

THE MEDICINE OF HISTORY

By Lawrence Segel, MD

For over 750 years, science has witnessed the rare occurrence of Christians who have spontaneously exhibited marks on their bodies, believed to be the markings of Jesus' torment. Puncture wounds have appeared on their palms, as if they had been nailed 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. These strange wounds, which seem to occur without any obvious apparent injury, have been collectively known as the Stigmata — the marks of Christ's suffering.

Saint Paul (Epistle to the Galatians, 6:17) stated: "I bear in my body the marks of Lord Jesus." The Greek translation for the word "marks" is stigmata. It is unknown, however, if Saint Paul was describing actual physical wounds or whether he was speaking symbolically. It is believed that Saint Francis of Assisi, the co-founder of the Franciscan order, was the first individual to have received these unusual lesions. His stigmatization is said to have occurred after his return from the Holy Land, in September 1224, during the Feast of Exultation of the



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Holy Cross. According to tradition, his wounds were received from a six-winged seraph that etched the marks of the crucifixion on his hands and feet with lines of light. The Saint's right side bore an open wound, as if a lance had pierced it. There were black nails of flesh through his hands and feet — the points of which were bent backwards.¹

The stigmatization of St. Francis

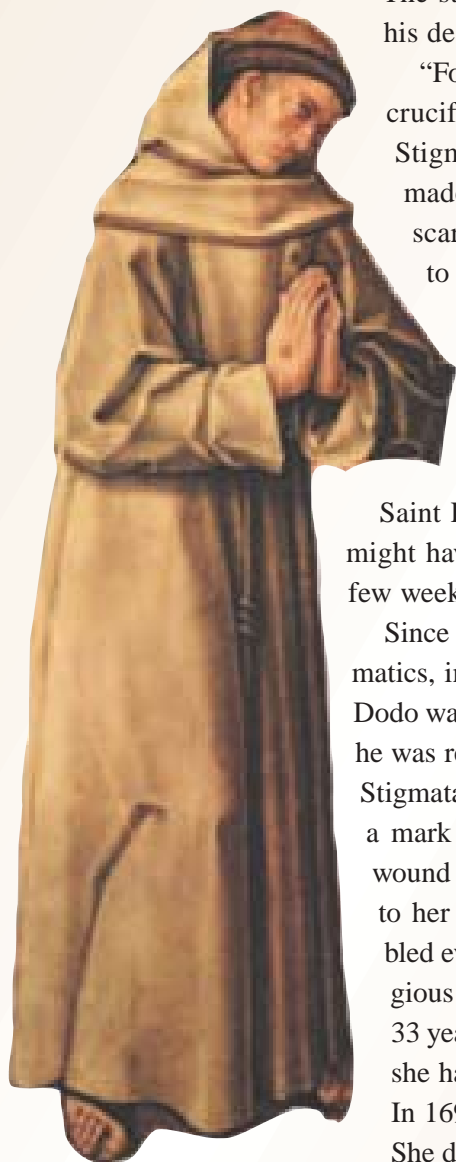
The stigmatization of Saint Francis was further described shortly after his death by a monk named Brother Elias:

“For a long while before his death, our Father and Brother appeared crucified, bearing in his body the five wounds which are verily the Stigmata of the Christ; for his hands and feet had as were piercings made by nails fixed in from above and below, which laid open the scars and had the black appearance of nails; while his side appeared to have been lanced, and blood often trickled there from.”²

Another contemporary of Saint Francis, Brother Leo, described the ordeal as follows: “And the hand of the Lord was laid upon him. After the vision and the speech he had of a seraph, and the impression in his body of the Stigmata of Christ, he made these praises.” Some contemporary writers dispute this and suggest

Saint Francis' wounds were discolorations or abrasions of the skin that might have been produced by pathologic conditions, and only appeared a few weeks before the time of his death.³

Since Saint Francis, there have been approximately 500 documented stigmatics, including about 60 saints. In 1231, a monk by the name of Brother Dodo was killed in Frisia, north of the Rhine Rivers, by a falling wall. When he was removed from the rubble, it was discovered he had the marks of the Stigmata. In 1237, Blessed Helen, a Dominican sister in Hungary, received a mark on her right hand during the Feast of Saint Francis, and later a wound in her side. In 1268, Saint Christina of Stommeln received wounds to her hands, feet, forehead and side. According to legend, her wounds bled every Easter. She was also harassed by demons and experienced religious raptures. Saint Catherine of Siena, born in 1347, died when she was 33 years old — the supposed age at which Christ died on the cross. At 28, she had five visible wounds and was said to have fasted for eight years. In 1697, Saint Veronica Giuliani received the Stigmata at the age of 37. She described an experience similar to Saint Francis: “In an instant I saw



five brilliant rays of light dart forth from Five Sacred Wounds, and all seemed to concentrate their force upon me. And I saw that these rays became small flames of burning fire. Four of them appeared in the form of great pointed nails, whilst the fifth was a spearhead of gleaming gold...”⁴

