

THE TURIN FIRE OF APRIL 11

It is expected that almost all members will have heard the news of the dramatic fire in Turin's Royal Chapel and Cathedral the night of April 11. Television news bulletins all around the world carried images of the Royal Chapel wreathed in flames and fireman **Mario Trematore** making his so dramatic rescue of the Shroud by smashing its so recently-constructed bullet-proof display case with his fireman's hammer. But there has been more than a little confusion about some of the background facts.

Thus according to one report, the first call to the fire brigade was at 11.35 pm by Cathedral parish priest **Fr. Francesco Barbero**, as a result of his having been alerted by fire alarms. According to another account, the first intimation was from Turin citizen Guido Principe, who saw the flames from his home overlooking the Cathedral. According to *The Times* the fire alarms had been switched off because of the structural work being carried out, despite the Cathedral and Royal Palace being festooned with electrical cables because of this very same work .

In any event the city of Turin's XXI brigade of firemen seem to have been quickly and efficiently on the scene, although despite the stories of Trematore dashing through the flames to rescue the Shroud, the actual time recorded for the Shroud's casket being carried from the Cathedral was 1.36 am - almost exactly two hours after the first alarm. Attended by 200 firemen, it took until 4.30 am for the blaze finally to be brought under control. A fully authoritative story of the rescue has yet to be told.

The Damage

Obviously with regard to the damage caused by the fire, the very positive news is that the Shroud survived entirely unscathed. That the danger to it was very real (hence fireman Trematore's intervention very necessary), is quite evident from the videotape footage, in which the display case can be seen littered with pieces of glass and other debris from the huge glass window that almost immediately overhung it, and which was completely destroyed in the blaze.

There was also serious danger from the Royal Chapel's blazing dome, which although not directly over the display case, was sufficiently close that any full structural failure would inevitably have buried the display case, and the Shroud casket with it, beneath an avalanche of flaming rubble. Although some early reports spoke of the dome having actually collapsed in the course of the blaze, this did not in the event occur. Nonetheless it has been slung with large wire ropes, its condition is being monitored constantly, and it may take many months before it can be properly stabilised.

The Royal Chapel's Bertola altar, in which the Shroud lived from 1694 to 1993, is said to have sustained less damage than originally anticipated thanks to scaffolding still in place for the dome's renovation, which protected it from the worst of the flames and falling debris.

However the damage to building fabric alone has been estimated at 60 billion lire, without counting the many works of art and antique furnishings also destroyed. The Piedmont local government has approved 10 billion lire for the restoration work, and European Commissioner Marcelino Oreja has said he will propose 100,000 ecu from European Union funds. The work is estimated to take until at least 2002, if not longer.

The Display Case

The damage to the Shroud's display case proper came during the rescue attempt, and the exact circumstances are again not yet entirely clear, as becomes evident from what is known of Mario Trematore's feat. For the display case, designed by architect **Andrea Bruno** at a cost of 300 million lire, was a very specialized security structure in its own right.

It consisted of three walls of plate glass each 11 feet long and 6½ feet high, that were made at Saint-Gobain, France, by the same manufacturers responsible for the case that protected the Shroud during the 1978 exposition. These were mounted on a bronze plinth sloped to keep spectators at a respectful distance, and which contained the mechanism for the panels opening. This mechanism apparently required the carefully synchronised deployment of four special handles, the opening operation normally taking about thirty minutes. Although these handles were provided to the first firemen on the scene, the heat and falling debris had apparently damaged the mechanism so that it would not work.

Accordingly it was at that point, and with the firemen in very serious danger from the heat and falling debris, that the decision was taken to smash open the bullet-proof glass with a sledge hammer, and remove the Shroud's casket by sheer brute force.

The Cause of the fire.

According to the latest available information, as given at a Press Conference on 24 April, the exact cause of the fire is not yet known. However an overloading of the Palace electrical circuits has been ruled out, and arson seems strongly suspected. Some reports have spoken of a cryptic telephoned warning shortly beforehand, also signs that it started seemingly in two separate places at the same time (i) in wooden and aluminium scaffolding just above the roof of the passageway connecting the palace with the Royal Chapel, and (ii) inside the Chapel itself. The finding of a discarded petrol can has also been mentioned.

