

EASTER WITH THE EYES OF THE SHROUD

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It is evident and is known to all that suffering is the main theme that the image of the Shroud conveys even to the most disenchanted pilgrim, as he eloquently portrays a man who has suffered in an unspeakable way. It is equally clear that the physical suffering suffered by the man of the Shroud - clearly visible in all the signs of the image - coincides perfectly with that suffered by Jesus. It is always said and underlined and it is one of the most convincing proofs of the very high probability that the man of the Shroud can be identified with Jesus.

St John Paul II admirably underlined this in his speech before the Shroud of 24 May 1998, on the occasion of his last visit to Turin: "The image of human suffering is reflected in the Shroud. It reminds modern man, often distracted by well-being and technological achievements, of the drama of many brothers, and invites him to question the mystery of pain to investigate its causes. The imprint of the tortured body of the Crucified One, bearing witness to man's tremendous ability to bring pain and death to his fellow men, stands as the icon of the suffering of the innocent of all times: of the countless tragedies that have marked past history and the dramas that continue to take place in the world. In front of the Shroud, how can we not think of the millions of starving men, the horrors perpetrated in the many wars that bloody the Nations, the brutal exploitation of women and children, the millions of human beings who live with hardship and humiliation on the margins of the city, especially in developing countries? How can we fail to remember with bewilderment and pity those who cannot enjoy basic civil rights, the victims of torture and terrorism, the slaves of criminal organizations?

These are the sufferings that still involve a large part of the daily mass media, even if we know that those that fill the news represent only the tip of the iceberg, since most of them are unknown. It is also the suffering that we are experiencing in this period due to the dramatic pandemic caused by the coronavirus. To such sufferings, including that which is so crudely described by the Shroud image, it is not possible to find a meaning, a justification that can make them humanly acceptable. Even for believers, suffering has always appeared unjustified and often unjustifiable: God seems absent, extraneous to human affairs, unable to prevent evil and pain. Only a direct involvement of God in the mystery of suffering could have given meaning to this mysterious and terrible characteristic of human life. And God entered human history: it happened with the Incarnation of the Son and with his death on the cross, with his sharing of one of the most atrocious human tortures, freely chosen for the salvation of humanity. What apparently looks like a sign of defeat and weakness has become the definitive victory of God (and with him of man) over death and pain (see 1 Cor 1: 23-25). Only in this way the sufferings of men have acquired a new value and meaning, because united with those of Jesus and his voluntary offering, a sign of God's infinite love for man. And in this sense that, as John Paul II said in his

aforementioned speech, "the Shroud thus becomes an invitation to live every experience, including that of suffering and supreme impotence, in the attitude of those who believe that the merciful love of God conquers every poverty, every conditioning, every temptation of despair."

However, the passion of Jesus was not just a physical passion, but also and above all spiritual and inner. The deep and tragic suffering suffered in the night spent in prayer at Gethsemane was perhaps terrible of the suffering suffered on the cross. Hematohidrosis - the phenomenon of sweat that becomes blood - is normally the consequence of serious psychophysical stress. What must have been the inner struggle of Jesus to provoke a vasodilatation of the subcutaneous capillaries so strong as to cause their rupture and consequently the widespread bleeding described in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 22:39- 44). Human suffering is also often psychological suffering, especially in our modern western society. The daily struggle between good and evil that opposes in a continual struggle will and action (cf. Rom 7:14-25); the never easy choices that man is called to make every day of his life, often forced to choose the lesser evil reluctantly; the clash with an often hostile and hostile society; the terrible daily confrontation with one's conscience and the constant temptation to make it silent in order not to live an infinite and unsolvable identity crisis; the solitude of the individual more and more marked not only generally within society, but also in the most intimate and familiar structures such as the couple, the family, the work environment, the circle of friends; being often forced to lose one's dignity in order to survive, to find a job or to stay within an environment whose rules are often not shared; living anguished personal and family situations for years, sometimes for decades, having to assist the sick in body or mind, without hope, with no way out, waiting for a definitive conclusion that is desired even without wanting it.

