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D. BALDUINO BEDINI O. CIST. *£ & Q*

THE SESSORIAN RELICS  
OF THE  
LORDS PASSION

ROME

Printed by Senoia Tipografia Pio X  
Via Etnischi, 7-9

1928



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## LORD'S PASSION

D. BALDUINO BEDINI O CIST.

Translation by Rev. ROBERT R. Da VIS

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Romae, ex Mon. S. Crucis in Jerusalem die 20 Maii 1928.

D. Edmundus Bernardini  
*Abbas Praeses Gen. Cong. Cist. Italiae.*

IMPRIMATUR

Josephus Palica, Archiep. Phil., Vic. Ger.

**Deacldif v**

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## The Cross Buried and Profaned.

After the death of Jesus and His burial on the evening of the 15 of Nisan, the instruments of the Crucifixion, that is to say the cross and nails, as well as those of the two thieves crucified with Him were buried in a hole, or grotto, near the tomb, which had been presented by Joseph of Arimathea to receive the body of the Messiah. It was forbidden by the Jews to bury criminals in the common cemetery ; it was considered a profanation. They had to be buried in a separate place, as well as the instruments of their death : cross, nails, spear, stones etc. all these were considered as dishonoured by the use that had been made of them. †

After the Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord into Heaven, the place of His Martyrdom soon became a sacred spot for Christians ; they came there often, either in private or in groups,

(\*) Baronius, *Annales.*, vol. I, an 34, n. 130 S. Ambrose in 393 found at Bologne the bodies of S. Vital and Agricola. Near the body of Agricola had been placed the cross and nails with which he had been martyred. See: *Exhortât castitatis*, ch. II. See also Bosio Antonio, *Roma sotterranea*. l. 1., ch. 20 p. 56 sq. (edit. Severani, Rome 1650) who speaks of similar inventions.

to pray on this ground which the Blood of the Redeemer had bathed, to kneel at the grot that contained the glorious trophies of the Cross, to kiss the rock on which the body of Christ had been laid.

As Golgotha became a place of attraction for the Disciples, the Jews and Pagans regarded it with suspicion. The Emperor Adrian (117-138), who in the last years of his life became a jealous and suspicious tyrant, decreed the profanation of Golgotha and the holy Sepulchre in order to prevent the Christians from venerating them. By his order the valley, which separated Golgotha from Christ's Sepulchre, was filled with earth so as to close the entrance to the tomb and obliterate the mount. The place of the Crucifixion and of Christ's Burial was surrounded by a ditch and levelled with stones. On this scene of the hatred of Christianity Adrian had one, if not two, infamous temples built, one to Jupiter, on the tomb itself, another to Venus over the actual place occupied by the Cross.

“ Fool ” writes an historian, † “ he thought to hide from mankind the splendor of the Lux which had risen upon the world! He did not perceive that in trying to erase the memory of the Sacred places, he for ever marked the site and that, in the time fixed by Providence for the liberation of the Church, the infidel columns of the temple would be the infallible signs of the place of the Sanctuaries ”,

(\*) Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*.

The Christians came no more to the Calvary now profaned by the temples and the debasing ceremonies, but they did not forget that the buildings of Adrian hid the spot where the Redemption of mankind was wrought. Golgotha, the holy Sepulchre and the Cross of Christ remained hidden under ground, but this desecration could not last for ever.

## The Conversion of Constantine.

In 306 Constantine the Great succeeded his father Constantius Clore in the government of Brittany and Gaul. He was in Nicomedia with Galerius Maximien, when the news that his father was dying in York came to him. Galerius, who regarded Constantine as a dangerous rival, tried to prevent him from returning to Europe. Constantine however succeeded in escaping and, at each stage of his journey, where he had to exchange horses, he had the animals left mutilated, so that they could not be used by the soldiers of Galerius who were pursuing him. He reached York safely and Constantius named him Cesar. He was forced at once to take the field against a strong army of Germans who had invaded Gaul. The barbarians being defeated and forced to retreat over the Rhine, Constantine found himself again in war, this time to defend his throne. Maxentius son-in-law of Maximien Herculeo, with the help of a few tribunes and pretors, had himself proclaimed Emperor of the West. This was in 307. A rising by Severus against the usurpation of Maxentius was completely foiled by the latter and Severus was killed.

Being proud of such an easy victory Maxentius refused a proposal, made to him by Constan-

tine, to admit him as colleague in the government of the Empire. Shortly after, becoming bolder, he ordered all the statues and pictures of Constantine in Italy and Africa to be destroyed. This was a declaration of war which Constantine could not refuse. He found however that he had a numerous army and a crafty and powerful opponent against h'mself.

His scouts brought news that some of Maxentius forces were occupying the passes of the Alps and that the army far outnumbered that of Constantine. The latter, who realised that his forces were inferior in number and in quality to his enemy, had recourse to prayer. He knew not to which divinity he should address himself, for, though he felt a certain sympathy for the Christians, who filled his court and his army, yet he was still an idolater, nevertheless he prayed that Heaven would come to his aid. One day, while he was still in Gaul, a miraculous manifestation took place before him and his army. The historian Eusebius of Cesarea, in his life of Constantine, speaks of it as a thing which the Emperor himself narrated. This is what happened. One afternoon, when the sun was sinking, a cross composed of luminous rays appeared above the solar disc. Inside the cross was written the following inscription in Greek: τούτο) νικά that is: by this signs thou shalt conquer. †

This wonderful apparition greatly astonished

(\*) Naturally Eusebius gave the sentence in Greek ; Philostorgius and others said it was in *Latin*.

Constantine and all the soldiers of the camp, who witnessed the miracle. Constantine however did not at once realise its meaning, but asked himself what it could signify. All day he sought an explanation of the prodigy.

During the night Christ appeared to him, having in His hand the same sign that had been seen in the heavens, and told him to have a Standard made similar to it and to use it as a sure aid in all his expeditions. The following morning Constantine arose early and narrated to his friends what he had seen and heard. Goldsmiths and jewellers were called and orders given for the construction of the Standard.

Eusebius, from whom these details are taken, saw the original Standard and has given a full description of it. He adds that the Emperor always used this Standard ; which was a sure defence against all his enemies and he gave orders that similar Standards should be borne before all his armies.

Having this Standard at its head, the Constantinian army left Gaul and, having crossed the Alps, met the forces of Maxentius at Susa. Other encounters took place at Turin, Brescia, Verona, in which Constantine was always victorious. The last and decisive battle took place at Saxa Rubra on the Via Cassia on October 28, 312. Maxentius was at the head of his army which suffered a memorable defeat. During the retreat, that followed, Maxentius was drowned in the Tiber, owing to the fall of a wooden bridge which had been built near Ponte Milvio. His body

having been recovered, not without great difficulty, his head was severed and fixed upon a lance and was carried before the victorious army into Rome amid the acclamations of the people and the Senate.

The visible divine protection, which Constantine had felt during the war against Maxentius, drew him still more to Christianity. In 313, after an interview with Licinius at Milan, he published an Edict of toleration of the Christian religion and obliged the restitution of the goods taken from the Christians during the last persecution.

After a few years Licinius broke the agreement made at Milan and renewed the persecution in the East. Constantine declared war on him, was victorious and forced him to abdicate. He then proclaimed himself Emperor of the whole Roman Empire. Political unity having been realised by Constantine through the abolition of the polygarchy introduced by Diocletian, there still remained the ideal to be attained of religious unity, that great and powerful coefficient in the unification of nations. Constantine did not see in Christianity an Enemy of the State but rather an indissoluble divine strength; and decided to follow the Christian movement. His conversion was sincere. His numerous laws in favor of Christianity, against blasphemy etc., the abolition of the punishment by crucifixion, the building of many Christian Basilicas are an undeniable proof of it.

## Saint Helena and the finding of the Cross.

To show his love towards Jesus Christ and His religion, Constantine conceived the desire of building a great basilica on Golgotha and on the tomb of Christ. Eusebius has preserved in its integrity the letter in which Constantine informs Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem, of his decision, asking him to superintend the work. Twelve years however elapsed before the basilica could be finished. Eustachius, a priest of Constantinople, was the architect. The Basilica was dedicated on the 14th of September 335. It was formed of various vestibules and porticos, and contained two large churches : the Martyrion on the place of the Crucifixion and the Anastasis which contained the grotto of the Sepulchre.

While the demolition of the temple, or temples, constructed by Adrian was progressing and they were endeavouring to restore the place to its former condition and thus unearth Golgotha and the grotto of the Sepulchre, St Helena, the mother of Constantine, already almost an octogenarian, arrived at Jerusalem. She was born at Drepanum in Bithynia. Proprietress or servant in an inn, she attracted by her beauty and goodness an officer of high rank in the roman army,



named Constantius Clore, who married her in 273. From this marriage Constantine the Great was born on the 27 of February 274 at Naissus. †

Constantius Clore having reached the dignity of Cesar was forced in 292 to divorce his wife in order to marry Theodora, daughter of Maximian Ercoleo, this union being more suitable to his new position. Helena lived from that time in strict retirement until her son in 306 became Cesar and ruler of the Empire. Constantine recalled his mother to the Court where she received the title of Augusta. In 311 when, after the apparition of the Cross, Constantine was converted to Christianity, Helena encouraged by his example, became a Christian at the age of 64 or 65. This last period of new life was filled with acts of tender charity and Christian zeal. Eusebius pictures her to us as devoting her life to feeding and clothing the poor, visiting and consoling the prisoners and, when possible, procuring their release. Although she had the title of Augusta and was moreover the mother of the Emperor, her simplicity was so great that she would serve the Virgins at Jerusalem at table and delighted to call herself “the servant of the servants of Christ”, † Helena showed by her piety her burning love of God. In every town she entered, her first visit was for the church. “Prayer and charity for others was the compendium of the life of the holy Empress

(\*) Today Nisch in Yugo Slavie.

(2) Rufin, l. I. c. 8.

