

He Has Borne **Our Grief**

Many people are simply unaware that the central fact of the Christian faith is the Person of the Crucified and Resurrected Christ. Christianity is not, essentially, a set of ideas, a culture, a series of customs or ethical attitudes, but a personal relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. As an aid toward making direct and personal contact with the Savior, Divine Providence has preserved for us an appalling image of His suffering and death. It is imprinted on a grave-cloth, which might be viewed as an additional Gospel, written not in ink, but in blood, shed for our salvation.

Can we remain indifferent to this special testimony of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection? The Shroud of Turin depicts the extent of the suffering, which Our Lord chose for Himself. And all this for love for us, in order to save us from Satan's rule, from sin and death.

"This precious burial cloth of Jesus – observes His Holiness Pope John Paul II – can help us better understand the mystery of the Son's love for us. Standing before this eloquent and shocking image of indescribable suffering, I wish to thank God for His special gift, a gift that no Christian eager to follow Christ should overlook... The Shroud enables us to discover the mystery of suffering sanctified through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, a suffering that has become the source of salvation of all mankind" (Turin, May 24th, 1998).

He was put through horrible suffering

Scientific research on the Shroud confirms that it bears the impress of an adult male almost six feet tall, of strong, muscular build, with long hair, a beard, and handsome Semitic features. The man was put through the horrible torments of scourging, the imposition of a crown of thorns, and crucifixion. Nearly 600 wounds have been found on his body. Yet the image of the corpse bears no trace of decomposition. In addition to agreeing with the accounts of the Gospels, these data contain a number

of additional important details. Above all, the Shroud shows us, explicitly and directly, the extent to which Christ suffered destruction – *"to the end"* (Jn 13: 1) – for love of us.

The face of Jesus

Despite all this physical and spiritual suffering, the image of Jesus' face on the Shroud is striking in its unsurpassed beauty and serenity. It shows the immensity of the suffering on the cross could only have been borne by someone who was aware that through suffering and death he would achieve complete victory over death.



The face as seen on the Shroud

The face on the Shroud attests to the torments Jesus endured. We can see a wound across the nose and right cheek, inflicted by a stick. In addition, there are abrasions to the eyelids and eyebrows, a swelling over the right zygoma, traces of hemorrhaging through the nostrils, bruises and bone displacement at the tip of the nose, scalp lesions from hair being torn out by the roots. As we read in the Gospels: *"And they struck his head with a reed, and spat upon him, and they knelt down in homage to him"* (Mk 15: 19) and *"struck him with their hands"* (Jn. 19:3).

The crown of thorns was laid upon Him

Soldiers *"plaited a crown of thorns and laid it on his head"* (Jn. 19:2). This torture was designed uniquely for Jesus. In no other historical source do we encounter this kind of torture before crucifixion. In the area of the skull, we can see numerous bloodstains that result in a positive, photographic-like print. These were caused by the thorns piercing the blood vessels of the head. The crown of thorns was shaped like a bonnet, which wrapped the entire upper portion of the head. Surgeons have found 13 thorn wounds on the forehead, and 20 at the back of the head, but there could have been as many as 50 wounds altogether. Owing to the network of blood vessels and nerves in the scalp, the crown of thorns must have caused enormous pain

and bleeding. *“If we consider* – observes L. Coppini, Director of the Institute of Anatomy at the University of Bologna – *that there are over 140 pain-sensitive areas per one square centimeter of scalp tissue, we can imagine how unbearable must have been His pain”*. Scientific investigation has confirmed that the blood traces appearing on the Shroud correspond to the anatomy of the blood vessels of the human head. Here is one more piece of evidence favoring the authenticity of the Shroud, since the human circulatory system was not understood or described until 1593.

Scourging

Jesus underwent the cruel act of scourging. Everywhere, the body of the Shroud bears traces of wounds caused by a type of Roman whip called the flagrum. The wounds on the buttocks mean that Jesus was beaten naked. Scourging was

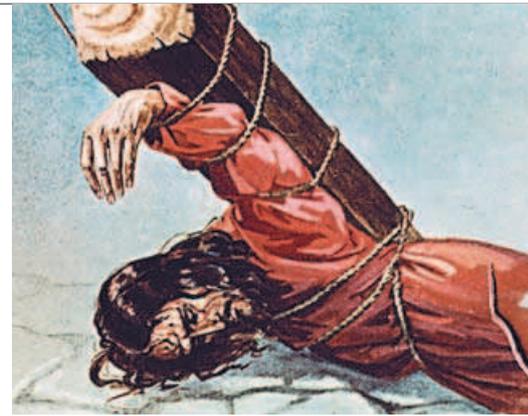
a terrible punishment, often resulting in death. The whip consisted of three longish thongs tipped with metal pieces. These tore out pieces of flesh in the process of lashing. 120 whip-inflicted wounds have been discovered. According to common practice, scourging was intended only for those spared of the death penalty. Those so punished would be set free afterwards. Originally, Pilate desired Jesus to be scourged only. He says: *“I will therefore chastise him and release him”* (Lk. 23:16). This explains



