

Three *Acheiropietos* Images in comparison with the Turin Shroud

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Abstract

Three acheiropietos images, venerated in Italy, have characteristics that are inspired by the Holy Shroud preserved in Turin, Italy: the Holy Face of Lucca, the Holy Face of Sansepolcro (Arezzo) and the Holy Saviour of Rome. Those ancient representations of Christ have big eyes, sharp and elongated nose, missing beard under the lower lip, that appears fleshy: just as it is observed on the face of the Holy Shroud. The two crucifixes have also hands with long fingers, again as it is observed on the Holy Shroud. The documented presence in Italy of those works of art since the 8th century (Holy Face of Lucca and Holy Saviour of Rome) and since the 9th-10th centuries (Holy Face of Sansepolcro) confirm the existence of the Holy Shroud already in that time.

Keyword: *Acheiropietos* images, Holy Face, Holy Shroud

1. INTRODUCTION

The likeness between the Man of the Shroud and the majority of the known representations of Christ in the art, both eastern and western, is evident and cannot be attributed to a pure case; it must be the result of a dependency, mediated or immediate, of an image from the other and of all of them from a common source.

This thesis, formulated for the first time at the beginning of 20th century by Paul Vignon, lecturer of Biology in the Sorbonne University and professor in the *Institut Catholique* of Paris, and today thought the only valid one, supports that the face of Christ, as represented by the art, must depend on the Shroud; that is, a likeness between the classic type of the face of Christ with the beard and the Shroud image exists.

According to the Eastern Church, the true portrait of Jesus is founded on the Image of Edessa, regarded as *acheiropietos*, “not made by human hand”: this image is the *Mandylion*, that today can be identified with the Shroud. The more modern studies have confirmed this ancient tradition.

Beginning from 6th century, in concomitance with the rediscovery of the *Mandylion* of Edessa, a peculiar type of portrait of Jesus catches on in the East. It is the majestic Christ, with beard and moustaches, that will be represented in several forms, like the *Pantocrator* (Almighty) that is present also in the post-Byzantine era and will remain substantially unchanged till now. In the East this image will become the only one for all the figurative arts, and also in the West it will always prevail.

On the images of Jesus, it is possible to single out many not regular elements, hardly attributable to the fantasy of the artists, that make us understand as the ancient representations of the face of Christ depend on the Shroud: the hair is long and halved; nearly all the faces show two or three tufts of hair in the middle of the

forehead: it can be an artistic way to represent the trickle of blood in the shape of epsilon present on the forehead of the Man of the Shroud; the superciliary arches are pronounced; many faces have one eyebrow higher than the other, like the Shroud face; at the root of the nose some faces have a sign as of a square lacking the upper side and under it there is one V sign; the nose is sharp and elongated; the eyes are big and deep, wide opened, with enormous irises and great rings under them; the cheek-bones are very pronounced, sometimes with spots; quite a wide zone between the cheeks of the Man of the Shroud and his hair has remained without imprint, so that bands of hair appear as too much detached from the face; a cheek is very swollen because of a strong trauma, so that the face turns out asymmetric; the moustaches, that are often drooping, are arranged asymmetrically and come down beyond the lips in every side with a different perspective; the mouth is small, not hidden by the moustaches; there is a zone without beard under the lower lip, that appears fleshy; the beard, not too much long, halved and sometimes divided into three parts, is slightly moved on one side.

Three *acheiropietos* images, venerated in Italy, have characteristics that are inspired by the Holy Shroud preserved in Turin, Italy: the Holy Face of Lucca, the Holy Face of Sansepolcro (Arezzo) and the Holy Saviour of Rome.

2. THE HOLY FACE OF LUCCA

The Holy Face of Lucca [1], preserved in the cathedral of St. Martin, is a big walnut wooden crucifix that measures 2 meters and 45 centimeters of height and 2 meters and 75 centimeters of width. It was realized, according to a legend, by Nicodemus who was helped by the angels for the face. It was hidden in Arimatea (Ramla), Palestine, for more than seven centuries.



Fig. 1. The Holy Face, cathedral of St. Martin, Lucca.

Discovered in the year 782 by the bishop Walfred, pilgrim in the Holy Land, the crucifix was brought to Joppa (today Jaffa) harbour by the bishop himself and put on a ship sealed with bitumen. The ship was left to the sea without crew, praying the Divine Providence that the crucifix could be brought to Christian lands.