The Greek historians, Eusebius, Socrate, Sozomene and Theodoret, have rendered an eloquent homage to the Christian virtues of Helena and she has obtained the honours of the altars from the voice of the people. The chief glory of Helena, by which she will be always remembered with feeling of gratitude, is, of course, the finding of the holy Cross, which was obtained through her prayers and zeal. The Cross, which had appeared to Constantine and was really the cause of the successes of the son and glory of the mother, was the centre of the cult and devotion of Helena. The religious love she bore to it, was the cause of her ardent desire to see it drawn from obscurity and honoured.

To build a sumptuous and magnificent church on the spot that had witnessed the death and Resurrection of our Saviour, was doubtless in the thought of Helena a just and holy thing ; and she willingly agreed to it. But... what about the Cross ? Must the Standard of Salvation remain unhonoured and buried in the dust ? “ No. I must find the sacred wood ” was the cry of Helena ; and in her holy transport she was wont to say : “ If Mary brought God down to earth, I will raise up the sign of our Redemption ”, †

With this holy and generous desire she embarked for Jerusalem. The excavators and masons on mount Calvary saw the aged mother of the Emperor walking in the midst of the debris,

†) S. Ambrose, *Oratio in fun. Theodosii.*

observing carefully the ground in deep reflexion. One day her features were illuminated and she cried for joy. She pointed to a spot, and the workmen, divining that a great event was near, began to dig. Helena, kneeling near by, was praying to God to hear the ardent wishes of her heart. Having come to a certain depth, a slab, covered with earth, appeared. Having carefully cleaned it, four words, imprinted upon it, were clearly visible. It was the inscription, or Elogium, which Pilate had had placed on the Cross of Jesus, giving the reason for which the Roman Procurator had condemned the Galilean to be Crucified — “ Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews ”.

While Helena, with tears of consolation venerated this glorious Title which embodied all the Messianic dignity of Jesus, the excavators drew out three crosses and the separate inscriptions of the two thieves. The joy, that filled the soul of Helena and of the bystanders at having discovered the cross, was embittered by the fact that they could not tell which of the three crosses was the Cross of the Saviour. Because, according to the Roman custom, the two thieves had been crucified, themselves also, with nails, which after the bodies had been detached, were replaced in the holes ; if even the wounds in the hands and feet were not enlarged in order to release the limbs, without having recourse to pincers. Hence it was impossible either from the nails or from the holes in the crosses to have any indication as to which was the Cross of Je-

sus. The only indication was the “*elogium*” ; but this was detached. Consequently a supernatural intervention was needed to indicate with uncontroverted evidence to whom the crosses belonged. Macarius, the saint bishop of Jerusalem, had a very happy idea. He had the crosses taken to the house of an illustrious lady, who was dying, for a bold experiment. A historian has preserved the prayer of the bishop at this emotional moment: “*Lord, Who hast granted salvation to the human race through the death on the cross of Thy Only-begotten Son: and Who has now inspired Thy servant (Helena) to search for the holy wood on which was suspended our Salvation, show us with evidence which of the three crosses served for the divine glory, and which served for the execution of the malefactors. Grant that this lady, who lies on this couch dying, may, at the touch of the salutary wood, suddenly rise from imminent death to life*” ,

This said, the bishop arose and touched with one of the crosses the body of the dying person, who continued to struggle in the spasms of agony. He touched her with the second ; and also this time the result was negative. But scarcely was she touched with the third cross, that the sick person, as though given a shock from a galvanic battery, opened her eyes, jumped from the bed and commenced to walk about the house, glorifying God for her instantaneous cure (!).

(!) Rufin, t. I, c. 17.

The finding of the Cross of Jesus, through the action of St Helena, is an historical fact that cannot absolutely be put in doubt. Someone has objected that Eusebius has not spoken of this discovery, although he speaks of so many things done by Constantine and Helena. Many, however, see an allusion to the finding of the Cross in a letter of Constantine to Macarius about the construction of the Basilica. When Constantine wrote the letter, the building of Hadrian had been demolished, the clearing away of the earth finished and the rock of Calvary and the grotto of the Sepulchre were once more open to the air. Constantine, in his letter to Macarius, wrote this sentence : (it is the second part of the whole of the letter). “ Certainly it greatly surpasses the all wonder of men that, the monument of His (Jesus’) passion (*insigne illud, sanctissimae illius passionis monementum*) hidden in the bowels of the earth through the course of so many centuries, should be displayed to His servants when, the enemy (paganism) being conquered, they have been called to liberty ”, Many see in this sentence an allusion to the discovery of the Cross; and they say : To find a grotto and a rock, buried for two centuries in a place precisely marked by a superstructure, is certainly not a thing that surpasses the just expectation of men. But to find the Cross of Christ, buried for three centuries, this certainly justifies the phrase of the Emperor. However, no matter how one may interpret the words of Constantine; reported by Eusebius, the finding of the Cross cannot be weak-

ened by the silence of this letter. St Cyril of Jerusalem (386), in a letter to Constance, son of Constantine, says to the Emperor ; " In the time of Constantine, thy father, the salutary wood of the Cross was found at Jerusalem ". This sentence is decisive. Constance died in 361. The letter, therefore, of St Cyril was anterior to that date. St Cyril, moreover, was the second successor to bishop Macarius, and his assertion cannot be disputed ; still more so, since St Cyril speaks of the true Cross and of the relics they made from it, through his catecheses and especially in the tenth. As it is well known, St Cyril held his twenty four catecheses for the Catechumens of his community, in 347 or 348 ; that is to say hardly twenty years after the finding of the Cross of the Lord. He, when a little boy, was probably an eye-witness of the discovery. St Ambrose (397), Rufinus (410), St Paulinus of Nola, the continuator of the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret, which last one died in 458 at a very advanced age, all speak of the finding of the Cross. We could make a long list of the ancient writers, who mention the finding of the Cross of Jesus, through the action of St Helena ; but the nature of this booklet would not allow that. We can only say that the belief that St Helena had found the Cross was so general that the Emperor Justinian (565) legalised, in 542, officially the historical legend Avhenj. wiiting oin tHe Novella 't/Quod jiuilchreA' rsHeiena.tifoundifefusdheTsaf cred wood of Christians P. to § ¶fl ettidse

Someone has remarked that the three crosses, after three centuries of interment, would have rotted away. But one must remember that not all woods decay with the same quickness. The hard woods are not an easy pray to decay; then one must consider the nature of the arid and stony soil of Palestine, especially of Jerusalem, where it rarely rains and that not abundantly. In the third place, the superimposed buildings of Hadrian certainly hindered the rain from filtering into the earth, where the crosses were buried. Lastly it is necessary to attribute the preservation of the crosses also, in some way, to the Divine Providence, which did not wish to deprive the Church of this notable trophy of the Redemption,

St Helena sent to her son a relic of the Cross, which Costantine caused to be placed in his statue erected in the Forum of Constantinople; one part she took with her to Rome, as we shall see later; the rest remained at Jerusalem.

## The date of the finding of the Cross.

The historian Socrates speaks of the finding of the Cross, immediately after having spoken of the Council of Nicea (325), from which most assign the year 325 or 326 to the discovery. The Alexandrian chronicle, which is very reliable in its dates, gives the day and year of the finding, namely, the 14th of September A. D. 320. An interpolation in the chronicle of Eusebius similarly places the invention of the Cross in the fifteenth year of Constantine's reign, that is to say in 320. But it seems that one cannot accept the year 320. Constantine became the master of the East with the defeat of Licinius in 324; before this date Constantine could not have been able to initiate the work at Jerusalem. Licinius had thrown off the mask in putting himself at the head of the pagan party, persecuting Christianity and declaring the edict of Milan to be of no effect in his states. The discovery of the Cross, then, must be assigned to some year after 324. However, if the date is uncertain as regard the year, the day would seem to be sure, since already in the fourth century, they celebrated the feast of the Cross at Jerusalem on the 14th of September. They called it: "the Exaltation of the salutary and venerable Cross", and



also “ of the holy wood ”. On this day were made to coincide the dedication of the “ *Anastasis* ” and of the “ *Martyrium* ”. For the celebration of this day, members of the faithful and bishops came to Jerusalem, even from Mesopotamia and Egypt. An illustrious female pilgrim, of the name of Silvia, has left an interesting description of this feast. Another visitor, a mondaine and sinner, Mary the Egyptian, was converted on the occasion of this feast. On Good Friday, at Jerusalem, the Cross was exposed for the adoration of the faithful, a rite that soon passed to the Latin Church. The Roman liturgy prescribes the adoration of the Cross in the Mass of the Presanctified on Good Friday. At Rome, before the exile of Avignon, (1305-1377) the Pontiff went in person to the Basilica of “ *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme* ”, to celebrate there the said function.

The relic of the Cross, that remained at Jerusalem, underwent a dangerous, sudden change of fortune, in the 7th century. Chosroes II, king of Persia, declared war on the Emperor Heraclius. In June 614, the Persian general Salbaras occupied Jerusalem, devastated it and retired taking away, amongst the spoils, the portion of the Cross preserved there. Heraclius aroused himself, made peace with Bulgars and marched with all his forces against the Persians. Chosroes was beaten several times and finished by being assassinated by one of his followers. His successor, Siroes, hastened to sue for peace. Amongst the conditions imposed by Heraclius was that of restoring the relic of the Cross. It was done,

and he carried it back personally to Jerusalem, delivering it up to the Patriarch Zachary on the 3d of May. This victory gave the origin in the West to the Feast of the Invention — better, the Recovery — of the Cross.

