

the law on celibacy. The fact that he has undertaken to study "all the different aspects of the problem" means that the subject is not closed, that the dialogue will continue. It is unlikely, however, that his letter will inhibit the journalists or silence the editors, or even that priests will interpret his words as a ban on public discussion.

VERONICA AND HER VEIL

The Growth of a Christian Legend

By MAURUS GREEN, O.S.B.

DID St. Veronica ever exist? If so, did she wipe our Lord's face with her veil? What is to be seen on the "Veil of Veronica" preserved in the Veronica chapel high up in one of the pillars that support the dome of St. Peter's? The answers are to be found in four rather inaccessible works.¹ The story that emerges is a fascinating example of the growth of legend whose evolution at once follows and shapes the devotional life of Christendom. Starting from the minimum of fact, it grows throughout the centuries, creating its own psychological reality as it goes. The available evidence suggests that neither deceit nor forgery played any part in this process.

The first mention of Veronica appears in the *Acta Pilati*, a second or fourth century work. During the trial of Jesus before Pilate, among the witnesses for the defence is a woman called Berenice or Veronica who comes forward to testify that the accused healed her of an issue of blood from which she had suffered for about twelve years. Veronica will keep her identity with the haemorrhoids of the Gospels until quite modern times (Matthew ix: 20).

Most scholars are agreed that the second stage occurred in the sixth century under the influence of the Abgar legend, much more famous in the Middle Ages than that of Veronica, which follows it step by step in its development. The Veronica story is almost certainly the Roman version of the exchange of letters between the sick King Abgar of Edessa and Jesus who sent to the king, not only the promise of healing and an apostle to convert his people, but His portrait miraculously imprinted on cloth. Rome could hardly have allowed the East to possess the universally acknowledged true portrait of the Lord without sooner or later producing one of her own.

In the earliest Roman version, the *Cura Sanitatis Tiberii* (600 A.D.), the Emperor Tiberius is afflicted with leprosy. He sends Volusian to Jerusalem to beg Jesus for a cure. Volusian discovers that Pilate has killed Jesus. The discovery leads to Pilate's recall to Rome and punishment. In Jerusalem Volusian meets Veronica, who possesses a portrait of Jesus. He forces her to go to Rome, where Tiberius is cured by the image. In the later work of uncertain date, called *Mors Pilati*, Veronica, knowing that our Lord will soon leave her, decides to have His portrait painted. Meeting her on her way to the painter and learning her errand, Jesus asks for the canvas, presses it to His face, and returns it to her with His image miraculously imprinted upon it. He had done exactly the same for Hannan, King Abgar's envoy.

This version of the Veronica story was universally believed, and held sway until the fourteenth century. It cannot be too strongly emphasised that neither the

icon of Edessa nor the Veronica image showed any sign of suffering. Both depicted the Lord alive and well before the Passion. Both were icons of the Byzantine school, the icon of Edessa being the prototype of that crop of miraculous images peculiar to the sixth century. Appearing mysteriously in the East, each had its own story of miraculous origin.

It is not until the twelfth century that we find a change creeping over the traditional Veronica story, a change that reflects both the growing interest in the Passion of Christ encouraged by the Franciscans, who invented the Stations of the Cross, and the new emphasis of the artists on the dead Christ. As early as 1160, Peter Mallius mentions our Lady's oratory in St. Peter's which is called Veronica, "where," he says, "without doubt is the *sudarium Christi*, on which before His Passion He wiped His most sacred face, when His sweat became as drops of blood falling to the ground." By the year 1300 the Passion motif has entered a French version of the Volusian story. The sick Tiberius has had his hopes raised by Peter, who, instead of healing the Emperor himself, oddly suggests sending for Veronica and her image. As before, Volusian goes to Jerusalem to fetch her, only to discover that she has obtained the portrait by emerging from the crowd on the Via Dolorosa to wipe the face of Jesus.

At last we have reached the familiar version, but it was not to become popular till the fifteenth century, when the authors of the Parisian Passion plays, performed by the *Confréries de la Passion*, seized on the new version as a dramatic device. The pathetic and courageous action of one of the "daughters of Jerusalem" bursting through the crowd to wipe the bleeding face of Jesus as He carried His cross to Calvary was a dramatic stroke of genius.

