

REFLECTIONS ON A CURRENT TREND

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The desire to know the true face of Christ has always been keen and deeply felt by Christians throughout the generations. From symbolic representations to realistic figurations of the person of the Savior, there has been a succession of searching attempts to portray the human features of the Image of the invisible God (Col 1:15).

The photograph of 1898 was a revelation; on the photographic plate, the tenuous negative imprints of the Holy Shroud revealed a stupendous positive image of the Man who had been wrapped in that sheet. By this unexpected discovery, the long search was given a solution which could be—and should be—considered definitive.

It is well to remember that the Holy Shroud is not so much a rare archeological object (which has all the guarantees of authenticity) as it is a relic, singular and unique, made even more precious by the blood of Christ, the presence of which has been demonstrated.

As the somatic and blood imprints were produced naturally on the sheet, giving us that mysterious result, so also it was by natural means, without any external intervention if not that of light and chemical ingredients, that we are now confronted by a person in the fulness of his corporeal perfection, no longer presented in the incomprehensible negative image but in the luminosity of a positive reality.

The whole figure is impressive, but the face, even with the eyes closed or half-closed, holds a particular fascination which attracts and subjugates. That face, as it appears in the solemn composure of death, is not altered by the bloodstains and the wounds, signs of pain and suffering; indeed these marks enrich the face and make it more precious because of their profound significance, as they call forth a reality never sufficiently understood; the visible documentation of the One who died to save us.

The present notes propose to call attention to the Original, in all its genuineness as document (photographic positive) and as revelation (photographic negative), and to make it appreciated as it deserves to be.

However perfect nature is in her manifestations (such as the photographic process of light/dark reversal), innumerable efforts have been made to improve upon it. The face of Christ as revealed by photography has been the starting point of pictorial reconstructions in various mediums, and interpretations according to the sensitivity and ability of those who set out to challenge nature. More often than not, however, the subjective element of the artist is superimposed upon the reality,

offering us a new conception which no longer corresponds to the Original. Though it shows us a figure lacerated and despoiled to the utmost, the Original remains infinitely rich in details that compel an explanation and call for a full comprehension and proper evaluation.

Some time ago, a skillful artist was highly congratulated by many people (not all of them knowledgeable in Shroud problems) for his reconstruction based on the Holy Face. But he longed for the praise of an esteemed Shroud scholar, who had never expressed his approbation of the artwork. The scholar's explanation for never having joined the chorus was very simple: The Shroud must be made known as it is; absolutely unretouched, in its soft and diffused tonalities of chiaroscuro (photographic positive) and in its reversal of values (photographic negative) without added contrast.

In this way one can appreciate, genuinely and simultaneously, all the richness of the details which derive from the vision of the two realities; the Object which is Relic, and the new, unexpected reality revealed by photography.

The Exposition of 1978 and the accelerated interest in every field of study which could refer to the authentication of the Shroud, have opened new prospects to research and experimentation. A new chapter in the history of the Relic was written by the discovery of the three-dimensionality latent, like a secret code, on the sheet itself. Various electronic elaborations realized by the specialists are meant to recreate the true appearance of Christ before the Passion, showing us a face divested of the marks of blood, contusions and wounds.

A very bold ambition, because every reproduction bears the stamp of the operator's personal interpretation. It also happens that operators, no less than artists, are not satisfied with previous results and continue with further research in the hope of finding an optimum result—always different. If the instruments themselves were endowed with the intelligence to give us the unique, true reality, then the electronic elaborations ought to be all exactly alike. But they are not all alike because the subjective element and the interpretation of the operator are interposed between the reality of the starting point and the subsequent outcome. In their attempts to give greater value to the Original, their aim is deflected by personal taste, and inevitably they arrive at an interpreted reconstruction. One might ask: But where is the true reality from which one started?

On the photographs we can see the weave of the fabric lightly apparent on the face, reminding us always that this sacred sheet covered the lifeless body of Christ. And the marks of his blood on the tenuous image are the visible seals of our redemption in the eyes of Christ's Father and ours.

Sincerely, we do not share this current vogue of making known the face of Christ no longer as it is recorded on the Shroud, but interpreted by art or technique. There can be no reproduction, however

excellent, which can stand comparison with the Holy Face. Whatever medium is used in a reconstruction of the Shroud face, the results will not only betray the sentiments of the artist or operator, but will also give leave to viewers to choose what version they like best and to rest content with this minor concept.

The ever-expanding gallery of "new faces" poses a problem which should be seriously pondered, in all its consequences, by everyone who proposes to make the Shroud known to the public.