

## Sancta Sanctorum

### Acheropita

The famous icon of Christ "painted without (the use of human) hands" is enthroned on the altar. It is tentatively dated to the mid 5th century, but there is so little left of the original paintwork that this is uncertain. If true, it would be the oldest icon in Rome. The first documentary mention is in the reign of Pope Stephen II (752-7), when it was taken in procession in the face of a barbarian invasion.

The actual work was painted in encaustic on a linen backing framed in walnut, and represent Christ seated on a throne with a backrest encrusted with jewels. One hand blesses, and the other holds a scroll. Of all this, you can only see the face which was re-painted in the reign of Pope Alexander III (1159-81). The rest is covered with a chased and jewelled silver-gilt cover which was added in the reign of Pope Innocent III (1198-1216), who is commemorated in an inscription on it. This cover has little relief depictions of the thirteen saints enshrined in the chapel, together with the symbols of the Evangelists. There used to be three holes at breast-height and one larger one at the feet, and these were used in a ceremony where the hands and feet of the image were washed with perfumed water. The top three holes were closed with silver discs in about 1400, which have enamel representations of the *Crucifixion*, *Nativity* and the *Coronation of Our Lady*. The hole over the foot has a rectangular shutter with four little scenes from the history of the Confraternita del Santissimo Salvatore, founded in 1318 to propagate the veneration of the icon.

The two lateral panels were added in the 15th century, each consisting of four silver-gilt reliefs of *Our Lady with the angel of the Annunciation* at the top, and six saints.

The altar itself has a railing grid, evoking the gridiron of St Lawrence and imitated in the modern re-fitting of the sanctuary of the church next door. The grid protects the original wooden relic-chest installed here at the start of the 9th century.

### Treasure and Relics

Below the Papal altar, protected by an enormous wrought iron cage, lie two bronze doors, covered with reliefs and inscriptions dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. These decorations cover the cypress wood ark, specifically made by Leo III to contain the illustrious treasures and relics of the Sancta Sanctorum. In 1902, the grate was opened for the first time since 1521, after Father F. Jubaru S.J. got the permission to examine the head of Saint Agnes which was kept within. In 1905, F. H. Grisar, was allowed to open it once again to study the magnificent collection of sacred objects made of gold, silver, ivory, and precious woods, together with numerous relic holders, crosses, fabrics, brocades, parchments, miniatures and enamels, all of incalculable value – a veritable treasure chest. The reliquaries were transferred to the Sacred Christian Museum in the Vatican library. Among the relics kept at this site were the heads of the apostles Peter and Paul, which are now venerated in the Basilica of Saint John Lateran.