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TWO MIRACULOUS PICTURES

The Christmas season is a good time to recall that two remarkable pictures on opposite sides of the world reaffirm the reality of the supernatural. Teams of scientists have examined and investigated them, but they can find no natural explanation for the pictures.

For centuries, the Holy Shroud has been believed to have been the cloth in which the crucified Christ was wrapped before he was laid in the tomb. Its early whereabouts are unknown, but since 1578 it has been venerated in the Cathedral at Turin, Italy.

A team of 32 American scientists spent two years examining and investigating it during 1978 to 1980. Most of the scientists were not Catholics; several on the team were not Christians or were atheists. Their approach was scientific, not religious; their findings are based on modern testing techniques, not on faith.

All 32 scientists of the Shroud of Turin Research Project unanimously rejected the notion that the image of Christ could have been painted on the cloth. They said that there is no evidence of dyes, stains or pigments of any kind.

The 14 by 3-1/2 foot Shroud shows the image of a tall muscular man about five feet eleven inches tall and weighing about 170 pounds. Since Christ was a carpenter who worked without any powered tools, and walked hundreds of miles in his public life, he was obviously very physically fit.

Every factual description of Christ in the Gospels is confirmed in the Shroud of Turin and none is contradicted. The image on the Shroud is that of a crucified man in his thirties, with 42 scourge marks on his back, a wound in his side, eight scalp wounds (evidently from the crown of thorns), and bruised knees (apparently from his three falls while carrying his cross to Calvary).

The Shroud correctly shows the nail wounds in Christ's wrists, not his hands. Many Christian artists portrayed Christ hung on the cross by his hands, but modern science tell us that his hands could not have held the weight of his body on the cross.

Modern photography has identified the image of a Roman coin placed over the man's right eye, a burial custom of Christ's era. Coin specialists say that the letters on

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the coin prove that it was minted during the reign of Pontius Pilate.

The Shroud even shows the man's long hair tightly compressed and gathered at the back of his neck, a fashion unique to young Jewish men of the first century.

On the other side of the world, high over the altar in a cathedral in Mexico City, is another miraculous cloth which defies ordinary scientific explanation. It is the Virgin of Guadalupe, venerated as the only authentic picture of the Mother of Jesus.

In December 1531 the Virgin Mary appeared to a Mexican, Juan Diego, and told him to have his bishop build a church on the spot where he was walking, northwest of Mexico City. The bishop, unaccustomed to receiving instructions from a peasant, demanded proof that the order was authentic.

Three days later, Mary again appeared before Diego and told him to pick flowers and take them to his bishop. Looking around, Diego saw roses growing in December, and gathered them into his simple cloak. When he opened his cloak for the bishop, the cloak had on it a remarkable image of the Virgin Mary.

Modern experts say that the cloak should have decayed in about 40 years since it was crudely made from a vegetable fiber. Now 450 years later, despite exposure to candle smoke and incense, the cloak is still firm and the colors are still vivid.

Modern experts who have examined the picture say that the physical features of the Virgin are those of a young Jewish girl and not of an American Indian, as once thought. The ermine on the neckline and cuffs of her dress identify her as a descendant of the Jewish House of David.

In 1951, a photographic enlargement of the Virgin's face showed that her right eye contains the image of a man, believed to be a picture of Juan Diego. Of course, no one knew about eye reflections and photography in 1531 when the picture originated.

In 1975, a group of scientists and photographers examined the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe and concluded that it cannot be a painting; the picture is on the surface of the cloak and no paint or dyes have ever penetrated the material.

The more we learn about these two miraculous pictures of Jesus and of his Mother, the more the evidence mounts to reassure Christians that we need never fear objective scientific inquiry; it will always confirm Christian faith. (end)