

EVANGELIZATION AND THE HOLY SHROUD*
Relevance of the Shroud Message to the Pastorate

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The most promising message from God to humanity is a message of love; man's eternal salvation through the redeeming work of the Son of God, incarnate, dead and risen. Confided orally to the prophets and, in the fullness of time, to the Messiah, from him to the Apostles and by them to the Church, the credibility of the message is founded upon the authority of God Himself who revealed it.

The oral message was committed to writing by the hagiographers of the Old and New Testaments and by the Magisterium which assures its genuine transmission and authentic teaching.

To this written transmission *calamo et atramento* I think it is permitted to compare the Holy Shroud, true paleographic page, in single irrepitable edition, on which God's love is written with blood.

A document is characterised by the message it carries. If the Shroud is authentic, its message deserves the same respect with which Jesus opened the scroll of Isaiah, that Saturday in the Synagogue of Nazareth, applying the text to his own messianic mission. We can approach this document with true prophetic understanding, reading the same message of salvation—not on a parchment scroll but on a long linen sheet; not written by Isaiah or by his amanuensis but in an imprint not made by hands, an imprint produced by a singular contact with his humanity; inscribed not in ink but with his blood.

On this rests the enormous importance which scientific research undertakes concerning authenticity. Once this is firmly settled, it guarantees the contents of the message.

At the present state of affairs, while on one hand we are clarifying and verifying the perfect harmony between the reading of the Shroud and the narratives of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus of the Gospels, we ask ourselves if this fact authorizes us to surpass that anthropologic view which would confine the identity of the Man of the Shroud with one of the many inconspicuous crucified persons of history, so similar, by some inexplicable, fortuitous coincidence, to the case of "Jesus of Nazareth" ...; while on the other hand the identification with this Crucified would immit us to the plan of salvation, revealing it, because it is visual, with an immediate efficacy, either for

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its salvific value for whomsoever has faith in the Man-God Redeemer, or only for its historical, existential value, always valid, even for those who do not have this faith.

Precisely from this identification would come the value of the assimilation, emphasized by Christ himself and by the Magisterium of the Church, with the suffering brother in whom one discovers the "first-born of many brothers" (Rom. 8:29), he who was like all of us except for sin and to whom we all are similar insofar that earthly life makes us protagonists associated with his redemptive work by virtue of his passion and death.

In each case however, supposing the identification: Man of the Shroud = Jesus, it would be legitimate to appeal to the Shroud as an instrument of efficacious evangelization for those who are far from us, and a surprising means of re-evangelization for a de-Christianized world where the great majority has not been given a serious catechetical education.

Very valid also as a reminder on all levels of spirituality; on every level, one can point out the measure of love-charity which God requires from man: *love without measure*, which was the exemplary and efficient causative, realized and presented in the voluntary donation of the innocent Son of God, obedient even to death on the cross.

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What does this evangelization consist of? The Christian mystery was concentrated upon the fundamental, kerugmatic, announcement from the very origins of the Christian community, even before it was expressed in an ordered and complete exposition of the catechism (initiated by the Apologists) or of the systematically deepened theology (St. Irenaeus). This announcement emphasized principally the "facts", the "events", through which Christ announced and accomplished salvation, according to what St Luke wrote: "First he began to do deeds, then to teach" (Acts 1:1).

This was precisely the secret which rendered the primitive announcement a ferment, a potentially explosive nucleus capable of self-activation; solely the affirmation, proclaimed and confirmed by the miracles and prodigies of the Protagonist himself and by the witnesses of the Easter events, that Christ was the Lord, the Living, because He was risen from the dead: the historical element which concluded with the soteriological.

I quote as example St Peter (Acts 2:22): "*Jesus of Nazareth, accredited by God among you, by means of miracles, prodigies; ... he was delivered up to you, according to the pre-established plan and the foreknowledge of God, and you nailed him on the cross by the hands of impious men and killed him. But God has raised him up... "we are all witnesses..."*" (v. 32). And in his first letter he writes: "*If ... you must suffer for justice' sake, blessed you are! . . . Because Christ also died once for our sins, the Just for the unjust, that he might offer us to*

God. He was put to death according to the flesh, but raised to life by the Spirit." (I Peter 3:14, 18).

