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Front Cover: Joseph M. Gambescia, MD, (1919-1991). Photo property of the Gambescia Family; used with permission.

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Top: Dr. Gambescia was Chief of Laboratories and Captain in the U.S. Army at the 120th Station Hospital, Army Hepatitis Research Center in Germany (1946-1948). Photo property of the Gambescia Family; used with permission.

Bottom: Shroud of Turin, 1898. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

Remembering Joseph M. Gambescia: A Man of Science and Faith

Stephen F. Gambescia

"Science does not prove anything; it can only disprove something." This is how my father, Joseph M. Gambescia, responded each time he was asked, "Is the man of the Shroud of Turin Jesus Christ?" The question would typically arise following his popular, 90-minute presentations on the shroud—surely one of the most peculiar artifacts in western history—which included physical description, archeological history, medical conjecture, scientific treatment, and discussion of the religious significance of the object. The question would also come after long interviews with journalists and students from all disciplines and professions who sought answers to the many mysteries of the Shroud of Turin.

My father admitted that he took a few months to ponder the question when it first arose. He determined there must be some reasonable explanation for the image on this shroud—therefore, there was no mystery. In 1955, Gambescia, a graduate of Hahnemann Medical College in Philadelphia, board certified in internal medicine, was approached by a Redemptorist father, Adam J. Otterbein, to join his team of sidonologists on the nascent Holy Shroud Guild, based in Esopus, New York, which became the premier American organization devoted to the study of the shroud.[1] Father Otterbein was looking for a man of medicine, a scientist, but also someone who would show a level of deference to help explain the suffering that appeared to have taken place for the man of the shroud.

At that time my father was hitting the prime of his medical career, having completed postgraduate training in pathology and medicine, as well as a two-year stint in the U.S. Army Medical Corps, working on hepatitis. But he was also wary of the limitations of science, which he

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1. Retrieved from https://www.shroud.com/78exam.htm.

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once described as a "sacred cow," and had been primed by a powerful religious epiphany while studying as an undergrad at Villanova University. Despite his eclectic range of experiences, there was little that could prepare him for what was to come—namely, taking the lead in a medical analysis of the shroud, including a forensic study of the various methods and stages of death of an individual undergoing crucifixion.[2]

Sindonology, the scientific study of the Shroud of Turin, is an esoteric area of study with a small number of devoted practitioners worldwide. Their ranks include a range of professional backgrounds and training, including photography, x-ray, microscopy, a range of spectrometry, textiles, chemistry, biochemistry, physics, forensics, pathology, archeology, materials conservation, and biblical studies. Through such varied methods, sindonologists aim to answer such questions as: What does this image reveal? What is the exact nature of the image? How did the image get on the cloth and stay there? and Who is the man of the shroud?

The Shroud of Turin Research Project (STURP), which assembled to study the Shroud during its 1978 public exposition in Turin, Italy, consisted of 32 American investigators. For my father, who served on the STURP team, the study of the Shroud would become a lifetime occupation. Decades after his death he would be credited for a hypothesis about the position of the feet and nails used for the crucifixion of the man of the shroud.

Examination of the Body of a Saint

Gambescia's experience may have gained him a reputation as someone comfortable working the borderlands of religion and science, because one decade after beginning his study of the shroud, he was one of two physicians asked to examine the body of John Neumann (1811–1860). The fourth bishop of Philadelphia (1852–1860), Neumann's contributions to the city are indelible, including his founding of a women's religious order and the building of a robust system of Catholic schools and parishes, including the Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul.[3] Neumann's body was exhumed as part of the canonization process: specifically, the movement from "Venerable" to "Blessed" status—the final stage before formal sainthood. (When canonized, Neumann

2. This was essentially the charge given to Gambescia from Rev. Adam J. Otterbein in 1955, soon after the Holy Shroud Guild was formed.

3. Multiple authors, *The Catholic Standard and Times*, June 9, 1977: 41–51.

became the third American saint.)[4] In addition to examining the body, Gambescia was asked to review medical records and reports of miracles attributed to Neumann.

When Gambescia examined Neumann's body in November 1962, he was chief of gastroenterology (later chief of medicine) at Saint Agnes Medical Center and professor of medicine at Hahnemann Medical College. His fellow examiner, William Zintl (1913–2013), was chief of surgery at Misericordia Hospital in West Philadelphia. The two physicians had much in common: both were devout Catholics who served in World War II and as personal physicians to Cardinal John Krol.

Dr. William Zintl (left) and Dr. Joseph M. Gambescia were appointed by a canonical exhumation commission to examine the body of John Neumann, buried in St. Peter the Apostle Church in Philadelphia. The examination of the body on November 8, 1962 was a necessary step before conferring "Blessed" to Bishop John Neumann. Photo shows the two physicians working with cloth to secure relics from Neumann's corpse. Relics were both of body and materials and were hand delivered to church authorities in the Vatican. Photo by Robert S. Halvey. Used with permission from the Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

4. Beatification is a status given before sainthood and involves evidence of a miracle; one would be called "Blessed." Bishop Neumann was beatified on October 13, 1963 by Pope Paul VI, after two miraculous cures where attributed to him and certified. Max Pauli, CSsR, "St. John Neumann, you've done it again!" *The Catholic Standard and Times*, June 9, 1977: 28–29.

