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CONTEMPLATING GOD' S FACE?

Pastoral Perspectives

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CONTEMPLATING GODS'S FACE?

Pastoral perspectives

1. Locating us a little...

1.a. Where do we want to go?

One of the questions that each of us might have asked himself is.... What are the significance and the aim of what we can say definitely about the Holy Shroud of Turin? Which is the limit for our statements? Which is the extent that could be reached? What can we affirm? What would be the echo and incidence of our conclusions?

Perhaps none of us may have clear answers to these questions, as we would be touching slightly, scratching softly the mystery of a Man-God who «dwelt among us» and «his own received him not»¹. Thus, from our limited categories we want to open ourselves to a reality that goes far beyond our rational understanding by categories. And that could be the reason why Pope John Paul II affirms that: «the Holy Shroud is a challenge for the intelligence»². And, really, it is a fascinating challenge ...

To be able to discover the relation of this linen cloth to the passages of Jesus' life has attracted consistently the attention of thousands of people, even more after the spring 1898 when Secondo Pia, a lawyer and photographer, took the first photograph of the Holy Shroud. «Locked up in my room – as Secondo Pia wrote later in his Memories – and focused completely on my work, I was touched deeply when, during the film revealing process, for the first time I saw, appearing on the plate, the Sacred Face; it was extremely clear and my blood curdled at that sight»³. I think that the Holy Shroud creates the same fascination to all of us who have met Him.

Let us move gradually into what we want to find out, starting by the simplest question to be raised, such as: is the linen cloth in the Cathedral of Turin authentic or false? If false, which is the reason for making it? If the latter hypothesis is discarded, because the Shroud is a unique item, which cannot be reproduced, and there is no valid support for a false origin, is it really the print left by a real crucified man, or, instead, it is a hideous set up made to a corpse?

If we finally are able to confirm that it really is the print of a crucified man with all the features of a person who lived in Palestine during the First Century, who is the crucified man of whom we are talking about? Can we identify him? Do we know his name? Can we affirm that he is Jesus of Nazareth? And, finally, the natural question would be: is the linen cloth in the Cathedral of Turin the same one mentioned in the last chapters of the Sacred Gospels?

I think that is the basic question, for which, in general, so many scientists, theologians and laymen search an answer. This and nothing more but also nothing less. We want to be able to affirm in a categorical way that we really have the linen cloth that covered the holy body of our Savior and Reconciler on his return from death to life. This is where we undoubtedly want to reach.

¹ See *John 1:1-18*.

² H.H. John Paul II, *Speech during the celebration of the Word in Turin Cathedral in front of the Holy Shroud*, 24/5/1998,2.

³ *Sindon* n. 5, p. 52

In fact, a strong question is still outstanding as derived from the former reflections. Why? Why God wanted to leave us the peaceful and serene image of his face over this Linen cloth? Why did he leave us this «precious relic linked to the mystery of our redemption»⁴? Which is the message of the Holy Shroud for men in this new millennium? What does the face of the Crucified One in the Holy Shroud wants to transmit to us? Our aim in this lecture is to set up a few guidelines about the theological and pastoral implications of the Holy Shroud with regard to the New Evangelization challenge that His Holiness John Paul II has launched for this New Millennium of Faith.

1.b. Whom are we addressing?

« You will not be safe any more at any place in the world», was the comment that we listened with fear after the suicide destruction that took place on September 11, 2001. Perhaps one of the most dramatic but realistic conclusions to which the common man and woman may have arrived after the disasters that hit contemporary history, is precisely that «there is no safety at any place, we are not invulnerable, we are not eternal». The feeling of loneliness, fear and dread that affected people not only in the United States of America but worldwide, has undoubtedly marked strongly the beginning of this new millennium.

Doesn't this reality correspond to the description that the Pope made during his first visit to Turin? «The contemporary generation of mankind is also tortured by fear. They feel fear in an increased way. Perhaps those who are more conscious about the general situation of mankind and have also accepted God's death in the human world may feel this more deeply. Fear is not on the surface of human life»⁵.

Fear is not on the surface of human life. Despite the great achievements and progress made in many areas, the man discovers himself as someone who is fragile and weak. «Besides, the reality is that on the face of the world's current evolution, everyday there are more people who ask themselves extremely critical questions that are increasingly acute: What is the man? How to explain pain, evil, death, as all of them persistently exist despite such a huge progress? What is the worthiness of victories obtained at such a high price? What can man contribute to society, or what can he expect from society? What is beyond life on earth?»⁶

The end of man's life is precisely one of the realities that destabilize him more and puts him in front of his own contingency. «Men are afraid of death. Men defend themselves from death and the society tries to defend men from death»⁷. The human being suffers with the gradual decay of his body, because his maximum torment is his own perpetual disappearance. His own nature rejects the submission to a perspective of a total decline and a definitive departure from life.