## The Cross at Rome-

St Helena did not remain a long time in Jerusalem. After having satisfied her devotion towards the Holy Places, and having provided for the erection of a church in Bethlehem — the Basilica of the Nativity — and one on the mount of Olives — the Basilica of the Ascension — she set sail for the West in order to return to Rome. The ship, which carried her to Italy, bore a precious cargo. A portion of the wood of the holy Cross, a part of the Title or inscription which Pilate had had affixed to the Cross of Jesus; one, or two nails of the crucifixion and, very probably, some thorns of the crown with which the Roman soldiers had tortured and insulted Jesus Christ. Then, at the bottom of the ship, they had placed some sacks filled with earth from Calvary. Helena could detach her heart no further from the holy Places: she carried with her all that would permit her to live at Rome the religious life that she had lived in Jerusalem, full of mystic emotions and of holy enthusiasms. The precious load, she had brought from Jerusalem, was to go to enrich the Basilica which she had constructed in her Sessorian palace. The Basilica of “ Santa Croce in Gerusalemme ” is certainly anterior to her journey to Palestine; for St He-

lena, almost an octogenarian when she set out for Jerusalem, did not long survive her return to Rome. It would appear almost certain that she died on the 18th of August, 326. Eusebius relates that Helena died in Rome, amid the embraces of her son and grandsons. Now, according to the chronological reckoning of the Theodosian code, Constantine, who was building a new Capital for the empire, was in Rome for the last time in 326; and stayed there during the July-September quarters. During this stay of the emperor in Rome, Helena passed to a better life. And certainly, during the short period of time, which elapsed between her return from Jerusalem and her death, Helena could not have built a Basilica, or have transformed a part of her Sessorian palace into a Basilica. But the tradition agrees with the statement that the Basilica of S. Croce in Jerusalem owes its existence to St Helena. The first name, that this basilica has borne, was the Helenian Basilica. This adjective is indicative of paternity, as the Liberian, the Eudoxian, etc. The “ basilica Heleniana, quod dicitur Sessorium ” †. appears in the acts of the Council which Pope Sixtus III is supposed to have held in 433. The reality of this Council is questioned, today; the acts, however, are not later than the first decade of the VIth century. If in 500, that is to say, two centuries after St Helena, the basilica of S. Croce was called He-

† Sac. Cone. Nov. Coll. Florentiae Tom, V, 1761. col. 1163.

lenian at Rome, that would mean that St Helena had been its foundress. It is true that the *Liber Pontificalis* attributes the Sessorian Basilica to Constantine (1); but that would not constitute a great difficulty. St Helena made use of the imperial treasury for the works of beneficence and piety 2 and wishing to give another destination to property of the crown, she was necessarily obliged to obtain the consent of her son. Similarly one can reconcile the *Gesta Sixti*, which make St Helena foundress of the Basilica, and the *Liber Pontificalis*, which attributes its origin to Constantine. Consequently St Helena founded the Basilica before her journey to Jerusalem: after her return she would not have had the time to link her name with the Basilica.

Because of the relic of the Cross, which St Helena took there from Jerusalem, the Basilica also took the name of Santa Croce.

In this basilica there is a semisubterranean Chapel, separated from the church. Actually it is dedicated to St Helena; and anciently was also designated by the name of \* *Cubiculum S. Helenae* ” In this chapel the mother of Constantine deposited the Relics which she had brought from Jerusalem; the earth from Calvary was spread under the pavement of the said chapel, as witnesses it an old marble tablet, placed there and of which we shall speak further on. The custom

(1) Duchesne, *Liber Pontificalis*, pag. 81.

(2) Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, III, 47.

- of transporting earth from the Holy Places, in order to lay it underneath the pavements of houses of prayer, was not introduced by St Helena. Already Naaman had loaded two mules with earth from Israel in order to pray to the true God upon it; and the Jews of Nardea, in Persia, had built a synagogue with stones and earth carried there from Jerusalem (1).

On account of the earth from Calvary spread under the pavement of this Chapel, the Helenian Basilica of S. Croce took also the name absolutely of Jerusalem: "Basilica Jerusalem" (2).

It had also, and still preserves it, another title: "Sessorian Basilica", by reason of the spot, where it was built. The corruption of Latin, during the low empire and the high middle-age, gives the following denomination: || Basilica in palatio sessoriano .. basilica sessoriani palatii "basilica in Suxurio" .. "basilica in Censorio" .. "in Suxorio, in Susulio, basilica in palatio Sessoriano" (3). Whatever this Sessorium, or Suxorium, was, which gave the name, in the past, to the sessorian palace, to the Basilica and to the pi azza, which extends to the Porta S. Giovanni and to(\*)

(\*) See Calmet: *Dictionarium S. Script. Venetiis* 1795, over Naaman.

(2) *Cone. Rom. sub. Symmacho*. SS. *Cone. Nova Coll. Florentiae*, t. VII; Col. 249; *Ordorom.* X, N. 13, aoud Mabillon, *Mus. ital.* II. See also *Ordo XI*, N. 6: «Statio ad Jerusalem in palatio Sussurriano».

(3) See Besozzi, *op. cit.* in *Bibl.*, pag. 26.

the actual Porta Maggiore, is not easy to say †. Some think that it is derived from some exercise performed by the pretorian in the neighbouring amphitheater, or circus castrensis. The “ Sessorium ” could not have been anything else than a straw dummy, sat, or set astride, on a wooden horse, against which the soldiers, feigning a cavalry assault, exercised themselves first to strike the horse, to make it fall, and then the knight.

Someone (2) has stated that it is derived from Sessorius, a Roman citizen, who must have had his palace where now stands the Basilica of S. Croce. Against this arbitrary statement there is a detrimental defection. Roman history knows nothing about of any family bearing this name. Recently there has been going another explanation. Lampridius, speaking of Eliogabalus, (218-222) says that this Emperor built a circus in the Horti Variani, that it extended behind the Circus Castrensis to the via Casilina, opposite the temple of Spei Veteris, which appears to be the circular ruins, actually enclosed within the area of the Umberto I Barracks, which are to the north of S. Croce, distant some thirty metres from the church. The palace which came to be transformed into à basilica, (at least some halls) must have been a building dependend on the Circus

(\*) Cf. Nardini, t. II p. 12, note of Nibby, with quotation from Anastasio, librarian.

(\*) Moroni, *Dizion.*, vol. XII, p. 5.

of Eliogabalus, in which he probably resided. This palace, being crown property, passed to Constantine, who gave it as a residence to Helena and she turned it into a church. The name of " Sessorium, sessoriano, Suxorium, Suxorianum " came to it from the people, through a nickname, given to the Emperor. The immorality of Eliogabalus is well known and it obtained for him most insulting names: the people called him the " sus " (pig). Moreover, Eliogabalus was a native of Syria, hence Syrian, sorian. To distinguish him from other immoral emperors, and also scorning his nationality, the people had united the two words: " sus " and " sorianum "; hence the word Suxorianum, suxorium, etc, given to Eliogabalus and, consequently, to his buildings. When, some centuries later, Eliogabalus and the orgies of Julius Domna's nephew had been forgotten and no one any longer understood the meaning of Suxorium, suxorianum, the word was corrected into Sessorium which offers an idea and finds room in the dictionary.

In whatever way one may solve the question of " Sessorium ", be it monument, palace or herwise, the first who speaks of it, laconically, is Acrone, an author of uncertain date. There is a simple reference, inserted in the Commentary on Horace at the word " Esquiliae " § " locus

(\*) *Satyr.*, lib. I; satyr VIII, 14. See edition of Bale 1555.



in quo antea sepeliebantur corpora extra portam  
illam in qua est Sessorium

It was certainly an important construction, since Aurelian (270-275) in encircling Rome with a wall, caused an elbow to be made in the wall behind the Sessorium so as to include it within the enclosure. St Helena has connected her name with the Sessorian palace. Three halls of the palace, except for the division walls, went to make the actual Basilica, of which the sidewalls, especially the lower part, are very ancient and appear to go back to the third century. A little distant from S. Croce, on the modern via Eleniana that leads to Porta Maggiore, at the side the third factory of railway workmen, some disinterred chambers may be seen. They are called the " Baths of St Helena " <sup>†</sup> whether they were public or private, these baths belonged to St Helena, as the following inscription, found in a wall, shows:

D. N. HELENA... VEN... AUG... MATER...  
AVIA. BEATIS.....  
THERMA..... SI.....

In the space, now occupied by the Barracks " Umberto I ", which, before the confiscation of ecclesiastical properties, was a vineyard of S. Croce, in the time of Sixtus V there was found a pedestal, which had supported a statue erected to St Helena by the celebrated Giulio Massimiliano. This pedestal, fractured up to the height

(\*) Nardini, t. II, pag. 12. Note by Nibby.

of the lower cornice, is to be found actually in the atrium of the Chapel of St Helena. From what the dedication says, the statue was erected to St Helena before the death of Constantine, because Constance, son of Constantine, is referred to, as Cesar and not as Augustus. Here is the text of the inscription:

DOMINAE NOSTRAE FL. IVL.  
HELENAE PISSIMAE AVG.  
GENETRICI D. N. CONSTAN  
TINI MAXIMI VICTORIS  
CLEMENTISSIMI SEMPER  
AVGVSTI AVIAE CONSTAN  
TINI ET CONSTANTIS BEATIS  
SIMORVM CAESARVM  
IVLIVS MAXIMILIANVS, V. C. COMES  
PIETATI EIVS SEMPER DICATIS 𐌆.

(\*) See Bkssozzi, op. cit. p. 70.

.. T 𐌆 E...: ..

## The Ancient Chapel of the Relics of the Passion of the Lord.

As we have said above, the relics brought from Jerusalem were deposited by St Helena in a semi-subterranean chapel, which is now dedicated to the foundress of the Basilica herself. This chapel is situated behind the left side of the apse. It runs parallel to the transept of the basilica and extends as far as the half of the apse. Behind the right side of the apse, opposite the chapel of St Helena, there is what is now called the Chapel of the Pietà. Beyond this chapel, Bernardino Carvajal, Titulary of St Croce, elected cardinal by Alexander VI, constructed a rectangular hall, which serves as a vestibule to the two chapels. The same cardinal was responsible for the two corridors, which lead from the piers of the apse to the chapels. In descending by the corridor situated at the right of that which faces the apse and which leads direct to the chapel of St Helena, one sees extended on the side walls a long inscription on panels of majolica. The inscription, which is now incomplete, owing to the fall of several panels, relates, in brief, the story of the basilica and of the chapel and what cardinal Carvajal did for the benefit of the church and of the monastery attached to it. On the

entrance doorway to the chapel one reads the antiphon of the Magnificat at first vespers of the two feasts of the Cross. It is reproduced on panels of majolica and arranged in three lines.

