



St. Charles Borromeo and his companions on their pilgrimage to Turin to venerate the Shroud. (From the souvenir album of the 1933 Exposition.)

## THE LETTER OF AGOSTINO CUSANO

The complete text of Agostino Cusano's letter, from which Don Fossati quotes a few lines in his article, seemed to me worthy to be known by all readers of *Spectrum*. Agostino Cusano was one of the "Twelve Elect" chosen by St. Charles Borromeo to be his companions on his 1578 pilgrimage, on foot, from Milan to Chambéry to venerate the Holy Shroud; as we know, Duke Emmanuel Philibert saved him that fatigue by bringing the Shroud across the Alpine pass to his city on the Po.

A copy of this letter and the illustration were kindly sent to me some years ago by Don Fossati. The writer, Agostino Cusano dei Marchesi di Somma, was elected cardinal in 1588. It is not known to whom the letter was written. The recipient was evidently a person of exalted station, being addressed as Your Lordship; but he was not an ecclesiastic or Cusano would not have omitted "Reverend". Whoever he was, Cusano writes as to an old familiar friend who, he knows, will not cavil at stylistic shortcomings when the subject is so solemn.

The letter reads as if written breathlessly, all in one spurt. Impatient with the pauses implied in punctuation within his sentences, the writer runs swiftly onward, like a freshet, tossing out a comma here and there. Upon some of these commas I merely put a dot to stem the impetuosity of headlong-tumbling thoughts, and added other semicolons where the sense required them. Long words, repetitive words, he abbreviated; some he skipped, some repeated; names are misspelled; capital letters share the honors with lower case. No time was lost in selecting fine expressions or variations in the vocabulary.

And if perchance he leaves a sentence without a subject, the subject is the Shroud. The sight of that Image had so flooded Agostino's mind that all his words, all his thoughts, reflected that alone. Which is not to say that his thoughts took ethereal flight or burst forth in mystical ecstasies. His description of the Most Holy Linen and its Image is a true account grounded on acute observation and keen perception, entirely consonant with descriptions attempted today. Indeed, among those who have seen the Shroud in recent years, few could match the clarity and probity of Agostino Cusano.

### **Letter from Agostino Cusano, 25 October 1578, from Milan**

Signore Pomponio and I were on pilgrimage to Turin to see and adore that rarest relic in the world, the Most Holy Shroud in which the body of our Savior was wrapped and buried.

Our Most Reverend and Most Illustrious Archbishop, Cardinal Borromeo, went there on foot with twelve other pilgrims, and we, being less mortified, took a carriage. His Most Illustrious Lordship was received by the Lord Duke of Savoy with every possible honor; he was first met by the Archbishop of Turin, then by the Cardinal of Vercelli, and lastly by his Highness the Lord Duke and the

Prince, with all the court on foot and with the gendarmes and light cavalry, and at their entry the air resounded all around from the many artillery salvos.

The Palace where H. M. Ill. Lordship was lodged was all adorned with hangings of gold brocade...and precious pearls; the good Cardinal, with charity and Christian piety, accepted all the courtesies done for him, without refusing a one, as the law of Christian hospitality commands.

After he had rested for one day, that Most Holy Linen was privately shown, spread upon a large table where it was adored by all of us, on our knees, for the space of one hour, part of the time being engaged with devout sermons, part of the time with pious meditations; after which we all got to our feet and with every reverence due to it, we gazed intently and contemplated it, close up and from farther back, from one side and the other, absorbed in a sight so devout and—piteous.

The following Sunday, the M. H. Linen was carried in procession from the Cathedral to Piazza del Castello where a multitude of people, practically innumerable from every region around about, had come together, filling all that huge piazza so thickly that one saw nothing but heads, so that it looked like the Last Judgment; it was estimated that there were forty thousand people, and there upon a big platform all richly adorned, the most holy relic was displayed, while cries of *mercy* rose even to the sky.

Two Cardinals assisted in the procession, ours and that of Vercelli; two Archbishops, of Turin and of Savoy; six other bishops, the Most Serene Duke, Prince, and other Lords of that court.

After that, the M. H. Relic was carried back to the Cathedral and with big lamps was replaced up high, and immediately the prayers of the forty hours began, continuing day and night, according to the time that Our Savior was wrapped and buried in that Shroud; from time to time the stations were made by various parishes, confraternities and associations which arrived processionally every so often; there were sermons, sometimes by Cardinals, sometimes by Bishops and by other Religious, about that most holy relic, and the Serene Duke and Prince were almost continually present.

At the end of the prayers of the forty hours, the most holy Linen was again carried processionally by the Cardinals and two Archbishops, the Bishops carrying the baldachin, all of them in pontifical vestments, the Duke and Prince wearing the habit of St. Lazarus, going processionally with all the Cavalry; and in the same piazza, on the platform, [the Shroud] was held out and shown to all the people and then taken back into the Cathedral; but since the Duke had learned that four thousand Huguenots had come from the valley of Ongrogna [?] on the Swiss border, but [people however] of his State [of Savoy], just to see Cardinal Borromeo, for this occasion he wanted that the prayers of the forty hours and the usual sermons should be prolonged, to see if some conversions could be

made among these people; so our Cardinal held forth for the space of almost two hours and the silence and deep attention in such a gathering was wonderful.

Then in the evening the M. H. Linen was replaced and the people were dismissed. The next day again we had occasion to return to see [the Shroud] again, privately, and engrave it on our hearts and our senses.

