

AN OPEN LETTER FROM FATHER PETER RINALDI

Turin, Italy, October 5, 1988

Dear Friends

It has been a long time since you heard from me. Bear with me, please. They have been busy months for me. Difficult, too! I doubt if the cause of the Shroud ever went through more trying times than it did during the past year.

Surely you must know by now that scientists, using the ultimate test, the carbon-14 analysis, have dated the origin of the Shroud to the 14th century A.D. This would mean, of course, that the Shroud is not the burial cloth of Christ.

Let me say, first of all, that not all the experts accept the results of the test. Some of them are actually calling for a new test on good scientific grounds. I was intrigued by what one of them told me: "Valid or not, the results of the carbon-14 test in no way solve the mystery of Christ's image on that cloth. The test has not said the last word on the Shroud."

The position of the Church

The Church, which for centuries has venerated the Turin Shroud much as it did other sacred icons, never officially stated that the Shroud is actually the burial cloth of Jesus. It could hardly have done so without the support of historical and scientific proofs. It was exactly in order to determine the true origin of the Shroud that Church authorities agreed it should be examined by a group of scientists.

Now that the verdict of the carbon-14 test is in, the Church will not question the results. Any disagreement among the experts on their validity will have to be settled by them.

Whatever the scientists' decision, the Shroud will continue to be a highly revered object. It is unquestionably the most impressive visual representation of Christ's sufferings, the only one of its kind in fact known to exist. Renowned art experts and pathologists refuse to believe it could be the work of a medieval forger. As one of them said: "I find it much easier to believe it is the actual burial cloth of Christ than to believe it is a 14th century artifact."

There is no question in my mind that the Shroud image will come again under the most intensive scrutiny by the experts. A Turin Shroud official told me: "No stones will be left unturned to solve the mystery of that incredible portrait."

The Church has nothing to fear from the truth

Shortly after the results of the carbon-14 test were announced, a friend met me in front of the Turin Cathedral. Placing his hand on my shoulder, he said mournfully: "I feel terribly sorry for the Church and for you."

"You can't be serious," I told him. "Do you really think the Church will fall apart because the Shroud may not be what many of us supposed it to be? The

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Church has nothing to fear from the truth, provided, of course, it is backed by solid facts. For one thing, in the case of the Shroud, it was the Church that took the initiative to find out the truth. Besides, my friend, what makes you think the carbon-14 test marks the end for the Shroud? I might be persuaded to accept the results of the test only when someone will demonstrate beyond all question, how a medieval artist produced so extraordinary an image as that of the Shroud."

A silent witness to Christ's death and resurrection

People constantly ask me how I reacted to the news that the Shroud could be a medieval forgery. Had the carbon-14 test placed the origin of the Shroud in the 1st century A.D., I probably would have burst in a joyous "Alleluia!" But the fact is that, aside from what the experts have said or may yet say about the Shroud, it will continue to be, in the words of Pope John Paul II, "a unique and mysterious object, its image a silent witness to the passion, death and resurrection of Christ."

Doubtless, that incomparable portrait, which no artist could have produced, will outlive all the scientists' tests, and will continue to touch the minds and hearts of countless people for ages to come. As for me, as often as I glance at the image of the Man of the Shroud, my heart still says: "It is the Lord!"

A sign of our faith and hope in Christ

One thing does trouble me: the thought that the simple faith of many good people may be somewhat shaken by this turn of events. This could be due to an exaggerated notion they have of the importance of the Shroud in the scheme of our Christian faith. When lecturing on the Shroud, I often reminded my listeners that for us Christians, it is the Lord that matters, not the Shroud. If the Shroud does have a meaning, it is because it speaks to us of His sufferings as no other image does. But, at best, the Shroud is only a sign of our faith and hope in Christ. He and He alone is our greatest and dearest possession, the supreme gift of the love of the Father to us.

If I am grateful the Shroud came into my life, it is because it has brought me closer to Him and, too, because millions of people, through the Shroud, were given a new and deeper awareness of Him who said: "Crucified, I will draw all men to me."

With my best regards, a promise to keep in touch with you on all future Shroud developments. Pray for me!

Cordially in Christ,

Peter M. Rinaldi, SDB