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The importance of Shroud science for faith

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INTRODUCTION

«Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth»¹. Neither faith nor reason (science) are self-sufficient to possess the whole truth. They are complementary. Each one helps us to seek the truth in its own order. Both of them have their own autonomy. They can exist one without the other. However, they are so united that faith without reason becomes fideism, and reason without faith becomes rationalism. There never can be contradiction between them for they have the same Creator, who cannot contradict himself. If it seems so, it is because we do not understand the faith well, or else science still needs to progress.

The truth does not depend on us. Both faith and reason can help only to seek it. «The truth is not created or measured by man but is given to man as a gift by the supreme truth, God»².

What does this mean regarding the Shroud? In short, we can say that the Shroud *is what it is*. If it is the true relic of Christ from the first century in which His Body was wrapped, all research made on it – whether or not they confirm its authenticity – they do not change the fact that the Shroud is true. The same can be said about the opposite. If it is not authentic, even if our results can give us the fundamentals to believe so, it will remain the facsimile.

Still Shroud science has an important input for the faith, since we cannot prove if the Shroud is authentic or not. Science can help find the answer which might be relevant for someone's faith. I present below my personal reflections on this subject. To have a better understanding of them, I begin with some theology regarding the Shroud as a proof of God's love for us.

¹ *Fides et ratio*, 1.

² *Pastores dabo vobis*, 52.

I. THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

«God is love» (1Jn 4,8). And love seeks to expand itself, to give itself to others. God created man out of love and for love. He wants to reach out to all men, and therefore He goes out to encounter them. He made a covenant with the first people and then with different Patriarchs. And in the fullness of times He became one of us. During all his life he taught how to love and confirmed it with his example, dying on the cross for our salvation. In Him God revealed us the splendor of his love.

The love of God has its consequence – it appeals for our response, our faith in the revelation. No one remains indifferent once he has experienced it. We see its fruits already in the time of Christ and even more nowadays. The first disciples spread orally the Good News. With time it was written down, so it could reach more people.

The Gospels present the life of Christ. The part about his passion and death relates in details the suffering He accepted for us. Among them, we read about his scourging under Pontius Pilatus, his crowning of thorns, his crucifixion, the spear that opened his side and finally about a shroud in which He was wrapped when laid in the tomb. Thus, the Shroud of Turin has its importance for the faith because it might be the one that the Gospels describe. And then it would be a real powerful sign of God's love for us. In fact Blessed John Paul II, during his visit to the exposition of the Shroud in 2000, said that it is «the mirror of the Gospels».

II. IMPORTANCE OF SIGNS FOR FAITH

Although faith is not based on scientific proof (for then it would not be faith) we need some signs to believe, for we are human. Philosophy teaches that each human being, besides the vegetal and sensitive principle of life, also has a spiritual soul that gives us the possibility to think. In other words, human beings have intelligence. All the concepts of our intellect are formed through the process of knowing that passes through our senses. The concepts of different things we have in our mind were formed on what we have sensed. This principle is also important for the faith. Although we cannot see, feel or smell God – besides the few saints, who received that special grace, we need signs of his existence, of his presence in this world. For that reason the Lord left us the sacraments, which are visible signs of invisible grace.

In the same sense, the different objects, that were used or possessed by saints and especially by Christ, had a similar function. The presence of relics had a great influence in the faith. There was a time, when even the fact of a relic's authenticity, was of secondary importance. Its presence and the message that was related to it was above all what counted³. We know that veneration of the Shroud throughout the ages took place, although at the same time we don't have total or definitive proof of its authenticity.

Faith is a gift and as such does not need proofs; that is why it is called faith. But at the same time it is not irrational. Everything that can support what we believe makes our faith stronger. Here is where the science can play a great role.

³ Cf. G.M. ZACCONE, *La Sindone. Storia di un'immagine*, Pauline Editoriale Libri, Milano 2010.

III. IMPORTANCE OF SHROUD SCIENCE FOR FAITH

We come to the climactic point of this essay. We live in a time in which science has a very strong influence in our decisions. Everything that can be proved scientifically is true; everything else is false. Obviously this way of thinking is wrong. We know that spiritual things – like love, poetry, etc. – exist although we cannot prove them inasmuch as they are immaterial. However it does not change the fact that science awakens in us a great trust.

There are many studies about trust, especially in the area of business, but they can be applied in the area of science as well. According to one of them, made by Rafael Echeverría⁴, in order to gain trust four elements are necessary: competence, responsibility, sincerity and vulnerability. This is, in my opinion, science's key role in relation to faith. Science can help us grow in faith in the measure that it generates confidence in us. Let us take a look now at the specific science regarding the Shroud of Turin.

Not every scientific research done on the Shroud meets all of the characteristics mentioned above. In my view, the STURP team offers some of the most relevant research ever done on that cloth, and for that reason is so important for the faith.

The STURP research team was very competent. Every member was an expert in his area. The way of preparation of the project was very professional. The whole operation had a well-defined goal, with a description of the different stages of the overall Test Plan. The team, to assure professional performance, performed a dry run. The selected tests were well-prepared beforehand and carried out with precision. The team used the most modern equipment available at that time. The results were published in various peer-reviewed scientific journals.

⁴ Cf. R. ECHEVERRÍA, *La empresa emergente*, Granica, Buenos Aires 2000.

What does merit a word of recognition is the fact that the STURP team performed its task with a great sense of responsibility. They chose only those methods that by nature were non-invasive.

Since the beginning the members of the team had a clear goal: to determine how the image was formed. There was no ideology behind their research. In that sense, the variety of confessions of the members who took part of the work testifies to their purely scientific approach.

Finally, the STURP team was able to recognize its own limits. It made no attempt to alter the results in order to prove something to someone. The results were published as they were obtained.

All these factors generate trust. The research convinces us about the authenticity of the Shroud. And if the Shroud is authentic, then its testimony is a valuable complement to the Gospels. This obviously makes the faith easier.

CONCLUSION

I am conscious that this brief essay does not cover all different reasons for which Shroud science is important for faith. In my mind, the factor of trust, which professional science can contribute to faith, is one of the most important. When I say professional science, I mean that one that looks for the truth moved by the love for the truth itself. One cannot be moved by one's own goals, whether pious or ideological. Unfortunately we have to admit that it has happened.

But even if we could be a hundred percent sure that the Shroud is not authentic, it would not affect the faith, for faith is not based on relics, but on the true encounter with the love of living God.