

THE REPORT OF THE POOR CLARE NUNS  
Chambéry, 1534

DOROTHY CRISPINO

In the night between the third and fourth of December, 1532, fire broke out in the sacristy of the Sainte-Chapelle in Chambéry, France. Before the danger was discovered, the choir stalls were roaring in the blaze and the church's oak-paneled walls were sheathed in flames. It was not long until a great crowd of horrified townsfolk gathered. With sinking hearts they watched the stained-glass windows melting and shuddered as the stone facade crashed to the ground.

But their worst fears were focused on something more significant than the beautiful church; a fragile, inflammable strip of linen bearing the image of the Savior: the Holy Shroud, Palladium of the House of Savoy, Presider at their weddings and baptisms, Protector of the land, Preserver against the plague and all calamities, and the foremost object of pious devotion.

In the stone wall behind the main altar was a recess, defended by an iron grill locked with four keys, and in the recess was a silver chest in which the Shroud was folded—twice lengthwise, then the fourteen-foot length folded twice over itself, and then in three, making an almost foot-square packet of forty-eight layers.

In this emergency, it was impossible to obtain the keys to the grill. The canon, Philibert Lambert, kept only one; the Duke of Savoy, Carlo III "the Good", held two; the fourth was in the hands of the president of the Treasury. But Canon Lambert, a blacksmith and two Franciscans were ready to risk the flames to save what was more precious than their lives.

The back of the church was built into the castle ramparts, where a door led directly to the choir. Through this passage the bishops conveniently carried the Shroud to the ramparts whenever it was to be displayed for public veneration. It was probably through this corridor that the four men entered the burning building.

They found the grill already incandescent. Breaking it open, they carried the silver chest outside to safety.

We would like to know how they managed to carry the silver chest; for it too had begun to melt at one corner, and silver melts at 900° C. In any case, it is recorded that neither the men nor their clothes were touched by the flames ...

The Shroud was rescued just in time. Molten silver had dropped onto the relic, burning through one corner and scorching two sides of the folds; so that when the Shroud is opened out we see the scorch-

lines running the full length of the cloth, framing the image, and the evidence of twelve large holes.

Rumors flew as to the cause of the disaster. Not that fires were uncommon in the town. But there was a widespread suspicion that this one had been deliberately set. Blame fell, not surprisingly, upon the Calvinists. For several years, political and religious friction had kindled into violence between the capital and its northern counties because Geneva, already converted to the doctrines of Calvin and Zwingli, fought to break away from Savoy rule and form a republic. In fact, by 1535, Catholicism was abolished in Geneva, forcing the cathedral chapter to move to Annecy; and before Carlo III died in 1553, the region over-the-Alps was lost to Savoy.

Was it by accident that arson occurred on the Feast of St. Barbara? As patroness of Artillery, she protected against fire. Or had it been derisively planned for that very day, to show the Catholics that their cult of saints was folly?

If indeed such a sardonic joke had been intended, it failed its point: for—not to mention the four men who stood in the furnace unharmed, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—the image of Christ was almost untouched by fire-damage, and that was hailed as a miracle. And today, precisely because of that damage, no one doubts that the Turin Shroud is the Chambéry Shroud; and the Shroud of Chambéry could not have been a forgery ...But of that some other time.

The salvaged relic was deposited in the tower of the Treasury. To us, it seems plain common sense that, in its weakened condition, the relic was not displayed to the people, as was customary, on Good Friday nor yet on May 4, the Feast of the Shroud; but its disappearance caused anxiety. Now rumors ran that it had been totally destroyed in the fire. Or that the duchess, Beatrice of Portugal, who was unpopular with the savoyards, had stolen it and fled to Spain and that she had put fire to the church to hide her larceny.

In April of 1534, Pope Clement VII sent his envoy, Louis Cardinal Gorrevod, to make an official recognition of the Shroud and have it repaired. Card. Gorrevod knew the Shroud well. For over four decades, he had been intimately associated with the Savoy family, and profoundly devoted to the Shroud. Many times, his hands had held it at expositions and ceremonies. It was he who first suggested that the image was formed by sweat and blood. And it was he who, in 1506, successfully intervened with Julius II to grant Carlo III's petition for a liturgy and feast of the Shroud.