the severity with which Jesus was lashed. The soldiers understood that this was the only punishment to be meted out to Him. There were two soldiers. The one on the right was taller and more sadistic in the exercise of his duty. Jesus stood, slightly bent, with his hand tied to a pole. The thongs of the whip wrapped around His body, hitting the front parts, the chest, the abdomen, the shins and the thighs.

Carrying the cross

From the shoulder wounds imprinted on the Shroud, researchers agree that Jesus carried the horizontal beam of the cross, called the patibulum, and that his hands were tied to it. It is believed that the patibulum was close to six feet long (1,8 m) and weighed about 66 lb (30 kg). Jesus was utterly exhausted after the scourging and walked to the place of crucifixion with great difficulty. He had to cover a distance of about 550 yards (500 m). He fell several times on His face, hit-

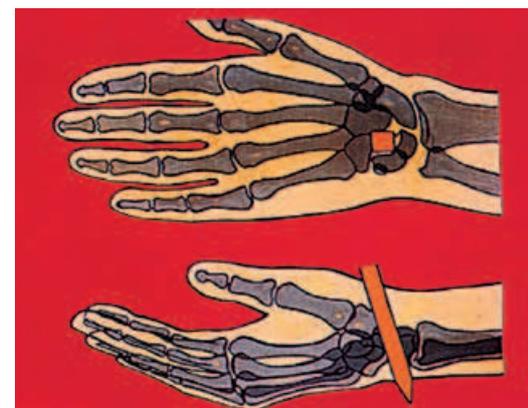


ting His knees violently against the stony road. Scientists have discovered large abrasions to the nose (particles of soil and stone mixed with blood have been found on the tip) as well as the knees, especially the right one. Since Jesus was unable to carry the cross Himself, Simon of Cyrene was forced by the Centurion to carry it behind Him (Lk. 23:26).

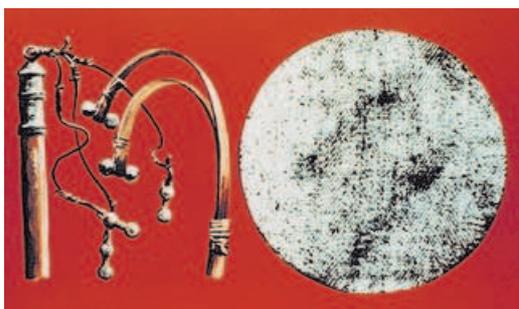
Crucifixion

Death on the cross was one of the cruelest and most degrading punishments carried out in the time of Jesus. The Shroud clearly shows the nail wounds of the wrists. The impression of the feet shows that they were pinned by one nail to the vertical beam of the cross. The nail pierced the tarsal bone. The left foot was placed over the right.

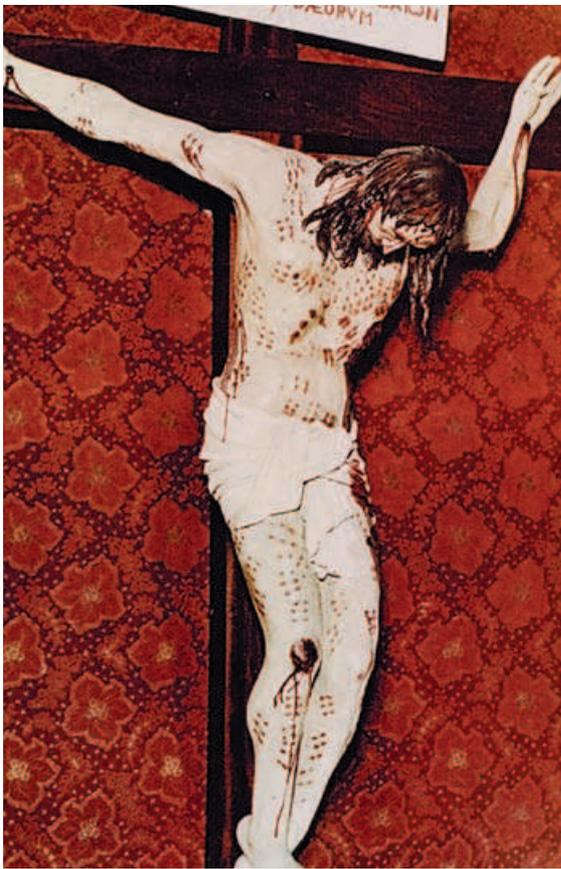
The hands were nailed to the cross at the wrists, not the palms, since the weight of the body was too great to be supported by the palms. Had the nails been driven into the palm, they would



have torn through the flesh, causing the body to break loose. The nails went in at a point called the “Destot point”, located between the bones of the wrist. No major blood vessels are found in this part of the body. However, as Dr. P. Barbet observes, there is a nerve, which not only controls the movements of the thumb,



