

MAJOR REPAIRS TO CHAPEL OF THE SHROUD

In the May edition of the Holy Shroud Guild Newsletter Fr. Peter Rinaldi, the Guild's Vice-President, reported:

I have just returned from a visit to my good friend Father Felix Cavaglia, pastor of the Cathedral [of Turin]. I wish I could give you better news about the Shroud. The truth is that the Relic, which used to attract hundreds of visitors daily, now lies in total abandonment in the Cathedral's Royal Chapel. For the last ten months the Chapel has been out of bounds for visitors, its massive bronze doors closed because of repairs now in progress on its great dome, one of Europe's architectural wonders.

"It's an extremely slow process," Father Felix told me as we surveyed the interior of the Chapel, presently a maze of metal scaffolds that reach up to the very top of the dome. "At this rate," he added, "the work may go on for several years. We have been told that entire sections of the ornate marble lining of the dome's interior will have to be removed, repaired and then set again into place."

It may surprise you to know that this extensive and expensive work (upwards of two and a half million dollars) is being financed by the Italian government. The Royal Chapel, in which the Shroud has been enshrined for nearly four hundred years, although part of the Cathedral complex, actually belongs to the Italian State, since it was originally built by Italy's royal family, which at that time owned the Shroud. When, following the Second World War, Italy became a republic, the Chapel became property of the state. Hence its upkeep devolves to Italy's government.

I asked Father Felix if any thought had been given to removing the Shroud from the Royal Chapel during the repairs, and placing it somewhere else in the Cathedral. "We have been thinking about it," he replied. "But the fact is that providing a place for the Shroud that will be thoroughly safe, and at the same time easily accessible to visitors, is no easy task. It would be an expensive task too, and to be honest, the Cathedral cannot afford it at this time."

And so it is that people who come to the Cathedral, unable to kneel in prayer by the altar of the Shroud, now gather in a side chapel to venerate a striking photographic life-size transparency of the Relic. It is but a copy of the Shroud, but it bears that one and only image of Christ, an image that has never stopped to amaze the world. It is no wonder that most visitors kneel and pray.

I am not overly encouraged by what I found in Turin with regard to any progress on an early scientific investigation of the Shroud. We know, of course, that on August 19 last year Pope John Paul II transferred all matters regarding the conservation and veneration of the Shroud to the direct responsibility of the new Archbishop of Turin, Giovanni Saldarini. Thus far, here in Turin, no direct, positive action has been taken to initiate a new investigation of the Shroud. This, in spite of the fact that the Archbishop has repeatedly stated that he will welcome any and all qualified proposals conducive to a serious research on the Shroud.

I was unable to speak to the Archbishop due to the fact that he was convalescing from a protracted illness. I did speak, however, with several Shroud experts close to him. The overall impression I was left with is that he does intend to move on the Shroud, but not at any time soon, whatever the reason. "What we do know," my informer went on, "is that the Archbishop is concerned with the conservation and preservation of the Shroud since he was told that it is deteriorating at a rather fast pace. On this he has no choice, and must take action soon. But how soon will that be?"

Since Fr. Rinaldi wrote that report, Pope John Paul II conferred the rank of Cardinal on Archbishop Saldarini, and invited him to join him during his recent visit to Poland and Hungary. As a result of Saldarini being away on this mission, Father Rinaldi was again unable to speak directly with him more recently, and a letter has so far gone unanswered.

Accordingly, all that can be said at the moment is that great uncertainty hangs over the Shroud's future, both with regard to its conservation, and to any new scientific access. There is word of a plan to make a special protective covering for visitors to the Royal Chapel, and over the Shroud altar, so that at least restricted public access may be resumed while the work on the dome continues. But at the time of this Newsletter going to press, there is no definite news even of this. As a result of the Chapel's closure, and only a limited demand, the Shroud tour announced in the last Newsletter has been postponed until further notice (see p.18)