On the 15th of April, 1534, a Wednesday, Card. Gorrevod sent word to the Sisters of St. Clare that they were to undertake the delicate task of mending the Sheet.

The convent of the Poor Clares of the Strict Observance had been founded by Yolande of France in 1471, the year in which her husband, Blessed Amedeo IX, Duke of Savoy, departed this life "in the odor of sanctity". Years before, Amedeo and Yolande had walked from Vercelli to Chambéry to venerate the Shroud: an act of perfect



Behind the main altar of the Holy Shroud Chapel, one can see the niche where the reliquary was kept until the fire of 1532.

devotion on the part of the heir to the duchy and his royal bride, daughter of Charles VII Valois and sister of Louis XI, then reigning over France with his queen, Charlotte of Savoy, Amedeo's sister.

On the 16th of April, with great solemnity, the Shroud was taken to the convent, where it remained until Saturday, May 2—two days before the Feast of the Holy Shroud. A report of the Shroud's sojourn in the convent was composed and duly notarized.

The report barely mentions the work the Sisters performed. All attention, of the whole Community, is upon the sacred image. During the fortnight that the Shroud was a visitor in their house, they kept constant vigil, day and night, in prayer and ... study.

In meditation, profound absorption and constant conversation upon the Figure on the Shroud, the Poor Clare nuns, with the eyes of loving faith, in the flickering candle-light were able to see many details which, centuries later, were revealed by the camera and re-discovered by the searchlights of modern science.

Here is their report:\*

The fifteenth of April of the year one thousand five hundred thirty four, before vespers, the Most Serene Duke of Savoy and Monseigneur the Legate sent us Messire Vesperis, treasurer of the Holy Chapel, accompanied by several other canons, to inform us to be ready to receive the Most Holy Shroud, which would be brought to us so we could mend the places that had been burned by the fire.

The Reverend Mother Abbesse, named Louise de Vargin, after having thanked them, answered, for the whole Community, that we were ready to obey the orders of His Highness and the Legate, even though we were unworthy to undertake so holy a task. Meanwhile, we decorated the choir the best we could, where, after vespers, a table was brought, on which it was customary to display the holy Relic.

The next day, at eight in the morning, while all the church bells rang, there was a general procession, in which Mons. the Legate carried the Holy Shroud; behind him came His Highness, Mons. the Bishop of Belley and Messire the Suffragan, besides the apostolic notary and several canons and ecclesiastics and the nobles of the land. After having laid it for a little while on the main altar of our church, they carried it to the choir, to the table that they had set up for laying it out.

We received it in procession, with lighted candles; it was unfolded on the table and the places where it had to be mended were verified. And then Messire the Legate asked all the counts and barons who were present if it was the same Shroud that they had seen before, and they, after having diligently examined it, on one side and the other, testified that it was the same; which the apostolic notaries recorded, while the nobles gave place to other gentlemen, ecclesiastics and prelates, who were then asked the same.

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\*Translated from French text given in *Validità ed Attualità di Due Antiche Descrizioni della Santa Sindone*, by Riccardo Gervasio: SINDON #19, April 1974. By kind permission of the Centro Internazionale di Sindonologia, Turin.

After that, Messire the Legate said to our Rev. Mother to choose some of her nuns for the mending. She offered herself and three others whom she named, to do the work; then all four gave their names to the notary, in the presence of all the nobility. Messire the Legate pronounced major excommunication against anyone who touched it, outside of the four chosen nuns.

After that, the preacher of His Highness gave a beautiful sermon on the Holy Shroud, at the grill of the choir, which was wide open; the preacher faced the people, and at the end of the discourse, he read the apostolic Brief which His Holiness had sent to His Highness, by which he permitted the poor daughters of the Observance of Sainte-Claire-dans-la-Ville de Chambéry to repair it. The crowd of people, which had hastened to see this precious Relic, was so big that one could hardly move.

After reading the Brief, Messire the Legate recommended us to be very careful, and to pray God that He would give us the grace to do this holy work according to his holy will; and after having us say the *Confiteor*, he gave us all absolution; and everyone retired except Messire the treasurer and Messire the Canon Lambert, to whom His Highness had particularly entrusted the care of the Holy Shroud.