At least 20 stigmatics were recorded in the 19th century. The most notable were Catherine Emmerich, Elizabeth Canori Mora, Anna Maria Taigi, Maria Dominica Lazzari, Marie de Moerl and Louise Lateau. For example, Catherine Emmerich, an Augustinian nun in West Germany, experienced excruciating pain in her temples and bled from her forehead as though she had worn a crown of thorns.

Stigmatics of the 20th Century

The 20th century has also exhibited notable examples of this phenomenon. Canada’s Georgiette Faniel, born in 1915 in Montreal, suffered the pains of the Stigmata. She felt that when the Lord chose a victim’s soul for himself, neither doctors nor science could find the source of the pains to treat them.

Another well-known stigmatic from the 20th century was Padre Pio (1887-1968), a Capuchin priest from San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy, who has recently been canonized. He was said to have been blessed by God in many ways, including exhibiting the Stigmata for 50 years. In 1918, he recounted the experience to his spiritual advisor Padre Benedetto. He said that, after seeing a vision, he became aware that his hands, feet and side were dripping with blood. According to biographers, Padre Pio lost blood from wounds on his palms daily for most of his life. He was also said to

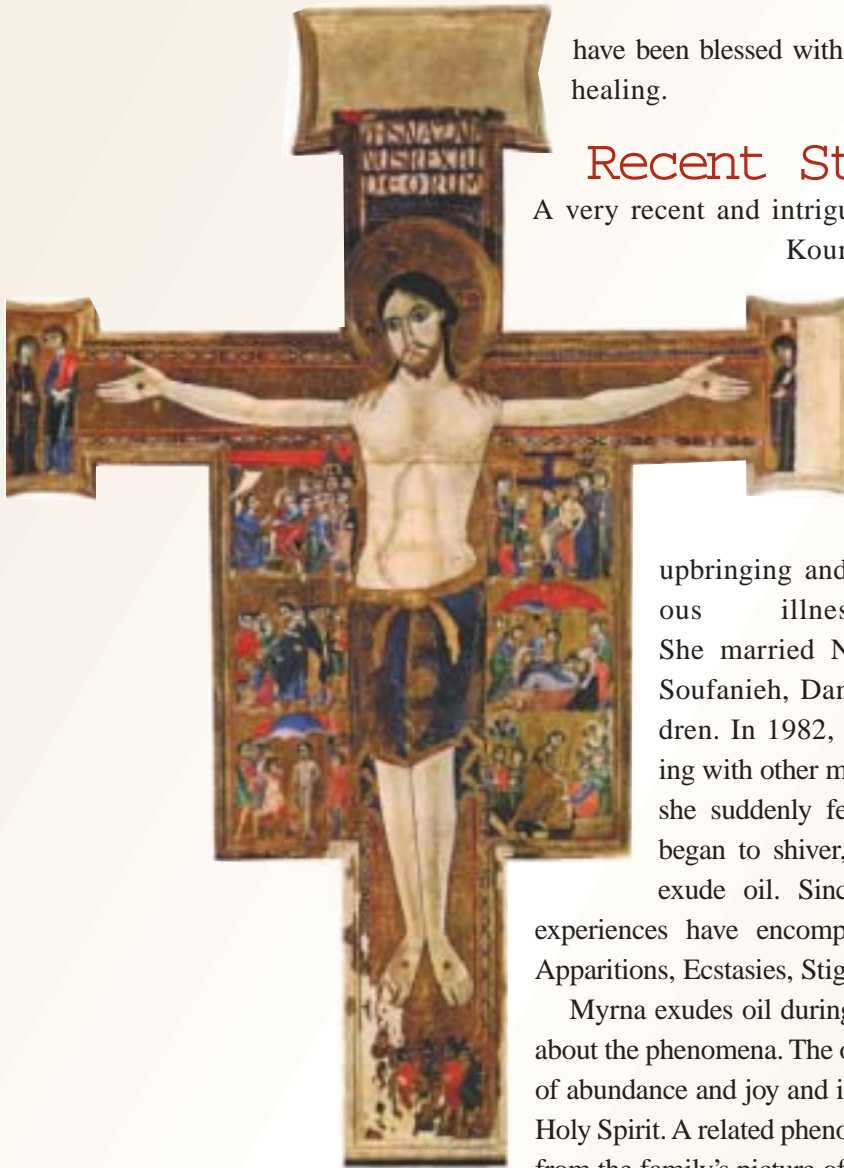
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have been blessed with the gifts of prophecy and healing.

