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The Body as Image of the Suffering Christ

Preliminaries

This essay was born to the inspiration of György Endre Szőnyi, prepared for his "Transregional Iconology 3" conference at the Central European University in 2014. He was urging me for a few years subsequently, asking the delivery of the manuscript of my lecture for the planned conference volume. I kept promising, yet the text remained unfinished till today. Now that the conference proceedings of a decade ago are finally developed into a book format, I decided to use the present occasion for saving this half-finished paper to posterity, offering it equally to a Festschrift celebrating Gyuri at his 70th birthday[1] and, with some additions, to the volume where it originally belongs.

My excuses for this unfinished stage have a scholarly dimension. Since the conference I kept on researching, documenting and updating the subject, which will become the introductory part of a large project, a book titled *The Discourses on the Stigmata from Saint Francis to Padre Pio.* While in the fractions of time that remained in the past decade, besides my university-occupations, I kept on working on this probably too ambitious enterprise, and several smaller parts have been published as individual studies.[2] Yet, this part on Saint Francis and the beginning of the stigmata rivalry remained unfinished, partly because every year a

1 Gábor Klaniczay. "The Body as Image of the Suffering Christ." In Attila Kiss, Ágnes Matuska, and Róbert Péter eds. 2022. *Fidele Signaculum. Írások Szőnyi György Endre tiszteletére. Writings in Honour of György Endre Szőnyi.* Szeged: University of Szeged. 481–504.

2 Gábor Klaniczay. "Estasi e stigmatizzazione: Il miracolo vissuto e presentato." 2019, 152–172; Id. "Padre Pio and Francis of Assisi: The Emulation of Models in the Lives and Cult of a Contemporary and a Medieval Saint." 2019, 197–212; Id. "The Mystical Pregnancy of Birgitta and the Invisible Stigmata of Catherine: Bodily Signs of Supernatural Communication in the Lives of Two Mystics." 2020, 159–78; Id. "Doubts in the Reality of Stigmata – Stigmata as a Weapon against Doubt." 2020, 69–90; Id. "Le stimmate: la narrazione e le immagini." 2023, 299–316.

new important book appeared on him and on his stigmata, and I felt I needed more time to keep pace.[3] Then, in 2024, the 800 years anniversary of the stigmatization of Saint Francis opened another torrent in which my participation was also involved,[4] and the digestion of its results of will take a few more years.

The present text has been last updated in 2018, and now I polished it only a little bit for this occasion, as a token of the long-time (about half a century long) scholarly partnership with Gyuri Szőnyi.

The founding event

Shortly after the death of Francis of Assisi, on October 3, 1226, Elias of Cortona, Vicar General of the order founded by Francis, announced, in a letter to Gregory of Naples, the Provincial Minister of France, together with the sad news, "a great joy, a novelty among miracles":

> Throughout the ages such a sign has not been heard of, except in the Son of God, who is Christ the Lord. Not long before death our brother and father appeared crucified, bearing in his body the five wounds which are in truth the stigmata of Christ: for his hands and feet had as it were the punctures of nails pierced through on either side, retaining the scars and showing the blackness of nails; his side appeared to have been lanced and often oozed blood (Menestò–Brufani 1995, 254).

It is not by chance that his devout followers saw in Francis of Assisi a bodily replica of Christ: more than anybody else in his age, he managed to bring to triumph a new ideal of the imitation of Christ, both in his way of life guided by voluntary

3 The most important ones: Jacques Dalarun. *François d'Assise en questions*. 2016; Id. *La Vie retrouvée de François d'Assise*. 2019; Donna Trembinski. *Illness and Authority: Disability in the Life and Lives of Francis of Assisi*. 2020; Carolyn Muessig. *The Stigmata in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. 2020; Adelaide Ricci. *Apparuit effigies: Dentro il racconto delle stigmate*. 2021; Roberto Rusconi. *Studi francescani*. 2021; Cordelia Warr. *Stigmatics and Visual Culture in Late Medieval and Early Modern Italy*. 2022.

4 Gábor Klaniczay. "Prima e dopo San Francesco: le polemiche intorno al miracolo delle stimmate." 2024.185–200; Id. "Histories and Historians of Stigmata. Old and New Approaches." 2023, 33–53.

poverty, in his apostolic action of converting the world around him, and in his emotional, compassionate devotion around Christ's suffering.5 After his death he was increasingly regarded as *Alter Christus,* and the fascinating miracle of his stigmata, told again and again in his legends and represented by medieval paintings and illuminations, became the principal touch-stone of this identification, a rich core symbol of thirteenth-century Christianity. The evolution of this motif and the reactions it provoked have been amply debated in recent historiography: from André Vauchez (Vauchez 1968, 595–625) and Rosalind Brooke (Brooke 2006) to Solanus M. Benfatti (Benfatti 2011) and Ulrich Köpf. (Köpf 2012, 35–60)