«The seed of eternity that is in man's self, is irreducible to his nature and it stands up against death. All technical attempts, no matter how useful they might be, do not soothe men's anxiety, due to the fact that a prolonged biological longevity cannot fulfill the desire for eternal life, that is steadily within men's heart»⁸. And, precisely, it is that rebellion and anxiety that lead men to search for answers to the existential questioning about the sense of life.

⁴ H.H. John Paul II, *Greeting to the civilian authorities and the representatives of the world of the industry and the work and to all the population*, Turin, 13/4/1980.

⁵ H.H. John Paul II, *Homily in the Solemn Mass in the vestibule of the Cathedral of Turin*, 13/4/1980,2.

⁶ *Gaudium et spes*,10.

⁷ H.H. John Paul II, *Homily in the Solemn Mass in the vestibule of the Cathedral of Turin*, 13/4/1980,3.

⁸ *Gaudium et spes*, 18.

As far as the human being understands himself as a human being, his restless heart will be satisfied only with the expected answers, because «the common origin of these questions is that need for sense that is permanently in man's heart; in fact, the guidance to existence depends on the answers given to those questions»⁹.

1.c. The Holy Shroud at the beginning of the new millennium

«Undoubtedly it is in our time when a great deal has been written and discussed about man, it is the time for humanism and anthropocentrism. Paradoxically, however, it is also the time when man is most anguished with regard to his identity and destiny, and the time when the abatement of man has gone down to levels never suspected before, a time when human values are being infringed as never before»¹⁰.

When we see mankind that starts its peregrination throughout this new millennium, we can verify that the prophetic description made by Pope John Paul II in 1979 is in force. Consumerism, secularism, biased ideologies, the movement of cultural paradigms, the deliberate forgetfulness of God in daily life, are events that involve a huge social presence that cannot be undervalued in any way. Those events are the expression of what is called a *culture of death*¹¹. Globalization itself, with its great burden of ambiguity, brings forward the danger of cultural and economic hegemony that may have incidence on the less developed and more dependent countries.

Another risk to be faced also is that the technological development may promote an “ideology of progress”, which, ignoring the instrumental character of technology, leads to leaving God out of consideration, as if technology by itself may be able to solve all the fundamental problems of mankind. The document *Gaudium et spes* of the Vatican Council II denounces clearly this indifference and apathy with regard to God. «There are many people who currently forget this intimate union with God or deny it explicitly»¹². This attitude towards our Creator is becoming increasingly an institution within the current culture, together with an ethical relativism that affects seriously the daily life of people thus providing a libertine bias to our current culture.

In a world subject to the so-called “image culture”¹³ where everything «could be news or image, the most important thing is to call everybody's attention and awareness, either in a positive or negative way. Excitement and boredom are the categories that have taken over the former role of both rationality and irrationality»¹⁴. In this world of intense emotions, of

⁹ H.H. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 1.

¹⁰ H.H. John Paul II, *Inaugural Speech to the participants in the III General Conference of the Latin American Bishops in Puebla of Los Angeles*, 28/1/79, I, 9.

¹¹ «We recognize the dramatic situation in which the sin places the man. Because man, who was created good in the likeness of the same God and master responsible for the Creation, in sinning, has lost God's friendship, has become divided in himself, has broken solidarity with the fellow and destroyed the harmony of the nature. Here we recognize the individual and collective origin of the evils we complain of in Latin America: the wars, the terrorism, the drug, the misery, the oppressions and injustices, the institutionalized lie, the marginalization of ethnic groups, the corruption, the attacks to the family, the abandonment of children and old people, the campaigns against the life, the abortion, the instrumentalization of the woman, the depredation of the environment, in short, everything that characterizes a death culture» (*Santo Domingo*, Conclusions 9).

¹² *Gaudium et spes*, 19.

¹³ «New in its methods. New situations demand new paths for the evangelization... Since we live in a culture of the image, we must be audacious to use the means that the technique and science provide to us, without never putting in them all our confidence. On the other side, it is necessary to use those means that make the Gospel arrive at the center of the person and the society, to the culture roots themselves and “not in a decorative way, like a superficial varnish.» (EN 20) (*Santo Domingo*, Conclusions 29).

¹⁴ Pedro Morandé Court, *Una modernidad abierta a la amistad y al misterio (A Modernity opened to friendship and mystery)*, Magazine Vida y Espiritualidad, n. 30, p. 80.

exacerbated stimuli, of permanent uproar, where information is confused with fiction, where the drama of daily life is losing its significance, thus opening a way towards greater interior resonance, the human being is engaged in finding authentic and valid models for a full life. Used to be surrounded of meaningless faces, of faces tailored to meet the market demands, of faces that smile with no reason at all...it is in this context then that we have in front of us a face that appears in a serene, calm, gentle way, a face that must be contemplated.

2. The Gospel's Mirror

2.a. A necessary set out

How has the Catholic Church considered the Holy Shroud of Turin? Which is the position of the pontifical teachings with regard to the linen cloth of Turin? Which are the teachings offered by Pope John Paul II on this issue? From our own replies to these questions we will have a better understanding of the face that we see in the Holy Shroud and whether or not our conclusions are valid ones.

