



[Headband and Initial from Crooke: A Description of the Body of Man. London, 1631.]

ANNALS OF MEDICAL HISTORY

VOLUME IX

SUMMER, 1927

NUMBER 2

THE STIGMATA OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI*

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THROUGH



THE seven hundredth anniversary of the death of St. Francis of Assisi, which occurred on the 3rd of October, 1926, brings vividly before us not only one of

the most remarkable figures of historic times, whose spiritual influence on millions has been incalculably great for many centuries and still continues, but also one of the most striking and best attested "miracles" that include marked changes in the human body, of which the Christian world is aware.

We cannot pause here to discuss the tremendous nature of the stimulus and the intense mental make-up which transformed the swashbuckling young Assisan reveller from a typical product of his day into the most Christ-like figure that has appeared in

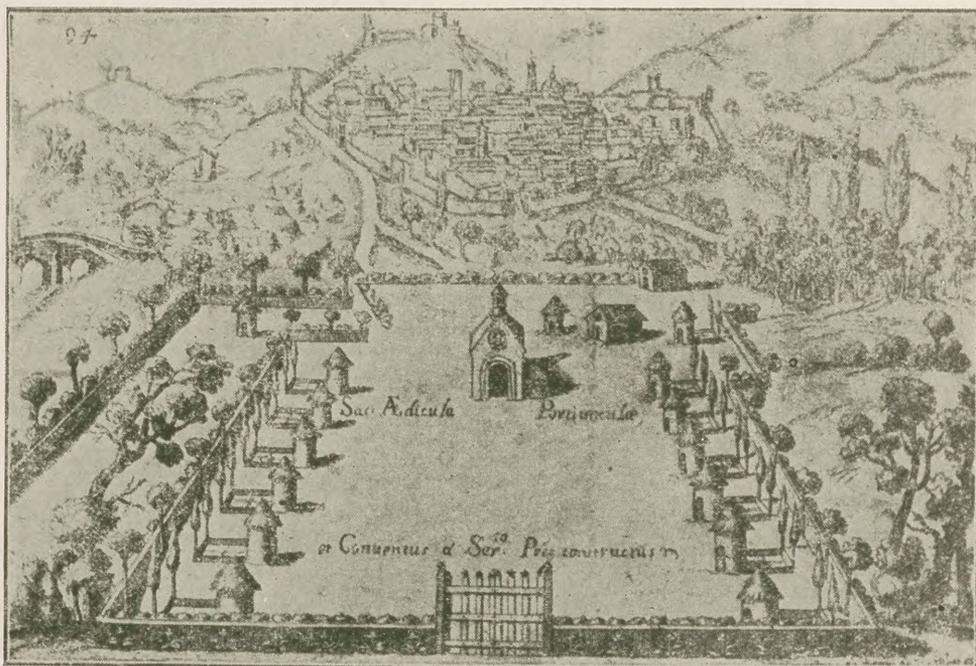
* From the Laboratories of the Philadelphia General Hospital. Read before the Section on Medical History of the College of Physicians, Oct. 28, 1926.

nineteen centuries; but these must certainly be taken strongly into account in any consideration of the famous stigmata. Neither can we more than mention that strange combination of poverty and asceticism (Brother Ass the body) with mysticism and joyousness (the Jongleur of God) which made up St. Francis' life after his conversion and helps us today in any effort to comprehend the nature of stigmata. The great order of the Franciscans or Friars Minor, which was founded for St. Francis by Innocent III in 1209, already by 1220 had developed along such different lines than he had anticipated that he resigned the office of minister general and gladly retired to his more appropriate life of saintly example, another incident that throws light on the make-up of the man.