After dinner, the embroiderer brought the wooden frame to stretch the Holland cloth on which one was to place the Holy Shroud; after two hours, the cloth was fixed on the loom and we laid out the precious Holy Shroud upon it, and basted all around.

His Highness came, with the Legate and several prelates, canons and gentlemen before we had begun to put the patches on the places where the fire had damaged it; he asked about our feelings concerning this relic; but we continued, each one, her work, because it seemed more reasonable.

There was such a great crowd of people pressing at the grill while we worked that we could not do much; which obliged Messire Audinet, the chamberlain of High Highness, to beseech the Canon Lambert to go often to make the crowd go back, beyond the guards who were there to prevent disorder.

His Highness having learned that there was such a great multitude of people that there was not a day that one did not see over a thousand persons, he was obliged to take away the key of the grill, which nevertheless he often gave back to his chamberlain to satisfy the holy desire of a great number of pilgrims who came from Rome and from Jerusalem and several other faraway countries. The Holy Shroud was shown to them, with candles lighted, while we sang on our knees. The people cried out mercy with a devotion impossible to express; and they went home extremely comforted, saying that it was the same they had seen before.

From the first day that it was brought to us, which was the Thursday sixteenth of April, one sent us, between seven and eight in the evening, several gentlemen who, after having greeted the Rev. Mother and all the Community, told her that they had orders to place

guards at our grill to keep watch before the Holy Shroud throughout the night; and that, although His Highness had confidence in us, he did it out of respect which was due to this sacred pledge of our Lord, and to avoid all sorts of accidents. A great number of foreigners having come to see it, they performed their commission and opened the curtain of the grill.

Messire the Mayor also brought persons of honor to keep watch.

We always kept a big candle burning in a basin in front of the Relic, where four of the guards always assisted, holding lighted candles, taking turns with such great modesty that they were more like novices of a well-reformed Order rather than laymen. Our Mother Vicar thanked them for not giving us any bother, to which they replied that His Highness had so ordered. They urged us time and again to go rest a bit, leaving three or four who could keep watch around this sacred object; but we could not tear ourselves away from it, and we had obtained permission from our Rev. Mother to remain there as much as we wanted. If some retired around ten or eleven o'clock, they all got up at midnight and assisted at Matins; the others only left to rest between two and four, and several even watched all night, with an inconceivable gratification. All our thoughts were with God; our eyes roved over all the bloody wounds of his sacred body, the vestiges of which appear upon the Holy Shroud; it seemed to us that the opening of the sacred side, as the most eloquent of the heart, was ceaselessly saying to us these words: *O all you who pass by this way, pause and see if there is any sorrow like to my sorrow.*

In fact, we see, on this rich tableau, sufferings which could never be imagined. We also saw traces of a face all plummeted and all bruised with blows, his divine head pierced with great thorns from which came streams of blood which ran onto his forehead and divided into diverse branches, clothing it with the most precious purple in the world.

We noticed, at the left side of the forehead, a drop larger than the others and longer; it winds in a wave; the eyebrows appear well-formed; the eyes a bit less defined; the nose, being the most prominent part of the face, is well marked; the mouth is well-composed, it is quite small; the cheeks, swollen and disfigured, show well enough that they had been cruelly struck, particularly the right; the beard is neither too long nor too little, in the fashion of the Nazareans; it is thin in some places because parts of it had been pulled out<sup>1</sup> for derision and the blood had matted the rest.

And we saw a long trace which went down onto the neck<sup>2</sup>, which made us think that he was bound by an iron chain when he was taken in the Garden of the Olives; because it is seen to be swollen in different places, as if he had been bound and pushed; the lead-marks and lash-marks are so thick on his stomach that one can hardly find a place as big as a pinpoint free of blows; they all cross each other and extend the length of the body, right to the soles of the feet; the big mass of blood marks the holes in the feet.

