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The Case of a Weeping Orthodox Icon

Last May, newspapers in Italy and abroad reported that the iconic image of a Madonna had wept tears in the Orthodox Church of Saint Nicholas in Milano. It was the second time that this phenomenon had reportedly happened there.

Tears and a Strange Potato

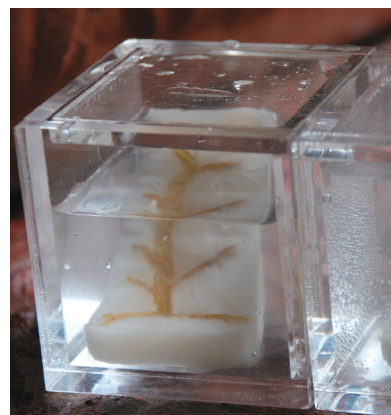
“It was around 4:30 PM and we were cleaning up the church right before the Vespers,” said Archbishop Avondios. “Suddenly, somebody noticed that the painting with the Madonna in our church was weeping. The same way as it did last year.” In April 2010, the same thing allegedly happened, and it is said that there had been another weeping in 2008.

“A miracle? We don’t use that word,” said Avondios. “But something has happened. And it is not a trick.”

A few days after the event, an Italian television show devoted to the paranormal, *Mistero*, called me asking if CICAP, the Italian skeptics committee, was interested in investigating the case. Of course we were. After obtaining permission from the Archbishop, I went to the little church in Via San Gregorio. The place is quite unique, since the Orthodox Church has been established inside the only remaining building of what was once the *Lazzeretto*, the place where those suffering from the plague were brought between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. The building was once a huge square, but in the following centuries, when the city grew much larger, it was torn down in order to allow for the construction of roads and houses in what is now part of downtown—one of the busiest quarters of Milano.

Father Avondios was there waiting for me, and he was quite willing to help.

However, before visiting the church and looking at the painting, we had to wait for the television crew to arrive. So he told me that there was at least one prodigious event that had already taken place since the latest weeping. He introduced me to a woman named Nechita from Eastern Europe who told me that until some weeks before she seemed unable to become pregnant. However, after visiting the icon and praying to the Madonna, the happy event took place and she was now with child.



A close-up of the sliced potato in its water box.



Massimo Polidoro examines the icon that had wept while Father Avondios looks on.

As further proof that something miraculous was going on, she showed me a curious relic. In a plastic box filled with water were two slices of a potato. While cooking at home, Nechita saw a strange dried-up shape that resembled a little tree inside a potato she had cut open. She took it as a sign and decided to keep the slices. Furthermore, although the potato had been cut awhile ago, it had not become dark: it still was clean and white, as

if it would keep fresh forever. “We have asked around and nobody has ever seen anything like that,” said Nechita. “I am sure that is part of the miracle.” I photographed the slices just before the television crew arrived.

Tiny Drops of Something

We finally entered the cramped room that served as the main church hall, where dozens of sacred paintings, icons,



Father Avondios showing the sliced potato with tree shaped signs.

reliquaries, and candles were kept and where women were allowed inside only with their head covered by a shawl. It contained a painting of the Madonna with baby Jesus and two little angels crowning her—a classic orthodox icon, probably not more than fifty years old, with gold and red as the prevailing colors and writing in cyrillic inside it.

The picture had now been put in a case with a glass cover over it in order to preserve it, whereas when the weeping occurred it was left in the open and people could touch it (and they constantly did, as a few films available on the web clearly show). For this occasion, while the cameras were rolling, Father Avondios promptly opened the case and took the painting out for us to see up close. There were traces of some liquid, which had oozed and had now dried up, starting at the eyes of both the Madonna and Jesus and trailing down. “You see?” asked Father

Avondios. “There still are little drops of tears. It is still weeping.”

It was not actually “weeping,” but as I looked closely at the painting I could see that there were in fact tiny little drops of something that still hadn’t dried. By running some new cotton swabs on the painting, I was able to capture some of those traces. The idea was to take them to the lab in order to see if some kind of analysis was possible. Father Avondios, a quite young Archbishop with a nice eastern accent and a good sense of humor, was quite helpful. He even took off some splinters from behind the painting with a knife in case we needed to examine those as well.

For the moment that was all I could do. Later I gave the samples to my good friend and colleague Luigi Garlaschelli, a chemist at the University of Pavia, and he checked with their labs to determine what sort of analysis was possible.

A Partial Solution to the Mystery

While that was going on in Pavia, I was interested in checking on the mysterious potato slices. I reached the Agronomy Department at the Regione Piemonte in Turin, where I knew some people who had been crucial in solving a previous “vegetable mystery.” I had been shown some apples on whose surfaces odd drawings and dark wavy lines had appeared—bizarre but not uncommon. In fact, it turned out that the apples were suffering from an infection due to poor preservation. I got a similar answer in the case of the strange “tree” in the potato slices. It was a well-known form of plant disease called “empty heart,” which is caused by imbalances in nutrients and water. As for the potato remaining preserved, the agronomists explained to me that it is a natural reaction to the fact that the slices were kept under water. Oxygen is what turns a potato or a fruit dark, and the lack of it can only slow down the decaying process.

In a few weeks, Garlaschelli had the results from the Mass Spectrometry

Labs in Pavia. It turned out that the substance found on the painting was some kind of vegetable oil. The suspicion that the painting itself had produced the oil was immediately discarded because a) oil paint is made with mineral oil because vegetable oils are easily perishable and b) if it was a natural transudation it would have taken place all over the painting and certainly not only around the eyes of the Madonna and her baby.

What conclusions can be drawn? The most logical one is that the oil came from outside the painting and it was either made to appear by some supernatural (and unproven) means or somebody put it there—it is now impossible to guess who and why. There were many people freely moving around the church area while I was there, and—as shown by various news clips—the painting had been left without a glass cover before our arrival, so anybody who wished could reach and touch it.

Father Avondios wrote to me later: “We have always been and will be very careful in our statements and in declaring true an event or an apparition, independently from the results of the analysis. I have always been open and curious, and that’s why I allowed for the tests to be performed. We will still worship and respect the icon of the Madonna not because of a supposed miracle but as an instrument of devotion to the Mother of our Lord.”

During our investigation, the police department had concluded work on another weeping Madonna case. This one was a print of a Madonna owned by a couple in Messina, Sicily, that they swore had wept blood. The house had since then been visited by thousands of pilgrims. Finally, the police were able to determine that the blood was human and that the DNA belonged to one of the owners. Now the couple risks charges of “abuse of popular credulity,” something that Italian law still considers a crime. ■