

The New, Restored Turin Shroud

Ian Wilson

For well over four centuries the Shroud has been sewn onto a piece of sixteenth century 'Holland cloth' that has prevented access to, and thereby full examination of, its underside. Throughout this same period some 30 patches, some sewn on in 1534, others by later repairers, have covered disfiguring holes from the fire damage that the Shroud sustained in 1532. Because it was necessary to sew these patches onto still intact portions of the fabric they have concealed such areas as well as those holed and scarred from the fire damage.

Now, after a thirty-two day conservation program carried out between 20 June and 22 July by Swiss textile conservator Mechthild Flury-Lemberg and assistant Irene Tomedi the backing cloth and the patches have been removed, and the Shroud rendered what the Church authorities have officially described as 'naked'. The operation, carried out in Turin Cathedral's new sacristy, built after the fire of 1997, was performed under strict secrecy, not least because of post-September 11 concerns for the Shroud's security while it was being kept outside its protective case. Sadly, when news of the work became leaked by Rome journalist Orazio Petrosillo, loud protests were voiced alleging that the advice of Shroud experts had been ignored and that potential vital microscopic evidence had been destroyed by the conservation process.

Describing himself as 'embittered' by such criticisms Turin's archbishop Cardinal Severino Poletto, the Shroud's official custodian on behalf of the Pope, held a press conference on 21 September to show the Shroud in its new form, and to explain the true facts behind the conservation work. The evening before this conference he and those in Turin most closely responsible for Shroud matters invited some thirty international 'Shroud-watchers' for a special preview, one of those attending this gathering being myself.

Having travelled at very short notice from Australia to take advantage of this invitation, I was very relieved to find the alarmist allegations totally unfounded. The Shroud's so-called 'denuding' has definitely not impaired it visually. Indeed the removal of the patches now enhances attention to the all-important image, and previously occluded parts, such as to one side of the bloodstain from the wound in the side have been revealed for the first time.

Also any reasoned appraisal of the work that has been carried out can only be one of admiration for its painstaking care and total professionalism.

The Shroud is now being kept in a side chapel to the left of Turin Cathedral's high altar, beneath what looks to the outside observer like a rather plain, box-like altar. On the night of 20 September the two halves of this 'box' were slid apart to reveal the Shroud laid out full-length and entirely flat inside an inner container with a full-size protective plate glass cover. We were admitted into the chapel in groups of twelve, the protective glass cover enabling us to view the Shroud at the closest possible range without compromise to its safety.

Visually the now revealed holes are little more obtrusive than the patches that formerly covered them. Conservators Flury-Lemberg and Tomedi, during their painstaking removal of the patches and the backing cloth, became increasingly astonished at the amount of carbon debris that had accumulated beneath the patches. The numerous occasions on which the Shroud was rolled and unrolled for display purposes during the centuries since 1534 had caused repeated abrasion of the charred edges to the areas holed in the fire. Because of the dislodged particles of carbon debris being acidic, their accumulation behind each patch posed a continual 'loose cannon' danger to the Shroud. The alarmist press reports suggested that this debris, and thereby its potential value as historical and scientific evidence, had either been destroyed or at best been gathered carelessly and indiscriminately. But neither was the case. The materials accumulated behind each patch, also some in the process of abrading, were carefully gathered and recorded, then sealed in canisters individual to each site from which they were removed. The array of these canisters is being kept in Cardinal Poletto's care awaiting proposals for how they may best be examined scientifically, the intention certainly being that every minutest scrap of evidence should be made available to those most competent to study it.

Another criticism was made that after removing the old 16th century backing cloth Mechthild Flury-Lemberg sewed the Shroud on a fresh backing cloth, thereby again denying ready access to its underside. But this was done solely and specifically to facilitate fresh expositions of the Shroud during which, as traditionally, it would need to be presented in a vertical display mode. The replacement cloth chosen, ironically deriving from Holland like that used in 1534, is not new, having originally been purchased decades ago by Flury-Lemberg's father for household purposes, and not in the event used until now. It was specially selected for its not having been treated with dyes, starches, bleaches and other potential contaminants, and its natural colour harmonises well with that of the Shroud. Even the thread used for the thousands of stitches was specially selected as from the finest silk, so that in the event of

any excessive strain or stress it would break before cutting into the Shroud's threads.

