

PADRE PIO AND THE STIGMATA¹

A Study of the Facts and their Significance

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SEVERAL articles have appeared recently in English publications about Padre Pio, the Italian Franciscan friar who for the last thirty-four years has borne 'stigmata' in hands and feet and side, resembling the traditional wounds of our Lord on the Cross.

Stigmata—in these days the word itself is apt to cause some raising of scientific eyebrows; it conjures up pictures of hysterical and neurotic girls inflicting wounds on themselves so as to be thought holy. Pious folk are too often over-credulous; and another instance, also in a person living today, has been under much discussion. It is necessary, therefore, to get at the facts.

Others have written of Padre Pio's life in its setting, of his extraordinary influence over the crowds who flock to S. Giovanni Rotondo to see him, of his apostolate of the confessional, of the village, almost, that has sprung up round his monastery, and the big modern hospital, now almost completed, that has been built through his inspiration and encouragement.

This article is in no sense an account of any 'investigation' of my own, still less of anything in the nature of a medical examination. It is only an attempt to record my impressions of Padre Pio, gained during six visits of three days each during the past five years. By his kindness, and that of those about him, I have been privileged to serve his Mass, to make my confession to him, to join on many occasions a group of men chatting with him in the monastery, besides assisting some fifteen times at his Mass, and last year, on the Feast of Corpus Christi, acting as subdeacon when he gave Solemn Benediction. To these personal reminiscences I have added a short description of Padre Pio's stigmata taken from *Misteri di Scienza e Luci di Fede* (2nd Edition Rome, 1938) by the late Dr Giorgio Festa, who examined him several times at the request of his Superiors, and some considerations about stigmatization in general.

¹ Reprinted, by kind permission of the author and editor, from *The Catholic Medical Quarterly*, April, 1953.

Padre Pio was born of a peasant family in 1887 at Pietrelcina in Southern Italy. At 15 he joined the Capuchin Franciscans and became outstanding as a religious for his humility, modesty and obedience. Ordained priest in 1910, he was soon known as a remarkable confessor and director of deep spirituality and great prudence. Called up in 1916 in the Italian Army as a private, he became ill the following year, suspected for a time of having pulmonary tuberculosis. On his discharge early in 1918 he returned to the friary at S. Giovanni Rotondo. On 20th September, 1918, he was making his thanksgiving after Mass as usual, in the gallery at the back of the church which serves the friars as a choir, when a lay-brother found him kneeling there in a state almost of unconsciousness, with bleeding wounds in hands and feet and side. It is said that exactly three years before, on 20th September, 1915, while staying with his parents, he had an experience in prayer in which he may have received 'invisible stigmata', i.e., pain in the traditional sites without any wounds being present. There is evidence that before 1918 he was more than once found in a state of ecstasy. Almost from his ordination his Mass took a long time, with pauses in which he seemed lost in recollection.

For the last thirty-four years he has lived at S. Giovanni Rotondo, following, except for two years, the daily routine of his community: Mass, Divine Office, prayer and study; but with the demands of the ever greater crowds who flock to visit him, more and more of his time every day of the week is taken up with hearing confessions. He remains a humble friar living under obedience to his Superiors. In other respects his life is not spectacular; there are no Friday ecstasies, no re-enactment of the scenes of the Passion. But there are stories of miraculous healings—after the sufferer has reached home; of extraordinary appearances to others at a distance, and of reading the hearts of his penitents.

About 1930, ecclesiastical authority decided that the public should no longer have access to him; obediently, he remained within the monastery, said Mass there privately, did not hear confessions. The crucifix in the gallery where he received the stigmata was taken down. After about two years he was given permission to appear once more in church, to say Mass publicly

and to resume his daily round of confessions and this has been his way of life ever since. The crucifix was restored to its place.

My first visit was in 1948 with a friend who had seen Padre Pio before. I went with mixed feelings; from what I had heard it seemed most unlikely he could be a fraud; but I felt a little apprehensive of the unaccustomed exuberances of Italian piety. However, I did want to meet one who was reputed a saint, and was curious to see what stigmata looked like.

