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Pope all but endorses authenticity of Turin Shroud

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press Writer

The Associated Press

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TURIN, Italy - Pope Benedict XVI all but gave an outright endorsement of the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin on Sunday, calling the cloth that some believe is Christ's burial shroud an icon "written with the blood" of a crucified man.

During a visit to the Shroud in the northern Italian city of Turin, Benedict didn't raise the scientific questions that surround the linen and whether it might be a medieval forgery. Instead, he delivered a powerful meditation on the faith that holds that the Shroud is indeed Christ's burial cloth.

"This is a burial cloth that wrapped the remains of a crucified man in full correspondence with what the Gospels tell us of Jesus," Benedict said. He said the relic — one of the most important in Christianity — should be seen as a photographic document of the "darkest mystery of faith" — that of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.

The 14-foot-long, 3.5-foot-wide (4.3-meter-long, 1 meter-wide) cloth has gone on public display for the first time since the 2000 Millennium celebrations and a subsequent 2002 restoration. Kept in a bulletproof, climate-controlled case in Turin's cathedral, it has drawn nearly 2 million reservations from pilgrims and tourists eager to spend three to five minutes viewing

was "an icon written in blood; the blood of a man who was whipped, crowned with thorns, crucified and injured on his right side.

"The image on the Shroud is that of a dead man, but the blood speaks of his life. Each trace of blood speaks of love and life," Benedict said.

The Vatican to date had tiptoed around the issue of just what the Shroud of Turin is, calling it a powerful symbol of Christ's suffering while making no claim to its authenticity.

Benedict's meditation — delivered after he prayed as if in a trance before the shroud — appeared to imply that in the end it doesn't matter what science says about its authenticity.

"The Shroud of Turin offers us the image of how his body lay in the tomb during that time (of death); time that was brief chronologically — about a day and a half — but was immense, infinite in its value and significance," Benedict said.

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A Vatican researcher said late last year that faint writing on the linen, which she studied through computer-enhanced images, proves the cloth was used to wrap Jesus' body after his crucifixion.

But experts stand by carbon-dating of scraps of the cloth that determine the linen was made in the 13th or 14th century in a kind of medieval forgery. That testing didn't explain how the image on the Shroud — of a man with wounds similar to those suffered by Christ — was formed.

However, some have suggested the dating results might have been skewed by contamination and called for a larger sample to be analyzed.

When Pope John Paul II visited the Shroud during a 1998 public display, he said its mystery forces questions about faith and science and whether it really was Christ's burial shroud. But he said the church had "no specific competence to pronounce on these questions" and urged continuous study.

Benedict, who has made the interplay of faith and science a hallmark of his papacy, did not mention the role of science and reason in his remarks Sunday.

Benedict's visit to the holy relic marked a bit of a respite from the clerical sex abuse scandal that has convulsed the Vatican in recent weeks. In the past week, he has met with several bishops to discuss resignations from inside their ranks over sex abuse by priests of children and the bishops' failure to report it to civil authorities, and more meetings are planned.

He also met with five Vatican investigators who reported on an eight-month probe into the

Vatican's handling of sex abuse cases and its role in society in general. Demonstration organizer Maria Matteo said Vatican documents detailing how clerical abuse cases should be processed insisted on secrecy.

When the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "he clearly said that these problems shouldn't be spoken about. What more does there need to be (to blame him)?" she told Associated Press Television News.

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