



## The Skeptics SA guide to Stigmata

**The phenomenon** of stigmatisation is the reproduction on a human body the wounds of the Passion of Christ, i.e. bleeding punctures on the forehead, hands, feet and side as though they had been pierced by nails and a sword. More than three hundred cases have been recorded over the centuries, beginning with Francis of Assisi right up until the present day, with Padre Pio Forgione, Gemma Galgani and Theresa Neumann being the best documented this century.

Theresa Neumann, (1898 – 1962) was born into a very poor peasant family in the village of Konnersreuth, Bavaria. Her health deteriorated rapidly after she injured her back at the age of twenty, when she became bedridden suffering from temporary blindness, convulsions, paralysis of the legs and purulent sores on the back and the feet. Devoutly religious, she prayed incessantly to St Theresa of Lisieux, and by 1925 had regained her sight, the use of her legs, and enjoyed some semblance of health.

During Lent in 1926 following an overwhelming vision of the Passion, she began to exhibit the marks of the stigmata from which blood would flow profusely every Friday for the next thirty-two years. She abstained from food, existing solely on a spoonful of water daily,

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and was given to precognition and visions of the Passion. Doctors were allowed to examine her thoroughly during her trances and periods of unconsciousness, and testified that her wounds bore a strong resemblance to those of St Francis. The wounds on the hands and feet gave the impression of having been pierced by a forged iron nail. Although the attitude of the Church authorities was reserved, the village of Konnersreuth became a place of pilgrimage as curiosity seekers and miracle hunters poured in to view the phenomenon and to listen to Theresa speaking in Aramaic, a Semitic language spoken by Christ. During her thirty-five years fast, doctors kept Theresa strict surveillance and subjected her to long periods of medical scrutiny. They testified that to the best of their knowledge nothing was ingested other than the wafer and wine of the Holy Communion, and that her excreta ceased completely after 1930, her intestinal tract having withered away. By 1951 Theresa's phenomenon had diminished, and in the last five years of her life, although she continued to have visions and ecstasies she faded into obscurity, dying of malnutrition in 1962.

There is considerable doubt that all the phenomena reported actually occurred. Theresa's abstinence from food for example was never

rigorously controlled to the satisfaction of the Church authorities and the medical men called in to advise on the case. Many of the phenomena resembled closely that which have been observed to occur in other paranormal but non-religious contexts, and the blood observed on the stigmata was never seen to flow from them but only appeared on the wounds after Theresa had escaped observation beneath the bedclothes. Further, when a sample of the blood was subjected to analysis, it proved to be of menstrual origin.

In the case of Gemma Galgani, the Roman Catholic Congregation of Rites, which deals with canonisation, declaring her to be a saint, explicitly refrained from giving any verdict on the preternatural character of her stigmata and allied phenomena, saying that it was a matter 'upon which no decision is ever given.'

Another celebrated stigmatic was Padre Pio Forgione, an Italian priest who died in 1968. For fifty years it is alleged that he suffered agony from terrible bleeding holes in his hands and in his left side. In his early years he had a delicate constitution which was seriously affected by rigorous fasts and harsh discipline. He developed tuberculosis, began to see apparitions and was subject to 'diabolical attacks' by poltergeists.

Are these simply cases of extreme religious ecstasy or hallucinations, or is there a scientific explanation?

One possible answer to this question was provided in an experiment described by V Finne (1927) in *The Word as a Physiological and Therapeutic Factor*.

“Subject M, 35 years old, easily suggestible, was put up into a state of suggested sleep after which a copper coin was applied to the inner side of her left forearm with the suggestion that it was a burning-hot metal disk; as a result the subject sustained a heavy burn and felt acute pain. After awakening she was continuously watched by one of the physicians, a member of the conference. According to the record of observation, twenty-five minutes after the aforesaid suggestion and upon awakening, the skin was red at the point of the ‘burn’, fifty-five minutes later, a swelling was observed; two and one half hours later a white spot appeared in the centre of the ‘burned’ spot, and three and one half hours later a blister formed. Under deep hypnosis a suggestion to the effect of ‘burning’ makes a second degree burn on that spot on the body of the subject where the hypnotist or operator wanted it to occur.”

In religious ecstatic states the same phenomenon takes place. During the long spells of prayer and dedication, the believer becomes exhausted, the result of excessive excitation of nerve cells due to strained body posture

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and concentration of sensory centres, etc. The believer thus enters a deep hypnotic state, his delusional beliefs of ‘holy wounds’ which have strong rooted impressions in his memory cells, turn out to be strong suggestions and he develops blisters and wounds in the palms and chest just like the second degree burns in the experiment carried out by V Finne.

Father Herbert Thurston (1952), who has made a lifelong study of these phenomena, wrote:

“The impression left upon me has been that the subjects who were so favoured or afflicted were all suffering from pronounced and often hysterical neuroses. Many of them were intensely devout (of course it is only in the case of people whose thoughts were concentrated on religious motives that one would expect to find this type of manifestation) but in others piety was combined with eccentricities and with apparent dissociations of personality which were very strange and not exactly edifying. I find it difficult to believe that God could have worked miracles to accredit such people as his chosen friends and representatives.”

While it is conceded that sufficient faith in anything can possibly bring about a cure of a psychosomatic condition, there has never been any medical evidence to show that there is a direct link between prayer, faith or belief and a cure. There is a condition called psychogenic purpura, in which spontaneous bleeding can occur with no current physical trauma. It can

be brought on by severe stress and occurs in people of ‘hysterical predisposition’.

The cause therefore would appear to be a psychological manifestation rather than a supernatural one.

**Harry Edwards**

## **Skeptics SA**

### **The South Australian branch of the Australian Skeptics**

Email: <[info@skepticssa.org.au](mailto:info@skepticssa.org.au)>

Web site: <[www.skepticssa.org.au](http://www.skepticssa.org.au)>