

PASTORAL VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO VERCELLI AND TURIN (ITALY)
(MAY 23-24, 1998)

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 24 May 1998

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. With my gaze turned to the Shroud, I would like to extend a cordial greeting to you all, the faithful of the Church of Turin. I greet the pilgrims who have come from every part of the world at the time of this public exposition to look at one of the most unsettling signs of the Redeemer's suffering love.

As I entered the cathedral, which still shows the scars of last year's terrible fire, I paused in adoration before the Eucharist, the sacrament which is the focus of the Church's attention and, under humble appearances, contains the true, real and substantial presence of Christ. In the light of Christ's presence in our midst, I then stopped before the Shroud, the precious Linen that can help us better to understand the mystery of the love of God's Son for us. Before the Shroud, the intense and agonizing image of an unspeakable torment, I wish to thank the Lord for this unique gift, which asks for the believer's loving attention and complete willingness to follow the Lord.

2. The Shroud is a challenge to our intelligence. It first of all requires of every person, particularly the researcher, that he humbly grasp the profound message it sends to his reason and his life. The mysterious fascination of the Shroud forces questions to be raised about the sacred Linen and the historical life of Jesus. Since it is not a matter of faith, the Church has no specific competence to pronounce on these questions. She entrusts to scientists the task of continuing to investigate, so that satisfactory answers may be found to the questions connected with this Sheet, which, according to tradition, wrapped the body of our Redeemer after he had been taken down from the cross. The Church urges that the Shroud be studied without pre-established positions that take for granted results that are not such; she invites them to act with interior freedom and attentive respect for both scientific methodology and the sensibilities of believers.

3. For the believer, what counts above all is that the Shroud is a mirror of the Gospel. In fact, if we reflect on the sacred Linen, we cannot escape the idea that the image it presents has such a profound relationship with what the Gospels tell of Jesus' passion and death, that every sensitive person feels inwardly touched and moved at beholding it. Whoever approaches it is also aware that the Shroud does not hold people's hearts to itself, but turns them to him, at whose service the Father's loving providence has put it. Therefore, it is right to foster an awareness of the precious value of this image, which everyone sees and no one at present can explain. For every thoughtful person it is a reason for deep reflection, which can even involve one's life. The Shroud is thus a truly unique sign that points to Jesus, the true Word of the Father, and invites us to pattern our lives on the life of the One who gave himself for us.

4. The image of human suffering is reflected in the Shroud. It reminds modern man, often distracted by prosperity and technological achievements, of the tragic situation of his many brothers and sisters, and invites him to question himself about the mystery of suffering in order to explore its causes. The imprint left by the tortured body of the Crucified One, which attests to the tremendous human capacity for causing pain and death to one's fellow man, stands as an icon of the suffering of the innocent in every age: of the countless tragedies that have marked past history and the dramas that continue to unfold in the world. Before the Shroud, how can we not think of the millions of people who die of hunger, of the horrors committed in the many wars that soak nations in blood, of the brutal exploitation of women and children, of the millions of human beings who live in hardship and humiliation on the edges of great cities, especially in developing countries? How can we not recall with dismay and pity those who do not enjoy basic civil rights, the victims of torture and terrorism, the slaves of criminal organizations? By calling to mind these tragic situations, the Shroud not only spurs us to abandon our selfishness but leads us to discover the mystery of suffering, which, sanctified by Christ's sacrifice, achieves salvation for all humanity. Death is not the ultimate goal of human existence

5. The Shroud is also an image of God's love as well as of human sin. It invites us to rediscover the ultimate reason for Jesus' redeeming death. In the incomparable suffering that it documents, the love of the One who "so loved the world that he gave his only

Son" (Jn 3: 16) is made almost tangible and reveals its astonishing dimensions. In its presence believers can only exclaim in all truth: "Lord, you could not love me more!", and immediately realize that sin is responsible for that suffering: the sins of every human being.

As it speaks to us of love and sin, the Shroud invites us all to impress upon our spirit the face of God's love, to remove from it the tremendous reality of sin. Contemplation of that tortured Body helps contemporary man to free himself from the superficiality of the selfishness with which he frequently treats love and sin. Echoing the word of God and centuries of Christian consciousness, the Shroud whispers: believe in God's love, the greatest treasure given to humanity, and flee from sin, the greatest misfortune in history.

6. The Shroud is also an image of powerlessness: the powerlessness of death, in which the ultimate consequence of the mystery of the Incarnation is revealed. The burial cloth spurs us to measure ourselves against the most troubling aspect of the mystery of the Incarnation, which is also the one that shows with how much truth God truly became man, taking on our condition in all things, except sin. Everyone is shaken by the thought that not even the Son of God withstood the power of death, but we are all moved at the thought that he so shared our human condition as willingly to subject himself to the total powerlessness of the moment when life is spent. It is the experience of Holy Saturday, an important stage on Jesus' path to Glory, from which a ray of light shines on the sorrow and death of every person. By reminding us of Christ's victory, faith gives us the certainty that the grave is not the ultimate goal of existence. God calls us to resurrection and immortal life.

7. The Shroud is an image of silence. There is a tragic silence of incommunicability, which finds its greatest expression in death, and there is the silence of fruitfulness, which belongs to whoever refrains from being heard outwardly in order to delve to the roots of truth and life. The Shroud expresses not only the silence of death but also the courageous and fruitful silence of triumph over the transitory, through total immersion in God's eternal present. It thus offers a moving confirmation of the fact that the merciful omnipotence of our God is not restrained by any power of evil, but knows instead how to make the very power of evil contribute to good. Our age needs to rediscover the fruitfulness of silence, in order to overcome the dissipation of sounds, images and chatter that too often prevent the voice of God from being heard.

8. Dear brothers and sisters: your Archbishop, dear Cardinal Giovanni Saldarini, the Pontifical Guardian of the Holy Shroud, has offered the following words as the motto of this Solemn Exposition: "All will see your salvation". Yes, the pilgrimage that great throngs are making to this city is precisely a "coming to see" this tragic and enlightening sign of the Passion, which proclaims the Redeemer's love. This icon of Christ abandoned in the dramatic and solemn state of death, which for centuries has been the subject of significant representations and for 100 years, thanks to photography, has been so frequently reproduced, urges us to go to the heart of the mystery of life and death, to discover the great and consoling message it has left us.

The Shroud shows us Jesus at the moment of his greatest helplessness and reminds us that in the abasement of that death lies the salvation of the whole world. The Shroud thus becomes an invitation to face every experience, including that of suffering and extreme helplessness, with the attitude of those who believe that God's merciful love overcomes every poverty, every limitation, every temptation to despair.

May the Spirit of God, who dwells in our hearts, instil in everyone the desire and generosity necessary for accepting the Shroud's message and for making it the decisive inspiration of our lives.

Anima Chri, sanctifica me! Corpus Christi, salva me! Passio Christi, conforta me! Intra vulnera tua, absconde me!

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