In this announcement—fundamental, primitive—re-echoes the authority of Christ, living Word of the Father, first and greatest evangelist; *it reaches the maximum expression of evangelization precisely in the final events of his life; his "divinely blessed passion"* (St Ign. M.), the death and glorious resurrection. These are the most convincing and efficacious evangelizing facts, the supreme revelation of God's love for mankind and the fulfillment of hope (cf. Esort. Apl. Ev. Nunt.).

Returning to the burden of this report: the connection between the message transmitted by Christ and the message contained in the archeological document under examination, becomes increasingly clearer. It is the same message that the Church, by divine mandate, has always expressed in the most ancient formulation of the faith: *"... suffered under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried, and on the third day rose from the dead according to the Scriptures..."*

Does the Shroud really contain this central message of the faith, transmitted uninterruptedly by the Church? And, if so, what concordance does it have with the Gospels, the primary source of this transmission of the faith?

In the answer to these complementary questions lies the full justification of the use of the Shroud as an instrument of evangelization, which will receive—*precisely from this concordance*—ulterior confirmation after the various and numerous scientific examinations now in progress and to be completed: the concordance of the *sindonic imprint with the Gospel of the passion*. Without this confirmation revealed by the presence of this singular imprint, all other examinations would be practically in vain; there would, in fact, be no possibility of finding an adequate solution to the problem of the authenticity of this sheet outside of the fragmentary documentation of its transmission. That is why the hermeneutics of this document call for the full collaboration of all researchers.

Therefore I set forth beforehand that it is from the researchers scientific language—a language fully corresponding to the human psychology—that what we wish to document emerges always more clearly in unconfusable harmony with the Gospels.

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As regards the application of penal procedure, the archeological data derived from the "reading" of the Shroud are those of Jesus' time but associated *with the name of Pontius Pilate*. One "reads" those proposals which were carried out, such as the scourging, and those not carried out, such as the solemnly-promised liberty—exposing in that procedure an imardonable incoherence.

The brutality used upon this Crucified, causing so rapid a death, is demonstrated in the goniometric analysis by the scientists' most advanced photographic technics.

In the new Shroud, of rare weave, differing from the old and ripped ones used for the common criminals condemned to death, we appreciate the audacity of Joseph of Arimathea, disciple in secret for fear of the Jews, who succeeded in rescuing the Master from an ignominious burial ... all in relation to the promise conceded by Pilate, loyal to the legislative norm of Rome—the tenth of Table XII. This law was more benevolent than the Judaic, for it allowed the exceptional burial of a Jew dead on the cross in the inviolate tomb of a rich man. A hurried and incomplete burial, because of the imminent Sabbath rest, on which the ritual washing of the corpse was not permitted, but could be performed only after the Sabbath.

These facts form the background to the account of the passion of Christ. But even more surprising is the confirmation, by analytical examinations, of the marks impressed upon the Shroud itself.

I will give only very brief mentions to shed light, if only in part, upon the parallel reading of the Gospel narrative. *Of the flogging*, I underline only the fact of the prevision made by Jesus to be "delivered into the hands of the gentiles to be mocked and scourged ..." (Mt 20:19).

The method used by the Romans—the gentiles—involved a greater cruelty and a procedure different (in the number of lashes and the type of whip) from that used by the Jews. The characteristics shown on the Shroud correspond to the Roman penal procedure. They remain unequivocal archeological demonstrations of Jesus' prophecy. At least in the case of the scourging.

Of the crown of thorns, described by St John as braided and placed on top of the head, I note only the uniqueness of the case in Jerusalem. It does not seem that Pilate, guardian of the law, ordered the crown, nor did he foresee it; but it was imagined and executed by the soldiers, inspired by the oriental custom of crowning kings with precious mitres which covered the head.