In the present study I will discuss one specific aspect of this vast theme, the "iconicity" of the stigmata, addressed first by Chiara Frugoni (Frugoni 1993) and Arnold Davidson (Davidson 1998, 101–24), then further discussed by Jean-Claude Schmitt speaking on the "body of images" (Schmitt 2002) and George Didi-Huberman in his book on the "open image" (Didi-Huberman 2007), and more recently by Hans Belting in a fascinating study on Saint Francis. (Belting 2010, 3–14) Belting cites what Saint Bonaventure said on Saint Francis's stigmata in his authoritative *Legenda maior*:

> The true love of Christ turned him into that image [... when the saint had...] on his body the physical effigy of the Crucified Christ, but not the one, as artists have in stone and wooden panels. Instead, it was written in his limbs of flesh and blood by the hands of the living God.[6]

This "iconic" statement comes after decades of passionate debates on the teachings and the *stigmata* of Saint Francis. Before commenting it, we must make a step back, and have a look at the "precedents" of Francis's *stigmata* and the contemporary challenges, rivalries related to it.

5 For a general appreciation of Francis see Roberto Rusconi. *Francis of Assisi in the Sources and Writings,* 2008, and two recent monographs: André Vauchez. *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint,* 2012, and Augustine Thompson, O. P. *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography,* 2012.
6 "[...] verus Christi amor in eamdem imaginem transformavit amantem [...] secum ferens Crucifixi effigiem, non in tabulis lapideis vel ligneis manu figuratam artificis, sed in carneis membris descriptam digito Dei vivi." (Bonaventura de Balnoregio, "Legenda maior, XIII, 5.") In Menestò–Brufani 1995, 863; cf. Belting 2010, 3–4.

Precedences

The oldest Christian mentioning of *stigmata* comes from Saint Paul, who declared in his letter to the Galateans: *Ego enim stigmata Xti in corpore meo porto.* (Gal. 6:17) This enigmatic sentence, which kept on recurring later in the self-designations of medieval and modern stigmatics, at that moment certainly did not refer to the five wounds of Christ – *stigma* meant the brand-mark, the bodily stamp of criminals or slaves, and it has been brought in contact with Christ's wounds only since Paulus Orosius in the fourth century CE. (Adnès 1988, 1211–43; Bouflet 1996)

Carolyn Muessig recently analysed how the commentaries of the Church Fathers and doctors, such as Jerome, Augustine, and later Peter Damian, pinned down more and more precisely that *stigmata* refer to Christ's wounds and suffering and also to the signs of those who emulate him. (Muessig 2013, 40–68) Giles Constable examined how Christ's human figure became more and more central in twelfth-century Latin Christianity, how his suffering got more emphatically represented in Italian visual arts where the painted crucifixes started to show his bleeding wounds, and how the "imitation of Christ" started to be understood increasingly as the imitation of the body of Christ. (Constable 1995, 143–247) Constable was joined by Richard Trexler who argued in a vigorously polemic study that in the eleventh and twelfth centuries any type of self-inflicted ascetic wounds, especially those resulting from self-flagellation would qualify as "stigmata Christi." (Trexler 2002, 463–97)

They called attention to two examples where contemporary sources already stated that some ascetics had the "*stigmata Christi*" in their bodies: the Italian hermit Domenico Loricato (d. 1060) whose life was written by Peter Damian, a great populariser of the idea of penitential self-flagellation (Muessig 2013, 51–7), and the French abbot Stephen of Obazine (d. 1159), imposing the harshest penitential flogging both to his monks and to himself. (Melville 2005, 85–1029) Religious laywomen also adhered to this new kind of devotion: the life of Marie of Oignies (1177-1213), a leading figure of the Beguine movement in the Low Countries, written by Jacques de Vitry, includes the description, how after the compassionate weeping over Christ's passion, "she cut out a large piece of her flesh with a knife" from her palms and feet and side, "as if inebriated." (Jacques de Vitry 1990, 22) Self-flogging and harsh ascetic penitence belonged to the discipline these devout women imposed upon themselves, or were imposed to by their

stern confessors, such as Conrad of Marburg did it to St. Elizabeth of Hungary (Elliott 2004, 85–117; Westphälinger, 2007, 22–31)

The stigmatic self-mutilation showed up in a remarkable case in Oxford in 1222 (i.e. four years before the stigmata of Saint Francis had been announced by Elias of Cortona), where during the Holy Week a layman playing Jesus performed a public self-crucifixion, assisted by a laywoman playing Mary, a case that was followed by a judicial condemnation of the "pseudo-Christ." (Powicke 1964, 104–5)[7]

All these cases show that the miracle ascribed to St. Francis of Assisi was not so "unheard of" as Elias of Cortona claimed, it was rather giving a forceful expression to a largely popular new trend in Christian spirituality – the emotionally heated compassion with Christ's redemptory suffering on the Cross, and the attempt to understand this suffering by bodily emulation.