As in the case of the shroud, no training or residency could have prepared my father for what the authorities in Rome had asked him and Zintl to do. The task was both straightforward and esoteric. The charge was first to validate that the body deposited in the crypt 103 years earlier was that of John Neumann. They were also to report on the condition of the body. To do this they would examine the body from head to toe and note any peculiar findings. Zintl, the surgeon, carved a few pieces of bone that would be sent to Rome to be splintered and encased as relics, but what they found was much dust. Gambescia explained later that the discovery deepened his understanding of the biblical words spoken on Ash Wednesday: "Remember, O man, that dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return."[5]

It was all in a day's work: undressing, examining, taking notes, redressing the body, inserting prosthetics, and taking photographs, to bring this revered shepherd of the church to public view again at St. Peter the Apostle Church in Philadelphia. Neumann was placed in a new casket with a glass front and set to a side altar (later moved to the front), where thousands of people each year visit to glimpse an American saint, to pray, and often to ask for his intercession. In a letter to the Philadelphia Archdiocesan Chancellor Monsignor John J. Noone in November 1962, Michael J. Curley, CSsR, wrote that the exhumation of Bishop Neumann was "done with reverence, efficiency, and the calm and common sense that characterized the bishop when alive."[6]

The process of becoming a saint is protracted, and for advocates, helping a candidate move up the ranks to sainthood is often a lifetime commitment: in Neumann's case, the process took over 90 years.[7] The Gambescia family played their own part in the cause.[8] John Neumann

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5. There is little written about this process. The priests took oaths of secrecy and I assume the two physicians did as well. Ron Javers was an eyewitness writer who wrote an article for *Philadelphia Magazine* about the exhumation and examination that took a full day's work on November 8, 1962. Robert S. Halvey took photos, but only four have been seen of the physicians' work. Ron Javers, "The Making of a Saint," *Philadelphia Magazine* 68 (May 1977): 127–133, 210–214.

6. Neumann exhumation material, Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

7. Redemptorist father, Francis J. Litz, was a leader in "the cause" for John Neumann's sainthood. People revered Neumann from the time of his death and whispers of sainthood grew louder as each year passed. The process took 91 years. Rita Bansbach, "Phila. Redempotorist has worked many a year towards June 19," *The Catholic Standard and Times*, June 9, 1977, 54.

8. The "cause" is the term used for the activities petitioners go through to present a rationale and evidence that someone should be considered a saint; the most challenging, of course, is documenting miracles via a saint's intercession in person or by prayers. Information is formally presented to church authorities in Rome; only the Pope can

was a frequent subject of dinner prayers, and my father blessed his sixteen children nightly with a relic of Neumann. On Sundays, the family often visited Neumann's crypt at St. Peter the Apostle. When Neumann's canonization finally occurred in November 1978, my father traveled to Rome for the ceremony. Afterward, he published a memoir to mark the experience.[9]

Preparing of relics from the Venerable Bishop John N. Neumann on November 8, 1962: From left to right: Monsignor John J. Noone, Dr. William Zintl, Monsignor John Connery, and Father James Graham secure relics from the exhumed body of Bishop John Neumann. Relics were both of body and materials and were hand delivered to church authorities in the Vatican. Photo by Robert S. Halvey. Used by permission from the Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

An Autopsy Without a Body

While Gambescia's background working on the Shroud of Turin seemed to recommend him for the canonization project, the cases had little in common. While John Neumann presented some dusty remains, the man of the shroud was gone. Gambesica was charged with doing an

declare a saint. See Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

9. Joseph M. Gambescia, A posthumous publication: *Reflections on a Pilgrimage to Rome on the Occasion of the Canonization of St. John Neumann.* Prepared by Stephen F. Gambescia for the author. Create Space, 2016.

autopsy without a body. Like the tens of thousands who have gawked at the object, he looked at the shroud and saw a faint image of unclear origin. Along with Robert Bucklin, a medical examiner from Texas, Gambescia examined evidence of a man crowned on the scalp with something sharp, wounds to the nose and cheeks, hyperextended chest, long wounds along the shoulders, major puncture wound on the left side, puncture wounds in each wrist, no sign of thumbs, bruised and bloodied knees, major puncture wound to the feet, and hundreds of distinct lacerations front to back and shoulder to calves.[10] As other scientists brought their findings, conjectures, and hypotheses to the physicians, their job was to consider what seemed plausible. How does a body respond to a blow to the nose? Are there any bones broken? How would blood flow from a wound of this size and someone in this position? How old did the victim appear to be? While these scientists knew their work would never establish proof positive of the shroud's former occupant, and while many claimed the image to be a hoax, the question remained: What if . . . ?

