

Stigmata: A Sign from God?

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Stigma (*n. pl. stigmata*):

- 1) *A small mark; a scar or birthmark*
- 2) *A mark or characteristic indicative of a history of a disease or abnormality*
- 3) *A mark or spot on the skin that bleeds as a symptom of hysteria*
- 4) *Bodily marks, sores, or sensations of pain corresponding in location to the crucifixion wounds of Jesus, usually occurring during states of religious ecstasy or hysteria*

The book of John recounts the following of Jesus' last days on earth (John 19):

“¹... Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him.²And the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, ...³and said, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ And they smote him with their hands.”
“¹⁶...And they took Jesus and led him away. ¹⁷And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha:
¹⁸Where they crucified him...”
“³⁴...one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.”

Throughout history there have been reports of people developing wounds resembling those suffered by Jesus. The earliest potential reference to these “stigmata” is found in the writings of St Paul in Galatians 6:

“¹⁷From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear

in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.”

In the original Greek text, the word ‘marks’ was written *στιγματα* (stigmata), meaning ‘sign’ or ‘mark’. It is generally assumed that he was speaking figuratively, referring to his sufferings, and not true stigmatism.

Nearly twelve centuries passed until the first undisputed case of stigmata occurred. In 1224 St Francis of Assisi, one of the great Saints, was praying on Mount Alverna. In the middle of a 40 day fast a vision appeared to him of an angel carrying an image of a man nailed to a cross. When the vision disappeared St Francis felt sharp pains in various places on his body. He saw that he had five marks like those on Jesus’ hands, feet and sides. During the following days his trousers and tunic were often soaked in blood, and the marks remained until his death.

Within 100 years of St Francis’ death over twenty cases of stigmata had occurred. An official list of stigmatics does not exist, but an unofficial list contains over 300 names, including around thirty who are still alive.

We have to question the authenticity of these signs. That many stigmatics were fakes is well established: Magdalena de la Cruz in 1543 confessed that her stigmata were deliberate deceptions when she became ill and fearful of dying. In 1587, the ‘Holy nun of Lisbon’, Maria de la Visitacion, was accused of

painting a fake wound onto her hand. She was taken before the Inquisition where her wounds were washed, revealing unblemished flesh beneath.

The Romans crucified many people, but the exact method used is still unclear. The gospels describe wounds in Jesus’ hands, and most people have assumed that the nails went through the centre of the palms. Modern researchers, however, have disputed this.

The French surgeon Pierre Barbet nailed up freshly amputated arms through the palms and tied weights to the other end. He found that the nail tore through the palm when the weight attached to the arm was increased to 88 pounds and the arm was jerked. As the human body would yield a much larger force he concluded that nails through the palms could not have supported the weight of crucifixion victims. He believed the wrist to be a more likely location and found that a nail could be driven readily through Destot’s space, located near where the base of the hand joins the wrist. This is surrounded by the wrist bones and so a nail placed there would be capable of supporting the weight of a body.

Other researchers have suggested that the nail may have been passed between the bones of the forearm or that there may have been no nails at all, the victims being tied to the cross with rope. Two other nailing positions have been suggested, including one on

the palm, in the thenar furrow.

Stigmatics throughout history appear to have produced wounds in positions corresponding to the currently believed location of the wounds, earlier stigmatists having marks on the palms of their hands, whilst later they were found on the wrist. Similarly, the wound in the side has appeared at different points, and on either the left or right side, drawing into question the authenticity of the stigmata.

Most stigmatics have been from Roman Catholic countries and follow that religion, 70% being from Italy and 90% being female. Many were nuns or priests, several being canonised. Therefore, we have to ask if the wounds were, whether consciously or not, created by the stigmatics

themselves. This would help explain the discrepancy in the wound positions.

One theory blames 'autoerythrocyte sensitization', in which individuals react to their own blood. Similarities have also been drawn between stigmata and Münchhausen's syndrome, an emotional disorder involving faked or self-inflicted illness.

One interesting question is whether the wounds are psychosomatic. There is evidence in the medical literature of cases of 'psychogenic purpuras', non-religious stigmata, in which patients with emotional disorders experience painful bruising and swelling, and even bleeding through apparently intact skin. It is also a known fact that the immune system can be controlled by

the mind and a heartbeat consciously slowed. However attempts to duplicate the phenomenon by, for example, hypnosis, have so far been unsuccessful.

It is virtually impossible to constantly watch a person, so the possibility that stigmatics are simply injuring themselves when unobserved cannot be ruled out. For example the case of Therese Neumann, who would only give forth blood from her wounds when those observing her had been forced to leave the room.

Stigmata, therefore, still remain a mystery. Are they a sign from God, or are they conscious or unconscious manifestations of the human mind? This is one question that we may never be able to answer.