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An extended version of this article is available at <http://bstsnewsletter.com/pdfs/Indicia-of-Reliability-Extended-Version.pdf>.

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How might the Vatican announcement ‘New Norms on Alleged Supernatural Phenomena’ affect Shroud Research?

by Philippa Foster

On 17 May 2024, there was a very important announcement from the Vatican which has implications for research into holy relics and is therefore of interest to Shroud scholars. The Shroud is under the custodianship of the Pope and therefore any changes to how religious relics, and the miraculous phenomena associated with them, are regarded by the Vatican, is of great importance to those seeking any future testing of the Shroud.

The Vatican’s Dicastery for the Doctrine of Faith¹ released a document entitled ‘**New Norms on Alleged Supernatural Phenomena**’. It contains guidelines for handling reports of miraculous phenomena, i.e. how they are reported, investigated and integrated into doctrine. It is an unprecedented updating of centuries old traditions, and I’d like to draw attention to a few key points from the main headings. (*Text quoted from the report appears in italics.*)

The Section: ‘*Reasons for the new norms*’ recognised that historically, the need for *urgent pastoral responses* to ‘miraculous’ phenomena *for the good of the faithful*, risked releasing information before all the stages of proper *discernment* for a miracle had been observed. This could lead to corrective statements needing to be issued later by the proper authorities.

The Section: ‘*Spiritual fruits and risks*’ noted that shrines & pilgrimages play an important

¹ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2024-05/dicastery-doctrine-faith-supernatural-phenomena-norms.html>

role in people's faith, but that new additions without proper verification could leave individuals or regions open to exploitation, and that *serious issues that harm the faithful may arise*. This is even more of a danger with modern CGI, Holograms & Deep Fakes. The following Section: 'General Guidelines' is quoted in full because it shows the cautious approach being taken to verify such events:

The Church will exercise her duties of discernment, based on the following:

"(a) whether signs of a divine action can be ascertained in phenomena that are alleged to be of supernatural origin; (b) whether there is anything that conflicts with faith and morals in the writings or messages of those involved in the alleged phenomena in question; (c) whether it is permissible to appreciate their spiritual fruits, whether they need to be purified from problematic elements, or whether the faithful should be warned about potential risks; (d) whether it is advisable for the competent ecclesiastical authority to realise their pastoral value" (I, 10).

However, "it is not foreseen in these Norms that ecclesiastical authority would give a positive recognition of the divine origin of alleged supernatural phenomena" (I, 11). Therefore, as a rule, "neither the Diocesan Bishop, nor the Episcopal Conferences, nor the Dicastery will declare that these phenomena are of supernatural origin, even if a Nihil obstat is granted. It remains true, however, that the Holy Father can authorize a special procedure in this regard" (I, 23).

The Section headed: 'Possible conclusions regarding an alleged phenomenon' has six subsections that warrant further examination, because the report indicates a move away from the term 'Supernatural' to describe Divine events. Subsection 1, states:

- *Nihil Obstat: Without expressing any certainty about the supernatural authenticity of the phenomenon itself, many signs of the action of the Holy Spirit are acknowledged...*

There is acknowledgement in Subsection 2 that phenomenon may not be what they seem:

- *Prae oculis habeatur: Although important signs are recognised, some aspects of confusion or potential risks are also perceived...*

Subsection 3 recognises that withdrawing authentication later could be detrimental:

- *Curator: Various or significant critical elements are noted, but the phenomena is already spread widely, and verifiable spiritual fruits are connected to it. Therefore, a ban that could upset the faithful is not recommended, but the local bishop is advised not to encourage it.*

Subsection 4: - *Sub mandato...* recognises the misuse of genuine phenomena for *...undue financial gain or immoral acts*.²

Subsections 3 & 4 are particularly relevant to Shroud research because, the downgrading of the Shroud by the widely discredited Carbon Dating in 1988, did untold damage to people's faith. Despite subsequent high-level, multidisciplinary, scientific tests strongly pointing towards the authenticity of the Shroud as a Divine relic - and as potential evidence for the Resurrection - many Christians still regard the Shroud with suspicion. Unfortunately some lost their faith in the validity of all relics as a consequence. Interestingly, many realised that their faith rested on something stronger than just a physical object, and they relinquished their need for 'proof' of faith. Others found that the Shroud still evoked a powerful response, even though their belief in its authenticity had been shaken. It's a reminder that Divinity is transcendent of our attempts to define it.

Then Subsection 5 deals with perceived harmful elements, and states:

- *Prohibetur et obstruatur: Despite several positive elements, the critical issues and risks associated with this phenomenon appear to be very serious. The Dicastery asks the local bishop to offer catechesis that can help the faithful understand the reasons for the decision and reorient their legitimate spiritual concerns;*

² An example may include an ill advised 'Art Installation' at Vienna Cathedral during Lent, which inverted the Shroud & associated it with material that was shockingly at odds with Jesus' message.

And finally, subsection 6: - *Declaratio de non supernaturalitate*:... deals with known fakes and fabrications that are found to be intentional deceptions.

These last two, are important, because of the risk that harmful man-made or unknown phenomena could mimic Divine events. An unexplained event could be demonic rather than Divine, or anything in between. If one believes in spiritual forces, the possibility of negative as well as positive influences cannot be ignored, and could be more dangerous than a hoax, because any intentions could be unclear until serious damage has occurred.

Further sections included:

['Procedures to follow'](#) and ['Positive and negative criteria'](#)

I think the document is well considered and shows an understanding of both the risks and benefits of supernatural events. Time will tell if that will affect Shroud researchers' ability to verify that the Turin Shroud is indeed the burial shroud of Jesus.

The future of scientific research into relics and miraculous events

This century has seen unprecedented discoveries in science and technology, driven by ever more sensitive and sophisticated instrumentation. IR & UV optical devices, LiDAR³, and gravitational wave detectors, have allowed a new understanding of the world around us, however, far from dispelling past myths, this new understanding has opened a new frontier of possibilities. There is also a greater awareness that the human mind extends beyond the confines of the brain to interact with the Universal Field in unexpected ways. This is relevant to messages received during apparitions so updated guidance is very wise.

Some 'mysteries' have been solved by science, such as cranial magnetite aiding certain birds to follow migratory routes, and 'waggle dances' that enable bees to teach each other where to find pollen for honey production. Things which previously seemed impossible for creatures without language or maps, are now recognised to be evolutionary adaptations for survival - although they are no less amazing now that we understand their mechanisms. Physicists can study black holes powering the spin of galaxies and geneticists can alter the codes of life that once seemed the sole domain of God - so one can be forgiven for thinking that, in time, all things will be known and achievable without the need for a Higher Power. But that isn't actually the conclusion being drawn by scientists at the cutting edge of these momentous discoveries. There still seems to be an 'organising force' behind creation, beyond any 'cut & paste' that humans can achieve. And IR, Night-vision & LiDAR are revealing tangible objects that would previously have gone unnoticed, like 'footprints in the sand' left behind by events beyond our optical range.

So whilst new technologies have unfortunately enabled hoaxers to fake spiritual events, instruments can also help distinguish between natural or man-made events, to reduce the risk of being misled. And for the Shroud, technologies working at the subatomic level can open our eyes to unimaginable possibilities. So scientific advancement hasn't done-away-with faith, but instead opened new areas of enquiry. And Shroud researchers have found that no matter how hard they test the science of the Holy Shroud, the more it remains an enigma, unrepeatably via current means, and has the power to move people and heal spiritual wounds. For me that is the most important litmus test for a Miracle.

³ LiDAR - Light Detection And Ranging - pulsed laser used for 3D mapping & distance measurements.