At once the new Veronica caught the imagination of Europe, and the artists were quick to develop the new theme. Henceforth, we find the two types of Veronica existing side by side. To the non-suffering Byzantine image is added the realistic and pathetic type of the suffering Holy Face, running with sweat and blood and crowned with the terrible thorns.

But what of the Roman relic itself? Did it ever bear an image, and if so, when did it reach St. Peter's? Mgr. Joseph Wilpert has answered the first question in the negative. He obtained permission from Pius X to examine the relic. After removing the metal covering and two glass plates, he saw a square piece of cloth yellowed with age. Upon the cloth were two dim stains, rust-brown in colour and joined together. No image, no remnants of any image. Does this mean that no image ever existed?

The cloth, known as the sweatcloth which is called Veronica (*sudarium quod dicitur Veronica*), seems to have reached Rome about 700 A.D. In 705 Pope John VII installed it in a magnificent shrine, known as the *ciborium Ioannis VII. Grimaldi*, the exact historian of the old St. Peter's, who witnessed its destruction by Bramante, has left us a detailed design of this marble shrine. On the front is a picture of Veronica holding her veil with its non-suffering image. He details the processions, pilgrimages, number of lamps burning, and papal instructions for the veneration of the Veronica veil by pope after pope down to his own time, 1620. Though no pope ever claimed that there was an image on the veil, Grimaldi's work implies the existence of an image from the beginning. Wilpert believed that an image was not fitted over the relic until the early thirteenth century, when writers begin to speak clearly of an image upon the cloth.

Wilpert's conclusion seems to leave out of account

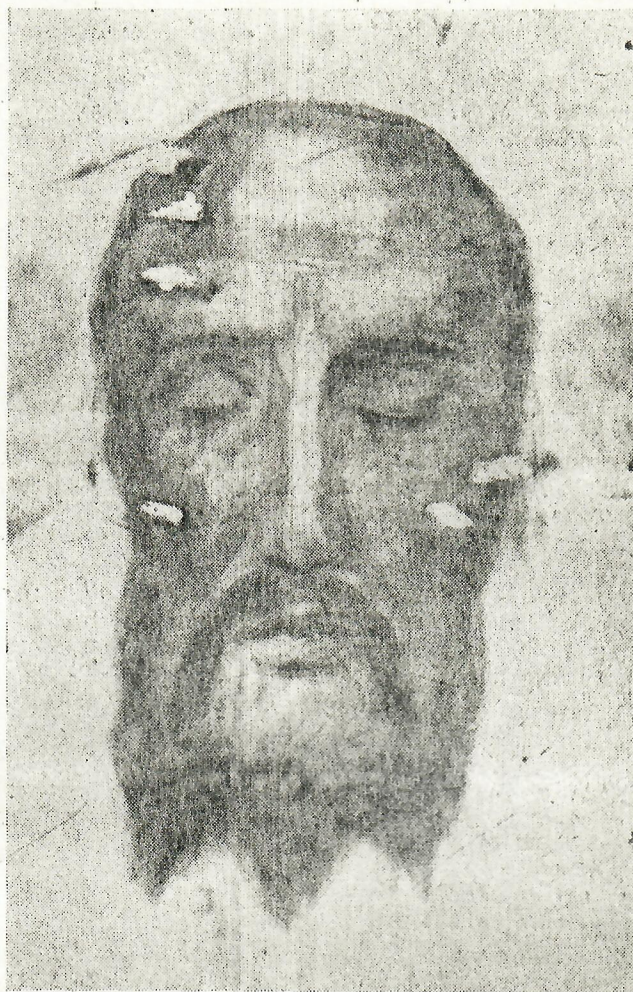
¹ P. Perdrizet, *De la Véronique et de Sainte Véronique*. Seminarium Kondakianum. Recueil d'études. T.V. Prague. 1932.
E. von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder: Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende*. Leipzig. 1899. p. 273-335.
J. Grimaldi, *De Sacrosancto Veronicæ Sudario Salvatoris Nostri Jesu Christi*. . . Rome. 1620.
E. Wuenschel, *The Truth about the Holy Shroud of Turin*. American Ecclesiastical Review. 1953 (CXXIX).