The removal of the backing cloth enabled the Shroud's underside to be viewed in full for the first time, and every opportunity was taken for conventional photography, scanning and other approaches. Not least of the discoveries was that although in the main the so-called body image does not show through to the Shroud's underside, a notable exception to this is the image of the hair, particularly the two sidelocks framing the face. A possible explanation for this show-through may be the cloth coming into direct contact with hair oils, natural and artificial, that had coated the hair, these, like the blood, becoming absorbed through to the underside. The blood stains notably register nearly as clearly and completely on the underside as they do on the side of the cloth that (theoretically) would have been in direct contact with the crucified body. A superbly-produced new booklet by Don Giuseppe Ghiberti, *Sindone le immagini 2002 Shroud images* with text in both English and Italian, includes a 3ft wide full length colour photograph of this underside, clearly illustrating these details.

Another of the alarmist concerns raised was that there had been a smoothing out of creases that provide vital evidence for how the Shroud was folded in previous centuries. This allegation similarly proved unfounded. The subdued light in which we viewed the Shroud the night of September 20th was particularly conducive to showing up creases and other irregularities on the Shroud's surface, and reassuringly, these were still readily apparent. And precisely because of the removal of the patches, the continuousness of some of the more ancient crease lines was visible for the first time. It was pointed out that the patches were responsible for creating some of the creases, and with the removal of these some crease lines had simply and naturally dropped out. But there had been positively no attempt to iron out old creases, as had first been feared.

Another of the criticisms levelled against Mechthild Flury-Lemberg and Irene Tomedi's work was that this had been carried out hastily, and without due consultation. But as explained by Don Giuseppe Ghiberti, speaking on behalf of the Turin archdiocese, a Commission specifically to consider matters of the Shroud's conservation had been formed as early as 1992, during the time of Cardinal Saldarini. Express permission to remove the patches and backing cloth was sought from the Shroud's formal owner, Pope John Paul II via a letter dated 10 November 2000. To emphasise that he and his aides are hiding nothing, Cardinal Poletto read out the full text of a letter from Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Sodano, dated 3 November 2001, specifically and unequivocally empowering him to get the work done. As was further pointed

out during the meeting, the idea of removing the backing cloth had been approved even at the time the Shroud was still owned by the Savoy family, i.e. before 1983, the agreement being that if the cloth were detached it would be returned to the Savoy family.

On a personal level the visit to Turin enabled me to view the Shroud in its new setting for the first time. Because of the table-top display height and the protective glass it was possible to study details as closely as one foot distance, a point of marvel being the fineness and near-invisibility of Mechthild Flury-Lemberg and Irene Tomedi's stitching. Thanks to viewing the Shroud again in artificial light some concerns that I had been nurturing that the image might be fading – as first aroused by my viewing in March 2000 - were satisfactorily allayed.

Throughout the near four decades that I have been actively interested in the Shroud there has often been a tendency to remoteness towards English-speaking 'Shroudies' on the part of those in Turin. A point of great happiness, therefore, was that this recent occasion, together with the Villa Gualino Symposium in March 2000 were notable for the great openness and cordiality exhibited by Cardinal Poletto and his aides. Whereas previous archbishops of Turin have often just said a few introductory words at Shroud gatherings, and have left the rest to their officials, Cardinal Poletto is clearly deeply and personally interested in the Shroud. He made regular 'drop-in' visits to view Flury-Lemberg and Tomedi's conservation work while this was in progress, and he speaks most authoritatively on the subject, from direct observation, and from the heart, rather than from texts prepared for him by others. The fine initiative that was first set by the calling of the Villa Gualino Symposium in March 2000 is clearly being sustained. From my personal perspective those in Turin deserve not any harsh criticism but the warmest congratulations for their recent endeavours, and I feel confident that the Shroud has never been in more capable and caring hands.