St. Francis of Assisi - Stigmata and stigmatization

In 1992 Chiara Frugoni entitled provocatively her book as "Francis and the invention of the *stigmata*," which pointed out both from textual and pictorial evidence that it took almost a century, until the presently known story of the stigmatization of Saint Francis took up its canonical shape, because of heated debates and diverging interpretations of this miracle. (Frugoni 1993) Her book renewed the old debate: what trustworthy proofs do we have of his Christ-like wounds, and their origins? While there are irrefutable witnesses – listed by Octavian Schmucki (Schmucki 1990, 234–48), Giovanni Miccoli (Miccoli 1991, 101–21) and Solanus Benfatti (Benfatti 2011, 105–10) – that Francis indeed had these wounds on his body, and some saw it already before his death, the question of their origin remained unclear, this was "the great secret of Francis" of which he never spoke to anybody. (Dalarun 2002a, 9–26) Were they, as suggested by Richard Trexler (Trexler 2002, 490) or Jacques Dalarun, (Dalarun 2013, 43–93)[8] self-inflicted wounds, perhaps in a state of ecstasy, or did they result from a miraculous, supernatural intervention? Jacques Dalarun convincingly argues that the true novelty attached to the person of Saint Francis was not so much his *stigmata,*

7 cf. Trexler. "The Stigmatized Body of Francis", 481.
8 Reprinted now in his *François d'Assise en questions,* 55–83, 288–308.

but the account of how these wounds have been acquired, his stigmatization – an account given to us by his first hagiographer, Thomas of Celano, in his *Vita prima,* written around or shortly after the canonization of Francis in 1228 (Paciocco–Accrocca 1999; Michetti 2004), which related this event to a vision he received on Mount La Verna on September 14, 1224.

> While he was staying in that hermitage called La Verna, after the place where it is located, two years prior to the time that he returned his soul to heaven, he saw in the vision of God a man, having six wings like a Seraph, standing over him, arms extended and feet joined, affixed to a cross. Two of his wings were raised up, two were stretched out over his head as if for flight, and two covered his whole body. When the blessed servant of the most High saw these things, he was filled with the greatest awe, but could not decide what this vision meant for him. Moreover, he greatly rejoiced and was much delighted by the kind and gracious look that he saw the Seraph gave him. The Seraph's beauty was beyond comprehension, but the fact that the Seraph was fixed to a cross, and the bitter suffering of that passion thoroughly frightened him. Consequently, he got up both sad and happy as joy and sorrow took their turns in his heart. Concerned over the matter, he kept thinking about what this vision could mean, and his spirit was anxious to discern a sensible meaning from the vision. While he was unable to perceive anything clearly understandable from the vision, its newness very much pressed upon his heart. Signs of the nails began to appear on his hands and feet, just as he had seen them a little while earlier on the crucified man hovering over him. His hands and feet seemed to be pierced through the middle by nails, and their points protruding on opposite sides. Those marks inside of his hands were round, but rather oblong on the outside; and small pieces of flesh were visible like the point of nails, bent over and flattened, extending beyond the flesh around them. On his feet, the marks of nails were stamped in the same way and raised above the surrounding flesh. His right side was marked with an oblong scar, as if pierced with a lance, and this often dripped blood, so that his tunic and under

> garments were frequently stained with his holy blood. (Thomas, of Celano 1999, 263–64)[9]

Let us note that in Thomas's description the bodily signs, the stigmata are caused by the intense commotion, by the "anxious meditation on what the vision could mean", by the "alternation of joy and grief," by the "preoccupation of his heart."

We should dedicate now a brief glimpse to the century-long process, how the Franciscan order strove to authenticate, accommodate and reinterpret this extraordinary miracle. While Gregory IX might have alluded to the stigmata of Francis in his canonization bull *Mira circa nos* dated 19 July, 1228 (Dalarun 2002, 17–9), he certainly avoided to mention them. It took nine years until he decided to take an open stand for the stigmata in his bull *Confessor Domini* dated April 5, 1237. (Schmucki 1990, 273–74) The same uncertainty is reflected by the contradictory reports on the stigmata by Roger of Wendover, transcribed by Matthew Paris, which still ignore the vision of the seraph, dates the stigmatization to two weeks before the death of Francis, who, according to Roger, did show his wounds in public, and which had perfectly healed before his death. (Hewlett 1886–1889, 2:328–33; Robson 2015, 86–8)

The uncertainty concerning the stigmata of Francis made also their imprint upon the iconography of this miracle, which became a very popular theme of late medieval painting and book illumination. One of the earliest depictions is to be seen on an enamel reliquary from Limoges, now in the Louvre, which shows with clear marks the separate spheres of the Seraph and Francis, the consecutive sequence of vision and stigmatization. (Davidson 1998, 106) (Figure1)

The oldest extant panel painting representing the stigmatization as one of the six miracle episodes beside the large central figure of Saint Francis, showing the stigmatic wounds on his hands and feet, is an altarpiece for Pescia (1235), made by Bonaventura Berlinghieri. It frames the event as a parallel to Christ's vision on the Mount of Olives (an appropriate way to see Francis as "*Alter Christus*"), and having an unsurmountable distance and separation between the divine Seraph-Crucifix and the kneeling, praying Francis. (Frugoni 1993, 321–30; Cook 1999, 165–8)[10] (Figure 2)

9 Thomas de Celano. *Vita Prima S. Francisci Assisiensis et ejusdem legenda ad usum chori.* Analecta Franciscana, X. vol. 1–267; c. 94.

