

The Stigmata of St. Francis



Exploring the Meaning of the
Stigmata Today

stigma (pl.
stigmata):
Greek
στίγμα

A “mark,” for example, a brand-mark, a tattoo or even a scar or a birth-mark.

An animal has a cattle-brand (*stigma*) on its back, to identify its owner.

A Roman slave had a *stigma*, usually branded on the hand, indicating slave status.

Paul refers to the *stigmata* (translated often as “brand-marks”) of Christ on his body, perhaps scars from whipping (Gal 6:17).



stigma

cattle-brand, Mission
San Luis Rey, 1800s



THE BRANDED HAND.



stigma: human brand-mark

United States, 19th century



stigma: tattoo

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- Coptic Christians with Cross tattoo, Egypt

The *stigmata* of Francis

The earliest report comes from Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, written in 1228 at the request of Pope Gregory IX for the canonization of Francis.

Thomas writes about Francis having a vision of a Seraph “like a crucified man” during a 40-day period of prayer on Mount LaVerna. The event occurred “around the Feast of the Holy Cross” (September 15).

“A little while” after that event “marks” (*stigmata*) began to appear on Francis’s body.

Thomas says no one really saw these marks during the lifetime of Francis because he kept them covered, but they had clues about them.

The role of Lady Jacoba de'Settesoli

- In his second Life (*The Remembrance*), written in 1245, Thomas adds more details.
- Lady Jacoba and Brother Elias prepared the body of Francis for burial during the night of October 3, 1226.
- They saw the “marks” (*stigmata*) on the body, and Jacoba convinced Elias that they were not disfiguring but beautiful.
- Therefore the marks on the body were not covered up: the funeral procession stops at San Damiano and Clare and the sisters see and venerate the marks (*stigmata*) on the body of Francis.

Giotto, Death of Francis

Assisi, Basilica of St. Francis





What meaning do the *stigmata* have?

The fact that these marks were seen on the body of Francis after his death is well-documented. But what do they mean?

The earliest interpretation, right after his death (by Lady Jacopa, according to Thomas) is that they were beautiful: “like pearls adorning his body,” or “like black mosaic pieces” in an overall white mosaic.

Thomas gives his own interpretation: they resemble the wounds on the body of Christ at His Passion and death, the heads of nails and the scar over a wound in the side.

The body of Francis, the servant, resembles the body of Christ, his Master.

Differing interpretations

Some modern psychiatrists interpret *stigmata* as an external, physical manifestation of a strong internal state (sometimes called *hysteria*, or just extreme identification with another person).

Bonaventure affirms that this was a miraculous “stamping” of the body of Francis at the very instant when the crucified Seraph (Christ) appeared to him: the “seal of approval” of Francis and his Order.

Modern authors (e.g., Chiara Frugoni) suggest these are symptoms of tubercular Hansen’s disease (leprosy), from his long service of lepers.

A possible interpretation

All of these approaches can be combined.

Francis shows an “extreme” identification with Christ in every aspect of his life and behavior, ways of speaking, dressing, treating others.

The veneration of the faithful toward these stigmata over the centuries support the idea that Christ put His “sign of approval” on Francis in many ways, not just physical marks.

A lifetime of direct service to people with an infectious disease (Hansen’s) could result in contracting the illness, making the marks a sign of a life of self-giving love for others, like Christ.

Stigmata: solidarity with suffering of others

Pope Francis frequently invites us to solidarity with those who are suffering, using St Francis as a model.

Compassion means “suffering with,” and marked the life of Francis.

The Feast of the Stigmata on Sept. 17 calls us to compassion for the suffering of Christ today in the members of the Body of Christ.

Compassion for those who suffer

- those suffering from Covid-19
 - brothers and sisters in Afghanistan
 - those who suffer persecution for their faith
 - family, friends, neighbors suffering in any way
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Gentile da Fabriano, *The Stigmata*, 1420