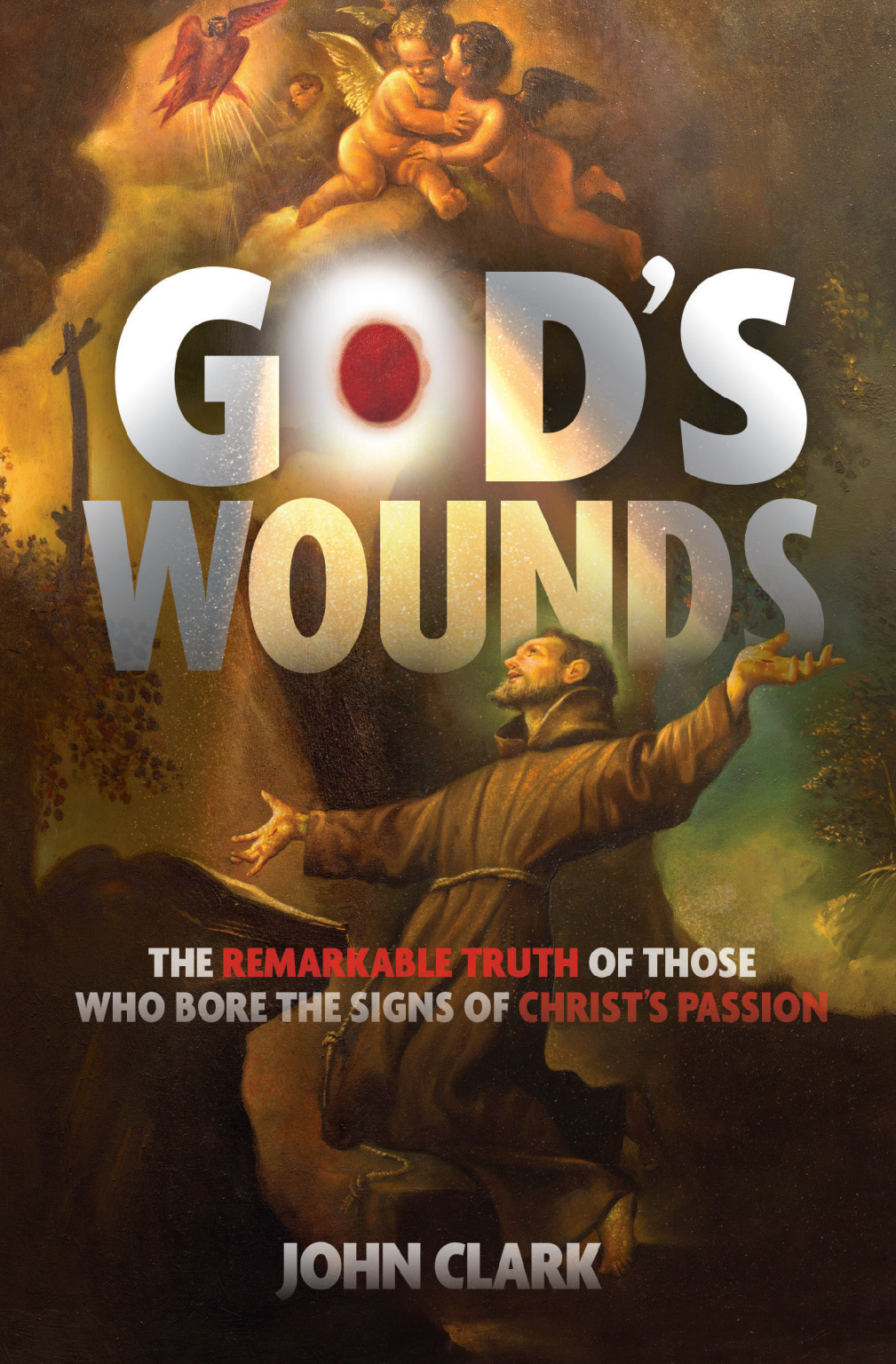
GOD'S
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THE REMARKABLE TRUTH OF THOSE
WHO BORE THE SIGNS OF CHRIST'S PASSION
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Catholic Answers Press

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PREFACE

This book began almost by accident.