Let us recall how: «the sacred deposit of faith (*depositum fidei*), embodied in the Sacred Tradition and the Sacred Scripture was trusted by the apostles to the Church in whole»¹⁵ and that «that the act of interpreting in a true way the Word of God, orally or by writing, has been entrusted only to the living teachings of the Holy Church, that acts in the name of Christ Jesus (*Dei Verbum*, 10) that is to say, the bishops in communion with the Successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome»¹⁶.

«The Bishop of Rome, as the Head of the Episcopal College by Christ's will, is first preacher of faith, and the one who must teach the truth revealed and must show how it should be applied to human behavior»¹⁷. This mission is fulfilled «through a continued series of written and oral interventions, that are the ordinary exercise of the teaching of truth that must be believed and translated into life (*fidem et mores*)»¹⁸.

With regard to the Holy Shroud and its link with the history of Jesus, Pope John Paul II has been most clear when saying that: «because it is not a matter of faith. the Church has no specific competence to pronounce on these matters»¹⁹. However, we must not disregard the fact that, even if it has been scientifically attested that it is the true burial cloth of our Lord Jesus Christ, and this fact can help us to live our faith in a deeper way, surely this statement cannot be the basis for our faith. «That the Spirit of God that lives in our Heart may inspire upon each of us the desire and generosity needed to understand the message of the Holy Shroud as an inspiration for one's existence»²⁰. And that is precisely what we are trying to do....

In the same way, let us remember what the Catechism of the Catholic Church states about the private revelations. «Throughout the centuries there have been revelations known as "private", some of which have been recognized by the Church authorities. However, they do not belong to the trust of faith. Their role is not to "improve" or "complete" the final Revelation of Christ, but to help us in living it in a fullest way at a certain time of history. Guided by the Teachings of the Church, the feelings of the faithful (*sensus fidelium*) enable

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 84.

¹⁶ *Op.cit.*, 85.

¹⁷ H.H. John Paul II, *Catechesis of March 10, 1993*, the Creed, Tome IV/1, Vida y Espiritualidad, Lima 2001, p. 307.

¹⁸ *Op.cit.*, 308.

¹⁹ H.H. John Paul II, *Speech during the celebration of the Word in the Cathedral of Turin in front of the Holy Shroud*, 24/5/1998,2.

²⁰ *Op.cit.*, 8.

them to analyze and accept what in these revelations is an authentic call from Christ or the Saints of the Church»²¹.

2.b. Clearing the panorama...

Up to this point, we already have some ideas that will help us to get closer properly to the Holy Shroud in Turin. How are we going to do this? Is it an icon? Is it a relic? Let us briefly try to clear some of the terms.

«Relic», in the etymological language, means “remains”, with reference to the human body or part of it. In a wider sense, relics are also those objects that have been in contact with a person known as a saint. The Church, since its first days, has venerated the relics, first of the martyrs, and afterwards of the confessing saints. It can be said that this cult begins with the martyrdom of Saint Ignatius of Antioch²² who died in the year 110.

When the relic included the entire corpse, it was known as *corpus*; and if it was only a part of the body it was called *ex ossibus* or *ex capillis*. The relics resulting only from the contact with a body were called in the ancient days *brandea*, *memoriae*, *nomina*, *pignora*, *santuaria*. The buildings standing over the tombs of the martyrs were known as *basilicae* or *eclesiae ad corpus*, that is, built up exactly over the burial place. The idea that objects coming from the contact with the saints' tomb were as many relics facilitated in a significant way the dissemination and enhancement for its worship. Relics worshipping, when duly authorized by the Church authorities, is known as relative, due to the fact that the relic is worshipped because of the relation it had with the person of the blessed or saint, and finally, with God²³.

In the past, in the Eastern part of the world, the bodies of the martyrs were cut into pieces so that the blessings linked to their holy bodies, might reach a larger number of people. This practice was known as “translation” or transfer.. Undoubtedly, the Church was deeply concerned about how and why the relics were used. Unfortunately, ignorance or the taking advantage of issues, mainly during the Middle Age, gave way frequently to false relics.

When reading the Letran Concilium IV (1215) we find clearly that : « Due to the fact that the Christian religion has been frequently criticized for the open sale of relics from the Saints that are shown everywhere, in order not to be criticized in the future, we are setting up with this decree that the old relics should in no way be exhibited out of its capsule or put out on sale. With regard to the newly found ones, nobody should worship them publicly, unless previously authorized by the Roman Pontiff»²⁴.

On the other hand, the word “icon” comes from the Greek word *eikon* that means historical “image”. It is not by chance that the Greek culture assigned this term to a “portrait”, that is, to the real, concrete and historical face of a person, with no room left to personal fantasies. This word was used afterwards in the Eastern Church, in particular in Greece and the Slav countries.

²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 67

²² Saint Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch of Syria, is one of the so called apostolic fathers, that is, one of those who lived with some of the apostles. On his way to Rome, where he was going to be devoured by the wild beasts, he wrote seven letters to the Asia Minor churches, which have been kept as a testimony of that very ancient tradition.

