



# You find him where history and faith collide

by BENJAMIN WACHS/bwachs@mpnewspapers.com

In 1349, as war ravaged Europe, the famous French knight Geoffrey de Charny established a church in honor of the holy trinity, who he said had helped him escape an English prison.

Into that church, de Charny placed what he claimed was the burial shroud of Christ himself.

Was it? Pilgrims who flocked to his church in the wilderness saw on the cloth an amazing likeness of a crucified man. They believed it was holy.

But in 1355 Bishop Pierre D'Arcis of Troyes sent a letter to the Pope denouncing the cloth as a forgery - "a cunning painting" - and the shroud was hidden away.

Controversy followed it across Europe.

It became the property of the House of Savoy, Italy's royal family, in 1453. It was moved out of France and to Turin, Italy, in 1578.

The Shroud of Turin was given to the Vatican and Pope John Paul II in 1986, as was its mystery.

Timothy Thibodeau, a professor of history at Nazareth College in Pittsford, can't solve that mystery but he does want to make one thing clear: the Shroud of Turin is most definitely not as authenticated as pieces of the true cross used to crucify Jesus.

The pieces of the true cross can be authoritatively documented back to the third century. The Shroud of Turin, on the other hand, has no definitively documented appearances prior to around 1350.

"Now, whether that's really the cross that he was nailed to we can't prove, but we can say there's more solid evidence for that relic being preserved," he said.

Thibodeau has spent the last 20 years of his life as a kind of Sherlock Holmes of the medieval church, looking past legend, rumor and forgery until he finds the truth, however improbable.

"In effect, what you're doing is looking at a crime scene from 2,000 years ago," he said. "What most people want to know is: What kind of forensic tools can you use to prove things?"

But forensics can only take you so far; then history has to take over.

“What kind of documentary sources exist to verify them?” asked Thibodeau. “Can we follow them through an itinerary, or did they just appear out of nowhere?”

He recently completed a chapter in the soon-to-be-published “Oxford History of Christian Worship” - a definitive source - on the Medieval Church.

And last month he was interviewed by The History Channel for a show on Christian relics like the Shroud of Turin, the pieces of the true cross and the lance that pierced the side of the Son of God.

It is, he said, an exciting time to be in this line of work.

Formerly regulated to dusty corners of scholarly libraries, the study of early Christianity has hit the best-seller list, the big screen and the headlines with the force of a flood.

“There have been three (recent) events that are of a profound significance to Christianity in the world,” he said.

The first was the death of Pope John Paul II. “More people saw the funeral than any other event in all of human history. That sort of whets people’s appetites,” Thibodeau said.

Then there was the success of Mel Gibson’s film “The Passion of the Christ,” which Thibodeau said he didn’t like as either a scholar or a movie patron. But it clearly had an impact.

“What was interesting was that, when the movie came out, you had merchants selling ‘Jesus nails,’ which you were supposed to wrap around you neck,” he said. “That’s a lot like the mind set of the early Christians, who were relic hunters. “

Then there’s “The Da Vinci Code” - which Thibodeau also doesn’t like. But it raised the kind of questions that previously only scholars like him were asking about what really happened back then - and what’s been preserved.

What it all highlights, Thibodeau said, is the complicated and passionate relationship Christianity has had with its history from the very beginning.

“The early church fought about (history), believe it or not,” he explained. Some early sects of Christianity believed that the knowledge of Christ was a secret only to be given to a few.

Others denied that Christ had a human body - they said he was entirely spirit.

“There was even a strand of early Christianity that rejected the crucifixion story. Many people are shocked to hear that,” Thibodeau said. “They said that he was lifted up into heaven and that somebody else died in his place.”

Settling such arguments was a key goal of early Christians. One of the earliest formal documents of Christian history - the Nicene Creed, created in 325 - specifically stated that Christ had been crucified under Pontius Pilate.

“Now, that’s interesting. Why would they say that? Put a historical fact in a creed?” asked Thibodeau. “But it’s loaded with historical references, because the early church was insistent that Jesus was a real historical figure, that he had a real human body, that he really died, that he really suffered.”

What it means, he said, is that “Christianity made a decision that it would have historical records, that it would have gospels and it carefully picked only four out of the 20 or 30 that were floating around. Not the gospel of Mary Magdalene, not the gospel of Nicodemus.”

Thibodeau’s own history is, he says, far more mundane than the quest for the Holy Grail.

“I started out when I was an undergraduate studying classics - ancient Roman history - and my advisor said ‘Everybody has studied the classics,’” he remembered. “Instead, there’s a lot more to do in what we call the ‘late antique’ period, the fall of the empire and the early rise of Christianity.”

He went to Notre Dame University, in Indiana, to get his graduate degree in history, focusing on Christianity and Christian worship. He has been toiling away at the intersection of faith, science and history ever since.

He has been at Nazareth College for 17 years, and a Perinton resident for seven.

“I’m really excited about my contribution to the Oxford History of Christian Worship,” he said. “It’s really sort of a synthesis of everything I’ve worked on for the last 20 years.”

During that time science has advanced the tools at a historian’s disposal. The Shroud of Turin was carbon dated in 1988, and the results conclusively showed that it dated back to the 14th century - far from the time of Christ.

However, the pieces analyzed were from a portion of the shroud that had been burned in a fire in 1532 in Chambry, in the French Alps.

“Those portions were the only parts that the Vatican allowed to be sampled for testing, “ Thibo-

deau said. “Critics say what we tested was fire and dirt and dust. That theory has gained credibility.”

So the mystery is still a mystery and anything is possible. But Thibodeau has cautious words for those eager to believe that the truth is out there, or that faith can be tested.

“If you could prove that the Shroud of Turin actually wrapped the body of Jesus of Nazareth, all you’ve proven is that it wrapped him: you haven’t proven that he was God,” he said. “Some of the people doing it hope that through science you can confirm faith. But you can’t really do it: faith is faith.”

It makes a heck of a mystery, though.