The ship arrived miraculously in front of Luni, near Lucca. The inhabitants of Luni, expert sailors, devoted to the marine commerce but also to the piracy, lowered the boats to prey upon that unguarded ship; but uselessly, because, at every attempt to catch it up, the ship set sail again, going away.

In the meantime, an angel appeared in a dream to the blessed John I, bishop of Lucca, revealing the arrival of the Holy Face and ordering him to go to Luni with the clergy and the personages of the people, in order to take it and to carry it to Lucca.

Reaching the port of Luni with his retinue, the bishop saw the inhabitants of Luni that again tried with oars and sails to catch up the ship, which went away eluding their harpoons. The blessed John made signal to the sailors to stop and exhorted all to ask the aid of God; at this point the ship headed spontaneously towards him.

The bishop opened the hatches and entered with his people in the hold, where he found the Holy Face, to the

sight of which everybody burst into joy tears and struck up the *Gloria in excelsis*.

Soon after a quarrel between the inhabitants of Lucca and those of Luni, on which of the two cities had the right to guard the simulacrum, arose. The bishop John drew out from inside the statue some relics preserved in it, among them, one phial of Jesus' blood, today preserved in Sarzana (La Spezia), and delivered them to the bishop of Luni.

Then there was the "steer trial": the Holy Face was hoisted on a cart richly adorned, to which two steers not still yoked were attached. Left free to go, the animals headed towards Lucca; in front to the result of this "judgment of God", the inhabitants of Luni returned to their houses, while the bishop John got on the cart, that, surrounded by the others inhabitants of Lucca, triumphantly reached the city at nightfall.

According to the medievalist Raoul Manselli [2], the legend of the miraculous landing could have origin in a shipwreck. It must be remembered that the bishop John was of Iberian origin and the iconography of the Holy Face of Lucca is very common in the Catalan area. Therefore the bishop could have made the crucifix arrive from Spain, but the shipwreck of the ship in front of Luni would have made the inhabitants of that city enforce the *ius naufragii*, that is the right of took possession of all of profitable could be found on a ship thrown on the coasts. The bishop John, very famous and powerful, however made the Holy Face arrive to Lucca.

A beautiful example of Catalan crucifix is the Batlló crucifix, a 12th century Romanesque carved wood crucifix now in the National Museum of Art of Catalonia, Barcelona, Spain. The magnificently decorated and well-preserved sculpture is thought to have come from the Pyrenees, possibly from the city of Olot.

As with much medieval art, its creator is unknown, although a medieval legend credits Nicodemus with producing the sculpture soon after the actual crucifixion, a pious tradition repeated elsewhere in Europe in connection with similar monumental crosses. These larger wooden crucifixes are often referred to as "majesties".



Fig. 2. The Batlló crucifix.

Many crucifixes were life-size and hung high in the church in front of the altar.

The Batlló crucifix was procured for the museum in 1914 by the collector Enric Batlló, for whom the piece is now named. At the time of its first arrival at the museum, it was covered with a thick coating of varnish that obscured but helped preserve its bright colors, which have now been restored.

The crucifix shows a living and conscious Jesus on the cross. The image of Jesus is meditative, with a look of serenity and resignation. A Latin inscription above his head reads: *Jhs Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum*, Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews.

Jesus is wearing a long and sumptuous robe. Such robes, called *colobiums*, are linked with royal and priestly functions. The *colobium* was a tunic worn by monks and deacons in the early church, and worn by a king at his coronation.

The Batlló crucifix is especially noteworthy for the excellent preservation of its colors, particularly on the *colobium*. The robe is covered in blue and red floral designs which imitate patterns seen in oriental silk. The designs are very fine.

An interlaced knot pattern on the belt of the garment can be interpreted as a common medieval symbol of protection seen on many medieval churches, Bibles, and everyday goods and may have pre-Christian origins.

Some scholars think that the tradition of depicting Christ in a *colobium* was brought to Catalonia by artisans from Pisa who arrived in 1114 to help Ramon Berenguer III, Count of Barcelona in his conquest of the Balearic Islands. Therefore it is possible to formulate an opposite hypothesis to that of Manselli, that is that they have been the Catalans to copy the model of the Saint Face of Lucca.

