



A SHROUD TO CONTEMPLATE

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Why has the Shroud been given to us?

First of all, the Shroud is a gift, as Saint John Paul II pointed out in his address in Turin in 1998.¹ The Shroud has been given to us so that we may contemplate the love of God, His limitless self-giving. In the Shroud we contemplate the extent to which God has loved us; we see His immolation, His sacrifice for us. Thanks to the Shroud, we can see what the Gospels tell us about the Lord's Passion, death, and Resurrection.

Jesus knows well that we need signs, that we need to see and to contemplate. For this reason He has left us the Shroud as a pledge of the full vision, as a beginning of the "unveiling" of His glory. Just as He gave His beloved disciples (Peter, James, and John) a

foretaste of His glory on Mount Tabor through the Transfiguration,² so He leaves us in the Shroud a visible sign of His *Passover*. We see Him there still bearing the marks of the Passion and the signs of his death, but also with the prelude of the Resurrection.

Pope Benedict XVI had repeatedly expressed the idea that Christianity was not primarily a doctrine or a set of moral norms, but above all a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, which transforms the life of the believer. This insight is central to his theological and pastoral thought. Indeed, at the opening of the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, he said: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a Person."

The text found on the shrine that holds the Shroud in Turin Cathedral is significant: *Tuam Sindonem veneramur, Domine, et Tuam recolimus Passionem,*

¹ "Before the Shroud, an intense and heartrending image of an indescribable suffering, I wish to give thanks to the Lord for this singular gift, which asks of the believer a loving attentiveness and a full readiness to follow the Lord." (JOHN PAUL II, Address during the veneration of the Shroud, 24 May 1998). Italics are ours.

² "[Jesus] was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his garments became white as light" (Mt 17:2).



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Revista Científica de Cultura e de Imagem
Nº 5 Ano II dezembro/2025
ISSN 3085-7309

meaning "We venerate your Shroud, Lord, and we remember your Passion." We venerate, but we also *contemplate*. We are gifted to see what Jesus suffered for us. The Shroud is like an illustrated gospel, where we find the signs of the Lord's Passion: the imprints of the wounds caused by the flagellation, the crown of thorns, the crucifixion, the pierced side; but the Shroud also tells us of Jesus's deposition in the tomb, and in some way His Resurrection from the dead. Indeed, otherwise, the formation and characteristics of the image found there could not be explained.

Just as the Shroud was a sign for John on the morning of Easter Sunday ("he saw and believed," he tells us in his Gospel; cf. Jn 20:8), so it is for us as well, who can see and believe two thousand years after the events witnessed and handed down in the Gospels. Thus we too can say, with John: "We have come to know [ἐγνώκαμεν] the love that God has for us and we have believed in it" (1 Jn 4:16). John's emphasis on this experiential dimension, which translates into testimony, is significant:

That which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life – for the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and testify to it, and proclaim to

you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us – that which we have seen and heard, we proclaim also to you, so that you also may have fellowship with us (1 John 1:1-3).

As the well-known Catholic intellectual Paul Claudel aptly pointed out, before the Face of the Shroud – revealed through the beautiful negative photographs of Secondo Pia (1898) and Giuseppe Enrie (1931) – thanks to the Shroud we can today contemplate the Face of the Lord, that face so longed for over the centuries by so many devout men, as the Psalms often say: "Your face, O Lord, I seek. Do not hide your face from me" (Ps 27:8–9). Here is Claudel's eloquent text:

It is He. It is His face! That face that so many saints and prophets were consumed by the desire to contemplate, according to the words of the psalm "My face has sought you: Lord, I will seek your face." We have it! Already in this life, we are permitted to gaze upon the face of the Son of God as much as we wish. For a photograph is not a portrait created by man. There was no human intermediary between this face and us. It is He who physically impressed this plate, and it is this plate that in turn comes to take possession of our spirit.³

³ P. CLAUDEL, letter to M. Girard-Cordonnier of August 18, 1835.



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Nº 5 Ano II dezembro/2025
ISSN 3085-7309

Let us therefore contemplate the Shroud, especially the Face. Indeed, as the late Pope Francis suggested, let us allow ourselves to be contemplated by Him:

Ours is not simply a matter of observing, but of venerating, of a prayerful gaze. I would say more: it is a matter of allowing ourselves to be gazed upon. This Face has closed eyes, it is the face of a deceased, yet mysteriously it looks at us, and in silence speaks to us [...]. Let us therefore allow ourselves to be reached by this glance.⁴

Why has the Shroud been given to us? I believe precisely so that we might see it, look at it, contemplate it, following the three “increasing” visual verbs used by St. John in the account of the post-Paschal encounter with the sacred cloth (*blepo, theoreo, orao*; cf. Jn 20:5–8). And this is particularly meaningful for today’s world, so tied to images, to the interactive, multimedia, sensory world, and to the scientific, experimental method.

But at heart this belongs to human beings of every age, as the “doubting apostle” testifies—so he is called by tradition on the basis of the account of Christ’s first appearances to the disciples after the Resurrection: “Unless I see... I will not believe.” The most astonishing

thing is that Jesus accepted the challenge and appeared to him the Sunday after Easter to give him the opportunity to see and to touch. As Pope John Paul II aptly commented, “Christ says: ‘Look... *verify*... and do not be unbelieving anymore...’”⁵ (cf. Jn 20:27).

The novelty of Christianity comes precisely from Jesus’ answer to the question posed by the disciple Philip—an astonishing answer that surpasses the response Moses had received to his own similar request⁶: “Jesus answered him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father’” (Jn 14:9).