²³ *Denzinger 342*: Roman Council of 933. In this way, we adore and venerate the relics of the martyrs and of confessors because we adore That, whose they are confessors and martyrs; we honor the servants so that the honor may go back to the Lord.

²⁴ *Denzinger 440*,

After the iconoclast controversy, which was brought to an end by the second concilium of Nicea in 787, the icon is partly considered as a proof of incarnation as well as a means for expressing our veneration to God the Saviour. «Because the more they are observed in their representation of image, the more they move to the observers for memories on the originals and a wish to worship and honor them, not certainly the real worship as for God which according to the faith is to be given only to the divine nature, but as it is done with the image of the precious and enliven cross, with the gospels and other sacred objects, that are worshipped with incense and lights, as it was done in the past ancient days. “Because to worship the image is to worship the original, and he who worships an image, is worshipping the person represented therein.»²⁵.

Let us remember that in year 726, Leon III, the Isaurico, had forbidden people to worship images in what is known as the “ iconoclasts’ war”. Despite being condemned at the Concilium of Nicea, peace was possible only in 843 when Empress Teodora restores definitely worshipping of images and the search starts for those images that had survived destruction, in particular the «acheiropitae»²⁶.

2.c. What does the pontifical Magisterium say about the Holy Shroud?

With the above terms clear, let us see the way in which the last century Popes have stated with regard to the Holy Shroud of Turin and how significant those statements have been. However, every year on May 4, there is a liturgical memorial of the Sacred Shroud, and it is most significant with regard to the recognition of its authenticity by the Church, exactly one day after the celebration of the feast for the finding of the Holy Cross. The prayers service for the Holy Shroud and the relevant mass were approved by Pope Julius II in 1506.

Pope Pío XI, Achille Ratti, on March 21, 1934, the day when in 1931 Giuseppe Enrie presented officially the photographs of the Holy Shroud, said: « This photograph is more worthy than any other study». On September 5, 1936, addressing a pilgrimage of Catholic Action youth to whom he delivered a print of the Sacred Face as the one shown in the Sacred Shroud, the Pope stated: «This comes from that still mysterious object, certainly not done by human hand, as has been demonstrated in the case of the Holy Shroud of Turin. We refer to it as mysterious, because there is still great mystery involved in this sacred linen cloth, as no other on earth; according to what has been ascertained up to now in the most positive way, leaving aside all preconceived idea about faith and piety, it is surely not a work done by man»²⁷.

During the International Congress of Sindonology in 1950, Pío XII addressed the participants with a blessing message in which he referred to the Holy Shroud as an «extraordinary vestige of the Passion of the Divine Redemptor» imploring for « universal worship to such a significant relic». Through a radio broadcasted message closing the National Eucharistic Congress of 1936, the Holy Father referred to Turin as «the city of the Holy Sacrament that keeps as a precious treasure the Holy Shroud, thus putting in front of us the commotion and comfortness of the death body and sad face of Jesus».

The Good Pope, Pious John XXIII, on February 16, 1956, in front of the worshippers of the Holy Shroud, who were presenting him with a photographic documentation of relic, he exclaimed several times : “*Digitus Dei est hic*” (God’s finger is here!).

²⁵ *Denzinger* 302

²⁶ Small cloth not painted by a human hand.

²⁷ *L’Osservatore Romano*, 7 – 8 September, 1936.

During a mass celebration in Saint Peter's basilic on June 4, 1967, Pope Paul VI said: «All artists have tries to translate in colors and shapes, the divine face of Jesus, and we have not been satisfied. Perhaps only the image of the Holy Shroud gives us something of the mystery of this human and divine figure, a wonderful document of Christ's passion, death and resurrection written with blood characters».

It was in front of millions of television watchers all over Europe that in an exceptional message broadcasted on November 22, 1973 by Eurovision on the occasion of the first presentation to the press and television means, that Paul VI stated: «We are most fortunate that this true and surviving image of the Holy Shroud allows us to contemplate the authentic design of the adorable physical figure of our Lord Jesus Christ, who really comes to calm down our avidity – so ardent now – to know him also in a visible way! Or are we may be like those pilgrims who walking in the way to Emmaus with cloudy eyes could not recognize that the Risen Christ Jesus was the pilgrim who was accompanying them in their walk?...The face of Christ, represented in the Holy Shroud, is so true, so deep, so human and divine, as we have never been able to admire and worship in other image. No matter what the historical or scientific judgement of demanding researchers might express about this surprising and mysterious relic, we cannot exempt ourselves from believing that this relic may lead the visitors not only to observe in a sensitive and close way the external and mortal lines of the wonderful figure of the Saviour, but to have them involved into a deeper vision of his hidden and fascinating mystery»²⁸.