The iconographic tradition of Jesus in a *colobium* dates to 586, as in a manuscript of the Syriac Gospels called the Rabbula Gospels, written in that year by the monk Rabbula in Zagba monastery, Syria, there is a crucifixion scene in which Jesus is dressed by a *colobium*. On the viewer's left are Mary and John the Evangelist, on the viewer's right are three mourning women.

Two figures beside the cross reach upward to Christ: on his left is a man who holds up before Christ a sponge on a stick, soaked with sour wine from a bucket in his hand. On his right is a man labelled Longinos, the name tradition has assigned to the soldier who pierced the side of Christ to certify his death. Obviously these two events did not take place in the same instant, which means that in this image the sequence of time is being collapsed or telescoped.

Beneath the cross three soldiers gamble for the seamless robe of Christ. They seem to have the purple robe on their laps, though Christ on the cross still wears a purple and gold garment. Notice also that the body of Christ is not bent or twisted in any way. His torso faces the viewer and his arms extend perpendicularly, nor does the weight of his body drag him downward. His head does not droop, but



Fig. 3. The Rabbula Gospel, Laurentian Library, Florence.

turns intentionally and his eyes seem to be open. Add to this his purple and gold robe, and the message is iconographically clear: Jesus Christ crucified is the King who rules from the throne of the cross. In comparison to him, the two thieves are stripped to the waist and tied to their crosses with x-shaped cords (though their hands are also nailed), and their crosses are lower and smaller. The artist of the Rabbula gospels has included the other two crosses but marked a definite hierarchy and subordination between The Cross and the crosses.

Regarding the aspect of the Holy Face of Lucca, the contrast between the “schematic” body - nearly a “cross” covered by a wide and long tunica - and the strong realism of the face, that appears not only very expressive, but also extraordinarily similar to that one of the Man of the Shroud, is evident: lengthened face, big eyes, halved beard lacking under the lower lip. An analogous similarity can be noticed in the very lengthened form of the hands.

Some medieval authors clearly assert that the crucifix was carved having the Holy Shroud as a model. In the 11th-12th centuries Leboinus wrote: “Nicodemus saw an Angel in a dream who urged him to leave an image of Christ to the posterity, in compliance with the figure imprinted in the sheet” [3]. This “sheet” is clearly the Shroud. In the beginning of 13th century, Gervase of Tilbury, chancellor of the emperor Otto IV (1196-1218), wrote that Nicodemus carved the crucifix having near himself the Shroud, that after placed inside it with other relics [4].

Analyses of comparison between the two images,



Fig. 4. Detail of the Holy Face, cathedral of St. Martin, Lucca.

realized with a computer by Giulio Fanti [5], associate university professor of Mechanical and Thermal Measures in the Department of Mechanical Engineering of the University of Padua, have confirmed the hypothesis that the Holy Face of Lucca can have been copied from the Shroud.

3. THE HOLY FACE OF SANSEPOLCRO

The Holy Face of Sansepolcro [6], preserved in the co-cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, is a big walnut wooden crucifix that measures 2 meters and 70 centimeters of height and 2 meters and 90 centimeters of width. According to an ancient tradition, this crucifix was brought by two pilgrims, Giles and Arcanus, coming from the Holy Land in the 10th century.

It must be remembered that in the East between the 8th and the 9th century the dispute of the images explodes and the crash between the iconoclasts and the iconodules infuriates.

In the year 730 an edict of the emperor Leo III prohibits the veneration of the icons in all the dominions of the empire. Also many bishops emphasized that the true image of Christ is the Eucharist while the popular mercy for the icons grazes the idolatry. However, the patriarch

Germanus of Constantinople refuses to condemn the images and is dismissed by the emperor.

To frighten Rome and the Italian dominions that resist, Leo III sends the fleet along the Adriatic Sea. At that time, the southern coasts of Italy and the Sicily were part of the Byzantine empire. Pope Gregory III answers from Rome convening a synod and excommunicating the iconoclasts.

The icons are defended also by a Father of the Eastern Church, St. John Damascenus, who emphasizes that the icon invites to a prayer and contemplation experience. Moreover the icons are copies of the true image of Edessa, that today can be identified with the Shroud.

Leo III and his son Constantine V do not withdraw from their decisions and the images are destroyed. In the year 754 in Iereia, near Constantinople, a synod, formed nearly exclusively by eastern bishops, makes official the iconoclast position and decrees the condemnation of the images. The emperor sharpens the persecution of the iconodules. Entire monasteries are confiscated and the monks are beaten and killed.