Above this inscription there is a circle in majolica having a Greek Cross in the middle and, around, the words: “ *Contra spem in spem* ”,

The door of the chapel consists of a wrought-iron grill, with brass ornaments. In the thickness of the wall is clamped a marble stone, similar to another which we shall see later.

This corridor is habitually closed on the transept by a door. In order to descend to the chapels one passes by the other corridor, pierced through the pier to the left of that facing the apse. This corridor, like the preceding, has the side walls curved. On the right the wall curves round the apse; on the left it curves round the base of a circular building in which ended the portico which flanked the side walls of the Sessorian Palace. † The existence of these porticos is vouched for by the *Liber Pontificalis* in the life of Gregory II, (715-731) and by the lower courses in travertine, still in place along the side external wall facing north.

On the left wall of the corridor is walled up the remains of the Ciborium, or Baldacchino of the high altar, that the titular cardinal of S. Croce, Ubaldo Caccianemici, (elected in 1144) had erected. There are three fragments of mosaic on

(\*) *Liber Pontificalis*, Greg. II, p. 401.

a band of marble. On the three fragments is reproduced the half of the inscription which was formerly on one side of the Ciborium:

IOHES DE PAULO CV FRTB  
SVIS ANGLO ET SASSO HVIVS OPIS MA-  
[GISTRI FUERVNT.

They are the names of the three workers in marble, who executed the Ciborium, which was destroyed in the restoration of 1744, and replaced by the present one †.

Over the arch, at the end of the corridor, one reads the following invocation to the Cross, it is carried across on panels of majolica:

AVE · CRVX · SPES · VNICA · VITE · MORTA-  
[LIS ! TEMPORE · REIS  
INDVLGE · VENIAM · PIIS · AVGE · IVSTI-  
[TIAM.

The corridor leads into a rectangular room, which serves as porch to the chapel of the Pietà, which is to the left, and to the chapel of St Helena, which is to the right. The porch is flanked by the monuments and sepulchral stones of the cardinals, bishops and abbots of the Cistercian Order to which were entrusted the custody and the service of the basilica of S. Croce by the Pontiff Pius IV in 1561.

The chapel of the Pietà is separated from the porch by a grill. It is so named since the

(\*) Besozzi, op. cit. pag. 31 sq. ; Ortolani, pag. 15.

time when the painting of the retable which represented Jesus taken down from the Cross was substituted by an altorilievo in white marble, representing the Pietà. Formerly it was called the Chapel of St Gregory. At the sides of the retable are two statues representing St Peter and St Paul. The front of the altar is inlaid with marble. The wall has frescos by Nappi and Nani with scenes representing the liberation of Souls from Purgatory. These paintings, much perished through salpetre, are in accord with the dignity of the altar which is Gregorian similar to that which is in the church of St Gregory on the Celian. As all know, the Pontiffs, availing themselves of the treasure of the church, first in favor of the most famous churches, then of all Cathedral and parish churches, have granted a plenary Indulgence — that is to say the total remission of temporal penalties — to the souls for whom is offered the holy sacrifice at a certain altar, which for that reason becomes privileged. Besides the privileged altars there are, throughout Christendom, a very few Gregorian altars, which profit by a special concession of the holy Pontiff, Gregory the Great (604). The dignity of a Gregorian altar was accorded to this altar by Gregory XIII in 1574 †.

Consequently in applying the holy Mass, celebrated at this altar, to a dead person, the soul of the dead person can enjoy the plenary indul-

(\*) See the *Brief* in Besozzi, op. cit. pag. 154, seq.

gence of Ordinary Privileged Altars and the suffrages of St Gregory, offered to God for the liberation of that soul from the sufferings of Purgatory.

The porch, we have spoken of, leads to the chapel of St Helena through a vaulted passage constructed in the wall of the chapel. This passage is closed by a great iron grill. In the thickness of the wall of the arch is inserted the following inscription. It is very old and contains some orthographical errors.

IN HANC CAPELLAM SANCTAM  
HIERVSALEM NON POSSVNT  
INTRARE MULIERES SVB PENA  
EXCOMVNICATIONIS NISI TANTVM  
SEMEL IN ANNO SCILICET IN  
DIE DEDICATIONIS EIVSDEM  
QVE EST XX MARTII

Here is the translation: “ In this holy Chapel of Jerusalem women cannot enter, under pain of excommunication, except once in the year, namely on the day of the dedication of this, which is March 20 ”. The motive of this prohibition cannot be discovered. In the Chapel has certainly been the Sessorian Holy of Holies. The Relics of the Passion, which were kept in this chapel, as we shall see, for more than a millenium, other relics which were added later, the earth from Calvary spread under the pavement, the very place hidden and out of the centre, give to the chapel something hidden and mysterious. It is not for that, however, that the female sex were un-

worthy to enter there, still more so that since ancient times permission has been given to women to enter it once a year, the 20th of March. Recently it has been attempted to give a probable explanation. Before Cardinal Carvajal had the Chapel of the Pietà and the corridors which lead to the two chapels built, it is not known which was the passage to go down there. Probably the chapel of St Helena was separated from the Basilica and one entered from the adjacent monastery. In this way the relics and most precious reliquaries were sheltered from any thievish device. It is well known how in the middle ages it was a habit to steal relics. To descend into the chapel the women would have to violate the enclosure of the religious and so incur excommunication. Whether this supposition be true or false, the prohibition to women to enter the chapel still continues. In the pavement of this chapel, not far from the threshold, there is to be seen ancient stone witnessing to the presence of the earth from Calvary under the pavement.

HIC · TELLVS · SANCTA · CALVA  
RIE · SOLIME · AB · BEATA · HELENA  
IN · INFERIOREM · FORNICEM  
DEMISSA · SERVATA · EST · ATQVE  
INDE · NOMEN · HIERVSALEM  
CAPELLE · INDITV M

The Chapel presents the type of the catecumbal chapels. A rectangle with three altars disposed in the form of a cross. At the bottom of the chapel, opposite the entrance archway, ri-



Ancient statue of St Helena in her Chapel

ses, severe and majestic, the altar of St Helena. It is raised from the pavement on three steps of white marble. Exceptional to all the three altars of the basilica, the front of the altar is scagliola in various colours and decorations. The pilasters of the retable and the arch above, are in African marble. Until about two centuries back, the altar piece consisted of a canvas by Rubens. For fear of damp, the canvas was taken away. A large niche was cut out of the wall and lined with Bardiglio marble. In the niche was placed an ancient statue, which some supposes to be a copy of the Vatican Juno. The statue, which is very beautiful, has the head and arms replaced. These restorations, from their very bad taste, are in contrast with the statue. With the right arm the statue supports a wooden cross, and with the left, two nails. On the wall of this altar could be once read the whole of the hymn "Te Deum laudamus". Now beneath the great oculus, which alone admits light to the chapel, are seen three frescos of Pomarancio. In the middle one, St Helena is shown in the act of adoring the Cross; in the side ones the symbol of Faith and of Piety. In the side walls of the chapel there are two altars, one on each side. The frontals, inlaid with marble, conceal the ancient consoles very much smaller and almost in rough marble. The retables are surrounded by large cornices which are set in the wall. The canvases were by Rubens and represented the "Crowning of Thorns" and the "Crucifixion". To save them from damp, these

canvases also were taken away and replaced by two copies executed by Mariani. Of these copies there remains one in miserable condition: the Crowning; the other, the Crucifixion, has fallen into shreds and the retable has been covered with draperies of red cloth. The pavement of the chapel was of "opus tessellatum" so it is said, like that seen in the basilica, that is formed with little bits of varied marble disposed in various geometrical forms. Through the action of indiscreet visitors wanting to carry away the underlying earth from Calvary, the pavement was entirely destroyed. Captain Herz of the Hungarian army, had it restored in 1854, in honor of St Helena with bricks in cement, which for the period, was a rarity. One still sees remains of the "opus tessellatum" at the sides of the altar of St Helena. The same officer also had the free walls of the chapel painted with a decoration of drapery of red. The decoration is now much spoiled by the salpêtre. Above the entrance archway to the chapel is the coat of arms of Clement VIII (1592-1605) during whose pontificate cardinal Alberto, Archduke of Austria, restored the chapel. The coat of arms of the cardinal is placed above the side altars and at the side of that of St Helena. At the corners of the chapel, resting on stucco pilasters, rise two arches, one above the entrance, the other above the altar of St Helena. Upon these arches and upon the side walls rests a domical ceiling. Arches and dome are covered with a splendid mosaic. The emperor Valentinian II (375-392) had it pla-

ced there; cardinal Carvajal had almost the whole renovated and the Austrian cardinal had it repaired in 1593. It is believed to be the work of Baldassare Peruzzi. In the centre of the dome is represented the Saviour surrounded by Angels and Cherubins. He holds the right hand in the act of blessing; and with the left supports an open book in which is written the sentence pronounced by Jesus: *ego sum lux mundi* †. The lineaments of the face of the Saviour betray a venerable antiquity; not so the toga that covers Him, which is badly done. In the corners are represented the Evangelists in the act of writing and, between the Evangelists, in four triangles, are reproduced: the Invention of the Cross, the miracle by which the Cross was distinguished from the two others, St Helena adoring the Cross St Macarius carrying the Cross to Jerusalem.

In the arch, which is over the altar of St Helena, are reproduced the figures of St Peter and St Paul; and in that over the entrance arch, St Sylvester, who consecrated the Chapel, and St Helena, holding the Cross, with at the feet, cardinal Carvajal, kneeling. The empty spaces and margins of the dome are decorated with peacocks, flowers, leaves and fruits in mosaics of finest workmanship. Over the side chapels and the entrance arch, the Pomerancian has frescoed all that we have seen in the triangles of the vault, namely: the invention, distinguishing and the di-

pl St. John. VIII, 12.

vision of the Cross. Each painting is flanked by two female figures symbolizing the principal virtues by which St Helena was adorned. The twelve frescos are greatly ruined by the action of salpetre.

