

THE POPE SPEAKS ON THE SHROUD...

Pope John Paul II spoke to journalists on his personal views on the Shroud on April 28 this year, in the course of a plane journey that formed part of the papal visit to Africa. One of the journalists present on the plane was Clyde Haberman, who has kindly made available his notes (translated from the original Italian) of the questions that were put, and the Pope's answers. These have been slightly edited to conform with normal English:

Journalist: Some unclear data is surfacing in relation to the tests carried out on the Shroud. Are you still of the opinion that the Shroud is a relic, as you have often said? Or that it is merely an icon?

John Paul II: A relic it certainly is, it certainly is. This cannot change. If it was not a relic it would be impossible to understand the reactions of faith which surround it, and which are now even stronger after the results from the testing. One might call it a scientific counterbalance, the way the reactions show themselves even more strongly.

In this sense a relic is always an object of faith. An icon ... yes, it too can be an object of faith, and it very often is. Very often. But it is also an object of culture, of art, of sacred art. Some icons are above all objects of faith. They are the motivation for pilgrimages. But it is not only this. At the same time they are works of art. For instance, if we take icons from the East, the icons of the Russian Orthodox Church, these are certainly more than works of art in the minds of Orthodox believers, the peoples of the eastern rite. Yet at the same time they are still works of art. Let us consider, for example, one icon painter, the famous Rublev, who is today a saint of the Orthodox church. He was an artist, and his works, his icons, can be looked at with the eye of an art connoisseur. Yet for those of the orthodox faith it is at the same time sacred.

Journalist: Do you consider it [the Shroud] authentic?

John Paul II: The Church has never pronounced on the matter in this way. The Church has always allowed the field to be open to all those who want to prove its authenticity or non-authenticity. But if we are speaking of it as a relic, I believe it is, and so does the custodian of the Shroud, Cardinal Ballestrero. He is, so to speak, the expert, the closest witness to the Shroud.

Journalist: Do you believe it ... truly the body of Christ?

John Paul II: Again we are going back to the problem of the authenticity which must always be considered scientifically. But on the other hand, if so many believe so, their conviction which, let us say, induces them to see the imprint as the actual impression of Jesus's body, cannot be without foundation. The problem with which many find difficulty is that of its origins.