Two years before his death, St. Francis went with Brothers Maseo, Angelo and Leo to the Mt. Alverna (also called Monte della Vernia or La Verna) in the neighboring Apennines near Arezzo, a mountain that had been given to the order as a retreat by Orlando, Count of Chiusi in 1213. It is known that at this time Francis was much

concerned over the future of the order and his own inability to guide it along the lines he had mapped out; he "was even more absorbed than usual in his ardent desire to suffer for Jesus and with him." After a "Lent" of forty days, spent almost entirely in fasting, prayer and meditation on his favorite subject, the Crucifixion, and in great bodily weakness and exhaustion, he had a vision on the morning of September 14, 1224, which Sabatier describes as follows:

Jesus Christ, the Crucified, the which had shown himself to him in the likeness of a seraph; and thus his hands and feet appeared to be pierced through the middle with nails and the heads of them were in the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet outside the flesh and their points came out on the back of his hands and feet, so that they seemed bent back and riveted in such fashion that under the bend and riveting which all stood out above the flesh, might easily be put a finger of the hand, as in a ring, and the heads of the nails were round and black.



VIEW OF THE PORTIUNCULA AND ASSISI, AS IT WAS IN THE TIME OF ST. FRANCIS.

In the rays of the rising sun . . . he suddenly perceived a strange figure. A seraph with outspread wings flew towards him from the edge of the horizon and bathed his soul in raptures unutterable. In the centre of the vision appeared a cross and the seraph was nailed upon it. When the vision disappeared he felt sharp sufferings mingling with the ecstasy of the first moments. Stirred to the very depths of his being, he was anxiously seeking the meaning of it all, when he perceived on his body the "Stigmata¹ of the Crucified."

In the language of the Fioretti:

Straightway in the hands and feet of St. Francis began to appear the marks of the nails, in such wise as he had seen them in the body of

¹στίγμα means a spot or mark, but is used in medicine to designate a variety of marks, e. g., stigmata of degeneration.

Likewise in the right side appeared an image of a wound made by a lance, unhealed and red and bleeding, which afterwards oft-times dropped blood from the sacred breast of St. Francis and stained with blood his tunic and hose.

In the account also of Thomas of Celano, the saint's first biographer (1228), he is pictured as considering anxiously what the vision might mean: "And when he could find nothing by which it might be understood and the novelty of the vision overwhelmed his heart, there began to appear [Coeperunt apparere signa clavorum] in his hands and feet signs of nails such as he had just seen in the holy Crucified One who stood over him." Bonaventura² (1263) also

²From Vita Sancti Francisci of Saint Bonaventura: "Manus enim et pedes in ipso medio clavis confixae videbantur, clavorum capitibus in interiore

uses the expression "began to appear" and the Three Companions (1246) tell the story almost in the same words. Though all but the earliest account may well have been borrowed from its predecessor, still it is apparent that it was not considered that the stigmata sprang miraculously into full-fledged existence.

Francis seldom if ever referred to this stupendous occurrence. According to Bonaventura, a small child at the time of the

panions (Leo, Ruffino, Angelo, Elias) bore prompt witness that the stigmata existed and that they were seen by many after his death, but none actually says: "I have seen them myself."

The day after St. Francis' death, Elias of Cortona, the acting superior of the order, wrote a circular letter in which it is clearly implied that he had himself seen the stigmata. Bonaventura says that the Saint's friend, Pope Alexander IV, had seen the



THE SUMMIT OF MT. ALVERNA, ON WHICH ST. FRANCIS RECEIVED THE STIGMATA.

occurrence and writing some forty years later, Francis after returning to the Portiuncula, related the occurrence to his companions in response to their earnest requests, but this was apparently the only time that he did so and this rests on the authority of Bonaventura alone. Several of Francis' com-

parte manuum et superiore pedum apparentibus et eorum acuminibus existentibus ex adverso. Erantque clavorum capita in manibus et pedibus rotunda et nigra—ipsa vero acumina oblonga retorta et quasi repercussa, quae de ipsa carne surgentia carnem reliquam excedebant. Dextrum quoque latus quasi lancea transfixum rubra cicatrice obductum erat, quod saepe sanguinem sacrum effundens, tunicam et femoralia respergebant." (XIII.)

mysterious wounds. Ruffino was said to have touched the wound in the side, but nowhere does this appear in his own writing. In the two years of St. Francis' life following the stigmatization his mode of existence was greatly changed. It is said that he wore his sleeves long to conceal the marks on his hands (how different from some of his modern imitators!) and was no longer able to walk in comfort on account of the marks on his soles. However, he never again mentioned them to his friends and there is no detailed description of their appearance after his death.

