

IN TERRIS

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"Impossible to tell if the Shroud is true or false"

On the anniversary of the first photo taken of the famous sheet, an interview with the sindonologist Bruno Barberis

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I started studying the Shroud almost by accident. In 1977, after graduating in Mathematics at the University of Turin, I won a scholarship from the CNR at the Institute of Mathematical Physics. By attending the institute I met a professor - then President of the International Center of Sindonology - who started talking to me and lending me books that spoke of the Shroud, of which I barely knew existed. I never thought that ten years later I would become his successor ". This is how **Professor Bruno Barberis**, sindonologist, interviewed by *In Terris* on the anniversary of the first photo taken of the famous sheet on May 25, 1898. The snapshot also marked the beginning of the "scientific history" of the Shroud, to which Prof. Barberis made a contribution.

Professor, what was the first study you took care of?

"It was the comparison of the descriptions of the passion, death and burial of Jesus written by the four evangelists with the characteristics of the double imprint of the Shroud. It is evident that there is a remarkable coincidence of many details, which justifies the centuries-old tradition that has always identified the Shroud of Turin with the funeral sheet in which Jesus' body was wrapped after his death ".

But are these coincidences sufficient to arrive with certainty at the identification of the Man of the Shroud with Jesus?

"At the beginning of the last century, some French scholars decided to use the probability calculation to prove this identification. I was involved in reviewing and perfecting these studies. I obtained that out of 20 billion crucifixes there could have been only one in possession of common characteristics, both to the man of the Shroud and to Jesus. Since it is evident that in history there have not been twenty billion crucifixes, the calculation allows us to conclude that the possibility that the man of the Shroud is really Jesus of Nazareth is very high".

Considering the exponential evolution of technological tools, according to her, in how many years could science prove with certainty that the Man of the Shroud is Jesus of Nazareth?

"I believe that an 'absolutely certain scientific demonstration' that the Man of the Shroud is Jesus of Nazareth will never be there, indeed he can never be there. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to achieve definitive and universally shared results also because often the results achieved are the result of the use of technologies and knowledge that can be implemented and deepened in the future or even replaced by new methods, new equipment, new ones knowledge. I believe that today, based on the data and the certain knowledge that we have about the Shroud, we can say that the probabilities that the Shroud is the funeral sheet of Jesus are very high. Based on new surveys and new data, these probabilities may increase or decrease but will never reach 100%. Of course this does not only apply to the study of the Shroud but to that of any other natural object or phenomenon ".

What are the guidelines of the scientific protocol for research on the sacred cloth?

"Today, after more than a century of studies and scientific research, it has not yet been possible to understand how the body image was formed on the sheet: all the theories proposed so far have always been deficient or because they have not been accompanied from serious experimental tests or because these tests have shown on the images obtained physico-chemical characteristics very different from those possessed by the Shroud image or at most only partially similar; the process that caused the formation of the Shroud image is therefore still unknown and to reach its identification further theoretical and

experimental studies will be necessary. It would be desirable to have a new campaign of direct studies on the cloth that should have the purpose of collecting the greatest number of data so as to constitute a complete map of the physical, chemical and biological characteristics of the entire Shroud, to be made available to scholars so that they can work and discuss on reliable and reliable data. To do this it would be necessary to organize a complex analysis program with the use of modern and sophisticated equipment: a real 'laboratory for the Shroud' ".

Currently in the case in which the Shroud is preserved there is a noble gas, the argon; How long does this conservative system last?

"In 1992 an international commission of scientists was commissioned to study a new and more modern method of preserving the Shroud. After a few years of study and verification, two new cases were designed: one, of maximum security, for public display and one, lighter, for ordinary conservation. In the latter the Shroud is arranged horizontally, completely extended, immersed in argon, an inert gas, protected from light and maintained in constant climatic conditions (temperature, humidity, pressure), kept under control by a computerized monitoring system. The conservation in an inert gas such as argon is essential to prevent the development of bacteria and to interrupt the progressive yellowing of the tissue (caused by the natural process of oxidation due to the oxygen of the atmosphere) which is responsible for the progressive reduction of visibility of the 'image. The two new cases have the shape of a parallelepiped, whose lateral and inferior surfaces are made of a metal alloy and whose upper surface is made of bullet-proof glass".

The Jewish root is important for us Christians. Do you have Jewish colleagues in your research group?

"I met two of them very well, unfortunately both of whom died. Professor Alan Adler, Professor of Chemistry at West Connecticut State University in the United States, specialist in blood chemistry. Professor Avinoam Danin, Professor of Botany at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel a specialist in flora from Israel, Jordan and Sinai They were two high-profile scientists in their specific fields of expertise who have seriously studied the Shroud for many years without, of course, being inspired by religious motivations, their

studies have led them to believe that the Shroud is really the funeral sheet of Christ, as stated in the articles and books published by them".