Recent Stigmatics

A very recent and intriguing case is that of Mary Kourbet Al-Akhras, better known as Myrna, who was born to a Catholic father and Orthodox mother in 1964. Myrna had a normal childhood, was raised with a basic Christian upbringing and never suffered any serious illness or accident. She married Nicolas Nazzour, lives in Soufanieh, Damascus, and has two children. In 1982, Myrna was devoutly praying with other members of her family, when she suddenly felt very strange. Her body began to shiver, then her hands started to exude oil. Since then, Myrna's mystical experiences have encompassed five elements: Oil, Apparitions, Ecstasies, Stigmata and Messages.

Myrna exudes oil during prayers or while speaking about the phenomena. The oil is considered to be a sign of abundance and joy and is said to be a symbol of the Holy Spirit. A related phenomenon is that oil also oozes from the family's picture of the Virgin Mary, *Our Lady of Soufanieh*. During Myrna's ecstasies (a state of disconnection with the external world), she has seen the Virgin Mary and Christ and has received messages from them. Myrna's stigmata first appeared in 1983. She suffers from wounds on her palms and feet, across her forehead and on the left side of her abdomen. These wounds open spontaneously, are associated with intense physical and moral suffering, and heal quickly without medical treatment.

Religious Revival

It is strange the phenomena of the Stigmata did not appear until 12 centuries after Christ's death. Perhaps this is because the 11th and 12th centuries were

periods of religious revival. People wanted to experience God first-hand, rather than through the Church. By the 13th century, individuals could explore their own spirituality and personal relationship with God, and still receive encouragement from the Church, as was the case with Saint Francis. Yet, why is the Stigmata more common among women? It can be speculated that perhaps women, who were denied the priesthood, developed a special empathic passion for Christ's suffering.

Defying Conventional Medical Logic

How can these strange stigmatizing lesions be described medically? Indeed, the wounds are very unusual — they open spontaneously, they often recur (as if the wound was incurable) and they heal quickly without intervention. Also, unlike natural wounds, they do not appear to fester or exhibit a fetid odour. On occasion, the smell of perfume and oil have been noted to exude from the wounds.

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. Skeptics argue that if the wounds were accurate replicas of those Christ suffered, they would at least be consistent in their position, size, shape and appearance. It has been noted that the wounds of individual stigmatics vary considerably, and often take on the appearances of a favourite religious item, such as a crucifix or statue. For example, an abdominal wound may be on the left side, whereas according to the Gospel, the spear wound of Christ

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was suffered on his right side. Believers reply that inconsistencies are not fundamentally important. The markings act as a mystical participation in the Passion of Christ, using his wounds as they are portrayed in iconography.

Another explanation is that the wounds are the result of self-abuse, occurring without willful deceit and without conscious memory of the event, with the understanding that the memory of religious ecstasy is followed by repressed memory. Careful medical observation and reports, however, seem to negate this theory. There is another theory explaining these phenomena — a form of self-hypnosis. Stigmatics identify so closely with Christ's life and visualize him so clearly, that his marks are imposed upon them. The best results achieved with conventional hypnotic techniques, however, have only produced a turgescence of blood without opening the wound.

Observe and Record

Whatever each individual's faith, it is not the place of medicine to conclude whether or not these cases are supernatural. The best that physicians can do is to carefully observe and record the phenomena and provide credible evidence to demonstrate the absence of trickery. There is no doubt these strange wounds will continue to fascinate the Church and the medical community for many years.

References

1. Harrison Ted: *Stigmata*. St. Martin's Press, New York 1994.
2. *ibid*, p. 25.
3. *ibid*, p. 26.
4. *ibid*, p. 31.

Suggested Readings

1. Bolgert M: *Stigmata of the Mystics*. Bull. Acad. Natl. Med. 1981; 165(1):35-45.
2. Padre Pio Foundation at www.padrepio.com.



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be the last depression?