The stigmata thus seem, without being actually proved, to be sufficiently well docu-

mented with contemporary evidence to admit of but little doubt but that on that historic morning St. Francis acquired certain marks on his hands, feet and side more or less resembling the stigmata of Christ's crucifixion, which stayed with him till his death two years later. The story is cer-

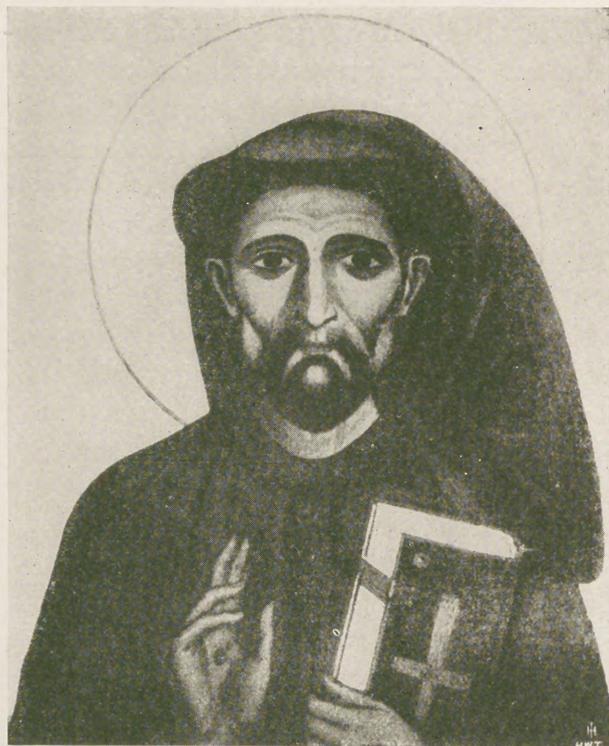
To have the incident brought home even more closely, a modern doubting Thomas should visit the treasury of the Church at Assisi and see as I have what is asserted to be the actual parchment used to cover the "wound in his side," worn through in its center and still bearing the signs of the ser-



CONTEMPORARY PORTRAIT OF BROTHER FRANCIS BEFORE RECEIVING THE STIGMATA.

tainly not a "late legendary accretion," as Chesterton³ has pointed out, and few will be found to agree with a cynical suggestion that has been made that St. Francis having been worsted in a fight with his friend Domenico di Gusman, his followers invented the story to mask the signs of the conflict.

³ Chesterton, G. K. *Saint Francis of Assisi*. Lond., 1924.



THIRTEENTH CENTURY PORTRAIT OF ST. FRANCIS WITH THE STIGMATA (MARGARITONE?).

ous exudate and also the contemporary attestation of his favorite disciple, Brother Leo, who is said to have removed the parchment from the Saint's dead body. The accompanying illustration of this document, in his and St. Francis' handwriting, was found on Brother Leo's body after his death. Kept ever since in the same treasury, these small parchments bridge the gap of seven centuries and bring one marvelously close to those soul-stirring events. In Brother Leo's handwriting in red ink is written in Latin:

The Blessed Francis two years before his death kept a forty day fast in the Alverna in honor of the blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and of the Blessed Michael the Archangel, from the Assumption of the blessed Virgin Mary to the feast of St. Michael in September; and

the hand of the Lord was laid upon him. After the vision and speech he had with the seraph and the impression of Christ's stigmata on his body, he made these praises which are written below on the sheet, and he wrote them with his own hand, giving thanks to God for the favor that had been conferred upon him [in Francis' handwriting], "The Lord bless thee and guard thee. Show his face to thee and have mercy upon thee—turn his face to thee and give thee peace."

And the blessed Francis wrote with his own hand this blessing for me, Brother Leo [again in Francis' handwriting]: "The Lord bless thee, Brother Leo."

And in the same way, he made the sign T together with the head with his own hand.

The marks on the hands and feet of St. Francis were apparently dark fleshy excrescences on both dorsal and palmar surfaces, resembling the flattened head of the nail on the palmar side. It is said that St. Clara, for whom Francis founded the "Second Order" of Franciscans, the nuns called the "Clares," tried after his death to remove one of the stigmata as a memento of her friend, but that it was firmly attached to the surrounding tissue. The wound in the side, corresponding to Christ's wound on the cross, constantly exuded a small amount of serous fluid, as the worn parchment covering at Assisi bears mute but eloquent witness.