During her dissemination interventions, she defines the Shroud as an "ecumenical instrument". Why?

"I have no doubt that every pilgrim who has marched in front of the Shroud in recent expositions has returned home richer and more spiritually mature and will hardly forget that disturbing image that speaks so eloquently to people of all ages, cultures and religion. That's why I completely agree with Mechthild Flury Lemberg, the Swiss expert on ancient Lutheran fabrics who sewed the Shroud on her new support in 2002, which in an interview defined the Shroud image as a precious instrument that it can foster ecumenical dialogue, indeed, not only ecumenical, but interreligious. In the month of August, for the third consecutive year, I will be in London talking about the Shroud at the annual conference of the Ahmadiyya Islamic community which annually gathers around 30-40,000 Muslims of Indo-Pakistani origin from all over the world. This interest should not surprise us: I think it comes from the fact that the Shroud is a unique and fascinating object and that besides Islam Christ is a great prophet and is mentioned several times in the Koran. The Shroud is there, it is there, in front of all men, without any exception; can involve and talk to any human being. To us the task of not wasting his precious message, lavishing ourselves so that all men can see it, get to know it thoroughly and let it be illuminated by its profound message".

You were invited by the IC "De Amicis- Bolani" of Reggio Calabria recently and spoke to 700 students. Why is it important to explain to children too, this "case" that is already complex for adults?

"In 2001 the International Center of Sindonology launched an interdisciplinary training project on the Shroud for all schools of all levels in the Province of Turin (later extended to the whole of Piedmont and also to other Italian regions), with the aim of allowing students to learn about the Shroud under its various aspects: historical, scientific, iconographic, biblical, cultural, etc. The title of the project (The Shroud: studies and research to try to understand the mystery) explicitly illustrates the purpose of the initiative which is to make the children aware of the importance of the Shroud, arousing their curiosity and their interest in a triple point of view. From the point of view of scientific research, with particular emphasis on its interdisciplinary nature, as the Shroud lends

itself very well to encouraging reflection on this aspect since the studies and research on it make use of the contribution of the most diverse sciences: biblical exegesis, history, art history, archeology, medicine, physics, chemistry, computer science, biology, etc. From the point of view of the reflection of faith, making the children follow a path of careful and comparative rereading of the evangelical tales of passion and resurrection that almost always leads to reflections (sometimes even very profound) on the fundamental themes of Christian life. From the point of view of reflection on the meaning of dis-value that our civilization attributes to pain, suffering and death with the help of reading the Shroud. It is interesting to note that in almost all classes pupils who do not attend the teaching of the Catholic religion participate in the meetings, a clear sign of the universality of his message, regardless of the choice of faith from belonging to religions other than Christian or confessions religious different from the Catholic ".

The Archbishop of Turin, Msgr. Cesare Nosiglia suggests two criteria for the study of the relic: "scientificity" and "neutrality". You are a great mathematician, but also a man of faith. What message does the Shroud convey?

“Reading, studying and meditating on the visible image on the Turin Shroud basically lead to two levels of reflection. On the one hand, the study of the image has a very high scientific interest. Especially in the last 40 years scientists have tried to fully understand its characteristics and origin, starting studies in the most diverse fields of science: physics, chemistry, biology, computer science, forensics, statistics, etc. In these years the Shroud has therefore been at the center of a wide, articulated and heated scientific debate at a multidisciplinary level. On the other hand, tradition has always identified the Shroud with the funeral sheet of Jesus of Nazareth and in more recent times this identification has been made use of modern exegetical studies, with relevant results. Often in recent years the two ways of approaching the Shroud have been opposed, as if one necessarily excluded the other, as incompatible with each other. Thus a very lively debate has developed, perhaps as never before in the past, favored both by modern means of communication and by the great interest aroused worldwide by the latest expositions. To put the scientific approach to the religious one in antithesis does not make sense, rather it is very dangerous because on the one hand, we risk reducing the Shroud to a 'dead object', to an image that has meaning only in itself and for itself and

which in no way challenges our lives, on the other hand to transform the Shroud into a kind of idol enslaved to a priori and instrumental theses. It is important to remember, for the avoidance of doubt, that the Christian faith is neither founded nor will it ever be founded on the Shroud. Several times I have heard from journalists and interviewers what would become of my faith in the event that the non-authenticity of the Shroud was demonstrated and of course I always answered that absolutely nothing would change. The Christian faith is based on very different assumptions, but the Shroud can be a valid support if seen as a precious instrument that, through the language of the image, contributes to the reflection on the supporting pillar of faith: the passion, death and resurrection of Christ " .