

CARDINAL BALLESTRERO ADDRESSES THE TURIN CARBON DATING CONFERENCE

Following the preliminary announcement of the Conference in the last *Newsletter*, it is now possible to provide further details. The meeting was held in Turin between 29th. September and 1st. October 1986 under the auspices of His Eminence Cardinal Ballestrero, Archbishop of Turin (right), with Professor Carlos Chagas, President of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, presiding.

Also taking part were:

Mrs. Shirley L. Brignall, Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, University of Rochester, U.S.A.

Prof. Vittorio Canuto, NASA Institute for Space Studies, New York, U.S.A.

Prof. Paul E. Damon, Dept. of Geosciences, University of Arizona. Tucson, U.S.A.

Don Renato Dardozzi, co-director, Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Vatican.

Dr. Robert H. Dinegar, Los Alamos National Laboratory, U.S.A.

Prof. D.J. Donahue, Dept of Physics, University of Arizona, Tucson, U.S.A.

Prof. Jean-Claude Duplessy, Director, Centre des Faibles Radioactives CNRS-CEA, France.

Dr. Jacques Evin, Radiocarbon Laboratory, Université Claude Bernard, Lyon, France.

Dr. Methchild Fleury-Lemberg, The Textile Workshop, Abegg Foundation, Riggisberg, Switzerland.

Prof. Luigi Gonella, Dept. of Physics, Turin Polytechnic, Italy.

Dr. Harry E. Gove, Dept. of Physics & Astronomy, University of Rochester, U.S.A.

Prof. Edward T. Hall, Director, Research Laboratory for Archaeology & the History of Art, Oxford, England.

Prof. Garman Harbottle, Dept. of Chemistry, Brookhaven National Laboratory, New York, U.S.A.

Dr. Robert E.M. Hedges, Director, Research Laboratory for Archaeology & the History of Art, Oxford, England.

Dr. Stephen J. Lukasic, Shroud of Turin Research Project, Los Angeles, U.S.A.

William Meacham, Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong.

Prof. Robert L. Otlet, Isotope Measurement Laboratory, Harwell, England.

Rev. Enrico di Rosavenda, Director, Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Vatican.

Dr. Michael S. Tite, Research Laboratory, British Museum, London, England.

Prof. Willy Wölfli, Institut für Mittelenergiephysik, Zurich, Switzerland.

In welcoming the delegates Cardinal Ballestrero remarked: "It seems to me worthwhile to state that this research, desired by the Church to be of a purely scientific character aimed at dating the Shroud cloth, does not mean, nor could it, addressing any issue of faith related to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ ... I hope that these days of study will bring out such conclusions to allow presenting a valid and acceptable project for at last carrying out the radiocarbon dating of the Shroud cloth, a test which, owing to the uniqueness and singular character of the object, certainly could not be easily repeated."

During the subsequent four days substantial agreement was achieved on the methodology to be employed, and if all goes to plan tiny samples from the Shroud will be taken for radiocarbon dating purposes sometime during the next year, with results expected to be released around Easter of 1988.

Following the announcement that the testing would take place, *The Times* published a most percipient editorial on the Shroud on its leader page for October 16, 1986:

Pope John Paul II is said to have given his consent to a series of Carbon 14 tests on the Turin Shroud, under the supervision of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Such tests have been proposed before, but the church has evidently been waiting until there was general agreement in the scientific community that the techniques available were sufficiently reliable, and that the art of Carbon 14 analysis had reached the point where only very small samples needed to be consumed.

The church does not generally object to exhaustive checking of claims to the miraculous: cures tendered as evidence in support of canonisations, for instance, are routinely submitted to independent panels of doctors who are encouraged to be as scientifically sceptical as they like. The same "devil's advocate" approach is the only honest one in this case too, even though the Shroud is by far the most famous and most venerated relic of all. For it appears to be the burial cloth which was round the corpse of Jesus after the Crucifixion.

If the Shroud was nothing more than that, astonishing though its survival would be, convincing scientific evidence of its authenticity would raise no further issues. But what makes it unlike anything else on earth is the trace it carries, in the same reversal of light and shade as a photograph negative, of the body of an adult male who met a violent death.

In previous scientific tests it is this pattern which has been the centre of interest, for no plausible explanation has ever been ventured as to how it got there. It is detailed, anatomically accurate, and haunting, especially the face and head. There is only the slenderest of evidence for the presence of pigmentation, whether artificial or natural, and the general view of scientists who have examined it is that it resembles a burn mark, or something similar, such as would be caused by radiation rather than contact.

If the Shroud is a medieval artefact, whether originally intended as a fake or as religious art, there would be universal curiosity as to how it was done, for no-one in the modern age has succeeded in reproducing anything like it. If it is approximately 2,000 years old, on the other hand, it will be hard to counter the claim that it is indeed what it is already reputed to be: evidence of the Resurrection.

The Bishop of Durham notwithstanding, the general belief of Christendom has always been that the dead body of Jesus went through a unique and mysterious transformation in the tomb, through the direct power of God; and that by this miracle it was returned to life, and the tomb left empty. But orthodox theologians have drawn a discreet veil over the nature of the process. They have insisted, rather, that these were matters of faith not science. They would even agree to an extent with the famous Durham dictum that God is not in the business of "knock down laser-beam miracles" such as would leave no work for faith to do.

Long have theologians practised their answers to the atheist's insistence that if there was a God, He would surely have provided some proof of Himself; and that if the central act of human history, as the theologians tell it, was the Resurrection, it would

surely be an appropriate occasion for such evidence. Not so, say the theologians; on the contrary.

Faith, as the supreme religious virtue, is the only appropriate way of apprehending the supreme religious truth.

The scientists in their C-14 laboratories certainly will not claim to be settling such grand philosophical arguments: they will emerge with a date (or range of dates) and that will be the end of their role. And should it be from the period of the Roman occupation of Palestine, there will still be cover for sceptics to hide in: the tests could be faulty; the Shroud must be a much earlier fake than anyone thought; the mediaevals had doctored a genuine relic; and so on. But the sceptics will be wriggling, grasping at unlikely explanations.

Before believers cheer too loudly in that event, though, they should count the cost to their own side. The church will be wriggling too. An authentic Turin Shroud is too amazing an object to have been left in the tomb by accident, perchance to be found and kept, perchance to have survived until scientific progress could reach a point where it could unlock the secret. It is almost as if God had calculated that some 2,000 years ahead science would have replaced theology as the commonly-accepted arbiter of truth, and planned accordingly.