As for the left hand, which is very well marked and crossed over the right, covering the wound, the hole of the nail is in the middle of the long and beautiful hand, from which a flow of blood winds to the shoulders; the arms are quite long and beautiful; they are disposed in such a way that one has an entire view of the abdomen, cruelly torn by whip lashes; the wound of the divine side seems large enough to receive three fingers, surrounded by a bloodstain of four fingers, narrowing at the bottom, and about half a foot long.

On the other part of this Holy Shroud, representing the back of the body of our Savior, can be seen the nape of the head pierced by long, big thorns, which are so numerous that one can see by that that the crown was made like a hat, and not a circlet like the princes wear and like the painters represent it; when one considers it attentively, one sees the nape more tortured than the rest and the thorns driven in farther; the traces of blood under the nape are bigger and more visible than the others, because the sticks with which they beat upon the crown made the thorns enter right to the brain, so that, having received mortal injuries, it was a miracle he did not die under the blows; and they re-opened also by the jerk of the cross when it was put into the mortise, and beforehand when he was made to fall upon the cross in order to nail him there; the shoulders are entirely torn and brayed with whip lashes, which spread all over.

The blood drops appear as large as marjoram leaves; in several places, there are large rents from the blows they gave him; on the middle of the body, one notices the vestiges of an iron chain<sup>3</sup> which bound him so tightly to the column that it appears all blood; the diversity of the blows shows that they used different kinds of whips, like switches knotted with thorns, iron cords which so cruelly tore him that, on looking through the underside of the Shroud, when it was stretched on the Holland cloth or on the loom, we saw the wounds as if we had looked through a glass.

All the Sisters contemplated it most attentively, with inexpressible consolation, and we saw by these beautiful vestiges that truly he was the most beautiful of the children of men, just as the prophecy that David predicted in one of his psalms.

During the fifteen days that this precious Relic remained in our convent, we could not find occasion for confession, to allow us to approach the Most August Sacrament of the altar and to receive the Son of God, while we had before our eyes a part of Himself in his image painted with his own blood; finally we confessed by turns, Monday and Tuesday, and Wednesday we satisfied our devotion.

That day, His Highness was to come see the condition of the Holy Shroud; but, fearing to disturb us, he put it off until the next morning, about seven o'clock, to give orders how to wrap it in the violet taffetas; this having been done, we were brought some tapestries, besides those which we already had. And Friday we hung them indoors and outdoors, and then it was decreed that the next day they would come to take it. That day, Messeigneurs the Bishop of Belley

and the Suffragan came with several other prelates and other ecclesiastics and gentlemen, who looked at our work and approved it; afterwards, they lifted it up to let us see it one more time; then they rolled it on the roller with a sheet of red silk, and Monseigneur went in procession, everything like when they had brought it, to between the two doors of the convent. All the bells of the town were ringing, besides trumpets and other instruments. For that moment, Messeigneurs the Bishops covered the Holy Shroud with a cloth of gold and carried it away, and we, we all began to sing the hymn *Jésus nostra Redemptio* [Jesus Our Redemption]. We all had lighted candles. With all veneration possible, Messeigneurs the Bishops gave it back at last to His Highness, who waited for them between the two doors. It was carried to the Chateau in great solemnity, and we remained poor orphans of Him who had so benignly visited us through his holy image.



## NOTES:

1. As Prof. Gervasio remarks, the fact cannot be excluded; however the discontinuity probably depends more upon the swelling of the chin, and blood and saliva from the mouth. It is certain that the sharp vertical margin of one side of the moustache is due to swelling on the lip and cheek, causing the hairs to bristle.
2. It is conceivable that the Sisters were referring to the shadowy line at the base of the throat; a line which is now obscured in the photographs because of a horizontal wrinkle in the fabric, cutting right through the line of the imprint. Up until that time, the Shroud had been folded; as the Report states, the Duke gave instructions on how it was to be rolled on a cylinder. It was then, because of the uneven thicknesses of the cloth, that wrinkles began to form.
3. The braid-like flow across the loins could easily suggest a chain. However, modern research has shown that the flow was produced by post-mortem blood and serous fluid issuing through the lance wound from the inferior vena cava when the Body, taken down from the Cross, was laid horizontally.

The scourging was executed with the Roman flagellum; short-handled, with two, sometimes three, hardened-leather thongs tipped by little metal barbells which tore into the flesh.

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