It is an amazing thing to see how that M. H. Linen, made of one-doesn't-know-what material, but one opines that it is of linen, so fine that it seems to be silk—is found to be whole and undamaged after a thousand and five hundred years.

But it is even more amazing to see here impressed the image and effigy of the true and natural body of the Lord with all his form and with the signs and vestiges of the scars and wounds that he sustained for our sins; impressed, I say, not with the human art of a painter nor with a variety of colors, but miraculously stamped and portrayed by his own body.

Not without miracle that, a fire having started in the Santa Cappella where it was preserved and the chest scorching and the silver melting, and the fire arriving even to the most holy Linen, did not touch a bit of the image, though many other places were burnt, as one sees now; and this happened several years ago in Chambéry where the Santa Cappella is established.

If so much honor and veneration is due to other relics, how much more is due to this one, which is unique and solitary in all the world, and for the contact, not with one part of the body of the Lord but with all the members and all the whole body, which was wrapped here for such a long time, so also for the true and natural image, but miraculously impressed, of the Lord with the signs of all the most holy wounds and even much more because of the most precious blood that colored and wetted abundantly in so many places.

One could say that it is these three respects that make this relic not only worthy of adoration, but unique in the world and superior to all the others; and furthermore for certification this one does not need other approbation since it carries on it the testimony of its veracity, with the image miraculously stamped, even if there are also the testimonials of many Popes who commend it, for instance Sixtus IV, Paul II, Julius II, with many privileges and indulgences.

Well can we here admire and be astounded by the love with which Christ has loved us, wanting that a living and continuous memorial of his Most Holy passion and the benefit of the redemption of the world should remain with us, not only leaving us the substance of his true and real body in the Most Holy Sacrament of the altar but even, adding memorial to memorial and pledge upon pledge, by leaving us the visible and perceptible figure of his body in this M. H. Linen so that we might have the wherewithal to nourish not only the interior man, the intellect and affection, with the

Most Holy Sacrament; but even the exterior man, with all his senses, in this glorious Shroud.

May the Lord give us grace, that since we have seen, in this figure, so much suffering and such a death [sustained] for our sins, so may we see Him, glorious and immortal, in Heaven, through the merits of his Most Holy passion; and in this, while we pray that he concede us that living faith and hope that that sainted Woman of the Gospel had who said, If I but touch the hem of his robe, I will be saved; and we, to whom it has been given not only to see, but to touch and kiss not the hem of his outer clothing, but the garment that touched all the most holy members of the Lord, and to kiss his very blood—how could we not hope in the salvation of our soul? But to satisfy the pious desire of Your Lordship, it occurs to me to add some other details, and I will tell how one sees this most holy figure.

Just as it was written by the great historian Nicephorus Callistus\*, Greek author, treating of the image of the Lord, the length of the body is three *braccia di panno* of our measure of Milan; four fingers broader than me, that is, one palm [broader than I am], and so forth, the rest of the body corresponding with proper proportion. The face rather long, the beard separated in two, but short; long hair, falling below the ears; a face that, to see it, calls forth great veneration; on the forehead there remain some vestiges of the crown of thorns, with some blood streams that flow as far as just above the eyes; the wound of the side is at the right, wide almost three fingers with copious blood as much as the breadth of a palm of the hand; the marks of the nails of the hand come out not in the middle of the hand but at the end of the juncture of the arm, equal to the size of a very big finger, and copious blood, as much as the size of an egg, and the hands are joined one over the other and the arms as if skinned, bathed in blood from the middle on down; and thus the feet as well have the marks of nails which entered not in the middle but in the juncture of the legs with copious blood, as with the hands.

And since the most holy Linen was folded over all the body, it came about that it received upon itself two figures, one of the anterior part of the body, the other of the posterior part where one sees clearly the blows of the flagellae, for they must have fallen more thickly upon the shoulders which appear as if with bruises.

The whole figure is rather obscure, like a dark shadow, or like the first sketch of a painting that now you see it, now you don't and that arouses greater desire and diligence to see it again better; now it is seen better up close, now farther back; the blood stains everything so that one could apply the words, *quam obscuratum est*

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\* Nicephorus Callistus († btwn. 1350-1380) refers to the Oriental tradition of the height of Christ as being 183.05cm.

*aurum, et non erat ei decor neque aspectus.* Oh merciful God, how can one tell all these things without tears, it would be much better to hush, and meditate in silence rather than speak so shallowly and unworthily!

The Most Holy Linen is six *brazza* (sic) *da panno* of our measure, and two and a half *braccia* wide....

Here, then, is what I have said to Your Lordship, by jumps and starts and quite haphazardly, all that occurred to me about that Most Holy Relic, [all] that seemed to me worthy of knowing. May Your Lordship accept kindly this true account, so badly composed and written hurriedly; for with you I am not embarrassed to let my shortcomings be seen.

Laus Deo.

*A REMINDER..*

May 4 will be celebrated in many churches around the world as the Feast Day of the Holy Shroud, established by Pope Julius II with a Bull of 9 May, 1506. In approving the Office of the Mass in honor of the Shroud, Julius II wrote, in part: ". . . as we venerate and adore the Holy Cross . . . so ought we equally to venerate and adore, in worthy manner, the Holy Shroud on which are clearly visible the imprints of the Humanity of Christ which the Divinity had assumed, that is, of his true blood . . ."

All devotees should try to remember the day in some manner; while Catholics should try to attend Mass.