In the sacristy at 4.45 a.m. I stood in a group of men waiting for Padre Pio. He came in and was at once jostled by the crowd eager to kiss his hand, as is the custom in Italy in greeting any priest. I had more or less to fight to do the same. He is now sixty-five years old, rather stout, though as a young man photographs show him thin, almost emaciated. After vesting he removed the brown woollen mittens which are the only covering of his hands. During his Mass at the High Altar men filled the sanctuary, clustered round the altar; women thronged the rest of the church. Padre Pio's Mass is the centre of his day and of his life; it lasts an hour and a half, apart from giving Holy Communion. His movements are leisurely but not unduly slow; everything is done with scrupulous care but without fuss, the words said in a perfectly natural voice. He gives the impression of the deepest recollection, with no hint of posing or affection. There are long pauses when he stands motionless at the middle of the altar, sometimes for as much as five minutes. He seems to have to pull himself together, as it were, before he can go on with the Mass. Every day it is the same; it would seem that he says Mass like this not so much from deliberate choice as simply because he has to. He wears an alb with long sleeves which come down to the fingers and partly hide the marks on the hands, but at times one can see the large-red-brown areas covering almost the whole of the palm and back of each hand. No actual wound is visible.

After thanksgiving he returns to hear men's confessions in the sacristy, then those of women in his confessional in the church for the rest of the morning, after which he gives Holy Communion. About four o'clock he appears again and hears more confessions of men. Later a few men are privileged to gather round him in the monastery or the garden. He chats easily, naturally, keeping the conversation going if it flags. Intensely vivacious, his manner is in complete contrast with the deep

recollection during Mass. He is completely human, cracks jokes, pulls one's leg; yet he easily brings the conversation back to serious and spiritual subjects and talks shrewdly, vehemently and with conviction, expressing his opinions strongly but without the least lack of charity. One has the impression of a dominant personality perfectly under control, of great force of character tempered to the utmost gentleness. He is entirely serene, with no trace of self-consciousness, not the slightest affectation; he never refers to his own condition.

In going to confession to him for the first time I was astonished at his quite extraordinary gentleness. On another occasion I asked his advice on a personal matter; his answer came clear, concise and to the point, and without a second's hesitation; it was the advice one would have expected of a wise and experienced priest.

In October, 1919, and again in 1920 and 1925 Padre Pio was examined by the late Dr Giorgio Festa at the request of the then Minister General of the Capuchin Order. The following description is taken from that given by Dr Festa in his book already referred to. He describes the lesion on the palm of each hand as roughly circular, a little over 2 cms. in diameter with clear-cut margins, and situated over the third metacarpal. It appeared covered with a scab or crust, red-brown in colour, with radiating striae on the surface. The scab detaches from time to time leaving the underlying lesion visible, red-brown in colour and always bleeding. Owing to the scabs it was difficult to gauge the depth of the wounds. Blood trickled from them during the examination. On the backs of the hands and on the dorsum and sole of each foot were exactly similar lesions, from which came a slight but continuous flow of blood. The surrounding skin showed no redness, oedema or inflammation. Direct pressure over the wounds caused intense pain. At a later visit with Dr Romagnelli, Dr Festa saw the wound on the dorsum of one foot when the scab had fallen off; in its place now was a circular rose-coloured area of equal size. In the centre of this area was a definite wound—a true break in the continuity of the tissues—about the size of a lentil, irregularly circular, with red-brown margins, extending deeply, appearing as if produced by a sharp instrument. An exactly similar lesion, a wound in the centre of a rose-coloured area, was seen on the sole of the foot.

On the left side of the chest about two fingers' breadth below the nipple, was a lesion in the form of an inverted cross. The longitudinal arm of this was about 7 cm. long, beginning at the level of the 5th intercostal space in the anterior axillary line and descending obliquely almost to the lower border of the costal cartilages. The transverse arm, about 4 cm. long, crossed the longitudinal one about 5 cm. from the upper end of the latter, not at a right angle but obliquely. This cross-shaped mark was very superficial, the two arms were ribbon-like, a little less than 1 cm. wide, with clear-cut margins except where the longer arm shaded off gradually at its lower end into the normal tissues. The whole was red-brown in colour; a thin scab covered the central part; there was nowhere any redness, oedema or inflammation of the surrounding tissues. From this central part drops of blood were seen trickling in much larger quantity than from the other wounds. These were the only lesions present on Padre Pio's body. Six years later Dr Festa found the wounds practically unchanged; they showed no sign of healing yet they did not suppurate, and they were still bleeding. Padre Pio wears mittens and stockings, with no dressings on hands or feet; on the wound in the side he wears a cloth or handkerchief which needs changing every few hours.

This description is very much condensed from Dr Festa's account. I have seen photographs of Padre Pio as a young man, in which the dark areas on the hands appear about 2 cm. in diameter as Dr Festa states; but today they are obviously much larger, covering almost the whole of the palm and dorsum. I once kissed the hand with the mitten removed; my lips touched the dark red area on the dorsum; it felt hard, almost horny, and seemed to have longitudinal ridges on the surface; and appeared firmly attached to the underlying tissues.