A Roman scourge and traces of wounds inflicted by it



The position of Jesus' body as reconstructed on the basis of blood traces on the Shroud

but also signals pain. The pain caused here by a piercing nail can be terrible, but not unbearable. Otherwise, the sufferer would lose consciousness.

The Shroud indicates two rivulets of blood on the left wrist. An analysis of these has enabled scientists to reconstruct the position of Jesus' hands on the horizontal beam of the cross. While hanging on the cross, with His wrists above the level of His shoulders, Jesus would have tried periodically to lift His body, in order to breathe. At such times the angle of His arms relative to the vertical increased by a range of ten degrees. When He lowered His body again, the angle returned to its norm of 55 degrees. Thus, for brief moments the position of His body changed, and he was able to breathe, after which pain and exhaustion forced him to lower his body again. This successive lowering and lifting of the body on pierced hands and feet continued for about 3 hours and would have caused indescribable suffering. The process became more and more frequent, until finally He was overcome by total exhaustion and death.

The Rupture of the Heart Muscle

The wound in Jesus' right side was over half an inch wide and one and three quarters of an inch long. By analyzing it,

along with the traces of considerable bleeding and fluid discharge which accumulated in the pleural cavity, scientists have been able to ascertain the cause of death as rupture of the heart muscle due to cardiac arrest. This in turn would have precipitated a massive hemorrhaging into the pericardium (about 2 quarts of blood), and thence into the lungs, causing hemopericardium. A violent rupture of the pericardium due to a high build-up of blood would have resulted in a paralyzing pain in the sternum area. Jesus uttered a sudden shout and died. *"And Jesus cried once again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit"* (Mt. 27:50). A violent death occurring in a state of full consciousness and extreme exhaustion usually precipitates a stiffening of the body (rigor mortis). That is why the body impressed on the Shroud appears to be so rigid.

The Pierced Heart of the Savior

Soon after Jesus' death, the blood in the pericardium would have separated into red corpuscles (accumulating in the lower part of the pleural cavity) and blood plasma (remaining in the upper part). When His chest was pierced by the Centurion's lance, both fluids flowed out, first the red corpuscles, then the blood plasma, i.e. *"blood and water"* as described in John 19:34.

The pierced heart of the Savior stands as a symbol of God's immense love for us. By becoming true man, Jesus chose to "empty himself of all things" and accepted a truly human death, along with the burden of our sins. Though innocent, knowing no sin, the God-Man experienced in the moment of His suffering and death the full extent of suffering caused by sin. *"Surely he has borne our grief and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted"* (Is. 53:4-5).

In this, Jesus acted in perfect obedience to His Father. And in doing so, He

overcame every sin, and death itself. His suffering reached its climax in the agony on the cross, when he exclaimed: *"My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"* (Mt. 27:46). It was at this point that His suffering reached to the limits of sin's destructive sway, overcoming it with inexhaustible filial love and obedience to the Father's will.

The Shroud helps us to discover the mystery of suffering sanctified through the sacrifice of Jesus. As John Paul II observes in Turin, this sacrifice represents the source of salvation of all mankind. The burial cloth is also an image of God's love and human sin. It obliges us to probe the deepest reasons for Christ's redemptive death. This testimony of unlimited suffering not only makes palpable the love of Him who *"so loved the world that he gave his only son"* (Jn. 3:16), but also highlights its dimensions. Faced with this degree of suffering, the believer cannot but exclaim: *"Lord, you could not have loved me more"*. Nor can he fail to realize that sin – the sins of every one of us – are the cause of this suffering.

The Shroud invites all of us to stamp the image of God's love into our hearts, and to root out the terrible reality of sin. A contemplation of Jesus' tormented body helps modern man to free himself from the superficiality and selfishness that so often shape his attitude toward love and sin. In the silent message of the Shroud, we can hear an echo of God's words and the centuries-old experience of Christianity: have faith in the love of God, the most precious treasure offered to humanity; beware of sin, the greatest danger posed to human life. (Turin, May 24, 1998)

M.P. ●



Blood traces from the pierced heart