

OBITUARY: FATHER PETER RINALDI, S.D.B.

by Ian Wilson

The world Shroud community is too small and well known to each other for the death of any of its number not to be a blow. When that loss is of the man effectively the Shroud community's parish priest the news is hard indeed.

Peter Rinaldi was one of twins, Peter and Paul, born circa 1910 (he was shy of ever stating his exact age), in the small Piedmontese village of Lu Monferrato, some forty miles from Turin, in vineyard country in the foothills of the Alps. His father had initially contemplated becoming a priest, but had been dissuaded by his uncle, Father Philip Rinaldi, on the grounds that 'The Lord has other plans for you'. Those plans were the successful rearing of twelve children, of whom five of the eight brothers became priests, and two of the four sisters nuns. At twelve Peter and Paul went on to higher education as boarders at Turin's Salesian Oratory, begun by St. John Bosco, founder of the Salesians, and where the twins' great uncle, Father Philip Rinaldi became Superior-General as a successor to Don Bosco. In 1925 while serving his first Mass as an altar boy in Turin's Royal Chapel, Peter noticed the curious grill structure above the altar, and inquisitively asked 'What's up there?' This was his first introduction to the Shroud, and subsequently he repeatedly prayed that he would have the opportunity one day to see it. This same year of 1925, when the twins were still only fifteen, Peter's twin Paul made the commitment to become a Salesian, while Peter decided to join his two older brothers, Caesar and Louis, who were both already Salesians in the United States. He could not know that when they parted at this time it was to be the last they would see of each other. Four years later Paul died shortly after their nineteenth birthday, having achieved many distinctions in his training to be a Salesian.

On arriving in America Peter Rinaldi quickly mastered English and there made his application to join the Salesians, returning to Turin shortly after Paul's death to begin theological studies at the International Theological Institute which Don Bosco had founded for his Order. The death of great uncle Philip, a saintly individual of the profoundest influence upon the young Peter, occurred the same December. On September 24th 1933 the Shroud was brought out as part of the Holy Year celebrations of 1933, Peter noting in his diary for that day 'A day to remember! The Holy Shroud was exposed today in the Cathedral of Turin ...It will be exposed for three weeks. I expect to serve Mass at the altar of the exposition at least twice a week. When I asked our rector to allow me to do so, he said to me "The Shroud means a lot to you, doesn't it?" It does!' Because of his good command of English and French, Peter acted as interpreter for the non-Italian speaking visitors to the exposition, thus getting to know leading Shroud researchers of the time such as Paul Vignon and Dr. Pierre Barbet.

In 1935 Peter was ordained as priest in the Basilica of Our Lady Help of Christians, the church that Don Bosco had built as part of the Oratory complex in Turin. The same year he was back in the States, teaching at New Rochelle's Salesian School, and within months first visited what would become his parish church for twenty-nine years, Corpus Christi at Port Chester. At about this time, on the strength of his first-hand viewing of the Shroud, he wrote an article about it which became accepted by the prestigious *Scientific American*, profoundly influencing the wife

of the magazine's managing editor, Sheldon Tilney. Although previously a staunch Episcopalian, Mrs Tilney subsequently became a Roman Catholic, and was one of several wealthy Americans to give Father Rinaldi considerable financial support for his ventures. In 1941 his book 'I Saw the Holy Shroud' was the first book on the Shroud to be published in the United States, and when seven years later he was given a 'temporary' posting as assistant pastor to the Corpus Christi Church where he had preached back in 1935, it was to be the beginning of a pastoral commitment to this church's community that would remain for the rest of his life, winning him the most devoted local following.

Ever anxious to promote the cause of the Shroud, in 1955 Rinaldi travelled to Portugal to call on the exiled Umberto II of Savoy at his Villa Italia, on the outskirts of Cascais, near Estoril. Upon requesting Umberto's approval for his prodding of the Church authorities to allow the Shroud to be opened up for scientific work, Umberto told him 'You may assure them that I am in favour of anything they may undertake to do with regard to the Shroud. All I ask is that I be kept informed'. In 1951, in partnership with Fr. Wuenschel and the Redemptorist Fr. Otterbein, Father Rinaldi founded the Holy Shroud Guild in New York, to act as a fulcrum for the dissemination of English-language