

The Holy Shroud

Within reason it is desirable that legionaries should be informed in regard to everyday Church matters. For it is their mission to pass on their knowledge to everyone else. I am referring not only to the doctrines of the Church but also to the secondary side of things such as its miracles, devotions and special historical items. These have the tactical value that they are of absorbing interest and will be more eagerly listened to than the higher intellectual material. Likewise they form evidence of the best quality.

The set phrase at the present time is that science has disproved religion. And that this represents an advancing process. Every day science takes a giant step forward while we are led to suppose that religion is static and thus bound to disappear. The harm done by these suppositions is evident. People put religion from them as not worthy of thought, whereas its real power and interest is such that it has only to be presented to make itself felt in hearts.

Science at a Lower Level Reveals God

Granted that science is a vast wonder. But likewise it is no more than an expression or channel of God. Science

belongs to nature and nature belongs to God. To certain higher aspects of nature God imparts much of himself, including the power to think and to will. He acts thus with special force in the case of his masterpiece, the Blessed Virgin, and mankind in general. Science is on an abysmally lower level, the mechanical. But as it gives and displays God, it therefore must manifestly be wondrous in itself. However, to suggest that science or pure nature at their supremest could ever tell against divine truth or rival God himself would be a contradiction and an absurdity.

But the divine things have to be presented before they will be considered by mankind. If they are not presented, the mind will rest completely under the spell of the wonders of nature, so that man will be found committing what is veritably an idolatry; that is worshipping the tangible in the place of its Creator.

The folly is being committed of supposing that science never testifies to religion and is no help to faith. Such is far from being the case. Nature is not against God; neither is it merely neutral. If our supernatural sense is delicate, we can see the Catholic Church in its true glory, as a superb adventure, necessarily offering all that nature offers and then going on to the infinitely greater things of the higher order.

Nature is as much, and probably more at work in the world of religion than it is in the purely material world. Because religion has to be no less beautifully decked out to the intelligent mind than is pure nature. Moreover it cannot be allowed to seem to the human mind that faith is only a cold, abstract quality. The mind is too much a thing of impulses and emotions to leave it unprotected like that.

All the time God is, so to speak, balancing things in order to compensate for the apparently heavier impact of the natural than of faith. And all the time he is gently assisting faith. Learned men have laughed the Church off the stage and declared it to be dead. But suddenly – for instance – Lourdes stands up and leaves the learned ones without a word to say. Or one of the more significant discoveries is made, such as photography or nuclear science. At once the materialistic brigade proclaims that these will show up all the relics and religious fictions which have kept religion alive. So men with the up-to-date scientific equipment descend on those items and subject them to the new devastating tests. But then there is invariably a silence, because the alleged fake has withstood the investigations. Or sometimes indeed it is not such a silence which follows the researching, but an excited tumult. For the object under test has been proved not merely genuine but of a character far exceeding what it had seemed to possess previously.

The Electronic Microscope

A while ago I ventured to discuss the celebrated picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe, something I had not known much about until then. For long it had been in the classification which I have been describing, that it was strongly believed in and as violently controverted. Thus things stood till the age of scientific discovery when tests began to be applied to it. Disconcertingly, the picture triumphantly stood up to each succeeding one of those tests until finally the new electronic microscope was turned on to it. This demonstrated conclusively that it was no painting as had been contended by the doubters but was photographic in its character, a true representation

of Our Blessed Lady and in her eyes perfectly reflected were those other persons present in the bishop's room on that famous feast of the Immaculate Conception. Recall too that the conversion of all Mexico was accomplished within seven years of that event.

All over the world are priceless relics of one kind and another, garnished with every sort of scientific and other evidence of an unquestionable character, and yet only receiving a half-attention. I have in mind such wonders as the True Cross, the Blood of St Januarius, the Sacred Thorn of Andrea, and countless others, about which one has only to talk to awaken interest.

But it is in regard to a different item of the Church's inheritance that I am going to deal. I am going to tell the tale of the Holy Shroud. Nothing more amazing could be narrated. Knowing the facts, you have a thrilling meditation for yourself and a shattering weapon to use against the forces of unbelief.