The difficulty lies choosing between the several plausible categories of possible suspects. For instance, the *Sunday Times*, in an article of 13 April, suggested the Italian mafia, pointing out that 'the mob' has recently turned its attention to 'cultural targets', the burning of Venice's La Fenice opera house in January 1996 being thought to have been their handiwork.

However, from the point of view of politically-motivated suspects, it may be no coincidence that earlier in the very same evening of the fire **Gianni Agnelli**, the Turin

magnate whose power has caused him to be dubbed 'uncrowned King of Italy', together with Italian foreign minister **Lamberto Dini**, held in the Royal Palace that immediately adjoins the Cathedral a special banquet for UN **Secretary-General Kofi Annan**. Annan's coming to Turin was apparently to give the UN's blessing to Italian intervention in Albania, an intervention bitterly opposed by the *autonomi*, a powerful Turin-centred anarchy faction descended from the former Red Brigades. Accordingly the fire may have been the *autonomi*'s protest.

Also suspected, however, are militant anti-Christian/pagan activists. In an article of 14 April in *The Times* journalist **Richard Owen** pointed out that April 11 was a Friday, recalling the original 'Good' Friday during the evening of which Jesus was laid in his shroud (whether or not the Turin article is one and the same). He also quoted Taurinese writer **Vittorio Messori** as saying the fire was 'no accident.' In Messori's words concerning the Shroud: 'There is no other object which attracts so much love and so much hate. It has everything - Jesus, the Templars who brought it to Europe, science... an ideal Internet conspiracy. The Internet is full of the sick fantasies of people who want to destroy the Shroud.' One of the bizarre lesser-known facts about Turin is that for years, and for reasons that actually do seem to be because of its possession the Shroud, the city has been literally ringed by rather more than its fair share of Satanic and witchcraft groups.

Whoever was responsible, if the fire was arson, then it will certainly not have been the first attempt to destroy the Shroud in this way. There was another in 1972, in which an intruder broke into the Royal Chapel after climbing over the Palace roof. The Shroud was apparently saved on this occasion by the asbestos forming part of the protection devices inside the 'sepulchre' repository inside the Bertola altar.

If whoever the suspected arsonists were, they wanted, if not for the Shroud to be destroyed, at least for its environs to be in some disarray during the expositions of 1998 and 2000, then it is already clear that they will have succeeded. The Cathedral can never be in the pristine state that Cardinal Saldarini and his colleagues had intended for these occasions, and as it has been for the previous expositions of the last four hundred years. However on 24 April Cardinal Saldarini issued this calm statement:

It is the firm intention of all the authorities responsible to hold the solemn Exposition of the Holy Shroud in Turin next year at the time and in the place previously planned, that is, between Saturday 18 April and Sunday 14 June 1998 in the Cathedral Church (the Duomo).

This news is our intention, barring unforeseen circumstances, while experts and the competent authorities monitor the situation day by day. I believe, as they do, that we can reassure the world public that it is highly likely that the Exposition will take place... We do not know the causes of the fire, but we are sure that, with God's help, it will be possible to limit them and overcome the consequences. About three million pilgrims are estimated to have come to the last solemn Exposition, between 26 August and 8 October 1978. We hope that next year will be no less successful.

Post-Fire Examination of the Shroud, and its Future Conservation

On 14 April the Shroud casket was opened up in Cardinal Saldarini's residence, and the cloth's condition examined by a small gathering, including the Cardinal, **Dr. Meththild Flury-Lemberg** of the Abegg Museum, **Professor Piero Savarino**, the Cardinal's scientific adviser, **Dr. Carlaenrica Spantigati** of Turin (described as Superintendent), **Dr. Rosalia Varoli Piazza** of Rome's Central Institute of Restoration, and **Prof. Bruno Barberis** of Turin's International Centre for the Shroud. It was found to have been completely unaffected by the fire. For obvious reasons its present whereabouts are remaining secret.

The fire aside, it is understood that the future plans are for the Shroud no longer to be kept rolled up. On April 17 the *Il Corriere della Sera* Italian newspaper reported that the Shroud will be placed in a new 5 metre long by 2 metre wide permanent container reliquary made from stone and crystal, and with its own internal lighting system. This will enable it to be kept flat, and to be illuminated at any time for observation purposes.

The container will include every safety and protection device, including against any form of microbiological infestation, and this time a special automatic system will be included for the cloth's easy removal, pulling out in a shallow drawer, in the case of any emergency. The cost, estimated at one billion lire will be funded by Italy's Italgas company.