Extensive though the evidence for the stigmata is, when one considers it over a space of seven centuries, nevertheless it is entirely inadequate as a basis for a pathological diagnosis, even if medical knowledge were sufficiently advanced today to give a complete answer in the presence of adequate data. It would seem that such a phenomenon must be either (1) a miracle; (2) artificially produced; or (3) a natural pathological lesion. If miraculous, and it is to be noted that even the Roman Catholic Church does not make belief in the stigmata an article of faith, it is then beyond the field of scientific inquiry and need not detain us here. In regard to the second possibility, as previously indicated, there is strong evidence that some physical change occurred in

St. Francis' hands, feet and side after he had had his vision and that he tried to keep his secret to himself, not exploit it. The chief argument in favor of pious fraud seems to be the belief that such an event is otherwise an impossibility; just as the cure of the advanced paretic is impossible, in the words



BROTHER LEO'S PARCHMENT IN HIS AND ST. FRANCIS' HANDWRITING.

of one sceptic who wrote on this subject. And yet we are today, apparently, seeing the cure of paresis and even greater wonders accomplished by scientific medicine. As Voltaire, I think, put it, the miracles of today are the commonplaces of tomorrow; or in Chestertonian paradox: "A man in Voltaire's time did not know what miracle he would next have to throw up. A man in our time does not know what miracle he will next have to swallow." On the other hand, pious frauds were not unknown in the history of the Church of that time, when all religious matters were on a very different plane than they are today. One has only to read the same Franciscan authorities who gave the accounts of the stigmata to meet certain narrations which must be explained on the first or second of our three theories. In the later "stigmatized," fraud is usually

prominent, either as a pure imposture to gain notoriety, or as the characteristic accompaniment of the hysterical nature which must underlie such phenomena, even if found to have a "natural" origin. St. Francis was undoubtedly highly emotional and neurotic, perhaps even hysteric, and his companions so emotionally saturated with the new idea that they might be expected to see events in a highly colored light. But the verdict of History is, I think



POSTAGE STAMP RECENTLY ISSUED BY THE ITALIAN GOVERNMENT COMMEMORATING THE FRANCISCAN ANNIVERSARY. NOTE THE STIGMATA, INCLUDING AN INDICATION OF THE WOUND ON THE RIGHT SIDE. LIKE THE FRENCH PASTEUR ISSUE AND OTHERS, THIS IS AN INTERESTING EXAMPLE OF THE RECENT TENDENCY TO UTILIZE PHILATELY AS A MEANS OF EDUCATING THE PUBLIC IN MATTERS OF HISTORICAL AND SCIENTIFIC INTEREST.

rightly, definitely against either him or his intimates being considered wilful impostors.⁴

We are thus brought to the consideration of the stigmata as possibly natural pathological phenomena. Certainly most unusual ones, just as the history of stigmatization includes very few if any authentic cases, and none recorded in the preceding twelve centuries of the Christian era. But who dare brand them as absolutely impossible, even without invoking miraculous supervention? We are in almost total ignorance of the limitations of the power of mind over body (a reason perhaps for the exuberant growth of a certain therapeutico-religious sect of

⁴ At the meeting at which this paper was presented Dr. C. W. Burr made the interesting suggestion that St. Francis in a spirit of self-castigation, but with no desire to defraud or to exalt himself over his fellows, may have inflicted the wounds upon himself in imitation of Christ's stigmata and that only after his death did the legend grow of their supernatural origin. His secretive attitude toward his stigmata would be quite in keeping with such an explanation.