Gospels Tell of the Shroud

I will begin by quoting literally from all the four Gospels to supply the foundation:

St Matthew: 'Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered the body to be given up. And Joseph, taking the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his new tomb which he had hewn out in the rock' (Mt 27:58-60).

St Mark: 'And Joseph bought a linen cloth, and took him down and swathed him in the linen cloth and laid him in the tomb.... and when the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalen and Mary the mother of James and Salome

brought sweet spices that they might go and anoint him' (Mk 25:46).

St Luke: 'Joseph took him down and wrapped him in a linen sheet and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb where no man had yet lain. But the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed after and beheld the tomb and how his body was laid. And they went back and prepared spices and ointments' (Lk 23:53-56).

St John: 'Joseph took away the body of Jesus. And there also came Nicodemus (who at first had come to Jesus by night) bringing a mixture of Myrrh and aloes ... they therefore took the body and wrapped it in linen cloths with the spices after the Jewish manner of preparing for burial' (Jn 19:39-40).

Here I interpose the comment that this does not refer to the full ritual of burial, which due to the approach of the Sabbath, had to be deferred until Sunday. Now to continue:

'And the other disciple, (John) outran Peter and came first to the tomb and stooping down to look in, he seeth the linen cloth lying there, yet he went not in. Simon Peter, therefore, cometh also, following and went in to the tomb. And he beholdeth the linen cloth lying there, while the napkin which had been upon his head was not lying with the linen cloths but was rolled up apart in a place by itself' (Jn 20:4-7).

There you have the first reference to the Holy Shroud. You will note that in all of the four gospels it is stressed in a particular way as if there were to be an after-history.

There are many of the principle events of gospel history which are attested to by only a single gospel. There is a whole section of persons whose special practice is to study intently every word of scripture and assert that it has an inspired meaning. What do they make of this gospel insistence on the linen cloth?

Its Subsequent Wanderings

We know nothing in regard to how and by whom the Shroud was preserved after the Resurrection Day. It is certain that loving hands took charge of it, but gaps and uncertainties mark its history. At some stage its course paralleled that of the True Cross itself. It came into the possession of the Roman Empire. The thought presents itself that St Helena, the mother of Constantine, had an analogous part in the taking possession of the Shroud to that which she filled in the finding of the True Cross and other transcendent relics. Therefore the Shroud was kept in the Chapel of Our Lady of Blachernes at Constantinople, definitely as far as the year 1269.

It disappeared when the city was taken by the crusaders and different versions exist as to the manner in which it found its way to France about 1353. But from time to time there is certainty about its location. At the instance of St Charles Borromeo it was transferred by the Duke of Savoy to Turin in 1578 where it has ever since been enshrined in the Royal Chapel adjoining the high altar in the cathedral there. It has always been known and venerated whether it was considered to be the miraculous object which it is or only as a superlative work of artistic piety.

In regard to the latter possibility, it was assumed that it was in the power of a great artist to produce such a triumph. However, I quote something which demonstrated the

contrary. During the researching of 1897 two celebrated Italian artists, Reffo and Casseti, were commissioned to paint replicas of the Shroud, an easier task it will be realised than to make the original. The result of their work appeared to be perfection. It was not possible to distinguish between the original and the replicas, no Shroud expert could detect any differences. But then photography was turned onto the imitations. The results were startling in their deficiencies, nearly every detail coming out crude and distorted. This has been judged to prove that to paint a negative from the Shroud would be beyond the power of even the most skilled artist.

The dimensions of the Shroud are three feet seven inches by fourteen feet three inches. It was originally bigger but relics were cut off each end in earlier times when people were more casual about such treasures. It shows two impressions, one of the front and one of the back of a human body. It is smudged, dirty, and the outlines indistinct. In parts it is stained and burnt as the result of being caught in a fire while it was in France.

