

A PROVIDENTIAL DISASTER

As soon as the Rome symposium was over, I loaded my Leica with fresh film, packed a small suitcase and left for Turin. Assignment: a picture for Spectrum of the new Shroud reliquary.

As the train sped toward Piedmont, a phrase, dormant in my mind for over 35 years, came forth from the inscrutable folds of memory. Breaking loose from its proper context,* the phrase resounded with oracular insistence, raising a disturbing question. It went like this: "The frame of the [Gospel/Shroud] drama has been preserved, with the protagonist left out".

A visit to the Protagonist, about whom we had sat through three days of earnest talking, seemed only common courtesy, like paying respects to a host after a party. Not everyone could spare the time to travel to Turin, but for those who were able to go, it was a strange and stirring experience, quite obliterating the prosaic purpose of taking pictures. Anyway, how do you photograph a transparent wall of clear crystal in a dark room?

You will remember that on May 4, 1990, the Archbishop of Turin, according to custom, celebrated the Feast of the Holy Shroud in the Royal Chapel, where the Shroud had been locked in tin ornate altar since 1694. Shortly after *Ite missa est*, several chunks of stone crashed to the floor from 98 feet above, dislodged from the spectacular dome designed by Guarino Guarini under commission to the Duke of Savoy, Carlo Emanuele II. The damage, of course, was caused from the exterior; recent surveys had already detected a change in the directional forces of some of the sustaining arches, threatening equilibrium. As long as repairs are in progress on the exterior of the dome, no work can be begun inside the Chapel, which remains closed.

The Shroud, clearly, had to be moved to a safe place. A shelter was built over the altar that housed the Shroud, to protect it against the fall of more fragments from the ceiling. Urgently, but quietly and diligently, various authorities convened for months of consultations, proposals, the inevitable legalities. The result was an ultra-modern repository, and a more magnificent concept than this could hardly be imagined.

The long-awaited, "maximum security" construction is not meant to be permanent. It will hold the Shroud reliquary during the time required for restoration of the dome, an estimated two years. The Archbishop has stated that this period will serve for studies on the best way to conserve the Shroud.

For the duration of repairs, the new repository is mounted between the two choir stalls behind the main altar of Turin's

*E. K. Rand: The Founders of the Middle Ages.

Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist. The space is guarded by a hush. A penumbral darkness subdues the surroundings so that only the jewel-studded silver chest in which the Holy Shroud lies rolled, is perceptible to the eye and mind. The chest is visible on every side, as if it were floating in mid-air, just above eye level, in a transparent yet inviolable box. If you have ever wondered at the dazzling beauty of the planet Venus, radiant in the night's velvet empery, you have some idea of the effect.

The construction is a marvel of contemporary architecture and technology. Three walls of plate glass, 11 feet long and 6½ feet high, stand parallel to each other about a handspan apart. Each wall weighs over 1500 pounds. The entire assemblage comes to about three tons. There is no metal in the structure.

The three glass walls are mounted on a bronze-plated socle slanting down and outward — "to keep visitors at a respectful distance". In the base are mechanisms to separate the walls, to release jets of waters in case of fire, and other safety devices. Amazingly sensitive, the fire bombs would go off at the puff of a cigarette, but the incense used during the liturgy will not actuate the extinguishers. The monument is under continuous surveillance by video cameras and sound sensors.

There is no light except the irradiation from six overhead optical fibers, giving the glass walls an eerie impression of self-illumination.

Andrea Bruno was the architect; the glass was from Saint-Gobain, in France; the same company that provided the crystal protecting the Shroud during the 1978 exposition. A special feature of this glass is its property to shield against ultraviolet rays. Saint-Gobain, a town near Laon, has manufactured glass since 1685.

The Shroud, arroll in its silver reliquary, was transferred from the Royal Chapel (property of the Italian State) down the black marble stairway into the Cathedral (property of the Church) on 24 February, 1993; Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Christian fasting and meditation on the Passion and Death of Jesus, culminating in the Day of Resurrection.

The official custodian of the Shroud, Giovanni Cardinal Saldarini, Archbishop of Turin, had designated this symbolic day for the Shroud's installation in the choir. A private ceremony included, besides the Cardinal: the custodian of the Royal Chapel,

Mons. Luciano Morelli; Mons. Pietro Caramello, who had been custodian of the Shroud for 60 years; the paster of the Cathedral, Don Felice Cavaglia; and Don Giuseppe Ghiberti. Sindonology's own Don Pietro Rinaldi, S.D.B. — whose role in bringing this day to pass may never be fully known — had come, on very short notice, to rejoice in the realization of his efforts and desires. So he was in Turin. But in hospital, where he died four days later. Everyone who knew Father Peter will echo the words of Don Felice Cavaglia: "His memory is in benediction".

In his Ash Wednesday homily, pronounced that evening in the Cathedral, Cardinal Saldarini tied this holy season with the Shroud. "This year," he observed, "we have another reason for entering this sacred and inviolable dimension of Lent ... because today in our Cathedral here behind the altar, the Holy Shroud has come down from its Chapel..." Speaking of the Shroud as a "sign", he said: "The sign of the Shroud is not an easy one, and it is not given to us to leave us tranquil. It cannot be treated superficially because, before fixing his image on the cloth, a just man, condemned as a criminal, a brother rejected and eliminated because he was an inconvenience, had lived a human life. ..." The Cardinal went on to say that Jesus "faced those sufferings, which the Shroud obliges us to remember, one by one", in order to bring about our reconciliation with God.

In its new monumental display, the precious silver chest that contains the Holy Shroud is contemplated every day by scores of visitors, each one of whom, unbeknownst to himself, is automatically counted. Each one who pauses here, even for an instant, feels the shock of an encounter. For in a sense, though still hidden from our eyes, this silently pervasive Presence has "descended" into his Church to be close to the people. Thanks to a spate of marble that hurtled into history and shattered the rigidity of an obsolete mold.

D.C.



Restoration on the roof began last January. Photo by D.C.