Pope John Paul II has left behind beautiful words during the various visits he has made to Turin. Upon his arrival in Turin, during his first trip on April 13, 1980, in front of the door of the sanctuary of La Consolata and in front of the Italian authorities, the Holy Father made his first programmatic speech. After the official greetings, the Holy Father referred to his personal visit returning from the 1978 Conclave: «When early in September 1978 I came here to Turin as a pilgrim to worship the Holy Shroud, a distinctive relic linked to the mystery of our redemption, I could not foresee then that immediately after the election of my beloved predecessor John Paul I, I was going to come back, in less than two years with other responsibilities and in a different framework»²⁹.

At the homily in the High Mass, in the atrium of the Cathedral in Turin, he will refer again to the Holy Shroud by saying: «It could not be different (with regard to the witnesses of resurrection) in the city that keeps a unique and mysterious relic such as the Holy Shroud, most singular witness –if we accept the arguments of so many scientists – of the Easter: of the passion, death and resurrection. A mute witness but at the same time a surprisingly eloquent one!»³⁰.

One week later, at the Marian invocation of the *Regina Coeli*, in Rome on April 20, 1980, he will evoke his visit to the city of Turin in the following terms: «And also the Cathedral in Turin, where for many centuries is being kept the Holy Shroud, the most splendid relic of the passion and resurrection»³¹.

Eighteen years later, on the occasion of the 500 anniversary of the consecration of the Cathedral of Turin, of the first centennial of the Exhibition of 1898 and the anniversary of the first photography that contributed in a determined way to the beginning of the scientific research about the Holy Shroud; a public Exhibition was held in 1998. For this reason, Pope John Paul II starts again a pastoral trip to the archdiocese of Turin. During his visit, the Holy

²⁸ *Sindon*, 19/1974, p. 8.

²⁹ H.H. John Paul II, *Greeting to the civilian authorities and the representatives of the world of the industry and the work and to all the population*, Turin, 13/4/1980.

³⁰ H.H. John Paul II, *Homily in the Solemn Mass in the vestibule of the Cathedral of Turin*, 13/4/1980,6.

³¹ H.H. John Paul II, *Dominical Speech in the Regina Coeli laetare*, 20/4/1980,1.

Father will mention in several occasions the Holy Shroud, in particular during his address in the liturgical celebration of the Mass in the Cathedral of Turin in front of the Holy Shroud.

In the morning, during the mass for the beatification of three servants of God in the Piazza Vittorio Veneto he refers twice to the Holy Shroud, as the appealing icon of the passion of Christ. «It is a perspective that allows us to understand better the message of the Holy Shroud, an appealing icon of the passion of Christ. I thank the Lord for the opportunity of returning to Turin to see once more this afternoon this extraordinary testimony of the sufferings of Christ...The Holy Shroud! What an eloquent message of sufferings and love, of death and of immortal life! It allows us to understand the conditions which Jesus wanted to go through before going up to heaven. This extremely precious linen cloth, with its dramatic eloquence, is offering us the most significant message for our life: the source of all Christian life is the redemption obtained for us by our Saviour, who took our human condition, suffered and died and resurrected for us. The Holy Shroud is all that. It is a unique testimony»³².

On the afternoon of that same day, the Holy Father went to the Cathedral of Turin to worship the Holy Shroud. First, he worshipped the Holy Sacrament and prayed for a while in the Nativity Chapel. Afterwards he prayed in silence in front of the Holy Shroud and then he presided a Liturgy of the Word.

In many ways the Holy Father will refer to the Holy Shroud. Sometimes he will refer in a direct way, that is, he will describe what the Holy Shroud is, and in other occasions he will refer to what the Holy Shroud represents and the message that it transmits. He begins his address referring to «the precious linen cloth that helps us to understand better the mystery of the love that the Son of God has for us»³³ as it is an appealing image of an indescribable pain»³⁴. For this gift the Holy Father thanks God. For the Holy Father it is the «mirror of the Gospel»³⁵ as the linen cloth is «deeply linked to what the gospels tell us about the passion and death of Jesus»³⁶ and «therefore, the Holy Shroud constitutes a really unique symbol that brings us to Jesus»³⁷.

In the last part of his address, he will refer to the Holy Shroud as «the icon of Christ abandoned in the dramatic and solemn condition of death»³⁸ and he concludes by saying that the Holy Shroud presents Jesus to us at the time of his maximum impotence, and reminds us that in the annulment of that death rests the salvation of the whole world»³⁹.

Certainly, after this brief review of the most important referrals by the Popes of the Twentieth Century, we can come to some conclusions: the Holy Shroud of Turin has been called by the ordinary pontifical teachers as a relic, meaning that it belonged or was in direct contact with our Lord Jesus Christ. This has been recognized not only in an explicit way by the current pontiff but it is also worshipped in an explicit way through a liturgical memory. It is important, however, to bear in mind the accent given by the Holy Father at the last public exhibition of the Holy Shroud. This time he did not any more called it publicly, a relic.

³² H.H. John Paul II, *Homily during the Mass of beatification of three servants of God in the Piazza Vittorio Veneto*, 24/5/1998, 5.