our own generation) and yet few will deny that some such power exists. Skin vesicles are said to have been produced by the unaided power of suggestion during hypnosis, and even on one occasion a bloody exudate from a previous dermatographia in the same state.⁵ It requires but a slight extension, therefore, if such reports are true, to include autogenous production of similar phenomena. Granted the production of blebs in given localities, following intense mental stimuli, probably as a result of vasomotor changes, it becomes less difficult to add to this concept a bloody effusion in specified areas, or in the case of fleshy protuberances, such as St. Francis' seemed to be, a hyperkeratosis or even a pigmented nevus or papilloma, which as it grew older and darker might easily simulate a nail. Rosenow has claimed even more minute localization in the elective affinities of bacteria and Maud Slye similar refinements in spontaneous tumor formation. Cutaneous horns, of extensive distribution and varieties are far from uncommon⁶ and while the etiology of such conditions is largely unknown, it is by no means improbable that neurotrophic influences, and these perhaps partly regulated by the mind, may play an important rôle. It is significant that the early descriptions speak of the stigmata of St. Francis as "beginning to appear," i.e. it was not believed that they instantaneously sprang full-formed into being, which would constitute an occurrence much more difficult for the ordinary mind to comprehend.

Following the stigmatization of St. Francis, other examples soon became numerous. Dr. Imbert Goubeyre,⁷ a most credulous individual, has collected 145 cases of

⁵ Bourru, H., and Burot, P. Hemorrhagie de la peau provoquée par la suggestion en somnambulisme. *Compt. rend. Soc. de biol.*, Par., 1885, 8s., II, 461.

⁶ Gould, G. M., and Pyle, W. L. Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine. Phila., 1897, pp. 226, 286, 338.

⁷ Goubeyre I. Les Stigmatisées. Par., 1873, I, 268, La Stigmatisation, l'extase divine et les miracles de Lourdes. Par., 1894.

persons who had received the stigmata, eight of whom he said were living at the time he wrote. Alexander Macalister,⁸ professor of anatomy in the University of Cambridge, in his article on stigmatization in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* enumerates ninety instances (eighteen males, seventy-two females) and about thirty more, of which there are no particulars recorded. The earliest of these was apparently Ida of Louvain (1300), on whom the marks appeared as colored circles, and soon after Gertrude von Oosten of Delft (1344, colored scars). The greatest variety was encountered: Some had all five of the classical marks (full stigmatization), others but one or two. Some had open wounds, others merely bloody exudates in the classical spots, occasionally varied with the forehead (from the crown of thorns) and in one case at least (Angela della Pace, 1634, fully stigmatized at nine) with the sponge and hyssop in the mouth (a benign neoplasm? lymphedema?). The wounds were sometimes fetid and some "emitted the odor of violets"!

A second group, more obviously neurotic, felt the pains of stigmatization, but did not exhibit any of the physical signs. A third group, from the earlier post-Franciscan centuries, where the stigmata were said to have been found on the heart without bodily surface markings, might perhaps be better considered as misguided interpretations of pathological lesions at a period when very little was known of morbid anatomy.

Although it would be tiresome and relatively useless to discuss these cases in detail, a few perhaps merit some further attention.⁹ One of the most famous is Saint Catherine of Siena, the youngest of twenty-five children and one of twins, the other of which

was stillborn. She was an ascetic and ecstatic from the age of seven, saw visions and in her seventeenth year took the habit of the Dominican tertiaries. In a post-communion ecstasy on the fourth Sunday in Lent, 1475, she received the full stigmata, but in response to her prayer for the sake of humility the marks were not made visible! It is hardly surprising then, especially in view of the intense rivalry between the Dominicans and Franciscans, that her stigmata were not universally recognized and that Franciscans especially were loath to see their Saint share his chief glory with one of a rival order. Termination of the discussions required bulls from two Popes (Sixtus IV and Innocent VIII), according to which representation of the stigmata in all pictures of St. Catherine and any expression of belief in them was absolutely forbidden.

The case that has excited the most interest and study in modern times is that of Louise Lateau, a Belgian peasant girl, born January 30, 1850, of poverty-stricken parents. She was chlorotic, did not menstruate till eighteen, was a recluse and soon became an ecstatic and saw visions. In March, 1868, she began to bleed from the mouth and the next month seemed so sick that on April 15 the last sacrament was given. Menses, however, were established on April 19, and two days later she was able to take a long walk to church. The stigmata began to appear on Friday, April 24, 1868, with bleeding from the left side of her chest, and thereafter reappeared every Friday for several years. On the second Friday blood exuded from the dorsal surfaces of both feet, in addition to that from the wound in the side; on the third from both dorsal and palmar surfaces of both hands as well. This continued regularly every week with other additions, such as the forehead and between the shoulders, and was estimated to amount to about 250 gms. per week. Warlomont,¹⁰ who was commissioned by the Royal Academy of Medicine of Belgium to make a

⁸ Macalister, A. Stigmatization. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Ed. 11.