In this chapel, as attested by a stone placed at the cornu Evangelii (gospel side) of the principal altar, St Helena deposited the relics of the Passion of Jesus, namely: The portion of the Cross, a nail, perhaps two thorns of the Crown and the earth from Calvary. The part of the Title, she carried from Jerusalem went to occupy, perhaps from that time, another place in the same Basilica, as we shall see when we come to talk of the Title of the Cross.

## The Modern Chapel of the Relics.

The chapel of St Helena, from its semisubterranean position, was bound, during the course of centuries, to feel the effects of the dampness which, owing to the Roman subsoil of tufa, inexorably rises from the foundations. In the sixteenth century they thought by taking away the Relics from the ancient chapel to save them from the dampness of the place. After obtaining the permission of the holy Pontiff Pius V, Cardinal Francesco Pacheco, titular of S. Croce, provided for the translation of the relics to the place that was drier and also more secure †. He adapted as a chapel an empty chamber already existing over the corridor which we have just now described. The chamber is large and in the side wall of the left, turns around the curvature of the vault of the apse of the basilica. The niche, where the relics are kept, is constructed in the side wall of the chapel of St Helena. Over the altar of the new

(\*) Cardinal Pacheco was one of the plenipotentiaries of the king of Spain who, with the Venetian representatives, Suriano and Soranzo and the delegates of the Pontiff led by Cardinal Morone, concluded the naval league which culminated in the victory of Lepanto (Oct. 7-1591).



chapel is placed the following inscription, which witnesses to the translation of the relics.

EX AVCTORITATE PII V · PONTIFICIS MA-  
[XIMI  
FRANCISCVS CARDINALIS PACECVS  
LOCUM HVNC  
IN QVO SANCTISSIMAE RELIQVIAE CON-  
DERENTVR  
EXTRVXIT DICAUITQVE ANNO MDLXX

The chapel underwent the first restoration in 1778, as is witnessed by an inscription above the inside doorway of the chapel:

RESTAVRATVM  
ET  
PICTVRIS ORNATVM  
MDCCLXXVIII

A second restoration took place in 1878, as one learns from a stone placed in the corridor adjoining the chapel. The pavement was made of marble, as also the graceful altar and the flight of steps behind the altar, by which one mounts to open the niche and to show the holy relics. The altar was consecrated by the Cardinal Vicar Monaco La Valletta, Titular of S. Croce, on March 31th - 1878. A second stone, placed in the bottom of the corridor, bears witness to this:



ALTARE  
IN · CELLA · CRVCIS · SALVTIFERAE  
SVB · QVO  
CORPVS · S.THEODORI · M. CONDITVM · EST  
RAPHAEL · MONACO · A · VALLETTA  
PRESB. · CARD. · TITVLO · SESSORIANO  
VICE · SACRA · ANTISTES · VRBIS  
RITE · CONSECRAVIT  
PRIDIE · KALENDAS · APRILIS  
ANN. · M.DCCC.LXXVIII

On entering this chapel one sees at the bottom a marble altar. The mensa (altar stone) is placed upon two supports. Under the altar, in an urn covered with glass, lies on his side the body of St Theodore, soldier and martyr. Although it bears a veil, the skeleton is complete and beneath the embroidery of the covering, are visible a bone of an arm and a bone of a leg.

The gradine above the altar contains a part of the cross of the good thief. This relic, visible behind the glass which covers it, is 1,78 meters long, and about 13 centimeters broad. The weight, according to De Corrieris, is two Roman ounces (1).

The niche, which contains the holy relics, is flanked by two columns standing on marble bases. Of marble also is the cornice placed upon the(\*)

(\*) See w. cit. p. 67, note 5, II. As for the relic see: Giovanni Marangoni, *L'amtirabile conversione di S. Disnia*, p. 107.

capitals of the columns. The altar is slender and elegant. The niche is closed externally by a door of two leaves and gilded around the edges, and interiorly by a grill of gilded iron. The reliquaries are arranged thus: in the lower division, to the left of the person facing the reliquary, a holy Nail; to the right, a reliquary in the form of a small temple, containing a small piece of stone from the Crib (Grotto of Bethlehem); a small piece from the Sepulchre, and a little chip from the column of the Flagellation. In the centre: the relic of the sacred Title. In the upper division: to the left, the reliquary containing two Thorns of the Crown of Jesus; to the right, two falanges of the index finger of St Thomas, the Apostle; in the centre, on an elegant pedestal, is enthroned the cross which contains three fragments of the holy Cross of Our Lord. We will speak of them separately, beginning with the most notable reliquary.

## The Relics of the holy Cross.

Of the portion of the Cross, that St Helena carried away from Jerusalem, there remain only three shapeless fragments, or chips. The division of the relic into three parts goes back to the period when it was thought to put it into a reliquary in form of a cross. These three fragments do not constitute the entire relic that came from Jerusalem. It is certain that relics of the Cross have left Rome. St Gregory, the Great, sent a particle of the Cross, as a gift, to Recaredo, king of the Visigoths in Spain †.

But admitting that this particle was not taken from the Sessorian relic but carried personally by St Gregory when he was recalled from the nunciature of Constantinople, it is certain that the Sessorian' relic has suffered some diminution. In 1515 the Pontiff Leo X extracted a small particle in order to give it to Francis I, king of France. Ciacconi, in the life of this Pope, has preserved for us the text of the letter sent to Cardinal Iacobazi, charged with the extraction

(1) *Reg. Epist.*. book IX, epist. 228 towards the end. (Edit. Ewald-Hartmann, Berlin 1893). He sent another particle to the son of Thodolinda. — (*Reg. Lib. XIV*, epist. 12).

of the relic. We translate from the latin: “ To Cardinal Iacobazi, left at Rome in the quality of legate ”. We, desiring to offer a pious and excellent gift to Francis, king of the French, on the occasion of the visit he is about to make us, we wish thee to go to the church of S. Croce, called in Jerusalem, and bring away from the relic of the Lord's Cross which is kept there, a particle having the dimension which we trace on this sheet. Immediately having done this, send the little piece, well sealed, by means of a rapid courier, together with an official report signed by thyself, that we may present it to the king together with the relic. Do everything with diligence; and health to thee. From the Villa Cafifagioli, near Florence Decembers, 1515” †. The century afterwards, Urban VIII (1623-1644), wished to give a relic of the holy Cross to the Vatican Basilica; and this relic was obtained from S. Croce in Jerusalem, as the following inscription, placed over the statue of St Helena in a pilaster of the Dome of Michael Angelo records:

PARTEM CRVCIS QVAM HELENA IMPE-  
RATRIX  
E CALVARIO IN VRBEM AVEXIT  
VRBANVS VIII PONTIF. MAX.  
E SESSORIANA BASILICA DESVMPTAM  
ADDITIS ARA ET STATVA  
HIC IN VATICANO CONDITORIO COLLO-  
[CAVIT

(\*) See Besozzi, work cited, p. 142.

During the last century the Pontiffs Pius VI, Pius VII and Pius IX removed other small pieces to satisfy the piety of noble personages †. Other abstractions are not known.

The authenticity of the Sessorian Cross absolutely cannot be suspected. There is the most ancient tradition and the support of ancient writers that a part of the Lord's Cross was taken to Rome and placed in the Sessorian basilica. The book of the munificence of Constantine, attributed to Anastasius the Librarian, says that Constantine "made a Basilica in the Sessorian Palace, in which he placed the wood of the holy Cross, enriched with gold and gems, and gave the name to the Basilica that came to be always called Jerusalem" ('). This assertion is reproduced in the *Liber Pontificalis* (in the biography of St Silvester) and in both editions. This proves clearly that at Rome the fact of the deposit of the relics of the Cross in the Sessorian Basilica was notorious. That afterwards the erection of this basilica came to be attributed to Constantine ought not to be wondered at. For one can certainly attribute to this Emperor that which St Helena did with the funds of the imperial treasury.

We have spoken above of the adoration of the Cross, practiced at Jerusalem on Good Friday

† See the De Corrieris, work quoted p. 143. As regards Pius IX, the abstraction is assured by a marginal note in a copy of Besozzi, kept in the library of S. Croce.

(8) See Baronio, tom. IV, Year 324, n. CVI.

and how this adoration; following the example of Jerusalem, came to be practiced also in the Latin Church. In churches not possessing the relic of the true Cross, one adored the altar Cross. Already the Sacramentarium Gelasianum prescribed the adoration of the Cross on Good Friday (1) and at Rome this was done in the Sessorian Basilica, as the Antiphonary of St Gregory the Great (1604) gives one to understand, which fixes the Station for Good Friday “ at Jerusalem ” (2). The Pontiff in person proceeds barefooted from the Lateran Basilica and goes in procession with the clergy and people to the Sessorian Basilica, there to adore the wood of the true Cross. Several *Ordini Romani*, published by Mabillon O. S. B. in the *Museum italicum*, second volume speaks of this solemn ceremony. These *Ordos* contain generally the ritual of the papal functions. *Ordo X*, which belongs to 1000, speaks of the procession which moved from St John Lateran to the church of the holy Cross “ quae est Jerusalem ” (which is Jerusalem) and of the ceremony which took place there. After the adoration of the Cross, the pope communicated himself at the altar with the Eucharistic consecrated the day before at St John’s and carried processionally from the Lateran Basilica (3).(\*)

(\*) See *Thomasii, opera*, t. VI, pp. 63 and 66, Edition Vezzosi, Rome, 1750.

(2) *Ibid.*, t. V, p. 82 sq. edit. Vezzosi, Rome 1750.

(3) *Afus. ital.* t. II, p. 202 sq.

