



The Exposition of 1933, when Father Rinaldi, then a seminarian, first saw the Holy Shroud.  
Photo courtesy of the Centro Internazionale di Sindonologia, Turin.

## WHEN AMERICA FIRST HEARD ABOUT THE SHROUD

PETER M. RINALDI, S.D.B.

Half a century ago, a large segment of the American public learned of the Shroud through the first major article on the subject to appear in the United States. Contrary to the ripple-effect from a pebble tossed into a pool, the repercussions of that article only strengthen as they widen.

The author was—of all people!—a young, unknown Italian seminarian, Pietro M. Rinaldi. *Spectrum* has persuaded Father Rinaldi to recapture those early memories, to share with us some of his experiences and reflections. We will see how a moment of youthful daring determined a life-long activity in the continuity of that pristine zeal.

The Editor

The Shroud first came into my life in 1925, when I was an altar boy in the Cathedral of Turin where I grew up. One day I approached our mentor, a kindly elderly priest who watched over us with fatherly concern: "What's up there?" I asked pointing to the altar in the magnificent Royal Chapel where the Shroud has been kept for some four hundred years. He gently enlightened me on the subject. I was enthralled. "Will I ever be able to see it?" I thought.

I did, sooner than I expected, in the fall of 1933. I was then in Turin where I had returned after a five-year sojourn in the United States. As a Salesian seminarian, I had easy access to the Cathedral where the Shroud was exposed for public veneration for three weeks in September 1933.

Like most people at that time, I did not regard the Shroud as some sort of scientific marvel at all. It was, if anything, a religious wonder, a miracle. Unexpectedly, on the closing day of the exposition, I found myself involved as interpreter in a seminar at which several Shroud experts expounded on the scientific aspects of the Shroud. That it should have become an object of intense interest to scientists came as a surprise to me. One man, Dr. Pierre Barbet, a distinguished French pathologist, impressed me particularly. I was never to forget what he said at the end of his presentation: "The more I delve into the marvelous complexities of the Shroud, the more convinced I become that we are only scratching the surface of this mystery. The best things about the Shroud have yet to be told."

**Not Known in the United States**

I knew only too well that little if anything was known about the Shroud in the United States. I had gone there as a youngster in 1925, and whenever I spoke about it to people, they did not seem to know what I was talking about. Once, while I was a student at Fordham University College, I asked one of my Jesuit teachers what he thought

about the Turin Shroud. He replied: "Read the article in the Catholic Encyclopedia on the Shroud, and then we will talk about it." I did, and found to my astonishment that the article, written by Jesuit Father Herbert Thurston, dismissed it as a "medieval forgery". When I told my teacher about it, his laconic reply was: "If that's what Thurston says, then the Shroud *is* a forgery."

Fired with interest and enthusiasm by all I had seen and heard during the 1933 exposition of the Relic, I decided there was but one thing to do—write an article, hoping that one of the better-known Catholic magazines in the United States would publish it. I first thought of *America*, published by the Jesuit Fathers in New York, but quickly discarded the idea, knowing Thurston's ghost would again appear on the scene.

I was acquainted with *The Sign*, a monthly published by the Passionist Fathers in Union City, N.J. It was, I knew, one of America's foremost national Catholic magazines, and decided it would be my choice for the article.

Being in Turin, I was blessed with the best possible sources of information. Giuseppe Enrie, the Shroud's official photographer, had just published his book, *La Sindone Rivelata Dalla Fotografia* (The Shroud Revealed by Photography), a best-seller that was the rage in Europe. Enrie proved to be extremely friendly and helpful to me. Some of my teachers at the Salesian Institute of Theology I was then attending, among them Shroud experts Fathers Anthony Tonelli and Albert Caviglia, were most generous with their assistance. I had met Dr. Pierre Barbet, Dr. Paul Vignon, and had spent a precious hour with Secondo Pia, the Shroud's first photographer in 1898.