³³ H.H. John Paul II, *Speech during the celebration of the Word in the Cathedral of Turin in front of the Holy Shroud*, 24/5/1998, 1.

³⁴ Op.cit.,1.

³⁵ Op.cit.,3.

³⁶ Op.cit.,3.

³⁷ Op.cit.,3.

³⁸ Op.cit.,7.

³⁹ Op.cit.,8.

3. A face to contemplate

«Is Christ himself the one printed in this death linen cloth? If it is not Christ, who can then be? May be someone condemned for a common fault? But then, how to conciliate all that has been said with the magnificent noble expression that can be observed in this image?»⁴⁰. That was with those words that Dr. Yves Delage, atheist and freethinker, brought to an end his famous lecture at the Science Academy in La Sorbona on April 22, 1902.

Undoubtedly, the Holy Shroud offers a paradoxical message. We know in the first place that those are the prints of a man who had suffered the terrible and atrocious tortures of someone condemned to death by crucifixion. However, the face of the man in the Holy Shroud in Turin does not match with that of a desperate person, nor to that of a criminal condemned to terrible scourging and to violent death. On the contrary, it is a face that opens for us, in a gradual form, the reality of mystery.

When looking at the image in the Holy Shroud we feel something of what is described by Daniel Rops. «This face is amazing, it is almost superhuman...it is the face that we would like to contemplate in Christ in eternity»⁴¹. We may say, like Paul VI, that it is the face of Christ, so real, so deep, so human and divine, as in no other image can be admired and worshipped.

3.a. What is Jesus Christ revealing to us?

But, going back to the initial questionings...What is Christ revealing to the contemporary man? What can he say to today's man? In the first part of this paper we have seen how the man living in a world where most of the time God is forgotten, where there is a relativism of truth and apathy to get into the depth of life aims and looks for answers for his deepest concerns and fragilities. «Men have many limitations; however, they have an unlimited feeling in wishing and claiming for a superior life»⁴².

That is why God, who is a Loving Father, comes up to meet his most beloved creature. «God looks for men, as his particular property in a way different from the rest of the creatures. They are a property of God by a choice of love: God looks for men moved by a Father's heart»⁴³. Through the incarnation of the Verb in the Virgin Mary's womb, everything was created again, everything found its real, full and definite sense.

«Truly, "God's Verb, taking as a whole the human nature in everything except sin (cf. Hb 4, 11), expresses the Father's plan, of revealing to the human person the way to reach the plenitude of his own vocation [...] Thus, Jesus not only reconciliates men with God, but he also reconciliates him with himself by revealing to him his own nature" (Gaudium et Spes, 22). With these words the Fathers at the Synod, in the framework of the Vatican Concilium II, have reaffirmed that Jesus is the way to be followed for the total personal fulfillment, that ends in the definite and eternal meeting with God. "I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through me" (Jn 14, 6). God " has predestined us to become conformed to the image of his Son, that he should be the firstborn among many brethren" (Rm 8, 29). Jesus Christ is, therefore, the definite answer to the question about the sense of life and to the crucial questions that come up also to many men and women in the American continent »⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ *Revue Scientifique*, May 31, 1902.

⁴¹ Daniel Rops, *Brief History of Christ Jesus*, p. 82

⁴² *Gaudium et spes*, 10.

⁴³ H.H. John Paul II, *Tertio millennio adveniente*, 7.

⁴⁴ H.H. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 10.

The Incarnated Verb, by being God and Man in a full way, will reveal to men the real sense of his life, that is the Father's Plan; outlining for them in that way their identity and mission. «The mystery of man is only made clear in the mystery of the Incarnated Verb»⁴⁵. He and no other will be the answer to those questions that come and overwhelms his heart, and by revealing to him who he is, he will be responding to his own nature, created after the image of God.

Jesus will reconcile and heal all that was damaged and corrupted since that first and ominous disobedience of the Creator's creature: the original sin. By the reconciliation of men with God, with himself, and his brothers, God is revealing men the true nature: the man was created to love and to live fully the dimension of the communion-meeting.

3.b. Show us your Face

The question to be made now is: How and where can we meet Jesus? How could we come to that close meeting with the Son of God? Is the Holy Shroud the proper and valid means to contemplate the face of Jesus and thus meet with Him?

Certainly, the faith, gift and supernatural virtue, springs out from the personal meeting with the Lord of Life. This virtue is not easy to have as even the apostles themselves did not find it easy to believe in the Risen Christ Lord. Let us bring to our mind when the apostle Thomas believed only after he had personally verified the miracle that his brothers had shared with him. « Really, if we were only to see and touch his body, but it is only through faith that we can overcome the mystery of that face»⁴⁶. That is the way we are called to go over: «It is only through Faith that we would actually go to God»⁴⁷.

It is easy to ascertain how the issue of "Contemplating Christ's face" is frequent and reiterative in the teachings of His Holiness John Paul II. It is for that reason that it should be proposed again vigorously and with conviction, in order to provide a solid theological basis to the various pastoral projects on behalf of the New Evangelization.