Of this ceremony speak again Ordo XI of Canon Benedict, drawn up before 1114; Ordo XII of Cencio Savelli, who became pope under the name of Honorius III (1216-1227); Ordo XIV of Giacomo Gaetani, nephew of Boniface VIII (1294-1303). The presence of a part of the true Cross in the Sessorian Basilica certainly determined the ancient Pontiffs to fix the Station for Good Friday in the said Basilica. That proves the authenticity of the relic and confirms the historic tradition of its preservation in the Helenian basilica. If, besides, we consider that the Pontiffs have, at various times, detached particles from the Sessorian relic, and that, although after the exile of Avignon they no longer carried out the ceremonies at S. Croce, nevertheless, they did not fail to betake themselves to venerate the sacred wood of the Cross in the Sessorian Basilica, such as Innocent III, Innocent VIII, Clement XI, Benedict XIII with all the Fathers of the Roman Council † and, lately, pope Pius IX, May 3d, 1858 (') the slightest doubt would be unreasonable, as it is difficult to find a more ancient relic that could present so many documents attesting its invention and veneration as the Sessorian relics of the Cross.

The three fragments of the Cross are kept now in a precious reliquary, the work of Valadier.

(\*) Besozzi, work quoted p. 162.

(2) See the stone in the chapel of the relics. Leo XII went there several times.

In 1798, by the order of the Tiberine Republic, the Monastery of S. Croce in Gerusalemme was confiscated, the monks, save one, expelled, the basilica despoiled of its precious objects. The 13th of September, the vigil of the Exaltation of the Cross, another order caused the depredation of the very precious reliquaries. The three fragments of the Cross and the two Thorns were wrapped up in thin paper; the Title and the holy Nail were left in their cases, but stripped of their artistic stands. It was a loss of inestimable value; but the relics remained in their chapel. On the 19th of September some agents of the Republic presented themselves to the custodian of the Basilica, D. Sisto Benigni, O. Cist, with the order to take away the relics themselves. The custodian understood that they wished to come their disappearance from hatred of religion; and defying all menaces, declared that he would not give up the keys of the chapel, except to the Prefect, to whom, as a matter of fact, he presented himself in order to give them up. A stratagem saved the relics. D. Sisto had hidden, or thrown away one key. Then the Prefect came personally to S. Croce and saw himself obliged to smash open the interior door of the chapel, he stormed, he threatened; but, afterwards, cooling down, by a secret counsel of providence he finished by restoring the keys which he had received, to D. Sisto. The relics were saved.

In 1803 a Spanish duchess of Villa-Hermosa provided the money for a new reliquary for the holy Cross. On the 12th of September the re-



liquary was taken to S. Croce, and the three fragments were placed in it. The Diario Romano of the year 1803, n. 284, describes in the following manner the reliquary and the ceremonies of enclosing the three fragments therein. " Having been completed, the Reliquary which was to contain the most holy wood of the Cross, was last Monday taken to S. Croce in Jerusalem. About 22 o'clock, (two hours before the Avemaria). Monsignor Cappelletti, who have been commissioned to have it made, crowd over there with father D. Girolamo Castiglia, abbot of the Monastery, and father Comprocurator General of the Order, D. Sisto Benigni abbot of St Bernardo. A little later arrived his Eminence the Cardinal Vicar della Somaglia and, having ascended to the chapel of the relics, the three pieces of the sacred wood were transferred into the new reliquary by his Eminence and by Monsignor Ponzetti, with the help of signor Giuseppe Valadier, the maker of the reliquary, which was closed with the seal of his Eminence the Cardinal Vicar. The reliquary consists of a silver gilt cross on the model of the ancient Stational crosses. In the centre of the arms there is a basrelief in gold, representing the most holy Trinity. In the upper part, under the rocky-crystal, one reads the inscription in letters of gold: " Humiliavit semetipsum, factus obediens usque ad mortem, mortem autem Crucis ", In the lateral arms and in the lower one, under rock-crystal, are placed, with graceful ornament of gold, the three pieces of the glorious Relic. In the lower part within a rectangle, there is a bass-

relief in gold of the sorrowful Virgin, below which in another square, is the Crown of Thorns; at the four ends of the cross, are in the three upper ones, in the letters of gold, the divine Title in the three languages: Hebraic, Grecian and Latin; and on the lower one, a skull and cross-bones. The same extremities are ornamented with foliage and little globes of purplebronze, as also with other ornaments which encircle the bass-relief of the most holy Trinity in the centre, as well as other little globes of lapislazuli and gilded rays. The Cross is set up on a base of silver gilt, ornamented with festoons of flowers and leaves with gold ribbons, beneath which is a lapislazuli plinth, in the middle of which appears a bassrelief in gold, which represents the Crucifixion of our Lord with the two thieves and a great number of figures and horses. On each side of the pedestal, are two Angels in silver, who, with sad countenances, carry, one the lance, the other the sponge; resting the one and the other on a base of lapislazuli ornamented with cornices and gilded festoons. The height of the work is five palms, and the value is two thousand sequins

## The Title of the Cross of Jesus.

The Sessorian Basilica has been restored several times. The popes, who carried out notable restorations, are: Gregory II (731) Adrian I (795) † Benedict VII (983) Lucian II (1145) †; and Benedict XIV (1758), who transformed it. Other restorations are due to the Titular Cardinals. In 1491 and 1492 Cardinal Peter Gonzales Mendoza, Archbishop of Toledo and Titular of the holy Cross, repaired the roof, lowered the ceilings of the transept and of the principal nave and renewed the plastering of the Basilica. While the workmen were at work round the arch which separates the nave from the middle of the transept, an important fact in the history of the Title of the Cross happened. Above the arch, at the point where one sees a cherub surmounted by a cross with rays in stucco, there was a short inscription in mosaic, illegible through the decay of the characters and the falling out of several letters. While the masons were at work around this inscription, they noticed that

(\*) For these two popes, see Duchesne, *Lib. Pont.* vol. I, pag. 401 and 508.

(2) See John the Deacon in the *Museum liai.* vol. II, pag. 568.

there was a hollow behind. They took off the plaster and found a little space, like a little window. In this space there was a lateritious block, a brick, with this inscription, engraved on the anterior face: "*Titulus Cruris*" (S'). Behind the brick, laid a leaden box, two palms in length, closed and tied with a bit of string. The box bore three seals, in the centre of which was a half-figure with the hat and, around it, this inscription: *Gerardus Cardinalis S. Crucis*. In the box was found a wooden tablet, a palm long, and of thickness of more than two fingers. It was a very ancient and very damaged board. On one side of the board there were three lines of writing cut on the wood. Each line had different characters. On the bottom line one read in latin: *Js Nazarenus Re*. The characters were straight and pointed, like the laws affixed by the Romans in the Pretorium Album, and the writing ran from right to left. Above the latin words ran, in the same sense, the Greek words and above the Greek were to be seen the same words in Hebraic or Syro-Chaldean characters, very much damaged.

The edges of the board were broken: it preserved here and there whitish stains, and in the letters cut in the wood were to be seen vestiges of minium. The board presented a dark colour,

;)\*) This brick is always to be seen in the Chapel of the Relics, preserved in a case covered with glass which lets the inscription to be seen.

Picture of the whole Title.

like chestnut or tobacco. There could not be any doubt that they found themselves in the presence of a part of the Title that Pilate caused to be fixed to the Cross of Jesus and which said in Hebraic, (perhaps Aramaic), Greek and Latin: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews ” †.

The discovery made a great sensation in Rome. Contemporaries spoke of it, as Lelio Petronio, Stephen Infessura (!), Paul De Magistris, Leonardo di Sarzana al Volaterrano (8), Burcard, the Master of Pontifical Ceremonies in his M. S. Memories (4). The discovery took place the first of February, 1492. The 14th of March following, Innocent VII, after having heard Mass in the church of St Gregory on the Celian Hill, went with his suit to the Basilica of S. Croce, to see and adore the Title. On this occasion Burcard had it in his hands; and so he was able to describe it minutely. Pope Alexander VI who, during the same year succeeded Innocent VII, published, the 29th of July, 1496, the Bull “Admirabile sacramentum ”, by which he acknowledged the authenticity of the finding of the Title, and granted a plenary indulgence to those who, having confessed and communicated, should have visited the Sessorian Basilica the last Sunday of

(†) Gospel of St John XIX, 19.

(2) Cited by G. Bosio. See the Bibliography Book 1. Chap. II. page. 92.

(3) Cod. Vat. cited by De Corrieris, p. 95.

(4) J. Bucardi, *liber Notarum*, tom. 1, 12 March, 1492. Published a new by Celani in Rer Ital. Scriptorum. Edit. Fiorini (Vol. XXXII, p. 339-341).

January †. The Title was placed in a Reliquary, that Cardinal Mendoza had made, and put in the Chapel of the Relics, (2) Then, as later on in the 19th century, small pieces were taken away.

As regards the Hebrew inscription, deterioration has increased. Sante Pagnini (f 1541 at Lyon) in his “ De nominibus hebraicis ” wrote that he had clearly read “ Notzeri = Nazarene Now this word can no longer be read there. There only remain undecipherable scratches. That is owing to the work of wood worms and to the handling of the Title in putting it into the new reliquary, as we shall see. The reader will ask why was the Title placed over the arch of the transept. Anciently to preserve relics from possible theft they had the custom of placing them in high places in churches. We could cite cases of relics immured in the box of apses. St Helena, or some one else later, placed the Title over the great arch perhaps in consideration also that in the church of the Cross ought to be enthroned the trophy which described the Messianic dignity of the Victim who had breathed out His last breath thereon. The leaden box, in which the Title was found, as we have seen, bore three seals with the legend: *Gerardus Cardinalis S. Crucis*. This Cardinal is Gerard Caccianemici of Bologna, canon of the Abbey of St Marie of the Rhine,

(\*) *Bullar. Roman. Magnum*. Edit, de Luxemburg 1721 Tom. 1, p. 455.

V) De *Corrieris*, *op. cit.* pag. III et seq. and pag. 120, n. 9.