### **"It's In Your Hands, Lord!"**

By the end of February, 1934, my article was ready. I went to the Shroud's Royal Chapel before I mailed it, and offered a fervent prayer. "It's in your hands, Lord!" I said confidently. But I held my breath for nearly two months. It was my first piece of writing of some consequence, and I wondered that I should even have dared to write on a subject unknown to most people in the United States.

Early May brought the long-awaited reply, and with it a check for \$75.00, a fortune for a poor seminarian. "We are pleased you sent to us your article on the Holy Shroud," the editor wrote. "We know it will interest our readers. It will be published in the June issue of *The Sign*."

I was not prepared for the avalanche of mail that followed in the wake of the article's publication. At the editorial office of *The Sign*, they would simply package the letters and forward them to me in Turin. Most writers were eager for more information, and nearly all of them requested photographs or picture cards of the Shroud image.

By far the most prized letter came from a man who was to become one of America's best known champions of the Shroud, the Rev. Edward A. Wuenschel, C.S.S.R., at that time professor of Dogma and

Scripture at the Redemptorist House of Studies, at Esopus, N.Y. Father Wuenschel was most encouraging with his comments on the article; he promised to pursue the subject further and to keep in touch with me.

Totally unexpected was the letter from the editor of the *Scientific American*, I. Sheldon Tilney, who probed the possibility of an article for his magazine. It was not until 1937 that an article on the Shroud, the joint work of Dr. Paul Vignon and Father Wuenschel, appeared in the *Scientific American*. The article was reprinted in the May 1938 issue of *Reader's Digest*.

Surprising, too, for those unecumenical times, was the number of letters from non-Catholics, including clergymen. Wrote the editor of *The Sign*: "No article in the history of our magazine ever drew such a response in terms of letters from our readers as the article on the Holy Shroud."

### **Absorbing Spiritual Hobby**

From the day in 1935 when I returned to the United States as a newly-ordained priest, the Shroud became for me a sort of spiritual hobby that added a new dimension to my life as a priest. The frequent lectures I gave on the Shroud, and the occasional articles I wrote for religious magazines, invariably elicited an enthusiastic response. In 1941, I was encouraged by Father Wuenschel to write my first book on the Shroud, actually a booklet of some hundred pages: *I Saw The Holy Shroud*. It was an instant success, sold well over one hundred thousand copies, and for months kept the presses humming away at our Order's school for dependent boys in Tampa, Florida.

In the early 1950s, the Holy Shroud Guild was founded, mainly through the efforts of Father Adam J. Otterbein C.S.S.R., a young Redemptorist priest whom Father Wuenschel had fired with enthusiasm for the Shroud. It was the best thing that could have happened for the cause of the Shroud in the United States. As more and more people became interested in the Shroud, a newsletter kept the expanding list of Guild members informed on Shroud matters.

It soon became evident however, that what was needed was more than a recounting of past events. "When will the Shroud be exposed again to the public? Will scientists be given the opportunity to examine it?" These questions were asked over and over again.

### **The One Thing To Do**

Both Father Otterbein and I realized there was but one thing to do: bring these questions to the people who were directly responsible for the Shroud. And so it was that in 1955, I personally approached Umberto II of Savoy, Italy's former king, whose family had owned the Shroud for over five hundred years. It was the first of several visits that took place through the years. I was impressed with the King's graciousness and willingness to cooperate. He was indeed agreeable to anything that might be done with the Shroud, "as long as the Church authorities approve it, and I am kept informed."

The Church authorities in Turin were less than eager to move, and it took several years of delicate diplomatic approaches before the curtain was finally lifted. The first breakthrough came in 1969 when the archbishop of Turin appointed a special commission to examine the Shroud. Then came the television exposition in 1973. And, finally, the Shroud's finest hour in 1978 when, after it was publicly displayed for five weeks, it was literally placed in the hands of the scientists.

What has happened since is fairly recent history. The Turin Shroud, almost totally unknown in the United States fifty years ago, has now become, in the words of *The New York Times*, "a wonder of our scientific age." For the once-young seminarian, now edging the sunset of life, this indeed is cause for gratitude unbounded.