10 cf. also Paloma Chatterjee. *The Living Icon in Byzantium and Italy: The Vita Image Eleventh to Thirteenth Centuries,* 2014, 168–84.

The illustration in the autograph copy of the *Cronica maiora* of Matthew Paris,[11] prepared by the chronicler himself after 1236, provides a different suggestion. Contradicting the narrative of Roger of Wendover, included in a preceding part of Matthew's chronicle, he certainly used Thomas of Celano's legend, so he included the seraph in the illustration. Nevertheless, in opposition to Thomas, he depicts the vision according to the dream-convention: Francis is shown in a reclining position, asleep on a green grass, while the red stigmata become visible on his hands, feet and his side. (Luard 1872–1883, 132–33; Lewis 1987, 31. Figure 201; Brooke 2006, 192–202; Robson 2015, 90–3) (Figure 3)

The confusion surrounding the stigmata illustration, as shown by Chiara Frugoni, continued for several decades. For instance, in the *Book of Hours* from Carpentras (c. 1250), instead of the mountain wilderness the scene is set in a church where the seraph appears on the altar. (Frugoni 1993, Figure 10) The Spirituals (*zelanti*) develop an iconographic theme showing the visionary contact of Francis and the Seraph as an illumination coming to him through three rays, making him an eschatological prophet – this is to be seen on the panel of the Bardi Master (1243). (Frugoni 1993, 357–98; Cook 1999, 98–102) (Figure 4)

In the meantime, one could witness the creation of a new series of legends of Saint Francis, nourished by the controversies and tensions between the Spiritual and the Conventual branch of the order. (Dalarun 2002b; Uribe 2002; Dalarun 2010) An increasing significance attributed to the stigmata is clearly discernible in the recently discovered abbreviated version of the *Vita prima* by Thomas of Celano (ca. 1232–1239). (Dalarun 2015, 23–86) Further legends included the one by Julian of Speyer (c. 1240)[12], the *Assisi Compilation* (c.1240–1260)[13], the *Legend of the Three Companions* (1240). *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, known as the *Second Life of St Francis* (*Vita Secunda*), completed in 1247[14] and supplemented in 1254 by the *Tractatus de Miraculis*,[15] was composed at the re-

11 Corpus Christi College Library, Cambridge, MS. 16, fol. 70vo.

12 Iuliani de Spira. "Vita s. Francisci." In Menestò–Brufani 1995, 1025–95.

13 Marino Bigaroni ed. *"Compilatio Assisiensis" dagli Scritti di fr. Leone e Compagni su s. Francesco d'Assisi...*; see also in Menestò–Brufani. *Fontes Franciscani,* 1471–1690; Armstrong et al. eds. *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents II. The Founder,* 118–230. On the *Compilatio Assisiensis,* see also Rosalind Brooke ed. *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli sociorum S. Francisci...;* and Theodore Desbonnets. "Introduction à la *Légende de Pérouse*".

14 Thomae de Celano. "Vita secunda s. Francisci." In Menestò–Brufani 1995, 441–639; Armstrong et al. *The Founder*, 393.

15 Thomae de Celano. "Tractatus de miraculis b. Francisci." In Menestò–Brufani 1995, 643–50.

quest of minister general John of Parma. While the episodes of the *Assisi Compilation* surprisingly avoided speaking of the stigmata, and only mentioned the vision of the Seraph; the *Legend of the Three Companions*, and the *Vita secunda* enriched the supernatural bond of Francis by the earlier communication with the *croce dipinta* at San Damiano, and developed thus substantially the concept of stigmatization:

> From that hour ... his heart was wounded and it melted when remembering the Lord's Passion. While he lived, he always carried the wounds of the Lord Jesus in his heart. This was brilliantly shown afterwards in the renewal of those wounds that were miraculously impressed on and revealed in his body. (*Three Companions*)[16]
> [...] the wounds of the sacred Passion were impressed deep in his heart, though not yet on his flesh. (*Vita secunda*).[17]

The *Tractatus de miraculis* continues in this vein "just as, internally, his mind had put on the crucified Lord, so, externally, his whole body put on the cross of Christ...."[18] The most interesting new aspect, making its appearance in this legend, is the series of miracles intended to prove the truthfulness of the stigmata in the eyes of those who have doubts in it. These ocular and juridical testimonies of those, who "have seen these things ... and have touched with our own hands... and what we once swore, while touching these things",[19] though curiously missing from the first, rather rushed canonization examination, made their comeback already in the 1230s, when a notarial list of several testimonies was compiled in Assisi, and added to the papal confirmation by Gregory IX. (Schmucki 1990, 273–74; Penacchi 1904, 129–97; Dalarun 2010, 2: 3059)

The *Memoriale* makes a special place for John Frangipani, the son of Lady Jacoba, who by that time became proconsul of the Romans, and who was one of the first people having the privilege to see and touch the sacred wounds immediately after the death of Francis. (Armstrong et al. 2002, 417–19) The treatise also enumerates a series of further miraculous events attesting to the mir-