Throughout the history of salvation we have already learned how the man has eagerly tried to contemplate the face of his God. «About you my Heart says: look for his face. Yes, Yavheh, I am looking for your face: do not hide your face to me»⁴⁸. The face of our Lord is deathly feared by man (Jc 13,22; Ex 33,20) because of his sin (Is 6,5; Sal 51,11); it is however his life and salvation. «That Yahveh is just and the just men love him, the upright men shall see his face»⁴⁹. Exceptionally, the highest point is the daring request made by Moses: «Show me your face»⁵⁰ That will only be listened partly by God, as «for no man sees me and still lives»⁵¹.

In the Incarnation of Verb, God becomes one of us and will have a concrete language and face. Jesus himself will say to us: «He who sees me sees also the Father»⁵². The beauty of Christ's face will be the reflection of his own divinity and humanity expressed by means of "deeds" and "words" ⁵³. His word will not be less important than his look as both of them take us to the reality of the Logos Incarnated in the world.

⁴⁵ *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

⁴⁶ H.H. John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 19.

⁴⁷ *Op.cit.*, 19.

⁴⁸ *Psalm 27 (26)*, 8-9.

⁴⁹ *Psalm 11 (10)*, 7.

⁵⁰ *Exodus 33*, 18.

⁵¹ *Exodus 33*, 20.

⁵² *John 14*, 9.

⁵³ See *Dei Verbum*, 2.

The old aim of «meeting face to face with God» could not receive a better and most surprising response than to contemplate Christ's face. «God has truly blessed us with Him and has “showed his shining countenance to us” (Sal 67(66),3). At the same time, God as man as he is, Christ reveals also for us the true face of men, “he truly shows man to the man himself” (Gaudium et spes,22)»⁵⁴.

In this regard, the Holy Father says: Besides, he who comes near the Holy Shroud is aware that he is not holding in himself people's Heart, but that he sends us He whose service brought the loving Providence of the Father...Thus, the Holy Shroud is a really unique sign that brings us to Jesus, to the true Word of the Father, and invites us to shape our life after the life of He who rendered himself for our salvation.»⁵⁵.

3.c. A face of sorrow

In his apostolic letter, *Novo millennio ineunte*, Pope John Paul II, invites us to contemplate in two ways the Face of the Son: the Face of sorrow and the Face of the Risen Christ. «In contemplating Christ's face, we confront the most paradoxical aspect of his mystery, as it emerges in his last hour, on the Cross. The mystery within the mystery, before which we cannot but prostrate ourselves in adoration»⁵⁶.

When getting closer to the Face of sorrow of the Crucified Jesus Christ the episode of the agony in the Garden passes before our eyes, together with the cup of suffering, and the cry “*Eli, Eli, lema sabactani?*”, scorned and abandoned by his friends, with only few faithful ones, with the Father's silence...The price to bring back man to his true face, that is the Father's face, was for Jesus to take on the face of man, including burdening himself with the “face of sin”. While he identifies himself with our sin, Jesus' anguished cry is revealing his feelings of great loneliness and abandonment. However, in the midst of that deep darkness, the Crucified One abandons himself totally to the protection of the Father: “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit,” and having said that, he expired»⁵⁷.

It is in the image of pain of the Crucified One that we can see our pain. The image of human suffering, the icon of the suffering of the innocent of all times, of the innumerable tragedies that have marked the history of humanity, as mentioned by the Holy Father with reference to the Holy Shroud in his address in the Cathedral of Turin. «When we think about these dramatic situations, the Holy Shroud moves us not only to leave behind our selfishness but also to discover the mystery of pain, that sanctified by Christ's sacrifice, gives way to salvation for the whole humanity»⁵⁸.

The Holy Shroud invites us to contemplate the mystery of love of a God who incarnates and dies for the reconciliation of his creature. «It invites us to discover again the ultimate cause for the redeeming death of Jesus»⁵⁹. It is precisely this awareness that must take us away from the tremendous reality of sin. «The Holy Shroud echoing God's word and centuries of Christian beliefs, whispers to us: believe in God's love, the greatest treasure given to humanity, and get away from sin that is the greatest disgrace in history »⁶⁰.

⁵⁴ H.H. John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 23.

⁵⁵ H.H. John Paul II, *Speech during the celebration of the Word in the Cathedral of Turin in front of the Holy Shroud*, 24/5/1998,3.

⁵⁶ H.H. John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 25.

⁵⁷ Luke 23,46.

⁵⁸ H.H. John Paul II, *Speech during the celebration of the Word in the Cathedral of Turin in front of the Holy Shroud*, 24/5/1998,4.

⁵⁹ Op.cit.,5.

⁶⁰ Op.cit.,5.

3.d. The face of the One who is Risen

The contemplation of the Crucified One cannot be reduced to the face in Good Friday. He is the Risen One! If this is not true...our faith would be senseless⁶¹. The Resurrection was the Father's response to Christ's obedience: «In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Son though he was, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him »⁶².