In the meanwhile Rome resists in defending the images: in a new synod in the year 769, Pope Stephen III declares legitimate the images and makes reference to the Face of Christ not painted by human hand. The fight drags on till the year 843, when a new synod, this time really ecumenical, with the presence of legacies of the Pope and many bishops of the East and the West, closes it

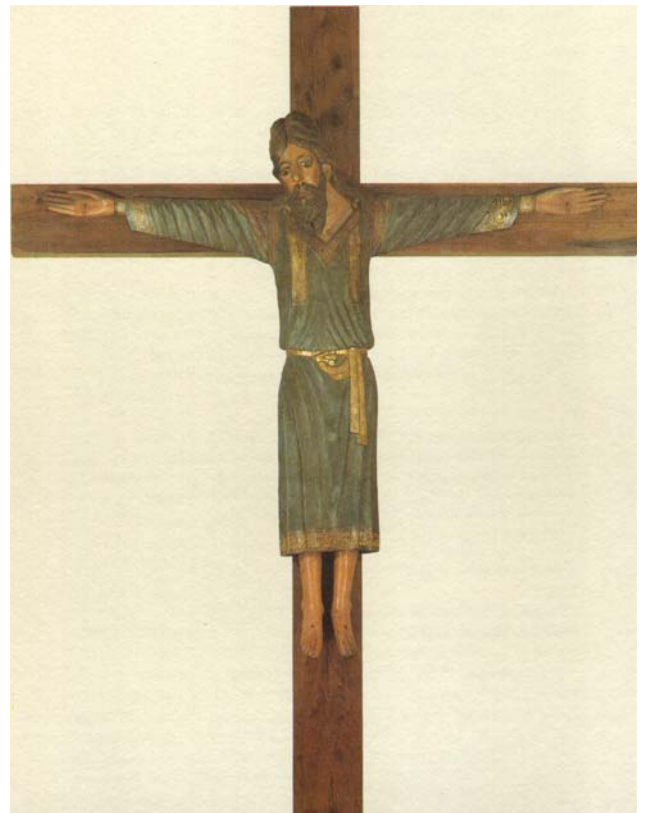


Fig. 5. The Holy Face, co-cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, Sansepolcro.



Fig. 6. Detail of the Holy Face, co-cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, Sansepolcro.

withdrawing the decrees of Iereia. In that year Methodius, a Sicilian which the iconoclast emperor Theophilus had ordered to lash and exile when he was still a simple monk, is patriarch of Constantinople.

During the iconoclast period, some persecuted monks succeeded to reach lands more hospitable in Italy and it is right to think that the fugitives have carried with himself, in order to save them from the destruction, images particularly venerated in the origin places.

Regarding Sansepolcro, in the zone numerous churches dedicated to S. Michael, testimony of the Longobard presence, and to S. Apollinaris, testimony of the Byzantine presence, rise; and it is just within the ambit of the Byzantine culture and art that the Holy Face takes its stand.

The ancient crucifix belonged to the noble Cattani family, who preserved it in his own castle of Bibbiena (Arezzo). In the year 1146 the Cattani donated it to the priest Martin, rector of the Parish of St. Mary in Sansepolcro, today church of S. Augustin within walls. In the year 1771 the Augustinians gave it in guard to the Cathedral, where it is still situated.

The analyses led on occasion of the restoration, realized in Florence from 1986 to 1989, have allowed to place the

origin of the Holy Face between the 9th and the 10th century. The wooden sculpture was blackened by the smoke of the candles and the deposits of a secular dust; moreover a heavy dark, uniform varnish substance covered the entire crucifix. Perhaps this painting had been added in order to make the crucifix assume a suffering identity.

Removing the black varnish, the late-Romanesque polychromy, mainly green, datable to the 12th century, reappeared. This painting is not put directly on the wood, but on a linen cloth accurately and wisely glued on the wood.

Under the linen cloth, traces of three ancient layers of colour are present: the first layer has a blue coloration, under which there is a black pigment on light-blue field and some more under there is a red pigment, very ancient.

The face of the crucifix shows remarkable characteristics derived from the Shroud: superciliary arches pronounced, big eyes, remarkable rings under the eyes, triangular cheek-bones, solid and prominent nose, small mouth, framed by drooping moustaches that do not hide it, prominent and fleshy lower lip, beard halved and lacking under the lower lip, long hair, symmetrically halved in the center of the head. Like the Holy Face of Lucca, also the Holy Face of Sansepolcro must have been copied from the Shroud.

