

An Extraordinary Experience

During the lockdown, millions prayed online to the Holy Shroud

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In the dark days of the pandemic, when the quarantine had flooded the heart with despair and anguish, an extraordinary event took place that only now can we begin to decipher it in all its enormous scope: millions of people in the world prayed by turning to the Shroud. Not only devotees who continued their prayers in every corner of the planet by taking a picture of the shroud out of their wallet, but also people far from the faith who came across one of the most impressive media events of the lockdown in the network: the prayer liturgy in front of the Holy Cloth on Holy Saturday of the archbishop of Turin and papal custodian of the Shroud, Cesare Nosiglia. The extraordinary worldwide contemplation on TV and social media, that April 11, had been literally solicited from below. Nosiglia himself wrote it, announcing the great event, perhaps the first ever of such a pervasive communication: "Thousands and thousands are the messages that come to me from the people, elderly and adults and young and young, healthy and sick to ask me that, in the moment of serious difficulty we are going through, we can pray during this Holy Week in front of the Shroud, to implore from Christ dead and risen - which the Sacred Cloth presents to us in such a true and concrete way - the grace to overcome evil as he did, trusting in the goodness and mercy of God ». It is clear from the colossal numbers that the event was eagerly awaited: the organizers' calculations indicate that the views on YouTube and Facebook reached two million three hundred thousand. Figures to which must be added those - impossible to calculate with certainty - of numerous television networks around the planet that broadcast the extraordinary ostentation live. An opportunity that highlighted how the Shroud should not be considered only an object of scientific investigation but also a reality that can help support personal prayer. Don Roberto Gottardo, president of the Diocesan Commission for the Shroud of Turin is convinced of this: "The time of the pandemic favored turning to the Sacred Linen because in it we see an analogy between what Jesus lived and what we lived: closed, as he was locked in a sepulcher; alone, as he was left alone. We were able to make our own the experience that the Lord shows us with the Shroud image".

The strength of the face and body impressed on the canvas remind us of the essence of our faith. Gottardo explains: "The Christian faith is a faith that is lived in front of a face. And the Shroud shows us a face and a body. Our faith is not a generic faith in a distant, unknown divinity, but it is our prayer in front of a singular face, that of Jesus". With the arrival of phase 2, the pilgrimage to the cathedral of Turin, which for centuries has preserved the Holy Shroud, has resumed at constant rates, despite the severe security measures. As is happening - always in the Piedmontese capital - in the church of the Santissimo Sudario which contains a copy in front of which the prayer has always been a karst river. The church, also reopened to the faithful after the forced closure, is annexed to the Shroud Museum, directed by Professor Nello Balossino. That finds in the Shroud image a disruptive iconic force: "There is suffering and death but also hope and strength. That's why anyone who is in front of it is led to pray for help to deal with hardships, problems,

difficulties". Balossino is convinced that we also approach that image with the heart: "And our heart interprets the signs that see the eyes in a particular, unique way, which leads me to say that there is no Shroud, but there are as many as people who watch it. "

The immense prayer of the tragic quarantine moments will not be forgotten when we return to normal. Balossino confirms it: "When you have been in front of the Shroud it is difficult for the effect to disappear over time. It is an experience that is intensely experienced once and then accompanies you forever." Even from the feast of the Shroud of May 4, experienced entirely on social media and on TV, it has been understood that the Shroud has accompanied the prayers of millions of people. The celebration of Holy Mass was followed by many people, albeit to a lesser extent than the display on Holy Saturday. The Shroud, as also in the past, has been a valid spiritual aid. Gian Maria Zaccone, director of the Turin International Center of Sindonology, goes into detail. As a historical historian, Zaccone cites an ancient reference to explain the current phenomenon of the soul deeply touched by prayer looking at the Shroud, as thousands of testimonies from almost all the countries of the globe tell: "In 1627 the bishop Agassino Solaro of Moretta wrote a treatise in which one wonders about the miracles of the Shroud. Someone could ask - said the prelate in his writing - but did the Shroud raise the dead? He replied: I don't know, but what I am sure of is how many dead souls have risen in the light of the Shroud".

The idea of the Shroud as a sail to which one clings in a stormy sea or as the tunic of Jesus to which the sick woman clung, are the two similarities that the Sindonologist Emanuela Marinelli likes to use to give substance to the concept of a humanity that, torn by the pain of the virulent and sudden pandemic, threw itself headlong into the comfort of that image of the man of pain, also torn by the nails of the cross but able to pour out peace and hope. "That's what happened - says Marinelli -. In the months in which we were isolated from the world, we received support in looking at the Shroud during the extraordinary display of Holy Saturday. It is clear that our faith is not based on it but it is a great help that also makes us reflect on the mercy of God who through Jesus makes himself seen with his eyes closed, almost as if he does not want to look at the sins of the world. Extraordinary. Marinelli has no doubts about what can give such a spiritual strength to a linen cloth: "Simple: the power comes from the fact that we know that there is the true face of Jesus there." It is a photograph "left impressed by himself". The young people who will participate in the meeting of the Taizé Community, scheduled for the days between Christmas and next New Year, will have the privilege of being able to approach the Shroud and pray. A new event that will surely record other record numbers.

by Federico Piana