⁹ The cases of Christine de Stumbele, Veronica Giuliani, Vitaline Gagnon, Palma d'Oria, Maria K. and Louise Lateau are narrated in some detail in Hammond, W. A. *Nervous Derangement*. N. Y., 1883, p. 154, Chapter on Stigmatization.

¹⁰ Warlomont. Louise Lateau, *Rapport Médicale*, etc. Bruxelles and Paris, 1875.

scientific investigation of the case, after careful observation and taking measures to prevent artificial production of the hemorrhages, was convinced that the weekly stigmatization and ecstasy (hystero-catalepsy) were both real; though other claims made by the girl, such as that she had not slept, drunk, or eaten for four years, and had no passage of urine or feces for over three, were proved to be false and fraudulently supported by her. The combination in an hysteric of true pathological signs with fraudulent attempts to augment them with simulated phenomena is by no means impossible and should not necessarily lead the searcher for the true state of the matter into denouncing the whole occurrence as fraudulent. Fraud in some features, however, cannot but suggest that the whole business may be fraudulent and there is some evidence that such was the case here.¹¹ For instance, though hemorrhages continued even when the hands were bandaged, paper lining the bandages was said to reveal numerous pinpricks. In the debate that followed Warlomont's report, adherents were found both for the miraculous and the natural pathological viewpoints; but the Académie perhaps wisely decided to leave the matter undecided.

A very recent occurrence, studied by Professor Bianchi,¹² offers an interesting comparison to the Franciscan story. In a young girl, aged twenty-eight, from Cosenza (Montalto Offugo), periodic sanguineous sweats and "stigmata" were observed to appear every Friday in March from 1923 on! Careful study has convinced Fabrizio and Turano and others who have seen this case that these phenomena were not "faked" and that the subject was other-

wise perfectly normal. They believed, however, that it was not a case of true hemidrosis but rather of a hemorrhagic exudate due to some condition such as angioneurotic edema, and that the stigmata, which appeared on the dorsal and plantar surfaces of the feet and the anterior surfaces of the elbow, were due to trophic and vasomotor disturbances. I have not been able to see the original descriptions to find the exact nature of these lesions. Even with the little that we know of the mimicking capacity of angioneurotic edema and other neurotrophic disorders, such an explanation (explaining little though it does), should as I have previously indicated, not be rejected as incomprehensible. In the case of Padre Pio of Foggia, an "exceptionally calm and composed individual," who is still living and has a good family and past medical history, Professor Bignami,¹³ an agnostic, did not consider that the superficial scars on the hands and feet and the form of a cross on the left breast were artificially produced. He thought it possible to account for them naturally, as due to necrosis of the epithelium of neurotic origin, probably attributable to unconscious suggestion.

It will be interesting to see whether the solemn celebrations attending St. Francis' anniversary may perhaps cause a sufficient stimulus to some religious devotee to produce similar phenomena that can perhaps be studied from the start in such an intensive and objective manner that more light can be thrown on the nature of the occurrence.

In the meantime, we, like the Belgian Academy, should leave the matter undecided. My own preference is to feel that lesions which might fairly be called stigmata of the crucifixion are not beyond the realms of pathological possibility; and that in some cases, including that of St. Francis, the evidence, while not enough to constitute actual proof, is sufficient to impress strongly the unbiased student.

¹¹ Boens, H. *Fin de la Comédie de Boisd' Haine*. Bruxelles, 1876; *Louise Lateau ou les Mystères de Bois d'Haine dévoilés*. Bruxelles, 1875. Boens first considered that the stigmata were the natural hemorrhages of a hemophilic.

¹² Bianchi. *Congr. degli Alienisti, Trieste, Sept., 1925*. Quoted by Del Gaudio, A. *Le Stimmate di S. Francesco d'Assisi. Ref. Med.*, Naples, 1926, xli, 252.

¹³ Quoted by H. Thurston, S. J., *The Month*, 1923, pp. 142, 97.

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