Several years ago, as a regular contributor for Fr. Robert Spitzer's *Magis Center*, I wrote a series of articles explaining C.S. Lewis's fascinating Christological argument often referred to as the "trilemma." In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis explains that some people believe that Jesus was a good man with important teachings, but clearly not God. Lewis, however, argues that the *good man* argument is untenable:

> I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.[1]

Simply put, in claiming to be God—which Jesus most certainly did—there are three essential possibilities. Either

Jesus was a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. It's terribly logical: no truthful and sane person could claim to be God, and still be a good man—unless, of course, that person *is* God.

Lewis's trilemma is a fascinating argument because it is airtight—liar, lunatic, or Lord—there is no fourth possibility. The trilemma is well known within Catholic apologetics circles, but I didn't feel it was appreciated quite enough. Because beyond the subject matter, what is also profound about Lewis's trilemma is the methodology itself. That is, a trilemma methodology can be logically applied to some other areas of the Catholic faith—and one of those areas is the stigmata. The subject of the stigmata has confounded medical experts, scientists, and skeptics for many centuries. Fr. John Hardon defines *stigmata* as a "phenomenon in which a person bears all or some of the wounds of Christ in his or her own body, i.e., on the feet, hands, side, and brow. The wounds appear spontaneously, from no external source, and periodically there is a flow of fresh blood."[2] Believers and skeptics alike should be able to agree that this is a momentous claim—that the wounds of Jesus suddenly appeared on his or her own body. To determine the veracity of such a claim, we can apply Lewis's trilemma. Even before we investigate any facts, we can conclude that a person who bears such wounds is either a 1) liar, 2) lunatic, or 3) *stigmatist*—that is, one who miraculously bears the wounds of the Savior.

Which is it? For surely, it is one of those three.

After I finished these articles for the *Magis Center* about Lewis's trilemma, I began to assemble research for the stigmata. I originally intended to write three articles in the series about the stigmata, but the more research I did, the more I realized that three articles were not enough. I contacted my editor and told her that it might be more like four or five, but I soon realized that this was not enough either.

By the time I reached eight articles, I realized that I had a book on my hands.

> I had intended to focus primarily on the trilemma methodology itself, but something happened along the way: I began to fall in love with these stigmatists. The more hundreds of hours I spent reading their biographies—St. Lutgarde, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Ávila, St. Rita, St. Faustina—the deeper affection I felt for them. True to the reality of the communion of saints, we developed a friendship. For there is no doubt in my heart that these stigmatists prayed for me as I wrote. My good friend Patrick O'Hearn wrote a beautiful and touching book called *Parents of the Saints* a few years ago. In that book, Patrick writes, "I felt more and more saints whisper to me in prayer, 'Tell my parents' story. The world needs to know about our unsung heroes, who laid the foundation for our spiritual lives.'"[3] As I researched and wrote about the stigmatists, I continually sensed a similar message: tell our stories.

Something else happened: I saw the crucifix in a new way. I would not say that I saw the crucifix *differently*, but I began to see it *more completely*. I hope and pray that the reader will have a similar experience. The Sorrowful Mysteries came alive for me during this book. As you will see, those mysteries are a chief focus of this book.

My great hope for this book is that it edifies the faith of the faithful, counsels the doubtful, and speaks to those who do not yet know Christ. There is no greater image of Christ's love for us than the crucifix, for it was on that cross that Christ laid down his life for his friends, and for those he willed to befriend.

In the second half of this book, I do return to my original mission to lay out the apologetics of the trilemma, as it applies to the stigmatists. Before we begin this inquiry into the stigmata and those who claim to bear the stigmata, let us manage expectations and state some ground rules for apologetics. When Catholic apologists discuss the subject of miracles (or from the perspective of a skeptic, those things *purported* to be miracles) such as the eucharistic miracle at Lanciano, the Shroud of Turin, the incorruptibility of St. Bernadette—the audience often demands proof. In fact, the audience often demands the sort of proof that eliminates any possibility to the contrary. Otherwise, it is deemed that the apologist has failed to make his case.