Reliquary of the Title of the Holy Cross.



near Bologne. Pope Honorius II (1124-1130) made him cardinal librarian of the Holy See and assigned him the title of the Sessorian Basilica. At the death of Celestinus III, in 1144, he was elected Pontiff. He took the name of Lucius II; and he died the following year, September 20, 1145. The Blessed Eugenius III of the Cistercian Order followed him in the pontificate. When he was still cardinal, Lucius II carried out important repairs at the Sessorian Basilica, his cardinalatial title. The present campanile of the same Basilica is owing to him. During the repairs the Title of the holy Cross was found. The cardinal did not dare to remove it from the place and, after having authenticated it, he left it over the arch.

We have said that the phrase: *Nazarene King*, for the Latin and also for the Greek, runs, as in Hebrew, from right to left. This fact might give room to doubt the authenticity of the Title. In a small book, like this, we could not enter into the question of the ancient manner of writing. It is certain however that there is no lack of Latin and Greek inscriptions engrave from right to left. We cite one in Latin and one in Greek.

NA TIXIV · 3VQ A1TN33NIV ' AIJ3  
 etc. .. SIN13..31V ' MVD ' II ' SIS3W ' T3

(Elia Vincentia who lived with her husband Cinis...  
 Years... and 2 Months).

This is a Christian inscription †. In an Ephesian coin the inscription surrounding the figure of Diana is thus written:

ΕΦΕΕΙῶΝ . ὩΒΙΕΩΙC

(Artemis [Diana] of the Ephesians).

We could multiply examples, but these two cited suffice to prove that amongst the ancient Greeks and Romans, the custom of writing like the orientals, from right to left, was not unknown. The intention of the engraver to facilitate the reading of the “elogium” for the Jews, who used to write from right to left, certainly suggested to him to write the condemnation of Jesus in the same direction in Greek and in Latin.

Some have observed that the word “Nazarenes” is not traced regularly in greek, because it should contain the letter eta (η) and not epsilon (ε). We reply that the ancients used epsilon indiscriminately for eta and viceversa (2). It has struck one that the engraver has made use of the diphthong ω instead of omicron. Also the diphthong ou was used for omicron. Finally others have noticed that “Nazarene” in Greek is written ΝΑΖΩΡΑΙΟΣ (3).

(<sup>1</sup>) See Boldetti, *Il Cimilero di Pretestato*, II, Chap. 18, p. 555.

(<sup>2</sup>) See Montfaucon, *Palaeographia graeca*, lib. II, Chap. III, p. 127.

(<sup>3</sup>) See De Corrieris, p. 197 and the following.

This is true, but it is also true that in the time of the Roman Empire many Latin words were written in Greek characters. Examples would never end. In the Gospels there also exist many Latin words written in Greek.

There is nothing, then, at which to be astonished if the Pilate's engraver, following an usage adopted in his time and even earlier, wrote in Greek what he had written in Latin, still more in dealing with a name. There is not, then, any orthographic reason to authorise any doubt as to the authenticity of the Sessorian Title. St Helena theft certainly found the Title, as St Ambrose assures us, and one part of it, even if not the entire Title, she took with her to Rome, where it was going to occupy the transeptal arch in the Sessorian Basilica. The elevated place which it occupied, and the oblivion into which it had fallen, constitute sure elements for seeing in it the authentic "elogium" that the procurator Pontius Pilate caused to be fixed on the Cross of Jesus. The base of the Reliquary in which it was placed in 1492 was confiscated by the Tiberine Republic of 1798. The Title rested in the silver "teca", that Card. Gonzales de Mendoza had made, up to 1827. In that year Card. Zurla had a new base made for the reliquary and decorated the teca, completing thus the recognition of the sacred relics. The reliquary consists now of a base, placed upon a step with six lions' paws. In the centre of the base, on a small square base, rises a cylinder flanked by two festoons of little roses, tied at the top with a knotted ribbon.

On one side of the cylinder, on a boss in relief, is represented the pelican, and, on the other, the coat of arms of Cardinal Zurla with the following inscription on the little base:

THECAM · ADVERIS · TEMPORIBVS · EXPI-  
LATAM · D. PLACIDVS · ZVRLA · CARD. ·  
TITVL. · RESTITVIT · ANNO MDCCCXXVII.

In the cylinder, by means of a large metallic pin, is inserted the case which contains the Title of the Cross. The case is rectangular, open in front, where, through crystal, one sees the tablet with the Latin and Greek inscription, and the remains of the Hebrew. It is surrounded by a festoon of small roses, which, in the upper part, forms a crown. At the point, where the crown rests on the case and on the reproduction of the Title, a pair of pincers and a hammer are crossed together with two lances and the sponge. In the lower part, the reliquary rests on a base formed by acanthus leaves; on both sides is engraved the coat of arms of Cardinal Mendoza. On the back of the case is carved in basso rilievo a scene from the Way of the Cross.

## The Holy Nail.

Although the Evangelists do not say whether Jesus was fastened to the Cross with nails or with cords, the declaration of the Apostle Thomas that he could not believe in the resurrection of Jesus unless he had first put his finger into the place of the nails (St John XX, 25) removes all doubts. The Saviour was fixed to the Cross by means of nails which passed through His hands and feet, as the prophet predicted: "They pierced my hands and my feet" (Psalm. 21, 17).

As we have shown above, St Helena found also the nails with which Jesus had been crucified. Socrates (Book I, c. 17) assures us that a miracle was not necessary to distinguish them, because they were together with the Cross which was proved to be that of Jesus. Speaking of the finding of the holy Nails and of the use St Helena made of them, St Ambrose, Rufinus, Sozomen, Theodoret, Cassiodorus, etc. said that she had one nail put into the bridle of Constantine's horse, and another into the crown or helmet of the Emperor. One certainly she took to Rome with her and deposited it in the Sessorian basilica. The tradition is so constant and sure that it is useless to insist

on it †. One must not pay too much value to the observation that some have made, that for example, the nails of our Lord are venerated in too many places.

Jesus was crucified with four nails. The custom of painting or sculpturing the Crucifix with one nail over the other began to appear in the XIth century. The ancient pictures and sculptures represent the Saviour as crucified with four nails †. Besides these nails, which penetrated the living flesh of Jesus, other nails were surely used to prepare the gibbet. The Title was nailed to the cross, as St Cyprian says; the crossbar of the cross at the point where it was clamped to the upright, was necessarily fixed with nails. Then some people believe that on all crosses there was a support upon which the victim rested otherwise the weight of the body would have torn the holes in the hands with the probability of the executed criminal becoming detached from the cross. Others deny the existence of this support and hold that the ancient phrase “*equitare cruci*” (ride horseback on the cross) supposes the custom of putting a crutch between the things in such a way that the trunk of the crucified weighed on the crutch.

(1) See Baçonius, book IV, year 326, n LVIH; Cornelius Kurz, Bartolini, etc.

(2) This at any rate, was the custom of the Romans. Plautus in one of his comedies (*Musteliaria*, act. II, sc. I) wishes one of the characters the punishment of the Cross: “*ea lege ut adfigatur bis pedes, bis brachia*”.

One of the nails of the Passion.

Whether they used the support or the crutch, it is necessary to admit that, besides the four nails of the crucifixion, other nails were necessary to fix the arms of the cross, the Title and the support or the crutch, if this last was not of iron. These nails were not as precious as the lour which martyred the Redemptor; still they are venerable from the use to which they were put; and they too, pass today as those of the Lord. It is certain that adding also these secondary nails, one does not catch up to the figure necessary to justify the number of sacred Nails disseminated through the churches of Europe. However it has been stated that in some of these churches named, the holy Nail does not appear in the catalogue of Relics; in others there is scarcely a little fragment of nail, and not an entire nail. One knows, besides, that in the middle age, with a filing or fragment of the true Nail, fused with other iron, nails similar to those of the Crucifixion were fashioned. For example, Clement VII gave such a nail to the Due of Berry †. St Charles Borromeo, later on, gave several persons nails which had touched the holy Nail of Milan. All this ought to make us prudent in the presence of nails said to be the Saviour's. When, however, the tradition, as in the case of the holy Sessorian Nail, is very ancient, constant and accepted by critics, the slightest doubt is unreasonable and one can securely venerate in it an instrument of the Passion of Jesus Christ.

(1) Felibanius, *Hist. Abb. S. Dionysii*, p. 299.



The holy Nail of the Sessorian basilica is, probably, that which Gregory of Tours spoke of. This writer relates that St Helena, on returning from Palestine to Italy, finding the Adriatic very rough (1), caused one of the Nails of the Crucifixion to be lowered into the sea and that, in coming into contact with the holy Nail, the sea became calm immediately. No one could suppose that St Helena allowed it to be thrown into the sea, so depriving herself of a relic so renowned. She let it be submerged in the sea and drawn back, carrying it with her to Rome. In 1798 the reliquary of the sacred Nail was broken up. They left the part, in which it was kept, but the very rich base was confiscated. In 1827, by the efforts of Abbot Benigni, O. Cis., the case received a new support substituted in 1889 by another silver base, which Abbot Bartolini had made.

The reliquary resembles a monstrance. Above the knob the silver plates expand circularly so as to support a circle of columns. On the upper part of this peristyle stands a smaller peristyle, covered by a dome surmounted by a Greek cross with rays. The base of the first peristyle, at the sides of the reliquary, protrudes externally to form brackets to support two Angels kneeling in the act of adoring the sacred Nail, which occupies(\*)

(\*) The Adriatic of the ancients included also the Ionian sea and the sea of Malta. See the Acts of the Apostles, chap. XXVI, 27, and XXVIII, 1.

the centre of the peristyle. It is secured by small tongues of silver, which fasten the head. The Nail is head downwards. It is 12,05 centimetres long, and it is blunt; — has the point broken off. The iron stem is square and measures 9 millimetres. The head of the Nail is empty interiorly; it looks from the outside like a domeshaped capsule with the edge somewhat expanded like campanulas. From the position of the Nail, one cannot see whether the head is joined on, or is all one with the iron stem.

