to follow Him. And still there are other depictions of Christ in Glory, bearing the wounds of his passion as a sign of his love and proof of his sacrifice for us. These images are all meant to accompany us in life and give us hope and strength.

As a child they used to read to us the story about a king who was a good man. He decided he would disguise himself as a peasant so that he could go and live amongst his subjects. He wanted to experience their sufferings and know their aspirations. As moving as this story might be, the Incarnation of the Son of God is quite different. In the Incarnation, Jesus does not come disguised as one of us but He comes as one of us, a brother. He does not come to get to know us. He comes so we can get to know Him, our God. He is the revelation. He is the event. He has not come for a short visit but to insert Himself into our history permanently. He is with us. He is our contemporary.

Fr. Giussani's charism was to help so many young people discover Christ in their lives. It is in the Church, in communion, that we have the best opportunity to experience Christ and his friendship. The poison of our contemporary culture is the extreme individualism of the age, which is documented in Professor Putnam's study on Americans, *Bowling Alone,*[1] in which Putnam demonstrates how each generation of Americans is becoming more and more isolated, more and more alienated. There are more people living alone, eating alone, and spending hours before a television screen or computer alone. In His Incarnation, God is with us and will never abandon us. He comes to take us out of our isolation and invites us into true friendship and communion.

As we look upon the face of Christ in this exhibit, I invite you to meditate on those words He spoke to St. Peter: "Who do you say that I am?" (Luke 9:20). He wants us to know Him and to know how much He loves us. He wants us to be a leaven in our world, a light that will help others discover God's presence, His Love and His Beauty so that you and I can share that with the whole community. I pray that this exhibit of the face of Christ will draw those who look upon it to discover in it the face of love and mercy, the face of the one who calls us to follow Him.

---

[1] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.