But is that a fair demand? In legal terms, is that a fair *burden*? That subject will be addressed in detail in this book.

One last point. This book is timely, but for reasons that I was unaware when I began writing it. When Catholic Answers and I signed the contract for this book, the due month for the manuscript was September 2024. I feel slightly embarrassed to admit this, but I didn't realize the significance of this month. At a ceremony at Ave Maria University, my wife mentioned to a Franciscan priest that I was writing a book about the stigmata. He happily responded, "Oh, in honor of the 800th anniversary of St. Francis's reception of the stigmata?" My wife assumed that was why I was writing the book. Yet, when I began the book, I had no idea of that fact. But God knew, and that's what matters.

The Providence of God is exhilarating.

— John Francis Clark
September 14, 2024 | The 800th Anniversary of St. Francis's Reception of the Stigmata

1

The First Stigmata: An Examination of Jesus' Wounds

> Some years ago, my good friend Dr. Pasteau, the president of the Société de Saint-Luc of Catholic Doctors in France, was visiting the Vatican with several high dignitaries of the Church. He was explaining to them, following on my researches, how much we now know about the death of Jesus, about his terrible sufferings, and how he had died, suffering from cramps in all his muscles and from asphyxia. One of them, who was still Cardinal Pacelli, and who, along with the others, had gone pale with grief and compassion, answered him: "We did not know; nobody had ever told us that."
>
> —Pierre Barbet[4]

On Ash Wednesday 2004, the eagerly-awaited movie *The Passion of the Christ* hit movie screens—but hit its viewers much harder. With ashen foreheads, Catholics across America cringed in their theater seats as they watched the por-

trayal of the intense whipping, beating, and stabbing of their Savior. Many in the audience openly wept as they peered at the screen and saw teams of Roman soldiers thrash Jesus' body with whips with metal hooks. The scene was violent, portraying the Roman soldiers covered in Jesus' blood, with only the physical exhaustion of the Roman soldiers finally slowing the assault. Most moviegoers had never seen any sort of brutality—real or imagined—like this. The two-hour depiction of Jesus' passion and death proved emotionally exhausting for the audience. A movie reviewer for the Evening Standard accounted that the cinematic "assault was so sustained and voyeuristic that most of the audience I saw the film with covered their eyes."[5] Another reviewer referred to it as a "primitive and pornographic bloodbath."[6]

As difficult as it was for the viewers to sit through these scenes, there is a reality that most audiences and reviewers missed: in comparison to the cinematic portrayal of the event, the actual crucifixion of Jesus was far worse. Some disbelievers may simply dismiss the account of Jesus' passion and crucifixion on the grounds that no human could survive such a physical assault. Yet, first-person accounts, ancient historians, and archaeology confirm that many thousands of men survived wanton scourging and lived—sometimes for days—on crosses before they succumbed to death. Even modern medical science confirms how that could occur. But the objectors are indeed correct on one essential point: crucifixion was almost indescribably violent and heartless. This is important to appreciate because within the sheer violence of the crucifixion lies much of the mystery behind the stigmata of the saints. Thus, in our quest to understand the *how* and *why* of the stigmata and stigmatists, we must begin by focusing on *the general nature and history of crucifixion itself* and, specifically, *the wounds of Christ*.

ROMAN CRUCIFIXION

Contemporary eyewitnesses, authors, and ancient and modern historians broadly confirm that crucifixion was a common practice before Constantine abolished it in the Roman Empire in the fourth century. In addition to the Romans, crucifixion was practiced by the Persians, Carthaginians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Germanic peoples, Assyrians, British peoples, and others.[7] Considering its barbaric brutality, it is not observed lightly that crucifixion—in particular times and places—was a routine punishment. Several books have been written within the past few decades that have accumulated the historical findings illustrating widespread crucifixion, but our focus here is on *Roman* crucifixion—for that is what Jesus suffered. At first, that might seem overly exacting; after all, one might wonder, isn't there one basic method of crucifixion? But the answer is in the negative. As Martin Hengel notes in his book *Crucifixion*, "A particular problem is posed by the fact that the *form* of crucifixion varied considerably."[8] The Roman method proved particularly dehumanizing, unjust, and widespread.

