

'Crying' icons raise hopes of faithful, doubts from skeptics

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TARPON SPRINGS — Skeptics and believers Monday debated the authenticity of what some have described as tears that have formed on several religious icons.

Meanwhile, hundreds continued to flock to the tiny Shrine of St. Michael on Hope Street with hopes of witnessing what some church members have called a miracle.

Gary P. Posner, founder of Tampa Bay Skeptics, a year-old organization that investigates "para-normal claims," said he found no evidence Monday that traces of moisture

on one icon are tears.

Posner said he compared an icon of the Virgin Mary and Jesus with a newspaper photograph taken of the icon last week. The icon is a photograph of one at a Chicago church that reportedly wept two years ago.

"I saw absolutely no change at all, in spite of the fact the priest told me that it has been weeping off and on," said Posner, a St. Petersburg physician.

Posner, further contradicting ministers, said he saw no evidence that the tears had crystallized, and saw no smudges that would indicate the tears had been dabbed with cotton.

Posner's remarks brought angry responses from some people gathered outside the shrine Monday.

"These people come here to believe. You just stop it," one woman, who would not give her name, told Posner.

The Rev. Christos Matos maintained that the tears were real, saying he has tasted the droplets and that they were salty.

He also rejected Posner's finding that the icon has not shown any change since last week: "It has (changed). The (tear) tracks appear deeper."

Posner said his group will push for a

There is no depth at all to the "tear" tracks.

scientific analysis of the photograph.

"I believe it's harmful to everyone who walks away from here believing in something that is not real, if that's the case," he said.

Matos said a scientific analysis of the photograph would be up to the archdiocese. He said the Rev. Nickolas Triantafilou, an administrator with the Greek Orthodox church in Houston, has told him the archdiocese plans to investigate.

The archdiocese also will interview witnesses, Matos said, including a woman and child who first discovered the tears while

praying at the shrine the morning of July 18.

Matos said the archdiocese has instructed him to collect the droplets on balls of cotton and not to use them for anointments.

More than 3,000 people have passed through the shrine's doorway in the last week to witness what some have said were tears flowing from the eyes, heart and feet of up to eight icons.

The Rev. Tryfon Theophilopoulos has said that the tears are a sign from God, but has stopped short of calling the phenomenon a "miracle."