Now in the *Novo millennio ineunte*, we read that the Church, contemplating the Crucified Christ, goes out, as the first disciples, to announce the Good News to the whole world, «The disciples rejoiced at the sight of the Lord»⁶³. This plain and significant phrase tells us about that reality so much expected by the disciples and by each one of us. The Lord has Risen and now life has sense. He has defeated death. «Yes. The only key against man's death is in God's hands. The witness of God alive: "the first, the last, the Living One"»⁶⁴.

The Holy Father will tell us that: «it is precisely in this time of ours when in the human conscience, in the human acts the perspective of "man's death" as a result of "God's death" has been opened, right at a time when in a particular way, we must know the truth about the resurrection of the Crucified One. It demands also that the testimony of resurrection must be more eloquent as never before»⁶⁵.

And it is just, from that perspective of faith, that the calm face of sorrow in the Holy Shroud reminds us that: «We remember Christ's victory, as it gives us the certainty that the tomb is not the ultimate end of life. God calls us to resurrection and to the immortal life»⁶⁶. Monsignor Rino Fisichella, Auxiliary Bishop in Rome, said: «In the face of the Crucified One we can recognize our pain; however, in the splendor of his glory as One who is Risen we see that all limits are abolished, even death in itself, with the vision of a life that will last forever»⁶⁷.

4. On the paths of God

The Holy Father John Paul II in the convocation document for the Great Jubilee of the year 2000 , *Incarnationis Mysterium*, tells us about the necessity of looking for a favourable sign to be able to discover the presence of God in our time: «The celebration of the jubilee creates an increasing interest for those who are looking for the proper signal that may help them discover the features of God's presence in our age»⁶⁸.

The ways of God are mysterious but they are the true ways. For the man of the new millennium it is a scandal to get across "traces of the presence of God still alive in our age" as those impressed in the Holy Shroud of Turin. Finding ourselves facing a reality that is

⁶¹ See 1Co 15,14.

⁶² Hebrews 5,7-9.

⁶³ John 20,20.

⁶⁴ H.H. John Paul II, *Homily in the Solemn Mass in the vestibule of the Cathedral in Turin*, 13/4/1980, 6.

⁶⁵ Op.cit.,5.

⁶⁶ Op.cit.,6.

⁶⁷ Mons. Rino Fisichella, *To contemplate the Face of Christ*, L'Osservatore Romano, 24 August 2001, p. (439) 11.

⁶⁸H.H. John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium*,3.

beyond the limited and narrow limits of our own reasoning, demands from us a true attitude of humbleness⁶⁹, contemplation and authentic conversion.

«When internally impressed and moved at contemplating»⁷⁰ this Face of Sorrow and of Resurrection, that is alive and victorious, men will be able to understand how: «The encounter with God produces a great transformation in those who are not deaf to Him. The first reaction to this transformation is to communicate to others the richness acquired in the experience of this encounter»⁷¹.

That is the way of hope that we are called to go over in this new age that is open like a huge ocean in front of the Church. «The contemplated and beloved Christ is inviting us once more to go on the way: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28,19). The missionary mandate takes us into the Third Millennium inviting us to share the same enthusiasm of the very first Christians»⁷².

4.a. A Horizon of Hope

In this new millennium we are urged to "attest for our faith and our hope" in a world that needs real witnesses to show that Christ is real, that God's love is real, and that they will save us. «This successful experience comes from the certainty that Christ died and resurrected for us, that is, to provide man with the real meaning of life, to be the cornerstone of history, light in the darkness of intellectual and moral misconduct, salvation of mankind, untiringly wishful for peace and happiness»⁷³, were the words of the Holy Father in his first visit to Turin.

The Holy Shroud of Turin brings us up to that reality: death has been defeated already. The man has hope. There is a real face that talks to me loudly and responds to me with his own testimony: «These things I have spoken to you that in me you may have peace. In the world you may have affliction. But take courage, I have overcome the world!»⁷⁴.

Only through the encounter with Jesus alive we might be able to live the horizon of the New Evangelization that the Holy Father invites us to live. «In an attitude of openness to unity, the fruit of truly communion with the One who is Risen, the particular Churches, and inside them each of one of its members, will discover through their own spiritual experience that the "encounter with Jesus alive" is "the path for conversion, communion and solidarity". And as far as these goals may be reached, it will be possible to have and increasingly greater dedication to the new evangelization in America»⁷⁵.

⁶⁹ "Truth is beyond understanding when this is not humble." Saint Gregorio Magno; *Homily 18, on the Gospels*.

⁷⁰ H.H. John Paul II, *Speech during the celebration of the Word in the Cathedral of Turin in front of the Holy Shroud*, 24/5/1998,3

⁷¹ H.H. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 68.

⁷² H.H. John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*,58.

⁷³ H.H. John Paul II, *Greeting to the civilian authorities and representing of the world of the industry and the work and to all the population*, Turin, 13/4/1980.

⁷⁴ John 16,33.

⁷⁵ H.H. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*,7.