Thus, Jesus is the answer to this longing of the human heart. In Jesus, God’s response to the request to see His Face is given. What had not been permitted in this life—while we are still *viatores*—has nonetheless been granted to us, albeit only to the extent possible in our present condition, in the person of the Incarnate Word. It is certainly not yet the full vision, face to face, as will occur in the

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, homily on the forecourt of the Cathedral of Turin, 13 April 1980.

⁶ Cf. Ex 33:11–22; Moses asks God to show him His glory. The Lord tells him that no one can see His Face and live: “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live”; so He will show him only “the back”: “When my Glory passes by, I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed. Then I will remove my hand, and you will see my back, but my face cannot be seen.”

⁴ Pope FRANCIS, video message on the occasion of the extraordinary exposition of the Shroud on 30 March 2013.



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beatific vision, but it is already an eschatological anticipation (“already but not yet”) of that vision.⁷ In the face of Jesus we can already glimpse the face of the Father, since “Whoever sees me sees the Father.” Therefore, if it remains true that in this life “no one has ever seen God,” it is equally true that “the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (Jn 1:18).

With Jesus and in Jesus, the veil that once hid the Face of God begins to be “unveiled.” With Jesus, in a certain sense, we have been given the possibility not only to see, but also to touch, kiss, and caress the face of God.

An icon of this “unveiling” can be glimpsed precisely on the face of the Holy Shroud. Indeed, before the Shroud we can say: here is the face of Jesus—a suffering face, bearing the marks of the Passion, yet at the same time majestic and serene, as a foreshadowing of the Resurrection. In some way, this is the truest face of Jesus, the one belonging to the fullness of time, to his passage—his *Pascha*—from death to life. It is the face of that body that was

given to us and that blood that was shed for us.

“We wish to see Jesus.” This is what some Greeks said to the apostle Philip (Jn 12:21). And so it is that many men and women of today, in various ways, approach us believers and ask us to show them Jesus. He offers the opportunity to do so in various ways, among which surely is the image imprinted on the Shroud. But he also wishes to do so through the testimony of believers themselves, who are called to reflect the Lord’s face in their own. Even today, the face of God must be “unveiled,” just as in the time of the first Christians. Here is the beautiful passage from the Second Letter to the Corinthians by Saint Paul the Apostle, which offers this marvelous exhortation to the community he himself founded:

Strengthened by such hope, we behave with great boldness, and we do not act like Moses, who put a veil over his face [...]. To this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts; but when they turn to the Lord, the veil is removed. The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled face, reflecting the glory of the Lord as in a mirror, are being transformed into that same image, from glory to glory, according to the action of the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor 3:12–18).

⁷ “Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor 13:12); “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. But we know that when he is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn 3:2).



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In view of the sum of so many scientific results accumulated over recent decades, we can affirm, as many do, that the Shroud is authentic *beyond any reasonable doubt*. Nevertheless, there is no shortage of those who do not want to see, who refuse to remove the veil from their eyes, and who—even when faced *with overwhelming evidence*, as many American scientists put it—persist in their opposing stance.

Perhaps, to give a recent example, one might mention the widely refuted claim that the image on the Shroud was formed from a bas-relief, as proposed by a single researcher (not a “Brazilian team,” as several newspapers reported in an effort to amplify the impact of the story), a certain Cicero Moraes.

I would like to move toward the conclusion of these reflections with another very eloquent and meaningful text by Saint John Paul II. In an address to young people on the occasion of one of the World Youth Days, he once again recalled the case of the apostle Thomas as emblematic of the attitude of many men and women of our time, who want to see, to touch, to put the Gospel accounts to the test of science:

The Gospel of John speaks to us about Thomas, an enigmatic figure, because when everyone else had seen the Risen

Jesus, he had not, and he said: *If I do not see, I will not believe; if I do not touch, I will not believe*. We know this category very well—this type of people, including young people. These empiricists, fascinated by the sciences in the strict sense of the word, the natural and experimental sciences. We know them; they are many, and they are very valuable, because this desire to touch, this desire to see, all of it expresses the seriousness with which they approach reality, the knowledge of reality. And these, if once Jesus comes and presents himself to them, if he shows them his wounds, his hands, his side, then they are ready to say: *“My Lord and my God!”* (Jn 20:28).

I think many of your friends, your peers, have this empirical, scientific mindset; but if they could once touch Jesus up close—see his face, touch the face of Christ—if they could once encounter Jesus, if they see him in you, they will say: *“My Lord and my God!”* (Jn 20:28).⁸

Someone might object that they have no need of proofs in order to believe. What can we say? I am reminded of Ahaz’s objection to God’s request—delivered through the prophet Isaiah—that he ask for a sign: “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.” It is a paradox that smacks of presumption. As we know, God gave a sign nonetheless: that of the virgin

⁸ JOHN PAUL II, Address to the youth of the Diocese of Rome in preparation for the 9th World Youth Day, March 24, 1994.



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who would conceive and bear a son (cf. Is 7:10–14).

The Gospels abound in signs, in miracles, which accredit Jesus as the Christ in whom the messianic signs are fulfilled. Jesus himself appeals to his works as proof: “If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even if you do not believe me, believe the works” (Jn 10:37–38).

Finally, what Luke says at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles is significant, where he explicitly speaks of the convincing proofs that Jesus gave after his Resurrection: “He presented

himself alive to them ... *by many sure proofs [τεκμηρίοις]*, over the course of forty days” (Acts 1:3). And what better proof than that of the Shroud itself?

Let us then try to see—indeed, to contemplate—the Shroud, so that we may believe in the Lord who died and rose for us. Behold, in the Shroud Jesus shows us today his wounds, his hand, his pierced side, and he tells us: “Look, verify, and do not be unbelieving anymore.” Amen.