On my first visit, during Mass, I became aware of a sweet and pleasant perfume coming apparently from Padre Pio's person, when I was 6 or 7 feet from him; it lasted for about a minute. Afterwards I learnt that this was well known in connection with him; many people remark on it independently but not everyone notices it. A few minutes later standing quite close to him I noticed nothing. He never uses any scent. Three or four times on subsequent visits I smelt the same perfume when near him. Dr Festa more than 30 years ago found that it emanated

strongly from a cloth soaked with blood from the wound in the side, which he had taken away for examination. Once, standing very close to him, I was aware of the ordinary smell of blood, distinctly unpleasant, and to me quite different from the sweet perfume.

Stigmata were unknown before the thirteenth century: St Francis of Assisi was the first well-authenticated example. In this case there can be no doubt that they were not self-inflicted and not due to any known natural cause. Since then over 300 cases have been recorded, apart from others finally proved to be false. Only 41 were men; 62 of them, both men and women, have been canonised or beatified by the Church.²

Stigmatisation is therefore classed among the phenomena of Christian mysticism. The 'mystic' in the strict sense is one who has received the gift of infused contemplation. This does not imply merely a series of isolated experiences, the prayer of quiet, of union, of ecstasy and so on; these may be regarded as psychophysical manifestations of an interior contemplative *state*, more or less habitual, bestowed by God and unattainable by any effort of the person concerned. Infused contemplation is certainly not sanctity, but is a means towards it. In its highest development it seems to connote the closest union of soul with God that is possible in this life. Such a soul, after passing through the fierce and searching purgation of the 'Dark Nights' described by St John of the Cross, will have reached by divine grace that union of will with God's will by love and self-giving which characterises heroic sanctity.

It is in the higher, and therefore less commonly reached, phases of this development that strange bodily phenomena seem liable to occur, usually after the stage of ecstasy. It is, of course, the interior union of soul that matters, not the bodily 'incidents', raptures, levitations, stigmata and the rest. But if such a person's interior self-giving, developed by means of infused contemplation, is so united with Christ's offering of himself on the Cross for our redemption that he can say with St Paul: 'With Christ I am nailed to the cross. And I live, now not I but Christ liveth in me' (Gal. 2, 19-20); if the disciple, like the Master, has become in spirit 'obedient unto death, even to the death of the Cross',

² See A. Poulain, s.j., *The Graces of Interior Prayer*. English edition (quoting Dr Imbert), 1950, p. 175.

is it so inconceivable that God, in rare instances, should make this manifest by causing bodily wounds to appear in hands and feet and side? It is noteworthy that all 62 canonised saints or *beati* who had stigmata (to say nothing of others) showed evidence of having travelled by the way of infused contemplation; all, according to Poulain,³ were subject to ecstasies.

In a sense, then, Padre Pio's stigmata are the least important thing about him; even if preternatural in origin, such things are no proof or guarantee of holiness. In themselves extraordinary phenomena of this kind prove precisely nothing in that respect. Many saints have not had them, and may have been holier than some who had. Sanctity is a question of virtue, of the interior union with God finding expression in conduct and action which have no authentic quality of heroism. So in that sense what is important about Padre Pio is not his stigmata but himself. Nevertheless we cannot dismiss these strange phenomena as irrelevant or of no account; we have to take him as he is, and his wounds in hands and feet and side are a *fact*; he has borne them, and the pain of them, for no less than 34 years; they are part of his life, part of him. He is a person, and we must take all there is about him as a whole. It would be a great mistake, I think, to allow ourselves to regard the stigmata as if they were some bizarre, and rather regrettable, blemish upon an otherwise flawless character.

To conclude: in our estimate of such a person we should look first at his character, way of life and conduct. If we conclude that he is not merely good and sincere, but one in whom heroic virtue, practised over the years, is the expression of a close union with God, that will be, I submit, an *a priori* argument that there is, in modern jargon, nothing 'phoney' about the physical manifestations. Secondly there should of course be the strictest scrutiny of the phenomena themselves, investigation of their origin and search for any possible natural explanation. I would emphasise once more that in the present case I myself have never made any kind of investigation or examination, nor have I sought or been given permission to do so. Ecclesiastical authority takes good care of what is appropriate in that respect; for the rest, Padre Pio's life must speak for itself.

³ Op. cit. p. 174.