As I have stated, up to the beginning of this century there was a clash of opinion in regard to its authenticity, and possibly the majority doubted its miraculous quality, believing that it was no more than an extremely expert piece of painting. Rather would it merit being regarded as a work of genius. Remember that it gave the effect of linen dating from the beginning of the Christian era. This progressively brought with it the doubt that the Shroud could last so long. This plausible objection has been completely refuted by the fact that fabrics, including linens, made in Egypt 3,000 years ago, are as good today as ever. Moreover the Shroud gave the impression of having only been briefly in contact with a body done to death

after ill-treatment of the most brutal and comprehensive kind, agreeing in every respect with the detailed account of Our Lords' tortures. Every impression, discoloration or damage was so brilliantly produced in reverse as to rival reality. So those who doubted its genuineness as the Shroud did not disparage it, but on the contrary revered and treasured it as a most perfect memorial of the greatest event in history.

Such was the situation up to the year 1898. In that year permission was given to exhibit the Shroud for investigation. Scientists of every kind hurried to submit it to the most up to date tools of their trades. It was tested as to the age claimed for it, and as to the source of each marking or stain.

The Advent of Photography

Above all it was subjected to photography which had been discovered in 1832. The artist given this responsibility by the king himself was Secundo Pio. As an expert he must have realised that he was going to find *something*. Assuredly the camera's searching eye was going to probe deep, to express the weaknesses, and most likely to show up the paint and brush marks of any artistic work. But can even he have sensed what he was to find?

As the chemical process advanced and the features took shape, he saw that the incredible was taking place. Before him in startling clearness was the figure of the dead Christ, and his privileged eyes were the first to see it! His mind may have needed a second or two to adjust itself and to diagnose what had taken place. It was something that today everyone in the world understands. He had reversed the usual photographic process, that is where an object is photographed yielding a negative, the latter

turning everything into its opposite and thereby into obscurity.

In a word Pio saw that the blessed Shroud by its contact with the body had mysteriously become a negative and that he himself had just reversed this; his negative was a positive. He had in his hands the portrait of the Saviour of the world fresh from his Passion and death.

Of course since then it has been photographed repeatedly with the result that it would be hard to understand the point of view that would today animate any attitude of denial. For scientific opinion is reasonably at one in its acceptance of these facts.

In particular it is to be noted that the photographic revelation in 1898 has made untenable the opinion that the Shroud was a masterpiece of painting. In 1936 Pope Pius XI declared that: 'The mysterious article was certainly not the work of any human hand.'

What we might call a quaint testimony is one which was published in 1937 by the *Scientific American*, a paper of the highest repute in its own sphere and not addicted to a support of religion. In publishing a completely favourable article by Paul Megnon on the Shroud, the journal insists that it is only concerned with the scientific aspects of this matter and that it regards Dr Megnon as having made his case.

I must repeat that in addition to photography every other conceivable test has been applied to the Shroud, including rays and chemicals not long known to us and principles of science only recently grasped. To every such approach the Shroud has remained impregnable in its evidence of genuineness. No loophole has been found, but on the other hand new qualities have been discerned. For example the acids and sweats produced from the skin of a tortured man.

Absence of Distortion

Moreover the photographic aspect may be said to be doubly miraculous in as much as the production of a film from a negative requires the even alignment of the two. In the case of the Shroud there is no such attempt to produce a precise alignment. The body was simply laid on the lower half of the cloth and the top part of the latter roughly folded back over the upper part of the body. According to the procedure of ordinary photography, such unevenness and gaps would be attended by the crudest results, whereas in the Shroud is the most perfect possible grading of continuity.

In quite a particular way, the countenance of the figure is shown in death as of great nobility and beauty of the pure Jewish type; hair and beard abundant; nose, mouth and brow of strength. Such is the effect that at the first glance the conviction is inescapable: It is the Lord!

The imprint of the face is more perfect than the rest of the body. This is strange by reason of the outstanding fact of the human face being its unevenness, to which it owes its features and accordingly its likeness. Moreover this creates its complication in the conveying of a contact image especially by photography. But of course where a miracle of such immensity is in question, difficulties do not enter in.

