

Weeping Madonna of Syracuse



The Reliquary that holds the tears of Mary



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Weeping Madonna of Syracuse Sicily, 1953

This plaster sculpture, or plaque, which depicts the Immaculate Heart of Mary was mass-produced in a studio in Tuscany. It was then shipped with others of its kind to Syracuse, where it was purchased as a wedding gift. But after it had hung for a time in the humble home of the Iannuso couple, the plaque was singled out for the unexpected and prodigiously shed tears for four days.

The veneration paid this plaque in a church built especially for its exhibition was approved by three popes, but only after an ecclesiastical tribunal scrupulously studied the miracle and had the tears scientifically analyzed. It has been said by authorities that never was a miracle so thoroughly tested or so quickly approved.

The history of the image begins with its sculptor, Amilcare Santini, who modeled it in only three days "under artistic inspiration." It was made of plaster that had been dissolved in water and poured into a mold before it was turned out to dry in the sun. It was then sprayed with nitrocellulose varnish that made it shiny and suitable for painting.

After it was colored, varnished and polished, ordinary screws were used to attach the image to a panel of black opaline. The panel measures 39 by 33 centimeters, the figure 29 by 22 centimeters.

The plaque was purchased as a wedding gift for Antonina and Angelo Iannuso, who were married March 21, 1953. They admitted that they were tepid and neglectful Christians, yet they hung the image with some devotion on the wall behind their bed.

Angelo was a laborer who had taken his bride to live in the home of his brother on Via Degli Orti 11. When his wife discovered that she was pregnant, her condition was accompanied by toxemia that expressed itself in convulsions that at times brought on temporary blindness. At three in the morning on Saturday, August 29, 1953, Antonina suffered a seizure that left her blind. At about 8:30, her sight was restored. In Antonina's own words:

I opened my eyes and stared at the image of the Madonna above the bedhead. To my great amazement I saw that the effigy was weeping. I called my sister-in-law Grazie and my aunt, Antonina Sgarlata, who came to my side, showing them the tears. At first they thought it was a hallucination due to my illness, but when I insisted, they went close up to the plaque and could well see that tears were really falling from the eyes of the Madonna, and that some tears ran down her cheeks onto the bedhead. Taken by fright they took it out the front door, calling the neighbors, and they too confirmed the phenomenon...

Of the many visitors who examined the plaque at close range was Mario Messina, who was highly regarded in the neighborhood. After observing the slow formation of the tears he removed the plaque from the wall, examined it thoroughly and satisfied himself that the tears were not the result of an internal reservoir. After the plaque was dried, two tears immediately reappeared.

News of the phenomenon spread quickly throughout the city, bringing crowds that forced their way indoors and gathered in the streets around the house. The inspector of security, with the couple's permission, hung the plaque on the outside of the house to satisfy the curiosity of the people, but later, on seeing that the crush showed no sign of diminishing, the picture was taken to the constabulary in an effort to reduce the confusion. The image wept while outside the building and during its transport, but after 40 minutes at the police constabulary, when it did not weep, it was returned to the Iannuso home.

On Sunday, August 30, at 2:00 in the morning, the weeping image was placed on a cushion and displayed to satisfy the curious who had remained in the street throughout the night.

The image was nailed above the main door on Monday, and its tears were collected by the people on pieces of cloth and wads of cotton. During this time the curious were satisfied, the skeptics were convinced, and many of the sick were healed. Also during this day, to protect the plaque from falling, it was brought to an improvised altar outside the home of the Lucca family who lived directly across the street. Several hours later, after the recitation of the Rosary, it was returned.

Three priests visited the home during this time. One of them notified the Chancery, which assembled a group of distinguished clergymen, four men of science and three reputable witnesses, to comprise an investigative commission.

On the specific instructions of the chancellor, the commission gathered at the Iannuso home the morning of Tuesday, September 1 for the purpose of studying the phenomenon and collecting a sample of the tears for chemical analysis. The plaque was examined while it wept and while the liquid collected in the cavity formed by the hand over the heart. The commission examined the smooth finish and found no pores or irregularities on the surface. The backing was removed and the unfinished calcined gypsum was scrutinized and found in a dry condition, even though tears collected on the reverse.

Six coats of nitrocellulose colors were counted on the image; these were covered with a coat of nitrocellulose varnish. Using a sterilized pipette, a sample of tears was collected and placed in a sterilized vial that was taken to the provincial laboratory to be examined by doctors and chemists. One centimeter of liquid was obtained, about 19 to 20 drops.

Following this thorough examination, the image continued weeping for another 51 minutes, but at 11:40 in the morning the tears stopped, never to be repeated.

The sample of tears was compared scientifically with those of an adult and to those of a child. Following a detailed analysis, the conclusion reached by the doctors was that:

the liquid examined is shown to be made up of a watery solution of sodium chloride in which traces of protein and nuclei of a silver composition of excretory substances of the quaternary type, the same as found in the human secretions used as a comparison during the analysis.

The appearance, the alkalinity and the composition induce one to consider the liquid examined analogous to human tears.

The report was dated September 9, 1953, and was signed by Drs. Michele Cassola, Francesco Cotzie, Leopoldo La Rosa and Mario Marietta.

Concerning this commission and the various investigations conducted, we must consider that the church is never in a hurry to pronounce her judgments on such occurrences and that she acts with maximum caution and prudent reserve and is ready to affirm miracles only after positive and unquestionable proofs have been extended. Nevertheless, sufficient proofs were apparently given, since a favorable judgment was rendered in a relatively short time.

