



"The Face that Most Resembles Christ":

The Matter of Motherhood in Dante's *Paradiso*

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This lecture will explore how soon after his ascent with Beatrice into the Empyrean, Dante-pilgrim finds himself in the center of a celestial rose, reeling beneath the newly unmasked souls seated on its petals. Shortly thereafter, St. Bernard provides him with a visual tour of the elect, bidding him to focus on one face in particular:

**“Look now at the face that most resembles
 Christ, for its brightness alone can enable you
 to see Christ.”**

(Par. 32.85-87)

This detail is occasionally noted by modern commentators as striking, beautiful, even stunning, but hardly unexpected. Whom else should the son of a single human parent resemble? What may strike modern readers as a banality appears to have caused discomfort among Dante's early commentators. Beginning with Jacopo della Lana, the verse was carefully qualified to attenuate the prospect of any physical affinity. Why this resistance to the resemblance of Christ to His only human parent?



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