

# What is the Stigmata?

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The stigmata is the spontaneous appearance of the wound marks of our crucified Lord on a person's body. These marks include the nail wounds at the feet and the hands, the lance wound at the side, the head wounds from the crown of thorns, and the scourge marks over the entire body, particularly the back. A stigmatic (i.e. the person suffering from the stigmata) may have one, several, or all of these wound marks. Moreover, they may be visible or invisible, and they may be permanent, periodic, or temporary in appearance.

Some skeptics would attribute such wound marks on a person to some pathology or even to a psychological condition without considering any notion of the supernatural. Of course, the Church too strives first to ascertain that the origin is not of natural causes, and looks for supernatural evidence to prove that the stigmata is truly a sign from God. Moreover, the Church would also want to insure that the stigmata is not a sign from Satan to cause some spiritual frenzy and lead people astray. Accordingly, since the stigmata is a sign of union with our crucified Lord, the genuine stigmatic must have lived a life of heroic virtue, have endured physical and moral suffering, and have almost always achieved the level of ecstatic union with Him in prayer.

The wound marks themselves of the genuine stigmata are also distinct from any arising from some pathology: The genuine stigmata conforms to the wounds of our Lord, whereas those of a pathological nature would emerge at random on the body. The genuine stigmata bleeds especially on days when our Lord's passion is remembered (such as Fridays and Good Friday), whereas those of a pathological nature would not. The genuine stigmata emits clean and pure blood, whereas those of the pathological origin suppurate. The blood flow from a genuine stigmata can be great at times without harm to the person, whereas that of a pathological nature would seriously weaken a person and require a blood transfusion. The genuine stigmata cannot be healed through medication or other treatments, whereas one of pathological origin can. Finally, the genuine stigmata appears suddenly, whereas that of a pathological origin appears gradually over time and can be linked to underlying psychological and physical causes.

Finally, the genuine stigmatics have been surprised at the appearance of the stigmata. This sign is not something for which they had "prayed." Moreover, in humility, they have often tried to conceal it so as not to cause attention to themselves.

The first "certified" stigmatic was St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226). In August, 1224, he and several Franciscans journeyed to Mount Alvernia in Umbria, near Assisi, to pray. Here Francis begged to share in the sufferings of Christ. On the Feast of the Holy Cross (September 14) in 1224, St. Francis had a vision of being embraced by our crucified Lord. The agony of the first Good Friday poured into his being, and he received the stigmata. He tried to conceal this sign of divine favor from others, covering his hands with his habit and wearing shoes and socks on his feet (which he normally did not do). Eventually, his confreres noticed the change in St. Francis' clothing and his physical suffering, and his stigmata became known. Eventually, upon the advice of his confreres, he revealed the stigmata publicly. St. Francis said, "Nothing gives me so much consolation as to think of the life and passion of our Lord. Were I to live to

the end of the world, I should stand in need of no other book." Surely, St. Francis' love for our crucified Lord, witnessed in his care for the suffering poor, gained him the stigmata.

St. Catherine of Sienna (1347-1380), who had mystical experiences and visions from the time she was six years old, also received the stigmata. In February, 1375, while visiting Pisa, she attended Mass at the Church of St. Christina. After receiving Holy Communion, she fell into deep meditation, gazing upon the crucifix. Suddenly from the cross came five blood-red rays which pierced her hands, feet, and side, causing such great pain that she fainted. Here she received the stigmata, but it remained visible only to her until after her death.

Perhaps the most famous stigmatic is Padre Pio. Born in 1887, he had visions from the time he was five years old, and from an early age decided to dedicate his life to the Lord. He entered the Capuchin Franciscans in 1903, and was ordained a priest in 1910. He said, "I am devoured by the love of God and by the love of my neighbor."

On August 5, 1918, Padre Pio had a vision in which he felt himself pierced with a lance; afterwards, the lance wound remained with him. Later, on September 20, 1918, while he was making his thanksgiving after Mass, he also received the wounds of our Lord in his hands and feet. Each day, he lost about one cup of blood, but the wounds never closed or festered. Also, a sweet odor emanated from his wounds instead of the smell of blood.

During his life, Padre Pio came to know the depth of the suffering of our Savior at the hands of those within and outside of the Church, and of the Devil himself. Nevertheless, Padre Pio said, "I am an instrument in divine hands. I am useful only when manipulated by the Divine Mover." The stigmata would stay with Padre Pio to the time of his death. Pope Paul VI said, "What renown he has! What an international following! And why? Because he was a philosopher? A scholar? A person of means? No, because he said Mass in a humble manner, heard confessions from morning to night. And because he was Our Lord's representative, certified with the stigmata."

Although very few saints have been granted the stigmata, those who have, like St. Francis, St. Catherine, and Blessed Pio, have known the sufferings of our Lord. While the stigmata may intrigue us, the sign itself and those who bear it should inspire us to seek a closer union with our Lord, especially through frequent confession and reception of the Holy Eucharist.

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