4. THE HOLY SAVIOUR OF ROME

The Holy Saviour of Rome [7], [8] is preserved in the church of St. Laurence in *Palatio* (in the Palace), also called *Sancta Sanctorum* (Holy of Holies), inside the ancient patriarchal palace of the bishop of Rome.

This icon is a *Pantocrator* (Almighty) seated on a throne,



Fig. 7. The Holy Saviour, *Sancta Sanctorum*, Rome.

but at present only the face is visible. According to a legend, the face was painted by an angel because Luke the Evangelist was not able to represent Christ's face in His glory.

The Holy Saviour has big eyes, sharp and elongated nose, missing beard under the lower lip, that appears fleshy: just as it is observed on the face of the Holy Shroud.

The painting is on a table that measures approximately 142 x 58,5 cm and is covered of embossed and chiselled silver layers, pertaining to various ages. Three openings were off the hands and the side, shut in the 14th or 15th century with three nielloed medallions. The unction with balsam was practiced through the openings.

The feet were rendered visible opening two little doors, still existing, situated in the inferior extremity of the table.

In the upper zone, in the center of a rectangular chiselled silver layer, within an octagon covered by a crystal, a face with big eyes is visible. On the right cheek the face brings a sign, surely painted, that the popular tradition thought a slash produced by an iconoclast.

The visible face is not the original, that according some scholars could go back to the age of Pope Hilarius (461-468), but a copy, probably ordered to be made by Pope John X (914-928). This restoration turns out from an inscription placed behind the image.

Another restoration goes back to the age of Pope Alexander III (1159-1181). In 1170 he ordered to reproduce the face of the Holy Saviour on silk cloth that was applied over the original. It is that we still see.

Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) ordered to cover all the sacred image with the storied silver slab, that has been further on enriched in the centuries.

In 1907 the German archaeologist Mgr. Joseph Wilpert [9] was authorized to carry out an examination of the painting, hidden for seven centuries behind the silver slabs. Detached the white silk, that covered the face till off the neck, the ground of the table appeared completely darkened by the accumulated dust in the course of the centuries.

After careful cleansing, very tenuous remains of the complete figure became visible. The original image was a distemper on canvas, prepared with a lightest coat of ceruse and glued on a walnut table of 2 cm of thickness. With difficulty it was recognized by intuition the image of Christ seated on a studded with gems throne, in the attitude of a master, with the head encircled by an aureole marked by a clearer cross.

In 1919 S. Nobili, director of the Study of the Vatican Mosaics, could observe the table taken apart from the silver armor in order to realize a reconstruction of the ancient image. An idea of the original painting can be had observing the Christ the King of St. Nilus Abbey, Grottaferrata, 11th century, the *Pantocrator* of the *Sancta Sanctorum*, Rome, 9th century, and other copies venerated in various localities of the Latium like Capranica, Sutri, Tarquinia, Tivoli and Viterbo.

According to Wilpert, the original icon could be of the 5th

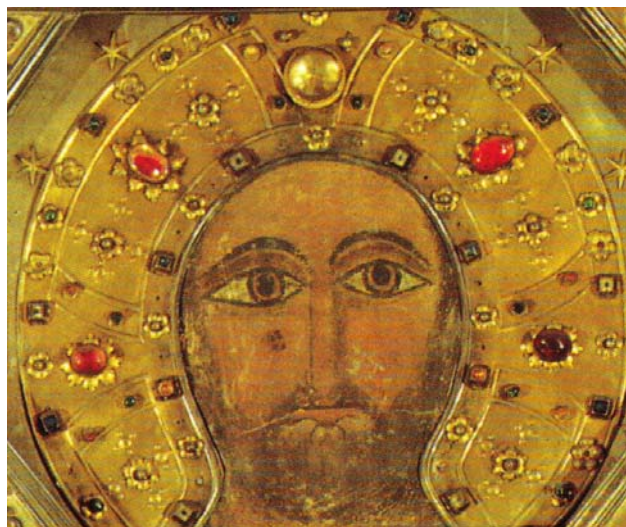


Fig. 8. Detail of the Holy Saviour, *Sancta Sanctorum*, Rome.

or 6th century and could have been realized in Rome. According to other scholars, the future Pope Gregorius I could have brought it from Constantinople, where he had been from the 578 to the 586 as *apocrisarius*, that is representative of the Pope.

