

EVENTS

THE 2015 OSTENTATION - L'AMORE PIÙ GRANDE

I visited the Shroud on a Wednesday in June, arriving at the reception area half an hour or so before my allotted time. Either fewer people are visiting than expected, or the facilities have been prepared for times of full capacity, as, I imagine, occurred around the time of Pope Francis's visit, or the pre-booking system in 15 minute slots is working remarkably well, for there were no queues, and no checking of times or tickets. I had my bag X-rayed, airport security style, and strolled up the convoluted half-mile access passage to the final check-in turnstiles in company with a hundred or so other pilgrims, almost entirely Italian. The later stages of this access passage are reminiscent of an airport, with white canvas walls and roof and a carpeted floor, and panels along the side to give you something to read along the way, in this case the lives of various saints particularly associated with Turin. The text was all in Italian, and the context of the Shroud, if any, was not obvious from the pictures. This seems a stark contrast from 2010, when pilgrims were treated to images of the crucifixion and sacred music playing. None of that this year. After waiting in a kind of hanger for a short video of the various 'landmarks' to look out for, mostly wounds, pilgrims are ushered gently into the almost blacked out Cathedral of John the Baptist, their route around the sides carefully partitioned off from the rest of the church, and therefore curiously impersonal and lacking in any ecclesiastical context. The three-tier viewing gallery behind the high altar could as well be in a museum as a church, and the Shroud itself, isolated in a heavy powder-blue wooden frame among deep maroon curtaining, hangs in a kind of limbo. The light levels are low, but the Shroud seems to glow brightly in contrast to its surroundings. In front of it a tired flower arrangement appears moonlit. The illumination is from four projectors, two each side, and appears to be deliberately on the blue side to enhance the contrast of the image against the background linen. In 2010 Barrie Schwartz was disappointed to see that the overall effect was grey. This has been avoided this time, but, to my

eyes, anyway, it meant that there was no colour distinction between the image and the bloodstains.

The Shroud was completely flat, its three layers (Shroud and two backing cloths) indistinguishable from the Haltadefinizione photographs available as souvenirs, so much so that some people wondered if they were, in fact, seeing the real thing.

After three minutes and a recited prayer, the pilgrims are asked to move off, and after another winding passage of white canvas, they debouch into the Cathedral Square, opposite the entrance to the Diocesan Museum.

And that was that. The whole ostentation is arranged respectfully, but there was no indication that we were visiting anything of particularly religious, let alone Catholic, significance, anywhere along the journey, except in the brief prayer. The words Christ or Jesus are strangely absent from almost all the advertising and associated marketing, and you would never know you had visited a Church unless you took the trouble to find out. The Shroud is flanked by armed carabinieri in full dress ceremonial uniform;¹ there is nothing clerical in sight but a pair of curvaceous cherubs holding candelabra, and they as suited to a palace as to a church.

This bothered me somewhat. Sadly, the secular paraphernalia of crowd management - rows of fire extinguishers and green emergency exit signs at every corner, wheelchair access routes, toilets, and No Smoking signs - wholly dominate all but the briefest moment of ones visit, as perhaps they must, but surely some indication of the Shroud's significance could have been



indicated, and some religious reverence paid. Along the half mile 'via sacra' could we not have seen images of the life of Christ, or followed the story from Nativity to Resurrection? Before the Shroud not a single candle? Or a votive offering? Authentic or not, it is a major icon of Christianity, showing the humanity and suffering of Christ, and by extension the redemptive power of belief in him, his message and his resurrection. Nothing whatever of this is shown, explained, or even indicated in any way at all at this exposition. Here the 'amore più grande' most definitely ends with death. Suppression of the Shroud's Christian identity extends even to the explanation of the wounds, where the rivulets on the hair are attributed to 'thorns', with no mention of a crown.

Having said that, it must be said that those who visited the Cathedral as a whole, rather than the Ostentation specifically, did see the Shroud in context, with the huge trompe l'oeil Royal Chapel towering above it and the full ceremony of archiepiscopal liturgy around the altar below. This was the site for Christian, rather than archaeological, reverence, and it was so different from the walk-through I wondered if the distinction was deliberate, between the three minute secular 'tourist experience' and the more Christian, and very specifically Catholic, environment of the cathedral.

While in Turin I was also delighted to meet the historian Andrea Nicolotti, who has been researching the Shroud for several years and has a vast database of scanned documents from sources all over Europe, many still confidential, and a great deal of unpublished information relating to the investigations of 1970s and 1980s. I look forward to his next book with eager anticipation.



¹ Although Pope Francis may have moral jurisdiction over the Shroud, this is a tacit assertion by the Italian state that, as a furnishing of the Royal Palace, the Shroud, like all the other relics you can look at in the Palazzo Reale, belongs to the government. This was debated in the Italian Parliament in 2009, but no resolution has yet been decided upon.