Conducting research on how one dies from the various torments of crucifixion calls for much improvisation. There was some work done by Pierre Barbet on amputated hands, in which he hypothesized that the wrists were the likely location for the nails that affixed Christ's arms to the cross.[11] Not wishing to take anything on authority, Gambescia recruited his sons to simulate how a human body hangs from a wooden structure. What continued to bother him was the interpretation that "only one nail" was used to crucify the man of the shroud, especially given the interpretive position of the feet on the cross. One evening while meditating and kneeling before a painting of the crucifixion, he had a sudden insight: What if there were two nails rather than one? Gambescia's hypothesis is credited in the work of Paul Maloney, an archaeologist and sidonologist who argued for its plausibility at a recent conference on the Shroud of Turin held in St. Louis (in a paper titled, "Joseph M. Gambescia, M.D. and the Position of the Feet on the Shroud of Turin: The History of an Investigation").[12]

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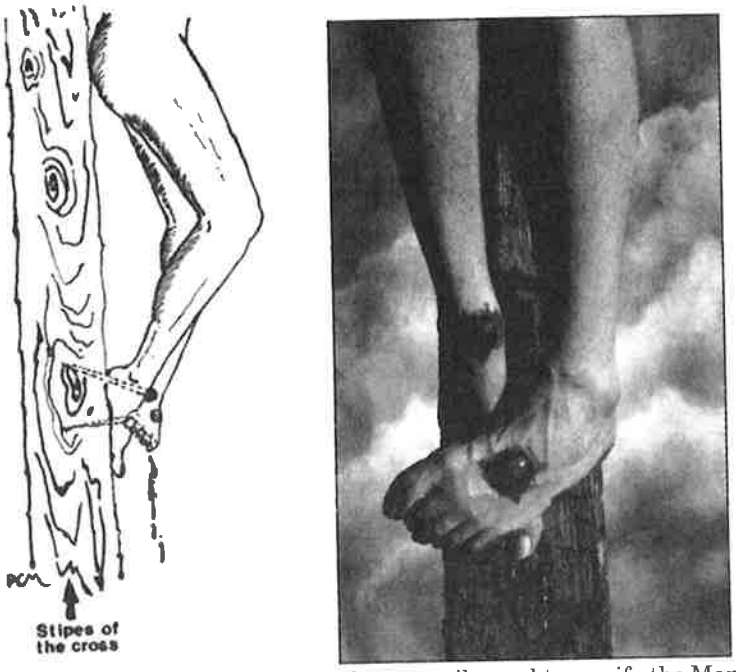
10. Robert Bucklin, "An Autopsy on the Man of the Shroud" (1997): https://www.shroud.com/bucklin.htm.

11. Pierre Barbet, *A Doctor at Calvary: The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ* (New York: Doubleday, 1963).

12. Paul C. Maloney, "Joseph M. Gambescia and the Position of the Feet on the Shroud of Turin: The History of an Investigation": http://www.shroud.com/pdfs/stlmaloneypaper.pdf.



Gambescia hypothesized that "there had to be two nails used to crucify the Man of the Shroud." For many years of study of this cloth, one nail was confirmed. Recent reports and studies on the Shroud document Dr. Gambescia's hypothesis to be quite feasible. These two photos show the likely position of the nails driven into the feet of the Man of the Shroud. Photo and Drawing copyright by Paul C. Maloney. Published in "Joseph M. Gambescia and the Position of the Feet on the Shroud of Turin: The History of an Investigation" at http://www.shroud.com/pdfs/stlmaloneypaper.pdf, pages 1 and 45; used with permission.

While new developments in sidonology might seem distant from the realities of daily life, even minor changes in our understanding of the life of Jesus of Nazareth arguably hold the potential to transform the practice of Christianity. Behind the longstanding public fascination with the mystery of the shroud lies the hope that whatever it contains might furnish some additional information regarding the final hours of Jesus' earthly life and the manner of his death than the accounts offered in the gospels. Evidence for this hope is testified by the reactions that my father received from the scores of presentations he gave during his lifetime on what may be medically and scientifically known about the image of the man preserved in the folds of the Shroud. Regardless of the location of the talk—in a lecture hall, restaurant, auditorium, or a church basement—the audience was always riveted. For even the most devout Catholic, the Passion of Christ came alive.

The Gambescia family at 15--one more to come.
Photo by Al Zecca, 1964; used with permission by the Gambescia family

Conclusion

Joseph Gambescia died on September 23, 1991. He was a physician and scientist who was comfortable and confident seeking truth in this world while also contemplating the bigger questions in life: Who am I? What is my purpose? What is my relationship to my fellow man? His life demonstrates the strange and often surprising ways that a layperson trained in a scientific discipline can find himself at the intersection of major moments and developments in American Catholic devotional life, and even in some cases help to shape those developments in unexpected ways.

He received 30 major recognitions and awards for medical, civic, fraternal, and religious contributions. His most cherished award was the "Family of the Year Award" given by the Pennsylvania Knights of Columbus. Each day, week, month, and year were filled with commitments, but he never lost focus on the meaning of two important Latin phrases: *Pax et Bonum* and *Pro Deo et Patria.*[13]

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13. Stephen F. Gambescia, "*Every Child, No Matter How Many, Is Special*" (Create Space, 2015).