

Back to Basics: The Shroud and Father Martin Haigh

*New Video: **The Wonder of the Shroud**. Presented by Fr. Martin Haigh OSB. Produced by David Brindley of Swanrose Productions, this will be on sale from Easter 2004 - the cost being £12.99 per copy. It can be obtained from the Ampleforth Abbey shop. It can also be bought through the Ampleforth Web Site - the address is www.ampleforth.org.uk/sales and also by telephone - the number is 01439-766778.*

Review by Ian Wilson

Roll over Sister Wendy Becket and her Old Masters. For a similarly appealing, compulsively viewable, ‘natural’ TV presenter, the Shroud has found its Sister Wendy in Fr. Martin Haigh, O.S.B., a quiet-spoken, youthfully octogenarian Benedictine monk based at Ampleforth Abbey, and currently serving as parish priest at Leyland, Lancashire.

For nearly five decades Fr. Martin has been giving a Shroud lecture that makes the profoundest impression on all who attend it – even including some inmates of Her Majesty’s Borstal institutions. Now thanks to some excellent camera work and production by David Brindley of Swanrose Productions, this lecture is available in the form of a video entitled ‘The Wonder of the Shroud’. And its ‘star’, besides the Shroud itself, is undoubtedly Fr. Martin, whose fluency and steadiness of delivery is exemplary, and who exudes the air of serenity and spiritual authority that can only come from long years of monastic practice. As Fr. Martin makes abundantly clear at the very start of his presentation, he has deliberately eschewed all the controversial scientific and historical researches that have occupied the minds of so many Shroud researchers during the last three decades. He rightly points out that these have distracted too many from the central mystery of the Shroud, its so haunting image and the relation this bears to the story of Jesus’ Passion as recounted in the gospels.

Accordingly Fr. Martin calmly yet vigorously gets back to the Shroud’s basics, the medical convincingness of the Passion injuries imprinted on it, and the graphic accompaniment they provide to the words of the Christian gospels. When he does call upon the insights of Shroud researchers, he speaks predominantly of the era of the continental European ‘greats’ of the first half of the last century, Vignon, Hynek and Barbet, though Britons can take comfort in the inclusion of a compelling quote from the late Professor ‘Taffy’ Cameron.

But this is in no way to criticise Fr. Martin’s presentation for being too other-worldly or old-fashioned. Far from it. Its stunning, natural-colour images of the Shroud are positively up-to-the-minute, mostly drawn from a CD shortly to be available from Turin which allows the sort of close-up examination of individual areas that we would all like to be able to do on the Shroud itself, except that practical considerations have long made that impossible. Because the images are digital, they have at times been contrast-enhanced in order to show key features with greater clarity. So they can be even better than viewing the Shroud itself! A further most compelling feature of the video, reflecting Fr. Martin’s inclinations

as a practising artist, is its use of well-chosen Old Master images, chiefly to illustrate narrative from the gospels. Producer David Brindley's clever close-ups and panning from familiar but 'to-die-for' works such as Giotto's *Arrest of Jesus* (in particular Judas' kiss), Rubens' *Deposition* and Titian's *Carrying of Christ's Body to the Tomb* all provide welcome movement, warmth and colour.

But perhaps Fr. Martin's cleverest decision is in respect of his presentation of the famous 'negative' image on the Shroud. Most who give talks on the Shroud, myself included, opt to introduce Pia's discovery of the hidden negative at an early stage of their presentation. This seems logical enough because the negative is so compelling, because its discovery certainly sparked off all the 20th century scientific interest in the Shroud, and because it provides such a secure, strong groundwork for then arguing against the Shroud being the work of a 14th century artist. But Fr. Martin is clearly a believer in saving the best until last. Admirably managing to present all the main medical and other arguments solely from images of the Shroud itself, natural colour, he then brings in the negative as his most clinching climax. It thereby naturally and most powerfully raises considerations of how the image was formed, and of Jesus' Resurrection (though Fr. Martin rightly insists the Shroud does not prove this latter), precisely at the best possible point.

For anyone wanting a comprehensive overview of the current state of international researches into, and arguments over, the Shroud 'The Wonder of the Shroud' can only disappoint. But that was never ever Fr. Martin's intention. Instead his presentation is directed steadfastly to the altogether more central and important issues of how the Shroud illustrates and complements the gospels, the utterly extraordinary wonder of its image, and what it means to all of us. He delivers on his promise that he will not 'preach' the Shroud, but will let it speak for itself – to our own individual minds. As such his video is a profoundly spiritual and visual 'tour de force' and a positive 'must' for everyone with a serious interest in the subject. Unhesitatingly, it carries my warmest and strongest recommendation.