Knights Templar may have secretly held shroud, Vatican expert says

VATICAN CITY – A Vatican researcher has found evidence that the Knights Templar, the medieval crusading order, held secret custody of the Shroud of Turin during the 13th and 14th centuries.

The shroud, which bears the image of a man and is believed by many to have been the burial cloth of Jesus, was probably used in a secret Templar ritual to underline Christ's humanity in the face of popular heresies of the time, the expert said.

The researcher, Barbara Frale, made the comments in an article published April 5 by the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano. The article anticipated evidence the author presents in an upcoming book on the Templars and the shroud.

Ms. Frale, who works in the Vatican Secret Archives, said documents that came to light during research on the 14th-century trial of the Templars contained a description of a Templar initiation ceremony.

The document recounts how a Templar leader, after guiding a young initiate into a hidden room, "showed him a long linen cloth that bore the impressed figure of a man, and ordered him to worship it, kissing the feet three times," Ms. Frale said.

The idea that the Knights Templar were secret custodians of the shroud was put forward by British historian Ian Wilson in 1978. Ms. Frale said the account of the initiation ceremony, along with a number of other pieces of evidence, supports that theory.

The shroud's history has long been the subject of debate. It was believed by some to have been in Constantinople, now Istanbul, Turkey, when the city was sacked during the crusades in 1204. It turned up for public display in France in 1357, and today is kept in the cathedral of Turin, Italy.

The cloth's image, according to some experts, corresponds with that of a man who was scourged and crucified.

Ms. Frale said the Knights Templar may have kept the shroud secret because of papal orders of excommunication for anyone involved in looting relics from Constantinople or trafficking in them afterward.

She said the shroud's image was particularly important for the Knights Templar, as an "antidote" to the heresies that had arisen – especially those that affirmed that Christ was a purely spiritual being, and never really had a human body or shed human blood.