the Byzantine background of John VII, who was a Greek. It is hardly conceivable that a Greek pope would erect so elaborate a shrine for a piece of stained cloth, however sacred. At this period the relic would have to be an icon to warrant such honour, since icons had long superseded relics in the Byzantine scale of values. The force of this argument is even clearer when we remember that the whole point of the Veronica story is its miraculous image. The Greek conception of the relationship between icons and relics also gives us a much more natural explanation of the seemingly strange procedure of passing off as genuine a painting superimposed on a possibly genuine blood-stained cloth. This would have involved no deceit for the Greek mind. And, as just mentioned, Pope John VII was a Greek. A man-made icon in direct contact with a martyr's relic—in this case the martyr's relic—would take on both the inherent power and miraculous origin of the relic itself. Indeed, it would become more important than the relic, owing to the Byzantine idea that the person depicted in an icon is not only closely connected with it, as in the West, but is in some sense incarnated therein.

If Wilpert found only a stained cloth, what happened to its Byzantine icon? After many centuries of veneration by pilgrims from all over Europe, it was finally stolen during the sack of Rome in 1527 and offered for sale in the taverns of the city. It has never been found, perhaps providentially so, in view of the change that had by then overtaken the legend that was its *raison d'être*. A non-suffering Christ was hardly consistent with the new Veronica of the Via Dolorosa.

Its place in Roman affections seems to have been taken by another ancient cloth image from the sacristy of St. Peter's. In all probability this is by a mediaeval artist who, using the non-suffering Byzantine icon as a model, changed it into a dead Christ with closed eyes and an agonised expression. A beautiful reproduction, made by Thomas Heaphy in 1854, may be seen among his other paintings of ancient portraits of Christ in the Print Room of the British Museum.² The sacristy image has been made famous by the eighteenth-century engraving on cloth, known as the Holy Face of Tours, which reproduces the sacristy image with the addition of drops of blood and tears. Diffused throughout the world by the Confraternity of the Holy Face, founded in Tours in 1850, it bears the Latin inscription: "The true image

of our Lord Jesus Christ which is preserved and venerated at Rome in the Basilica of St. Peter." It must be this description that has given rise to the erroneous idea that this is the image of Veronica's veil. No such claim has ever been made, since this image has no immediate connection with the stained cloth in the Veronica chapel.



The Likeness of Christ, by Thomas Heaphy (1845), copied from the ancient cloth image in the sacristy of St. Peter's. Reproduced by kind permission of the British Museum.

In an unexpected way, the claim of the sacristy image to be a true likeness has been corroborated by the late Dr. Hynek's experiment with its copy, the Holy Face of Tours. Believing the latter to have been copied in the early centuries or during the Middle Ages from the image on the Turin Shroud, the only likeness of our Lord with an evidential claim to authenticity, he offered photometric proof of the identity of the two images that appears to be irrefutable.³ His mistake in dating the Holy Face of Tours is of small importance, but his experiment is most suggestive.

By the time the non-suffering Veronica image was turning into the suffering one, the Shroud was well-known in Europe, and many copies were being made. How much did this suffering image of the Shroud influence both the change in the story and in its iconography? Indeed, one is tempted to wonder whether this influence of the Shroud on the Veronica veil is, in fact, only this more modern

one. Is it perhaps legitimate to go even further, and ask how much influence the Shroud, hidden in obscurity during the early centuries, may have had on the very origin of the Veronica legend—either the Shroud itself, with its puzzling image, or the tradition of its existence somewhere? Could it be that the reality of the Shroud has all along saved the Veronica story, so dear to us all, from toppling over into myth?

One thing is certain. Whatever the truth at the back of Veronica, the haemorrhoids, and her veil, she has created a psychological reality of her own. If her piety and her pity did not cause her to leave her place in the crowd to perform her work of mercy, there is something essentially right and true to life about her gesture. It has the ring and the validity of one of our Lord's parables. If we had been there, it is what we should like to have had the courage to do. Indeed, it is what the Lord would have us do to one another as we greet Him with love in the least of His brethren. In this sense the loving devotion of Christendom, imaginatively pondering the life and Passion of Jesus has a validity and truth all its own.

² Sir Wyke Bayliss, *The Likeness of Christ*. London, 1886.
³ R. W. Hynek, *The True Likeness*. London-New York, 1961.