## The two Thorns from the Lord's Crown.

To still more insult and torture Christ, the Roman soldiers added to the scourging a chastisement of their own: the crowning of Thorns. (St John XIX, 2). We do not know whether this crown was buried with the instruments of the Passion, or whether, after the theatrical and bloody representation of the king in mockery and after two presentations to the people, the soldiers threw it away to be retrieved and preserved by some disciple of Jesus. Baronius (Annals, tom. I, Year 34, n. 131) holds that St Helena found also the crown of our Lord. Moreri accepts and adopts this opinion. (Diet. art. Coronae). Whether found with the other instruments of the Passion, or guarded jealously by some Christian family in Jerusalem, the Lord's Crown was venerated at Constantinople in the time of Justinian. During the Latin empire of Constantinople (1204 1261), Baldwin II pledged it to the Venetians in return for a sum of money.

St Louis, King of France (died August 1270), redeemed it and deposited it in the Chapel of the royal palace. In 1791 it passed to the Abbey church of St Denis and, a short time after, to the imperial library. In 1806 it was transferred to Notre Dame, where it is still preserved. It is bereft of thorns; there only remains the stem.

The thorns are distributed in many churches. The Sessorian basilica possesses two. How came these two thorns in the basilica of St Helena? It is difficult to say. Bartolini † and Panciroli † assert that these two thorns were taken to Rome by St Helena, or by others when the thorns commenced to be detached from the crown, and distributed to illustrious churches; and it is certain that these two thorns have been venerated in the basilica of S. Croce in Jerusalem for many centuries. St Helena, say ancient, reliable writers, besides a portion of the Cross, the Title and one of the Nails, placed other relics in her basilica.

To what species belonged the branch of thorns which was intertwined into a crown for Jesus? Let us say at once that the botanical examination of the crown and of the thorns, attempted several times, has given no result. Time has so altered the character of the bark that competent judges have not dared to give a pronouncement. Some persons have believed that the crown was plaited from berberry or holy thorn, but berberry does not belong to the family of thorns; it is a brier which bears these thorns at the summit. This then has no resemblance to the thorns of the Lord's Crown which are venerated in several churches. The name of holy thorn became attached to the berberry not

(\*) *De Cruce*, p. 164.

(2) *Tesori nascosti dell'alma città di Roma*, 1625, p. 151.

Three small stones of the  
grotto of Bethlehem, the ho-  
ly sepulchre, and the column

Two thorns of the holy  
crown of our Lord

because it served in the coronation of Jesus, but because among the pagans it was regarded as a charm, a preservative against ill-luck †. For a long time it has been believed that the Crown was made from marine rush; but this is inadmissible. Prescinding from the fact that the marine rush is not found at Jerusalem, and the soldiers, therefore, were unable to provide themselves with it, the marine rush, although it has woody and sharp points, is not a thorn. Now the Evangelists say that the soldiers “plectentes coronam de spinis” (plating a crown of thorns) (2) put it upon His head. It deals, therefore, with one or more branches of thorns twisted round to make a painful and sanguinary wreath for Jesus. Some, finally, believe that the branch or branches employed by the soldiers to prepare the crown, were furnished by the thorn, called “Ranno”. This opinion is supported by the Syrian tradition, which says that the soldiers placed upon the head of Jesus “coronam rhamnorum». Pliny (Lib. 24, Cp. XIV) says that the “Ranno” is whitish and its branches covered with straight and woody points. Whichever way, the question is insoluble. The two Thorns, preserved in the Sessorian Basilica, are straight, woody, pointed. One is 3.05 centimetres long, the other 3.04, some more centimetres taken up by the ring that supports them. The bark is ash-white, but it is

(\*) Dioscoride, Lib. I, Chap. 102.

(2) *Matth.* 27, 29 \ *John.* 19, 2.

understood that the pith is reddish. These two Thorns resemble perfectly the other thorns preserved in other churches. The reliquary, that contains them, has the form of a chalice up to the knob. Above the knob or head, stands upright, a crown of thorns whose centre is occupied by the case glazed on the two sides with crystal. Between the crystals rise the two sacred Thorns on two little cornucopias.

## The Other Relics of the Sessorian Lipsanoteca.

In the same niche of the Chapel of the relics, are kept other relics contained in reliquaries, placed at the right of those which they face. In the lower reliquary, which is taken to be Lombard work, are preserved small stone fragments from the Grotto at Bethlehem, the one of the holy Sepulchre, and the Column of the Flagellation. The reliquary is of gilded bronze, in the form of a small circular temple. It began to form part of the Sessorian relics in 1825, through Abbot Benigni O. Cist. It is not known from whence it came or by whom it was given †. On the upper shelf is kept the index finger of the Apostle St Thomas. Some say that this relic has been preserved at S. Croce from the time of St Helena. In the basilica there is an altar dedicated to St Thomas. It is the first to the left on entering the church. The altar-piece is by Passeri; and represents the apparition of the Redeemer, who invites the unbelieving Thomas to place his finger in the wound of the side, and to convince himself thus of the reality of the re-

(1) See De CORRÉIS, work cited, p. 67, note 5, HI.



Finger of St Thomas the Apostle.

surrection. The reliquary, newly made after the French Revolution, has at the base the form of a chalice. Above the knob, two palms, symbols of the martyrdom of the Apostle, interlace in the form of a crown, surmounted by a radiated cross. In the centre of the crown is fixed an oval receptacle glazed with crystal on its two faces. In the middle of the case stands a sheath in the form of a finger, with two slits at the sides. Along the slits one sees clearly the falanges of the sacred finger †.

Outside the Niche and on the epistle side, on a small table of the XVIII century is preserved a most precious reliquary, for the number 01 relics which it contains. It is a sort of “ aedicula ” (a small building or temple) closed by folding doors ; it bears an inscription in letters of gold : “ Fuit S. Gregorii Magni ”. (It belonged to St Gregory, the Great). When the doors are open, one sees on their interior face and across the interior of the “ aedicula ” two hundred and two divisions covered with glass †. These small

(\*) Really the two reliquaries, that of the holy Thorn and this of the oly finger, are a pair, as they resemble one another, except that the glazed teca, or case (oval) is surrounded in one case by thorns and in the other by palms. Note of the translator.

(†) Besozzi, work cit. p. 149, gives 137 “little boxes”. If this number is not a typographical error, the compartments have been increased since Besozzi ; perhaps at the time of restoration, to which the text alludes.

Reliquar}' ol Pope St. Gregory the Great.

compartments contain relics of martyrs and Saints wrapped in green silk. In some compartments are miniature ampullas. The names of the relics are for the most part illegible with age. In the centre of the little temple there is seen a very delicate Byzantine mosaic surrounded by a bronze frame worked in relief. The mosaic is much perished, but allows some details to be seen enough to make us understand that it represented a Jesus of Nazareth in the scene of «Ecce Homo». In 1862 the reliquary was repaired externally, and a new base was made for it. The tradition is that the reliquary belonged to St Gregory the Great. As one sees it at present, it is not possible to attribute it to St Gregory because there are relics of later Saints. But the tradition has some foundation. The Sessorian basilica, down to St Gregory, was immediately dependent on the Pope. When the title of the church of St Nicomedes on the via Nomentana ceased towards the end of the sixth century and it was not thought opportune to reconstruct it, the title of St Nicomedes was transferred to S. Croce, which began to function as a parish church. From that time then began for the Sessorian basilica the series of the Titular Cardinals. It is not known whether St Gregory was the first Titular of S. Croce, or whether he transferred to the church the parish of St Nicomedes; but it is certain that the name of St Gregory is connected with the Sessorian Basilica; and it is not improbable that he had given the Byzantine mosaic to the ba-

silica, (1) surrounded by some relics of martyrs and saints. This initial reliquary has become gradually enriched with new relics until it contained two hundred and two, and even more, as certain little compartments contain more than one name.(\*)

(\* ) St Gregory had been apocrysarius at Constantinople.

## Exposition of, an visits to the most holy Relics.

In the Sessorian Basilica it has been usual for centuries to show the holy relics from a balcony which looks from the Chapel over the small nave to the right of the entrance to the church. The exposition takes place:

The fourth Sunday in Lent, after the singing of Vespers and the stational procession;

Twice on Good Friday, once in the morning after the Mass of the Presanctified, and a second time in the afternoon, after the procession of penitence

The 3d of May on the Feast of the Invention of the Cross, twice: in the morning, after the pontifical Mass, and in the afternoon after the pontifical Vespers;

The 14th of September, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, after the pontifical Mass.

Very rarely and exceptionally, they are shown on the occasion of some important pilgrimage. On Good Friday, the two Thorns, the holy Nail, the Title and the holy Cross are shown; at other times the finger of St Thomas, which is shown the first, is added. The relics appear for a short time on the balcony, and are then withdrawn. The cardinal, or abbot, who shows them, is accustomed, at the end, to bless the people with

\*

the holy Cross. Then, centuries ago, the Title alone was exposed. †.

The past centuries it was very difficult to visit the holy relics. In 1625, at the holy apostolic visitation, a decree of excommunication was renewed against those who dared to enter the said chapel. Cardinals, bishops and the abbot and monks of the adjoining monastery were ex-cepted. A copy of this decree reproduced on parchment is still affixed to the outer door of the chapel. †. To obtain access to the chapel, a written permit from the Titular cardinal was re-quired. Now it is no longer necessary to address oneself directly to the Titular, nor, in his ab-sence, to the Vicariate. During the Jubilee of 1900, on account of the great number of pil-grims, the titular cardinal delegated the abbot of St Croce to give this permission. During the following years the number of pious visitors not having diminished, the delegation became per-manent. Every new Titular grants the delegation ad annum, or ad suum beneplacitum to the ab-bot of S. Croce who, by means of priest monk, custodiam of the chapel, conducts visitors there, and, after some prayers, shows the sacred relics.

#### U.I.O.G.D.

(\*) Mabilion, *Mus. liai.* I, p. 233. There was also exposed a coin of Rhodes, thought to be one of the 30 pieces of silver given to Judas for the betrayal. It is still preserved in the Chapel, but not amongst the relics.

(8) See the text in De Corrieris, work cit. p. 150, Note '27.











