

THE RESEARCH MUST CONTINUE

by Giacomo Biffi



The cardinal archbishop of Bologna told the conference that, as long as there is contradictory evidence, the question remains open

Cardinal Giacomo Biffi, archbishop of Bologna. On the opposite page, the Duomo (Cathedral) of Turin and the Chapel of the Shroud

«We are like pilgrims on the earth and, if the precious image of Christ were not before us, we would be totally lost and bereft of everything, as the human species prior to the Flood.»

This passage, which Dostoevsky places on the lips of the staretz Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, seems beautiful to me and not out of place in a conference like this.

However, it is not only a beautiful passage, it is also a true one: true in its most intense and radical meaning, which refers to the awareness by means of the faith of the personality of the Man-God and his mystery. But true also in its most literal and simple meaning: man has, in the depth of his being, a nostalgia, perhaps unconscious, for the face of the Lord Jesus, and needs some image of the Savior upon which to rest, as a help to the eyes of faith, his bodily eyes. This is, in essence, the teaching which comes down to us from the Council of Nicea (of 787) and from the Church's condemnation of the iconoclasts ("image-destroyers").

We ought therefore to be grateful to God, loving and provident Father, that he has met this great need of our spirit and provided for us an icon as eloquent and stirring to the emotions as the Holy Shroud; an icon that comes down to us accompanied and presented with love, with devoted care, with the veneration of our brothers in faith who have gone before us over the centuries.

We may ask ourselves: today, in 1989, after the Carbon 14 dating tests, what should the faithful do in regard to the extraordinary and inalienable "family treasure"? The faithful should continue to care for it, venerate it, love it and seek in it the "precious image of Christ" which helps us not to lose our

way in the darkness of the world.

And what should scholars do today, in 1989, in regard to a problem, like that of the Shroud, which calls upon so many and such diverse scientific disciplines, so many and such different methodologies of research? Scholars — it seems to me — should continue their study, as this symposium rightly proposes to do.

to say a scientific-historical problem is not correctly solved, it is necessary that the solution should emerge from the complete convergence of the evidence. In the case of some evidence being contradictory, it is necessary to explain the apparent contradiction. Until one reaches this simultaneous and harmonious vision of all the elements in play, the question must be considered still open.

Naturally, the results of a certain type of investigation, if they appear to directly contradict the results of other types of investigation which had led one to certain conclusions, must lead one to re-examine previously held views with great care. But in the same way, should the conflict remain, one must be prepared to critically re-examine the conflicting result itself.

True science is always able to question its procedures and its aims, above all when they are not confirmed — or are indeed contradicted — by the results of other examinations on the same object.

Allow me a final observation. In my judgment, the believer and the non-believer are not in the same situation at the outset of this race: the non-believer is, from a psychological point of view, at a disadvantage; and he must be understood in his difficulties.

Let me explain. As it has been authoritatively recalled,

and as it is right to restate with clarity against every possible intemperance, the question of the Shroud, whatever answer is finally given, does not involve the faith. No Church official, as far as I know, has ever listed the Shroud among the proofs of the truth of the Christian faith.

The believer is, therefore, a researcher who, as a believer, is not conditioned by any matter of principle: he can quite calmly have the faith and deny the authenticity of the Shroud. It is, however, much more difficult to come to admit the authenticity



of this extraordinary relic and continue not to believe in anything. Lack of belief would find itself at a loss if it were compelled by the scientific-historical evidence to the conviction that the Shroud is the burial cloth of Christ, such would be the "historical prodigies" that in such a case would have to be admitted.

As often happens — and contrary to what is generally held — in this case too, faith in Christ renders one more free and less biased in research than "the faith in the existential void" that often is wrongly mistaken for pure rationality.