16 Armstrong et al. *The Founder,* 76.
17 *The Founder*, 249.
18 *The Founder*, 401.
19 The words of Pope Gregory IX, quoted by Thomas of Celano in *Vita prima,* see Armstrong et al. *The Saint*, 293.

acle: a doubting cleric of Potenza who is punished by having similar wounds on his hand; a noble woman in Rome whose devotional image of Francis lacked the depiction of the stigmata, but these did miraculously appear on the panel; a doubting Franciscan friar to whom Francis appears in his dream and lets him touch his wounds; and a mortally wounded man saved and healed by the appearing St. Francis, who touched the mortal wounds with his own stigmatic wounds. (Armstrong et al. 2002, 404–8)

All these testimonies have been completed by the words and above all the most precious relic of Leo, the closest companion of Francis, who had been there with Francis on the Mount La Verna and had received a parchment with the autograph words of the hymn *Laudes Dei Altissimi* written down by Francis after his vision there, and to which Leo added a brief factual note concerning this donation, stressing that he had received it "post impressionem stigmatum." (Bartoli Langeli 2002, 31–2) Though the precise date of this note is much debated, it seems clear that at least from the 1240s on Leo, who is now also identified as the most probable author of the *Assisi Compilation*, has also accepted to step in as the principal witness of the stigmata. (Frugoni 1993, 72–105; Benfatti 2011, 44–51, 170–76)

The debates were finally settled by the *Legenda Maior* of Bonaventura, finished in 1263, which gave a new account of the vision received by Saint Francis and the causality of his bodily transformation. (Bonaventure 2002, 525–683)[20] His principal novelty was to emphasize that the man crucified appearing between the wings of the seraph is no other than Christ, Bonaventura called him by his name several times. (He rejoiced because of the gracious way Christ looked upon him under the appearance of the Seraph... He wondered exceedingly at the sight of so unfathomable a vision, realizing that the weakness of Christ's passion was in no way compatible with the immortality of the Seraph's spiritual nature.) He also added the new description of the psychological modalities of the stigmatization: "Eventually he understood ... that he was to be totally transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified, not by the martyrdom of his flesh, but by the fire of his soul." And finally, the wounds were not external protrusions as in the version of Thomas, but were directly caused, imprinted by the body of Christ upon that of Francis. "And the vision disappeared, it left in his heart a marvellous ardour and

20 Recently Adelaide Ricci elaborated a detailed analysis of Bonaventure's legends, see n. 3, Ricci 2021, 57–111.

imprinted on his body marks that were no less marvellous... His hands and feet seemed to be pierced through the centre by nails."

The authoritative account by Saint Bonaventure, after the acceptation of which the general chapter of 1265 ordered the destruction of all preceding legends of Saint Francis to stop the internal debates around his personality, did not fully eliminate the question marks. The ongoing interrogations are reflected by the fact that in 1282 a curious document is produced by Philip, minister of Tuscia: *Instrumentum de stigmatibus beati Francisci*. This is an inquisition of the visions of a lay brother who made a pilgrimage to Mount Alverna in 1281, where St. Francis appeared to him when called upon. The lay brother interrogated him in detail about precisely how the reception of the stigmata took place, with the same kind of factual, inquisitorial questions, as what is received by the witnesses of canonization investigations. The account he claimed to have received from Saint Francis in his vision is quite different from the one to be read in the legends of Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure: the Lord touched him three times with his hand, at the hands, the feet and the side, and "printed in him his stigmata that caused such a violent sensation of pain that he had to cry out each time loudly. (Heullant-Donat 2013, 96)

Chiara Frugoni and Arnold Davidson also analysed the parallel iconographic evolution where a similar change of interpretations could be observed as in the texts. After a large initial variety, it was Giotto who elaborated the new iconographic canon, based on the new interpretation in Bonaventure's text. Let us observe here some basic traits. The earliest one from the Upper Church of the Basilica of St. Francis at Assisi (prepared by Giotto and/or his assistants), has the caption: *vidit Christum in specie Seraphim crucifixi.* We are also told in the caption that the crucified seraph "impressed" the stigmata in his body. A new feature in the iconography is that this "impression" did not occur, as in the *Vita prima,* after the vision had disappeared, but became simultaneous with it, operated by five luminous rays emanating from the wounds of Christ and piercing the body of St. Francis.[21] A similar logic can be observed on the panel painting in the Louvre, originally exposed in Pisa, where Saint Francis becomes the dominating figure of the scene, almost soliciting this supernatural encounter, and not merely subject to it. (Gardner 2011, 17–46) (Figure 5) A further development of this motif is that while on the Assisi and the Louvre paintings the rays impress the

21 A recent detailed analysis of Giotto's works is provided by Serena Romano. "Giotto, Francesco, i Francescani", 2018.

wounds as if coming from a mirror-image (from the left hand of Christ to the right one of Saint Francis, and so forth), the Bardi Chapel fresco corrects this by an even further bodily identification: the left hand and feet wounds are beamed to the left ones of Saint Francis and the right ones to the right: thus Francis is not "mirroring" Christ, but becomes simply identical with him. (Frugoni 1993, 210–16)[22] (Figures 6 and 7)

This strong claim then became the principal source of the identity of the Franciscan order. Despite the vicissitudes of the order during the persecutions from Pope John XXII, the uniqueness of Francis got further strengthened in the 14th century by the broad popular reading of his legends, new compilations such as the *Actus beati Francisci* (c. 1320), the *Speculum Perfectionis*, and their new vernacular versions, above all the *Fioretti*, and the attached anonymous treatise, *Considerazioni sulle stigmate*. (Armstrong et al. 2002, 207–660). In 1390 Bartolomeo da Pisa could resume this tradition in a magisterial, two volume work: *De conformitate vitae Beati Francisci ad vitam Domini Jesu*.[23] One should not wonder that this claim also provoked very hefty counter-reactions.