The Archbishop of Syracuse visited the Iannuso home to examine the plaque and returned another day to recite the Rosary together with the crowd. Various monsignori visited the plaque, some of whom witnessed the weeping. Many cardinals expressed interest, while the Archbishop of Palermo, Ernesto Cardinal Ruffini, in a radio broadcast of December, 1953 stated:

After careful sifting of the numerous reports, after having noted the positive results of the diligent chemical analysis under which the tears gathered were examined, we have unanimously announced the judgment that the reality of the facts cannot be put in doubt.

Pope Pius XII, in a radio broadcast on October 17, 1954 said:

We acknowledge the unanimous declaration of the Episcopal Conference held in Sicily on the reality of that event. Will men understand the mysterious language of those tears?

The medical commission that was nominated on October 7, 1953 to examine seriously and scientifically the nature of extraordinary cures worked through the intercession of the Weeping Madonna of Syracuse, considered 290 cases of which 105 were of "special interest." These miracles were reported within a few years of the incident.

The first person to experience a miracle of healing was also the first to observe the weeping. From the time Antonina Iannuso first saw the tears, she recovered completely from severe toxemia and gave birth to a healthy son on December 25, 1953. Archbishop Baranzini officiated at the infant's Baptism. The same astonishment experienced by the people of Syracuse at the time of the miracle was felt by those around the world who read about the occurrence in local newspapers, or heard about it on radio or television. It has been tabulated that reports even reached India, China, Japan and Vietnam. In Italy alone more than 2,000 articles appeared in 225 papers and magazines, while hundreds of articles appeared in 93 foreign newspapers in 21 different nations. Rarely is an event of religious interest given such worldwide attention.

That the events were the result of collective hallucination is rejected by authorities of the shrine where the image is now kept, since one, then, two, then small groups and finally hundreds of people, including skeptics, viewed the event and the intermittent character of the weepings. The plaque was seen to shed tears in several locations inside the home and at three places outside; moreover, there was the tangible evidence of saturated cloths and cottons. Hallucinations are to be excluded because of the psychological state of numerous unbelievers who examined the image and even tasted the salty liquid. Moreover, photographs and motion picture footage of the weeping cannot, of course, be hallucinated.

The question of condensation is likewise rejected since it would have covered the whole statue and would not have originated only from the corners of the eyes. Condensation would have collected on nearby objects as well, which did not occur, and if it had been present certainly would not have been salty.

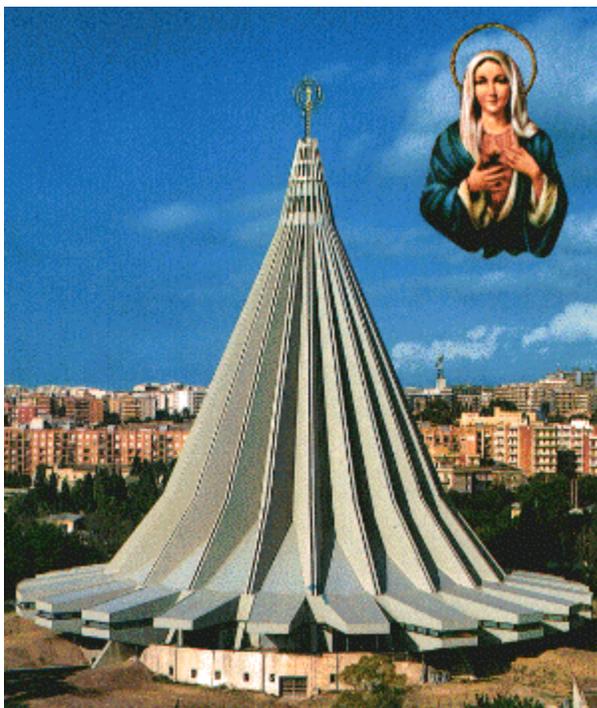
The physicians and scientists who studied the event could offer no natural explanation for the occurrence and deemed it extraordinary in several documents.

The reliquary presented to Archbishop Baranzini on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his ordination is of special interest since it contains the tears collected by the medical commission for their chemical analysis. The reliquary is comprised of three layers. The bottom contains, in addition to cloths that had been saturated with tears, one of the vials that contained the tears collected by the commission and cotton wool that absorbed some of the tears on another occasion. The second layer has four panels depicting the events. The third and highest layer has a crystal urn which holds another of the vials used for the collection of the samples. The tears within it are now crystallized.

The little house on Via Degli Orti 11, where the Madonna first shed her tears, is now an oratory where Mass is often celebrated. The image itself is enshrined above the main

altar of the Santuario Madonna Delle Lacrima, built specifically to accommodate the crowds that continually gather in prayer before the holy image.

Why did the Madonna weep? Many theories have been offered which remind us of the tears Mary shed at the foot of the Cross and of those shed by her during the vision of La Salette. During one of the visions of St. Catherine Labouré on July 18, 1830, St. Catherine noticed that the Virgin looked sad and had tears in her eyes. Perhaps we should pray the words engraved on the base of the reliquary, "Weeping Madonna, take from the hardness of our hearts tears of penitence." And we wonder with Pope Pius XII, "Will men understand the mysterious language of those tears?"



Madonna

Sanctuary Weeping Madonna Syracuse

Weeping