In the *Life* of Germanus of Constantinople († 733) and in the *Letter of the three Eastern Patriarchs*, written to emperor Theophilus in the 836, it is written that the image was sent by the same patriarch Germanus to Rome in order to put it in a safe place from the iconoclastic destructions.

The story of the three patriarchs has a legendary aspect, as in it is narrated that the patriarch Germanus left the icon to the sea and it miraculously arrived to the Tiber river, always remaining in vertical position. For three nights it remained flaming and shining on the waters.

Pope Gregorius II, informed in a dream of the arrival of the image, went to Ostia and came near it with a small boat, inviting it to approach himself. The icon by itself moved on his arms.

In the *Liber Pontificalis* (8th century) is written that Pope Stephen II (752-757) carried the icon on his shoulders in penitential procession on barefoot for the ways of Rome in the 753, in order to avert the Longobard invasion of Astolph.

During all the Middle Ages the image was brought in procession on the eve of the Assumption Day. The procession in Rome was abolished by Pious V (1504-1572) but it remained in many towns of Latium, like Capena and Tivoli. In Rome the procession has been resumed under Pious IX, then in the Holy Year 1925 and at last in 1931.

On occasion of Easter of the Jubilee year 2000, the icon was taken on the parvis of the Vatican Basilica, to be worshipped by the Pope in the beginning of the Mass of the Day, resuming an ancient tradition that already St. Jerome made go back to the first Christian centuries. The

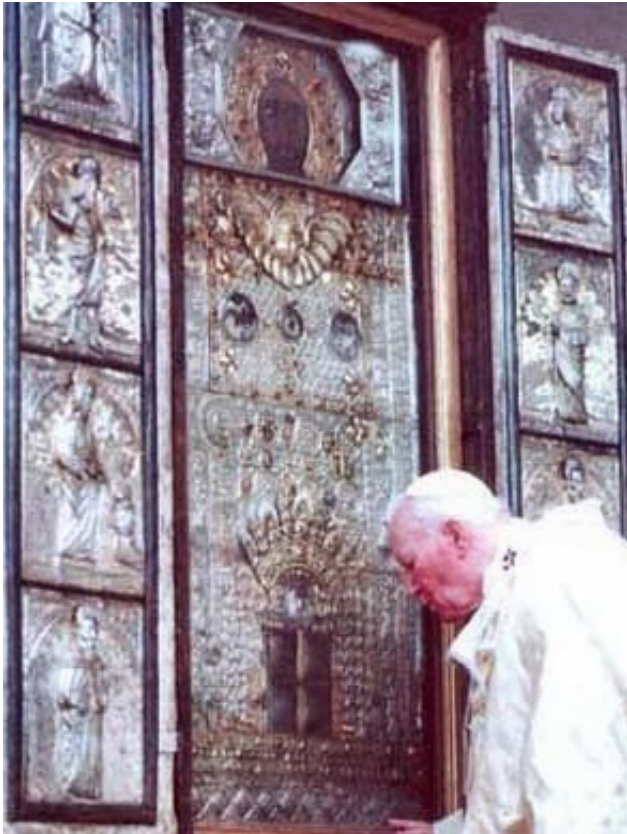


Fig. 9. Blessed Pope John Paul II worships the Holy Saviour.

rite firmly entered to be part of the papal liturgy and was omitted only in 2005, as in that year, for the serious disease of John Paul II, the Mass was celebrated by the then Secretary of State, Card. Angelo Sodano.

From 2000 to 2006 the true icon of the Holy Saviour was used. However, since its antiquity and preciousness advised against the transfer from the *Sancta Sanctorum* of the Lateran to the Vatican, in 2007 a new icon was realized purposely for this rite.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Those ancient representations of Christ have big eyes, sharp and elongated nose, missing beard under the lower lip, that appears fleshy: just as it is observed on the face of the Holy Shroud. The two crucifixes have also hands with long fingers, again as it is observed on the Holy Shroud.

The documented presence in Italy of those works of art since the 8th century (Holy Face of Lucca and Holy Saviour of Rome) and since the 9th-10th centuries (Holy Face of Sansepolcro) confirms the existence of the Holy Shroud already in that time.

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