

## DEVOTION TO THE HOLY SHROUD\*

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To Our Lord Jesus Christ pertains that complete cult which we owe to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We adore him because he is God.

But in Jesus Christ, the human nature is inseparable from the Person of the Son of God, in whom this nature is indissolubly united. Therefore, to the Humanity of Christ we give a true cult of adoration, although it is relative and not absolute. Thus, in adoring the Sacred Heart or the Precious Blood, in reality we adore the Incarnate Word, the Son of God made Man.

However, a venerable tradition recommends to us not only the cult of Christ, but also the cult of images of Christ. Certainly, the Catholic who kisses the crucifix is not thinking that that crucifix is living, that it is God or that it has some mysterious power. Things of that kind could be done by a pagan before an idol. Kissing the crucifix or kneeling in prayer before the crucifix, the Catholic renders a cult which refers to Him who is represented by that crucifix. Just as, on the human plane, the relative respect one gives to a portrait or a souvenir is the same that one gives in absolute manner to the person remembered.

The Church has always firmly defended a cult of images. "They are the books of the unlettered, the writings which even the least instructed persons can read ...; they are lessons transmitted by memory, told and retold as long as the Church shall last; they are the seal which impresses in our minds the examples and the mysteries of the life of Jesus, of Mary, of the Saints. The world did not have to wait for modern psychology to discover that visual aids are an almost indispensable element for explaining, for enjoying and for remembering." It was for this reason that Vatican II exhorts all the children of the Church to religiously observe everything which has been sanctioned in the past concerning the cult of images of Christ, (*Lumen Gentium*, VIII, iv, 67).

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that we ought to venerate the true Cross of Jesus for a double reason: because it represents the figure of the Redeemer spread out upon it, and because it was in contact with his body, bathed in his blood. Therefore, we adore the Cross as we adore Christ and we address our salutations and our prayers to the Cross as to Christ in person. *O Crux, care, spes unica, Hoc Passionis*

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\* Trans. and reprinted from *La S. Sindone* #12, 1967, pub. by the Holy Shroud Chapel.

*tempore, Piis adauge gratiam, Reisque dele crimina* (cfr. *Summa Theol.* III, 25, 4).

The same thing, it seems, must be said about the Holy Shroud. Like the Cross, this precious Relic represents the figure of Jesus and was in contact with his members and his blood.

*It represents the figure of Jesus:* Setting before our contemplation the mysteries of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Savior, it reminds us that the image of Christ must, in a spiritual way, be imprinted more deeply and more fully in us. In fact, the heavenly Father, according to his eternal plan, has called us to mirror the image of his Son, to experience the power of Christ's Resurrection and to participate in his sufferings so that, becoming conform to Him through death, we can attain the resurrection (cfr. Phil. 3:10-11).

*The Holy Shroud was in contact with the Members of the Body of the Lord:* It was sanctified by them and, in a certain manner, gained from them a sanctifying efficacy. In fact, pious contemplation of the sacred Cloth arouses in the soul sentiments and feelings of compunction, of faith, of trust, of love; which dispose one to receive divine grace. The heart opens in a humble and fervid prayer, beseeching Christ Savior to grant an abundance of the fruits of his Resurrection.

One can easily perceive, from these few words, not only the significance and the value of a sincere and fervid devotion to the Holy Shroud, but also the spiritual advantages which descend into the soul.