

Editorial – After 2000 - What Next for the Shroud?

By the time that this Newsletter reaches you, this year's round of Expositions of the Shroud - originally scheduled to be held from Saturday August 12 to Sunday October 22 - will have come to a close. Because of the floods which caused so much havoc in northern Italy, the showings were in fact extended to close on October 29.

Up to October 20 the official number of visitors to the Shroud had been 950,792, so the final tally is likely to be around a million. Every visitor had to make a reservation, and for this year's round (up to October 20) 207,994, or 20% of all visitors made their booking via the Internet, compared to the 9% who used this method to reserve for the 1998 expositions. Nationality-wise 112, 874 of the visitors were non-Italians, from 170 different countries, the largest groups being France (22.5% of all non-Italians) and Poland (13.3% of all non-Italians), though another way of looking at the same figures is that nearly 90% were Italians. About 30,000 youngsters visited the shroud on their way to, or return from, World Youth Day, held in Rome in August. This year's expositions, the longest in the Shroud's entire known history, were therefore significantly more thinly attended than those in 1998 (when the attendance was nearly 3 million), undoubtedly a reflection of the two having been held so close in time. For this Pope John Paul II, as the Shroud's formal owner, appears to have been directly responsible. Reportedly, when Cardinal Saldarini asked him whether he would prefer to see a Shroud exposition held in 1998 or 2000, he most unexpectedly responded that he would like to see the Shroud shown on both occasions.

But what next for the Shroud? Archbishop Poletto, the Shroud's present custodian, has promised that the next extended showing will be held in the year 2025, the next Holy Year. Of the interim, however, probably neither he nor the Pope, have yet made up their minds when the Shroud will be shown next, or will next be made available for study. And this is perhaps as it should be.

For a time of careful reflection is now definitely needed. Although it became learnt only recently that the Turin scientific committee responsible for the March symposium has set a deadline of this 31 October for receipt of recommendations for future testing of the Shroud, this should not deter anyone with sensible proposals from submitting these after that date, since there is unlikely to be any rush to conduct major new scientific initiatives. From the personal viewpoint, one of the most valuable benefits of my second opportunity to study the Shroud at close hand, as accorded in March (see last Newsletter), was simply to observe and to let hitherto unnoticed details on the cloth impinge upon my consciousness. While in having been allowed this I feel already privileged well over and above all expectations, still a substantially longer period of such observation would have been beneficial, both for myself and for others similarly viewing the Shroud from their individual perspectives.

Thus some of the observations that I personally made in March have even yet properly to resolve themselves in my mind. The way that the Shroud was illuminated and displayed for us on that occasion was very different from what I recall of my first experience back in 1973, also from the conditions under which STURP studied it in 1978. On this recent occasion the lighting - that of a large, plain room naturally lit by daylight from large windows on its north side - made certain details such as the yellowish haloing around the bloodflows readily apparent in a way that they were most certainly not in 1973. Yet interesting as this was, there were also puzzles and worries as well. Compared to what I could recall from 1973 the cold northern daylight made the Shroud's surface look disquietingly cold and lifeless, lacking the 'sheen' or 'lustre' that had so struck me 27 years ago. So could there be some significant

deterioration in the cloth over that time, conceivably because of the recent inert conservation conditions? The late Dr. Alan Adler repeatedly expressed serious concerns that the Shroud's image, if not the Shroud itself, might not last another twenty years, an extraordinary lack of confidence in modern scientific conservation procedures given that the traditional ones have served the Shroud so well for so long.

Whatever the answer, the Shroud's subtleties of coloration are such an integral part of the enigma it poses that it has hurt greatly to see that coloration seriously misrepresented, as has happened in the book co-authored by myself with Barrie Schwartz, a publication enthusiastically heralded in Newsletter 51. For the very sorry tale of what Barrie and I regard as a publishing disaster and the loss of a priceless opportunity to make available definitive colour photos of the Shroud, see Recent Publications.

And still on the theme of hurt, never ever to be forgotten are the sufferings of a real-life crucifixion that the Shroud arguably documents. We could have no more forceful reminder of this than the major feature by Dutch physician Frans Wijffels 'Death on the Cross' - exploring the physiological effects of crucifixion as these have become understood quite independently of the Shroud - which appears as a Special Feature of this issue. In his covering letter when he sent the article Dr. Wijffels warned me 'Be aware - before reading - that death on the cross is the most cruel way to die'. In the light of his article few could disagree...