The stigmata contested

André Vauchez was the first to draw the attention, in 1968, to the strong resistance to the claim of the stigmata. (Vauchez 1968, 595–625) Among those who were the most reluctant to accept the attribution of this prestigious emblem to St. Francis, thus making him an *alter Christus*, were the two rival religious orders of the age, the Cistercians and the Dominicans. Robertus de Anglia, the Cistercian bishop of Olomouc (Bohemia) opposed to this new cult so heftily (labelling it a sacrilege) that he accepted rather the mandate of Pope Gregory IX constraining him to resign from his episcopal see than withdraw his criticism.

22 Recent restoration of the Bardi chapel frescos revealed, that the change of the direction of the rays was a posterior change of the original, probably made by the disciple of Giotto, Taddeo Gaddi. According to this discovery Giotto remained faithful to his original concept, that the body of Francis just "mirrored" the body of Christ. But after his death the change of the order of the rays did impose itself. Cf. Fabrizio Bandini et al. "I recenti interventi di restauro sulle pitture murali di Giotto e del Maestro di Figline nel transetto della basilica di Santa Croce," 2014, 268–90, at p. 276. Special thanks to Dóra Sallay for this reference.

23 Bartolomeo de Pisa. *De Conformitate vitae beati Francisci ad vitam Domini Iesu*. Analecta Franciscana, IV–V. vols (1906–1912).

> Because the son of the eternal Father alone was crucified for the salvation of mankind, and the Christian religion ought to adore his wounds alone with suppliant devotion, neither blessed Francis nor any other of the saints is to be depicted with stigmata in the Church of God, and who asserts the contrary, sins. (Vauchez 1968, 601; Mencherini 1924, 8–11)

In the same year Gregory also issued a condemnation of a Dominican a friar named Evechardus, who was preaching in Oppava (also Moravia) against the authenticity of the stigmata of Saint Francis and named the Franciscans "false preachers."

The envy among the Dominicans – and from now on I will concentrate upon them – got also expressed in several different manners. The first could be named rivalizing imitation: a long series of rival claims of having the stigmata. This series starts with the case of Walter of Strassburg, about whom we read in the *Vitae fratrum* by Gerhard Frachet, written around 1260.

> He entered to pray in Colmar in the house of the Friars minor and meditated on the bitter suffering of the Lord, and felt in his body on five places such a strong pain that he could not withhold himself and he cried out in a loud voice, and since then he keeps feeling bitter pain on these five places. (Gerardus de Fracheto 1896, 223)

This interesting idea of the invisible but painful Christ-like wounds shows also a meaningful difference in the spirituality of the two mendicant orders. Instead of the theatrical religious manifestations that the Dominicans reproached the Franciscans, they proposed a more disciplined, ascetic and interiorized assimilation to Christ's suffering.

The stigmatization of Francis has been tackled by the Dominicans, in a very sophisticated way, also from another angle: the supernatural origin of these bodily signs. We find this in the preachings of James of Voragine (1230–1298), in one of the four sermons he had dedicated to the stigmata of Francis. (Bériou 2015, 279–313)

> His ardent imagination (*vehemens imaginatio*) imprinted the stigmata on his body as is evident in two examples which are in Je-

> rome's writings. The first is the account of a certain woman who gave birth to an Ethiopian baby, because of this she was suspected by her husband of having an affair; but it was discovered that this happened to her as a result of a certain image of an Ethiopian which she could not get out of her mind. Another example is that a woman had given birth to a son who looked nothing like her or her husband; and because of this it was suspected that she had an affair; but it was found that she had a painting of a man in her bedroom which looked like her baby. If therefore, Francis in a vision had imagined the crucified Seraph, so great was his imagination that it impresses the wound of the passion on his flesh. (Jacobus de Voragine 1926, 113–14)

Despite all of James' praise of Saint Francis elsewhere, this explanation and the accompanying naturalistic and psychological arguments undermine the claim of the supernatural origin of these *signa*. The Franciscans tried in vain to refute such reasoning in university *quodlibet* debates (Mohan 1948, 284–94; Petrus Thomae 1957; Boureau 1995, 159–73); this interpretation – the precursor of the modern psycho-somatic explanation of stigmata – remained popular. Petrarch wrote this in 1366:

> Concerning the stigmata of St. Francis, this is certainly the origin: so assiduous and profound was his meditation on the death of Christ that his soul was filled up with it, and appearing to himself to be also crucified with his Lord, the force of that thought was able to pass from the soul into the body and leave visibly impressed in it the traces. (Petrarca 1868, 465; Vauchez 1968, 625)

Another Dominican sermon went much further: we learn that in 1292 Pope Nicholas IV (the first Franciscan pope) excommunicated a Dominican friar named Thomas of Aversa and forbade him from preaching and teaching for seven years because he asserted that the stigmata of the passion were in fact obtained not by Saint Francis but by Saint Peter Martyr who indeed suffered and died the martyr's death and five rivulets of blood had sprung from his wounds. He added that Francis only received the signs of the "dead God" while Peter Martyr received those of the "living God." (Prudlo 2008, 123–24; Ames 2009, 74)

A similar animosity is recorded in one of the complements to the *Actus beati Francisci* where a Dominican friar was angered by a fresco depicting Saint Francis's stigmatization, and tried to erase the stigmata from the painting, but these stigmata miraculously reappeared on the painting.

> [...] when the friar sat down at table, he looked at the picture of Saint Francis and he saw those sacred Stigmata seeming more beautiful and new than they had ever appeared before. ... And he said to himself: "By God, I am going to erase those Stigmata so that they will never appear again!" ... Then with intense fury he took a knife and carved the marks of the Stigmata out of the picture, cutting out the colour and the stone. But just as he finished digging, blood began to flow from the openings, and it gushed out violently and stained the friar's face and hands and habit. He was terrified and fell to the ground as if he were dead. Meanwhile the blood was flowing in streams from the openings in the wall which the unhappy man had made where the Stigmata had been. (Armstrong et al. 2002, 559)[24]

The appearance of female stigmatics

While these polemics continued till the end of the Middle Ages, the Franciscans constantly reasserting the uniquely miraculous origin of the stigmata and excluding any rational explanation by the "vehement imagination," the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries have seen repeated attempts to appropriate this special sign of perfection, precisely by the two religious orders that had been so sceptical about the stigmatization of St. Francis.

In 1267 Philip of Clairvaux, from the Cistercian abbey of Herkenrode, diocese of Liège, reported that a Beguine living nearby in the village of Spalbeek, named Elizabeth,

> bore most openly the *stigmata* of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is, in her hands, feet, and side, without ambiguous simulation or doubt-

24 See *Actus Beati Francisci,* cap. 65, 2214–2215. For a detailed recent analysis of this episode see Warr, *Stigmatics and Visual Culture,* 2022, 43–47.

> ful fraud. The visibly open, fresh wounds are bleeding frequently and especially on Fridays.[25]

Philip of Clairvaux colourfully described how Elizabeth presented, in a series of ecstatic raptures, a meticulously precise performance of Christ's sufferings from the moment of his arrest till the deposition from the Cross, and fitting this presentation, in addition, to the rhythm of the seven canonical prayers. Philip also underlined that "he himself with his companions, abbots and monks" could observe with his own eyes the blooddrops or streams coming from the eyes and the wounds of the virgin. (*Vita Elizabeth* 1886, 371)

After his detailed description of the miraculous bodily signs (where Elizabeth added to the bodily imitation of the wounds also a series of passion-related postures), Abbot Philip raises the question how the divine choice for representing "this glorious victory, this wonderful virtue" could fall upon "a representative of the feeble feminine sex", and tries to justify it with eloquent arguments.[26] He points out that "in the members and the body of this girl as a vivid and unmistakable Veronica, a living image and an animated history of redemption" could be read, even by the illiterate people.[27] A passionate controversy ensued, initiated by the Franciscan master of Paris, Guibert of Tournai, who wrote a treatise entitled *On the Scandals of the church (Collectio de scandalis Ecclesiae)* mentioning this attempt to steal the privilege of stigmatization from St. Francis. (Guibert of Tournai 1931, 62)

Almost simultaneously, in the Rhinelands there emerged another stigmatic Beguine: Christina of Stommeln (1242–1312), a devout laywoman near Cologne, discovered and promoted by Peter of Dacia, a Dominican friar from Gotland. He met Christina in 1267, who was already bearing the stigmata on her body then; Peter visited her thirteen times before leaving for Paris in 1269, and he provided a detailed description of the divine experiences of Christina, the

25 "[...] praefata puella manifestissime stigmata Domini nostri Jesu Christi in corpore suo portat: in cujus scilicet manibus et pedibus necnon et latere absque simulationis ambiguo aut fraudis scrupulo evidentissime patent plagae recentes, frequenter et maxime sextis feriis sanguis irriguum emoventes" (*Vita Elizabeth* 1886, 362–78, at 363); cf. Simone Roisin. *L'hagiographie cistercienne,* 1947, 69–73; Walter Simons and J. E. Ziegler. "... Elisabeth Spalbeek and the Passion cult", 1990, 117–26; Susan Rodgers and Joanna E. Ziegler. "Elisabeth Spalbeek's Trance Dance of Faith", 1999, 299–355.