The redemptive response of Jesus to all these incomprehensible sufferings is highlighted by the Shroud imprint, as John Paul II always reminds us in the quoted speech: "By evoking these dramatic situations, the Shroud not only pushes us to get out of our selfishness, but it brings us able to discover the mystery of pain which, sanctified by the sacrifice of Christ, generates salvation for all humanity." It is the sacrifice of Christ that gives meaning to all the sufferings of all human beings, transforming them into the saving and co-redemptive action of the Body of Christ which is the Church.

Personally, I have always felt deeply challenged by the image of the Shroud. I remember - it was the month of July 2002, on the occasion of the restoration work carried out on the Shroud - a whole night spent next to the Shroud without any assignment or research to be done, but with the free soul to let myself be carried away in an intimate and deep relationship with the image of that tortured man, universal symbol of the suffering of man of every race, epoch, religion. And that night the reflections of Saint John Paul II of four years before came to mind one by one.

That of the suffering that characterizes the life of man from birth to death is one of the great mysteries with which man has always had to confront, desperately trying to understand even

only partially the meaning (see the desperate, how apparently useless, search for "Job"). The society of our time in the face of this great mystery has chosen the path of ignoring it, of pretending that it does not exist. These are the facts of every day that illustrate these clear trend lines: it is considered right and right to physically eliminate those who suffer, enhances perfection and physical efficiency, hides old age relegating the old to golden ghettos but alienating, we try to exorcise death by delegating to specific structures to deal with this uncomfortable reality and we are under the illusion of being able to win it sooner or later or at least remove it thanks to the findings of the research. But we all know that it is only a great and general illusion. The dramatic moment we are experiencing shows us every day. The pandemic that is spreading all over the world, sowing death and suffering, is affecting all peoples and all social classes, a serious distinction. And the column of military trucks that transport to some cemetery far away from the coffins forces us to touch the raw reality with our hands, even if we are comfortably seated in the living room in front of the television. Pope Francis repeated it to us over and over again. In his homily held last Friday evening in the churchyard of St. Peter's Basilica, desolately empty and beaten by the rain, he told us: "For weeks it seems that the evening has fallen. Dense darkness has thickened and descended on our squares, streets and cities; they have taken over our lives by filling everything with deafening silence and a desolate void, which paralyzes everything in its passage: you can feel it in the air, you can feel it in your gestures, the looks say it. We found ourselves afraid and lost, taken aback by an unexpected and furious storm. We are all on this boat."

We feel desperate, lost, disarmed, unable to overcome the invisible enemy, we seem to have lost all our certainties. Yet a clear and definitive answer has been given to us. That night I spent in front of the Shroud had the answer in front of me. It was that image, it was that battered body. I knew very well that if on one hand that image appeared to me an enormous mystery and suggested many more questions than answers, on the other hand it gave me the greatest certainty of my life: in that blood-stained sheet that body is not there it was more, it had been gone for almost two thousand years. That man had risen by defeating death definitively and forever and not only for himself but for all humanity. At that moment the words with which Saint John Paul II had concluded his meditation before the Shroud had become very clear and eloquent: "The Spirit of God, who lives in our hearts, arouse in each one the necessary desire and generosity to welcome the message of the Shroud and to make it the inspiring criterion of 'existence'."

We need it so much, especially now in these difficult and dramatic moments. Pope Francis in his homily last Friday helped us to make the right choices, to travel the only sure road, urging us to make our faith the most powerful and most precious weapon against suffering and against death: "Lord, make us an appeal, an appeal to faith. Which is not so much to believe that you exist, but to come to you and trust yourself. You call us to take this time of trial as a time of choice. It is not the time of yours. Judgment, but of our judgment: the time to choose what counts and what passes, to separate what is necessary from what is not. And the time to reset the course of life

towards You, Lord, and towards others. The Lord awakens and revives our Easter faith. We have an anchor: in his cross we have been saved. We have a helm: in his cross we have been redeemed. We have hope: in his cross we have been healed and embraced ensure that nothing and nobody separate us from his redeeming love amid the isolation in which we are suffering the lack of affections and encounters, experiencing the lack of many things, we listen once again to the announcement that saves us: he is risen and lives next to us."