

Is the Shroud of Turin a Catholic Relic?

By Fr. Andrew Dalton, LC, STD

In one sense, the answer is an obvious yes. It is certainly illegitimate to affirm that the Shroud of Turin is not a Catholic relic. But the question is not as simple as it sounds. A full answer must first distinguish and define the key terms.

I. Relic

Relic is the term most in need of disambiguation because it operates on two distinct levels, and conflating them is the source of considerable confusion.

In the **devotional sense**, a relic is an object venerated on account of its claimed or believed association with a sacred person. This is a functional definition, grounded in the Church's actual practice across centuries. It does not require that the association be historically or scientifically verified. It requires only that the association be the basis of the veneration — that the faithful approach the object precisely because they believe it to be connected to someone holy.

Consider a fragment of the True Cross. Countless such fragments are venerated throughout the Catholic world, and the Church has never adjudicated the provenance of each individual piece. For most, the chain of custody is unverifiable. Yet the Church warmly embraces this devotion, recognizing that the faithful approach these objects in faith, and that the spiritual fruit of such veneration does not depend on a forensic certificate of authenticity. She wisely declines to press the empirical question. The spiritual fruit of a devotion does not depend solely on the object; it depends also — and perhaps primarily — on the disposition of the one who venerates.

In most such cases, the Church's restraint reflects a sound theological instinct: devotional practice can bear genuine spiritual fruit independent of the object's verified status.

In the **ontological sense**, however, a relic is something more: an object that actually *is* materially connected to a sacred person — not merely believed to be, but objectively, historically, physically so. The etymology of the word is helpful here: *relic* is from the Latin *reliquiae*, meaning “remains” or “that which is left behind.” Given this reading of the word, it is redundant to speak of an *authentic* relic because the notion of authenticity is already baked into this notion of relic.

Is the Shroud a relic in this sense? Is the Shroud authentic? Is it the actual burial cloth that wrapped the dead body of Jesus of Nazareth on Good Friday and which lay empty in the tomb after his glorious Resurrection? These are three ways of asking the same question.

To that question we will return — in a companion article, *Is the Shroud of Turin Authentic?* First, a simpler one.

II. Catholic

So far we have been asking about the noun: Is the Shroud a Catholic *relic*? What if we shift the emphasis to the adjective? Is the Shroud a *Catholic* relic? Here the answer is unambiguous, and it deserves to be stated without equivocation.

The Shroud of Turin resides in the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist in Turin, Italy — a Catholic cathedral, maintained by a Catholic archdiocese. It has been venerated by Popes St. John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis, each of whom traveled to Turin to kneel before it in prayer. Major public ostensions have been authorized by ecclesial authority and framed explicitly as acts of Catholic devotion. On the cloth that covers the Shroud in its reliquary, a Latin inscription reads: *Tuam Sindonem veneramur, Domine, et tuam recolimus Passionem* — “We venerate your Shroud, Lord, and we contemplate your Passion.” There is no ambiguity about whose Passion — or whose Shroud — is invoked.

The Shroud is Catholic by custody, by veneration, and by centuries of institutional history. That is not a sectarian claim. It is a historical one.

Moreover, it is a liturgically ratified one. In 1506, Pope Julius II formally approved May 4 as the Feast of the Holy Shroud, placing it the day after the feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross — a deliberate positioning that inscribed the Shroud’s veneration into the Passion cycle of the Church’s liturgical year. In his bull *Romanus Pontifex* of April 25, 1506, Julius II speaks explicitly of “that most famous Shroud (*præclarissima sindone*) in which our Savior was wrapped when he lay in the tomb.” The feast has been observed for over five centuries in Savoy, Piedmont, and Sardinia, the regions most closely associated with the Shroud’s documented history. Feasts — and the bulls that authorize them — do not emerge from institutional indifference. They are acts of deliberate theological judgment.

In 1983, upon the death of Umberto II of Savoy, the last king of Italy, ownership of the Shroud passed formally to the Holy See in accordance with the terms of his will. The testamentary disposition, signed in Geneva on March 27, 1981, and published in full by Princess Maria Gabriella di Savoia in *La Sindone nei secoli nella collezione di Umberto II* (Gribaudo, Turin, 1998), is unambiguous: “*DISPONGO che dopo la mia morte la piena proprietà della Santa Sindone venga trasferita in donazione della Santa Sede*” — “I dispose that after my death the full ownership of the Holy Shroud be transferred as a gift to the Holy See.” On October 18, 1983, Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, Secretary of State, formally accepted the donation, confirming in writing that he had done so “*a nome e per conto della Santa Sede*” — “in the name and on behalf of the Holy See.” The Archbishop of Turin serves as its pontifical custodian. That the bequest was made to the Holy See — and not to John Paul II as a private individual — is confirmed not only by the text of the will but by the very mechanism of succession: upon the death of each pope, the Shroud does not revert to any

estate or require a new conveyance. It passes automatically to his successor, by virtue of his occupying the same chair. The man possesses it, but by virtue of his office, not his person. The Shroud became, in the fullest institutional and legal sense, the property of the Catholic Church.

Some have nonetheless suggested that the Shroud is not a Catholic relic — that its association with the living pope somehow places it outside Catholic institutional identity, or renders it neutral ground accessible to all Christians equally. The first part of this claim has been answered above: the Holy See is the central governing institution of the Catholic Church, and the mechanism of apostolic succession makes clear that the institutional Church, not any individual pope, is the possessor. As for the second part — that the Shroud is for all Christians — this is true, but it does not follow that it is therefore not Catholic. The two are not in tension; they belong together. The Shroud is universal insofar as it is a gift for everyone. It is also Catholic insofar as it is the Catholic Church that gives it — having preserved it for centuries, opened it to scientific scrutiny, and made it available to all people, of every creed and none. Thus the doors of the Turin Cathedral stand open every day.

Conclusion

So, is the Shroud of Turin a Catholic relic?

Catholic? Yes, absolutely — by custody, by veneration, by five centuries of liturgical observance, by the explicit language of a papal bull, and by the sustained pastoral judgment of the Church's highest office across multiple pontificates. Since 1983, it has been the legal property of the Holy See.

Relic in the devotional sense? Yes — the Church has venerated this cloth as the burial cloth of Christ, and that veneration has borne fruit for countless believers across the centuries.

Relic in the ontological sense — which is to say, authentic? That is the harder question, and it deserves its own answer. It is taken up in the companion article: [Is the Shroud of Turin Authentic?](#)

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