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Association Notre-Dame de Soufanieh a Montreal  
C/O Gabriel Berberian  
955-40th Avenue  
Lachine, P.Q.  
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Dear Gabriel,

Please find enclosed

1 ) A complimentary copy of the August 4, 1997 issue of "*Family Practice*" with the published article on the Stigmatics.

2) Some reduced-size colour photocopies of the article which are easier to distribute, or reproduce.

I would again like to thank you for all your help in assisting with the article.

Kindest regards,

[signature of doctor]

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[Photo of Myrna during stigmata, 1990]

## The inexplicable phenomenon of the Stigmata

### *THE BEST THAT PHYSICIANS CAN DO IS RULE OUT TRICKERY*

BY DR. LAWRENCE SEGEL

For over 750 years rare individual Christians have exhibited unique, physical marks on their bodies. Generally, spontaneous wounds have appeared on their palms, as if nailed through to a cross. Other lesions documented include piercing marks on the feet, spear-like wounds on the torso, scratch marks on the forehead corresponding to a crown of thorns, and scourge-like stripes across the back- strange wounds which they manifest are collectively known as the Stigmata, the marks of Christ's suffering.

It is believed that St. Francis of Assisi the co-founder of the Franciscan order, was the first individual to receive these unusual wounds. His stigmatization is said to have occurred after his return from the Holy Land, in September 1224, during the Feast of Exultation of the Holy Cross. According to tradition, his wounds were received from a six winged seraph who etched the marks of crucifixion on his hands and feet with lines of light. The saint's right side is described as bearing an open wound which looked as if pierced by a lance. Through his hands and feet were blacknails of flesh, the points of which were bent backwards.

Since St. Francis there have been approximately 500 documented Stigmatics, including about 60 saints. At least 20 Stigmatics were recorded in the 19th century, with the most notable being Catherine Emmerich, Elizabeth Canori Mora, Anna Maria Taigi, Maria Dominica Lazzari, Marie de Moerl and Louise Lateau. As an example, Catherine Emmerich (184-1874), an Augustinian nun, experienced excruciating pain in her temples, and bled from her forehead as though she had worn a crown of thorns.

The 20th century has also had its notable examples of this phenomenon. Canada's Georgette Faniel, born in 1915 in Montreal, suffers the pains of the stigmata. She has said: *"In 1950, Jesus made me understand that I had His Most Holy Wounds.... The Father gave them to me as a pure gift and I feel unworthy of having them."* When queried further about her faith and the phenomenon, she has said, *"When the Lord chooses a victim soul for himself, neither the doctors nor science can find the source of the pains that nurse them. Jesus told me: "It is only after your death that doctors will be able to know the pains you have borne."*

Another example was Padre Pio (1887-1968, a humble capuchin priest from San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy, who was said to have been blessed by God in many ways, including the Stigmata for 50 years. In 1918 he wrote to his spiritual advisor Padre Benedetto, *"The vision disappeared and I became aware that my hands, feet, and side were dripping blood. Imagine the agony I experienced and continue to experience every day"*. His biographers state that he lost a large cup of blood from wounds on his palms each day for the rest of his life. Padre Pio was also said to have been blessed with the gifts of prophecy and healing.

A recent intriguing case is that of Mary Kourbet Al-Akhras better known as Myrna, and born to a Catholic father and Orthodox mother in 1964. Myrna had a normal childhood, was raised with a basic Christian upbringing, and has never suffered any serious illness or accident. Now married to Nicolas Nazzour, and living in Soufanieh, Damascus (Syria), Myrna Nazzour is a warm, happy wife, and mother of two children. Still, her life is far from normal. In 1982 Myrna was devoutly praying with other members of her family when she suddenly felt very strange her body began to shiver, then oil started to exude from her hands. Since then, Myrna's mystical experience encompasses five elements: oil, apparitions, ecstasies, stigmata and messages. Oil exudes from Myrna during prayers or while speaking about the phenomenon. The oil is considered a sign of abundance and joy and is said to be a symbol of the Holy Spirit. It has been scientifically analyzed at least six times in five different countries and found to contain 100% olive oil. During her ecstasies (a state of disconnection with the external world), Myrna has seen both the Virgin Mary and Christ, and has received messages.

Myrna's stigmata first appeared in 1983. She suffers from wounds on her palms and feet across her forehead and the left side of her abdomen. These wounds seem to appear spontaneously, are associated with Christ's physical and moral suffering and quickly heal without any medical treatment. An examining surgeon, Dr. Antoine Mansour of the U.C.L.A. school of Medicine, wrote a report in 1990 after personally observing Myrna. He noted that the blood appeared bright red, oxygenated, and likely arterial in nature. He also noted, but could not scientifically explain, their rapid healing. Countering any armchair skeptics face on, he has succinctly written, "*I saw the opening of the wounds of the exposed feet and hands in front of me on games here.*"

Another examining physician has been Dr. Philippe Loron, a neurologist at the Salpêtrière in France. He records, "*The opening of the wounds was spontaneous without foreign object, without any suspicious move from Myrna nor from anyone present in the room, as if the skin was opening from the interior and exploding.*" A related phenomenon is that oil also oozes from the family's picture of a replica of the icon of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Soufanieh.

What can we deduce about these strange stigmatizing lesions? Indeed, the wounds are very unusual in that they have been observed by physicians to open spontaneously, often recur (thus seeming to be incurable), and heal quickly without any intervention. Also, unlike natural wounds, they do not produce festering or a fetid odor. The smell of perfume has even been noted to come from them on occasion. Oil as in the case of Myrna Nazzour can also exude from them.

The cause of the Stigmata seems to defy conventional medical logic. Catholics believe it is truly a miracle from God granted to whomever he chooses. Doubters argue that if the wounds were accurate replicas of those that Christ suffered, they should at least be consistent in their position, size, shape and appearance. They note the wounds of individual Stigmatics vary considerably, and often take on the appearances of a favorite religious item, such as a crucifix or statue. For example, Myrna Nazzour's abdominal wound is on her left side, whereas according to gospel, the spear wound of Christ was suffered on his right side. Believers defend the inconsistency as not fundamentally important.

Another explanation is that the wounds are the result of self-abuse, that occur without willful deceit, and without conscious memory of the event religious ecstasy followed by repressed memory. Careful medical observation and witnessed reports seem to negate this theory. Finally, another theory invokes undiscovered psychophysiological mechanisms where Stigmatics identify so closely with Christ's life, and visualize him so clearly, that his marks are imposed upon them in the form of mind-body-altering self-hypnosis. However, the best results achieved with conventional hypnotic techniques have only produced a turgescence of blood, never an opening of a wound.

Whatever our individual faith leads us to believe, the Stigmata are a fascinating subject, so much so that they have even been alluded to in some popular TV series. Finally, it is not the place of medicine to conclude that these cases are supernatural. The best that we as physicians can do is carefully observe and record the phenomena, and provide creditable evidence that they are absent of trickery, as was done in the case of Myrna Nazzour. Doubtless, these strange wounds will continue to fascinate church and medicine alike for many more years.

*I would like to express my thanks to the Association Notre-Dame de Soufanieh à Montreal for their help in supplying research and photo/video reference material.*

**[ Photo of Our Lady of Soufanieh]**

**[caption: Oil also oozes from the Nazzour family's picture of a replica of the icon of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Soufanieh.]**

*Dr. Segel is an assistant vice-president, medical research and development, Manulife Financial. He lives in Aurora, Ontario, Canada.*

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religious stigmata - Myrna Nazzour