The intense examination of the Shroud renders up to us the entire history of the Passion. All of Our Lord's wounds can be located: the sign of the cruel scourging such as was inflicted by the Roman flagellum made of leather thongs, each one bearing two metal balls at their ends. Other marks show the wounds in the head, the shoulder lacerated by the carrying of the Cross, the wounds in hands and feet caused by the nails, and the

heart pierced by the soldiers lance after death. So unique from every point of view is this manifestation that it is impossible to see how any other miracle could move the mind more than it does. So the fullest use should be made of the Holy Shroud in our approach to those who are cold to religion. It shows the power of God pouring itself out in an overwhelming way and endorsing all that we have been taught about the sufferings of Our Lord. Studying the rich detail of the Shroud, it is impossible to avoid emotion and even to refrain from tears. The psychology of having a central gospel feature like the Shroud placed before us in all its photographic details is profound. It almost enables us to see those past events with our eyes and to read what amounts to a doctor's minute report of the satanic outrages to the Innocent One. We realise more acutely that he suffered it all for us and his place in our hearts widens to a new dimension.

A 'Must' for Every Scientist

It would be hard to conceive a more spiritual exercise than such a study of the Shroud. If it could be imposed as a *must* on every scientist in the whole world – and why not, for it offers mysterious depths of knowledge for each profession to study – the effect on them would be bewildering and thought-provoking, and a new attitude towards religion might result. It is true that not many of the doctors who take part in the investigations at Lourdes are converted to Catholicism, but certainly none of them are ever again found indulging in any foolish mockery of what happens at the shrine. We confidently assert the same in respect of any scientist who would study the Shroud seriously.

Is the mystic process which has given us the sublime image true photography? Though the final result imitates

photography, it must be taken as a matter of course that it far exceeds our photography. The latter is a clever human invention which utilised lenses and the laws of light to cast images onto a sensitised paper. But the image of the Shroud was placed on it without any mechanisms except perhaps angelic ones, and therefore hardly qualifies to be strictly styled photography. This higher nature enabled it to overcome what would have been insuperable obstacles to ordinary photography. For instance if the sensitised paper were not in proper juxtaposition with the film or negative, a worthless picture would result, whereas the Shroud was only conformed in a rough way to the contour to the Sacred Body. Nevertheless the impression produced is a flawless one, a perfect likeness.

Photography has its own laws and is pinned to them. But we do not know what the future will do in regard to the Holy Shroud. Just as successive waves of discovery in the past have found new features in the Shroud, so we must believe that the future will bring forth further ones. God's hands are not held in any way and it would seem certain to me that at some future juncture when human or diabolical malice launches some damaging assault on our faith, God will respond by delivering one of his most typical dynamic strokes.

The Future Will Reveal Further Wonders

But having made the Shroud the subject of one demonstration so colossal as to have the eyes of the entire world centred on it at the moment, could we not piously reason that he has gained from it all that he designs? I would have to think otherwise. God does not remove his gaze from what he has already done, and certainly he would never put out of his thought the garments which

Our Lord wore in the tomb for those 'three days'. He has preserved the Shroud through every sort of peril and has held it over to these times of special peril for religion to publish the stupefying and strange memorial of his son's ordeal for men.

So I would think that in the future we will see the Holy Shroud force itself upon the attention of mankind in some further miraculous way. Surely we are meant to talk about it and introduce it to the notice of every believer and half-believer.

I hark to that significant fact that all the four gospels, contrary to their ordinary practice, give so much attention to the Shroud which in relation to such a tragic moment would hardly have seemed a matter for recording at all. Unquestionably the Holy Spirit in so moving the pens of the four evangelists had in mind every stage of the mighty relic's history which is far from terminating in the sensational discovery in 1898 or in those which will follow from the present critical re-examination, that is of the year 1978.

Of course, experiment will have gained a tremendous impetus as a result of the present researches, and these will eagerly continue out of motives of very different quality. Some will hope to prevail against the supernatural side which is now the predominant one. Others will long for further tests of heavenly wonders, which indeed could be anticipated having regard to the fact that the Shroud is so intimately linked up with the Redemption.