The crucifixion is described in the Gospels by a single word: "*They crucified him*" (Jn 19:18, Lc 23:33, Mc 15:24, Mt 27:35). In the Gospel narrative, I emphasize only the fact of the duration of Jesus' agony on the cross: three hours. Too short a time for a common crucified, notably long considering the treatment Jesus received. The directional examination of the blood streams from the carpus has allowed a goniometric calculation of the rotatory movements of the forearms and consequent displacements of the entire body, from the lower members to the upper body; movements necessary to avoid the initial stage of debility which would have procured death by asphyxia and orthostatic collapse in the space of 15-20 minutes.

St John says that *the head fell upon the chest* (Jn 19:30). This is documented on the Shroud: the sagittal distance from the *rima oris* to the sternum is notably reduced; *circa* 8 cm. instead of the 18 cm. with the head erect.

Finally, *the burial*, of which the Shroud is a direct witness, is shown to be: 1) incomplete, because hurried; proof is in the presence of the

beard and the hair, which in the final stage were customarily shaven; 2) the omission of the seven ritual washings; 3) the imprint of a naked corpse on the sheet used to cover him (the thousands of shrouds discovered by Gayet at Antinopoli were without imprints, not having been in immediate contact with corpses dressed in the normal way) ... : for Jesus, the clothing could not be used, as it had been divided among the soldiers ... That the burial was hurried is indirect proof that the Man of the Shroud was prepared for burial at an hour which did not permit the complete ritual, as could have been the case in the morning or early afternoon. The burial was toward sundown of a Friday, in the imminence of the Sabbath, at an hour when Judaic law permitted the postponement of the ritual until after the Sabbath rest.

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The fundamental lines of the "religious aspect" have been recapitulated by Vatican II in the Christocentric vision, realized in the sacred liturgy, "apex and origin" of the life of the Church, life which emanates from the Father, in the Spirit, to "unite all things in Christ" (Eph. 1:10).

This liturgical orientation of the mystery of the passion, death and resurrection, renewed in the eucharistic liturgy, is not recent. Ever since the dawn of the liturgical cult, it has been associated with a liturgical prescription regarding the altar-cloth to be used at every celebration of Holy Mass. It was at the Provincial Council of 325, held at the Baths of Trajan, in Rome, in the presence of 267 bishops and the Emperor Constantine, that Pope Sylvester established that "*...the holy sacrifice of the Mass be celebrated upon a cloth of linen consecrated by the Bishop, as if it were [being celebrated] upon the Clean Shroud of Christ*" (Labbe, Scr. Conc., p. 1542).

Thus for 1653 years, in the tenuous but continuous bond of this liturgical prescription, never abolished, Christ's faithful are reminded of the completeness of his central mystery, for which there is no substitute: mystery of the passion, death and resurrection, represented on the Shroud and renewed on all the altars of the world. And now that today, thanks to the powerful means of scientific research and social communication, this visible document becomes audiovisual; if it is used to complete the catechism of the passion of Christ, it allows us not only to announce but to demonstrate and reconstruct the facts, the movements, the reality that make evident the historicity of Jesus of the Gospels and to "*contemplate the authentic lineaments of the adorable physical figure of Our Lord Jesus Christ*", as it was expressed, with moving accents, by the Supreme Pontiff of sainted memory Paul VI, on the 23rd of November 1973, on the occasion of the historic television exposition.

That the Shroud is a valid support to exegetic studies, catechisms and conversion, is a fact of worldwide range which eludes the most accurate statistical control to take refuge in the invisible relationship between each soul and God.

Symbolic of the conversion of penitent souls, and of desire, an aching to return, and at the same time the discovery of God's love—all this leapt from the pen and the heart of St John, reporting the prophecy of Zechariah, verified at the moment of the Roman soldier's lance-thrust: "... *they shall look on Him whom they have pierced*", revealing the fundamental significance of that blood and that water that he saw gushing from the lance-wound ... blood and water quite visible on the Right hemithorax of the Man of the Shroud.

Pastors of souls of all the continents, who have sensed the validity and the pastoral incidence of presenting the message of Christ's passion in the light of sindonic documentation, have not hesitated to insert this specialized catechism into the diocesan pastoral program, entrusting it to catechists who have been strictly formed by courses of study and are furnished with proper visual and audiovisual equipment to facilitate the transmission; but who are, above all, richly representative of life apostolically lived.

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