26 "[...] infirmitatem sexus muliebris...exhibitione tam gloriosae victoriae, tam admirabile virtutis [...] praesignavit". *Vita Elizabeth,* 372.

27 *Vita Elizabeth*, 373; I quote the English translation from Walter Simons. "Reading a saint's body..." 1994, 11.

appearance of bleeding stigmata on her body, and the diabolic tribulations that tortured her. (Coakley 1990, 222–45; Kleinberg 1992, 40–98; Ruhberg 1995)

Another very detailed description was transmitted from Germany about the stigmatization of Lukardis, a Cistercian nun of Oberweimar, Saxony, who had a Dominican confessor, Friar Eberhard. The story of this paralytic nun who could give sense to her suffering from enduring illnesses by assimilating her passion to that of Christ has been analysed by Aviad Kleinberg and, from the point of view of the history of emotions, by Piroska Nagy. (Kleinberg 1992; Nagy 2009, 323–53) The life of Lukardis presents her stigmatization as the high point in a sequence of visions producing also different bodily manifestations. She is being fed by the Virgin, then she is also allowed to taste the milk of the Virgin (the first female version of the *lactatio*), Christ breathes the Holy Spirit into her mouth in the form of a kiss, Lukardis even had a mystical pregnancy for being able to experience that the Virgin gave birth to Christ without any pain.

Her desire to receive Christ's wounds surfaced in 1279, with a spectacular vision of the Crucifix. In the vision she saw the crucified Christ whose right arm was loosened from the cross, pathetically hanging down; this seemed to her to sharply amplify the suffering Christ's pain. Approaching him with great compassion, the beloved handmaiden tried to tie the arm back to the cross with a silken thread but could not succeed. She then began to lift his arm with her hands and, with groans, to hold it in place. The Lord then said to her: "Attach your hands to my hands and your feet to my feet and your breast to my breast, and thus shall I be helped by you to find relief." Once the handmaiden of God had done this, she instantly sensed within herself the harshest pain of wounds in her hands, feet and breast, even though no wounds were visible to the eyes. [28]

Two years later, however, in 1281, Christ appeared again; gently pressing his wounded hands to hers, the five holy wounds gradually appeared. These wounds, like those of Elisabeth of Spalbeek, also obeyed a liturgical rhythm: they started to ache more and bleed every Friday, and especially in Lenten period and mostly on Holy Friday. And finally, after the stigmata also the other wounds of Christ appeared on her body: the scars of the flagellation, and of the crown of thorns. We also get a detailed explanation of all these mystical wounds in the legend:

28 "Iuge, inquit, manus tuas manibus meis et pedes tuos pedibus meis et pectus tuum pectori meo, et sic ero per te adiutus út levius habeam" ("Vita venerabilis Lukardis," ed. J. de Baker, *Analecta Bollandiana* 18 [1899]: 305–67, at 314); Kleinberg. *Prophets in Their Own Country,* 101–11.

> So it happened that the handmaid of God, who has been bearing the image of the passion secretly inside her soul for a long time, was revealed by the Lord, and marked on the outside of her body for a multitude of people to be seen.[29]

Maybe this is the point where I should suspend the narration of the medieval history of stigmatics, which is continuing until the present day. The stigmata rivalry between Franciscans and Dominicans continued throughout the Middle Ages, the Italian Dominicans first attributed stigmata to the saint-candidate Margaret of Hungary,[30] and then managed to get recognition, with considerable difficulty, for the "invisible stigmata" of their biggest late medieval mystic, Catherine of Siena.[31] For supporting the claims of the Dominicans that Catherine's "invisible stigmata" were still truly existent, in the late fifteenth century several "new Catherines" appeared, among whom Lucia Brocadelli was the most noteworthy. (Herzig 2013)

With more and more stigmatics continuing this tradition, stigmatization became a special, privileged type of ecstatic and somatic spirituality, cultivated above all by women. In the 19th century, when new stigmatics attracted public attention, a deeply religious French doctor, Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre considered these stigmata as a response to the "*libre-penseurs*" of the age and became an assiduous collector of all historical data on the stigmatized, compiling the first and to date most complete encyclopaedia of stigmatics, amassing 321 cases. (Imbert-Gourbeyre 1873; 1996; [1890]) The far most popular 20th century Italian saint is again a stigmatic, Padre Pio. (Luzzatto, 2007) A recent ERC research project in Antverp, directed by Tine van Osselaer, examining 19th and 20th-century stigmatics in Catholic Western Europe identified 350 stigmatics only in these two centuries. (van Osselaer et al 2021)

The body ranks very high in Christianity: *Verbum caro factum est* – the Word became flesh (John 1:14), the Son of God was incarnated in a human body; it was his bodily suffering that redeemed humanity. And since Saint Francis of Assisi, as we could see, some very specially devout men and women have provided live, tormented, bleeding bodily images of the suffering Christ in order to propagate this message.

29 "Vita venerabilis Lukardis", 324.
30 I have dealt with this issue in several studies; in English see Gábor Klaniczay, "On the Stigmatization of Saint Margaret of Hungary", 2009, 274–84.
31 See my 2020 study "The Mystical Pregnancy..." mentioned in n. 1.

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