A study of crucifixion is such an analysis of violence and savagery that it is easy to lose sight of a central aspect of crucifixion: its intentional degradation. Under some Roman emperors, crucifixion was a common punishment for slaves.[9] Cicero even refers to it as the *servitutis extremum summumque supplicium* (the highest and most extreme penalty for slaves).[10] In his oration known as *Against Verres*, Cicero expresses that crucifixion should only be used on slaves and never against a citizen: "It is a crime to bind a Roman citizen; to scourge him is a wickedness; to put him to death is almost parricide. What shall I say of crucifying him? So guilty an action cannot by any possibility be adequately expressed by any name bad enough for it."[11] Cicero's objection highlights a point:

crucifixion was broadly considered suitable for slaves. Crucifixion served a purpose beyond its ruthlessness: it confirmed that the crucified man or woman was—in fact—a slave. It was standard procedure for Roman authorities to make crucifixions as public as possible. It was not enough for the Romans to simply crucify slaves and leave their carcasses to serve as food for the birds in the middle of nowhere. Instead, the Romans used crucifixion as a socio-political statement. Historian Barry Strauss explains, "Roman authorities also favored the most crowded roads for crucifixions, in order to impress the maximum number of people."[12]

Not only was a *trial* unnecessary to crucify a slave, no *evidence* was necessary; in fact, no underlying *crime* was necessary. Horace provides the example of a slave who was crucified for tasting the soup of his master, but slaves were crucified for less.[13] Crucifixion was designed to illustrate ignobility; it was deemed the proper way to dispose of a slave. Simply put, slaves were treated as subhuman, and public crucifixion was designed to remind them—and all others who witnessed their deaths—of their sub-humanity.*

This anti-human view of slaves by the Romans is magnified by looking at the sheer volume of slaves who were crucified. The generational crucifixion of slaves was a reality alluded to around 205 B.C. in the play *Miles Gloriosus* written by Titus Maccius Plautus. The character Sceledrus states, "I know the cross will be my grave: that is where my ancestors are, my father, grandfathers, great-grandfathers, great-great-grandfathers."[14] That's an even more sobering

* It is worth noting that it was not only slaves who were crucified in the Roman Empire. Some freemen who were non-citizens were crucified. After all, the Gospel records that two thieves were crucified next to Jesus, but there is no indication that they were slaves. Nevertheless, the crucifixion of freemen was comparatively rare.

thought when considering how large the slave class was in the Roman Empire. Slavery was not the unhappy circumstance of only a handful of people. On the contrary, Strauss estimates the number of slaves in Italy at the time of Spartacus's uprising (73 B.C.) was between one and one-and-a-half million.[15] After that uprising, six thousand slaves were crucified, which was not an isolated event. Strauss notes that one of the mass crucifixions involved "2,000 rebels crucified in Judaea by the Roman official Quintilius Varus in 4 B.C."[16] But it was not just slave uprisings that led to crucifixions; Hengel notes that Caligula and Domitian "crucified imperial slaves . . . at their whim."[17] Seneca stated that slaves broadly lived "under the certain threat of crucifixion."[18]

As to the method of Roman crucifixion, the procedure generally occurred in three distinct stages: scourging at a pillar, the forced carrying of the cross, and nailing the victim to the cross where he would eventually die. Each stage consisted of a tortured madness in which human misery was viewed as entertaining theater.

Stage One: Scourging. Hengel writes, "In the Roman Empire . . . crucifixion was a punishment in which the caprice and sadism of the executioners were given full rein."[19] That is no overstatement, especially considering that the process of scourging was given to those men who most enjoyed scourging others in the first place. In his book describing his experiences in a Nazi concentration camp, *Man's Search For Meaning*, Viktor Frankl noted, "When the SS took a dislike to a person, there was always some special man in their ranks known to have a passion for, and to be highly specialized in, sadistic torture, to whom the unfortunate prisoner was sent."[20] The same basic process played out in the Roman scourging process; that is, the Roman authorities sought out the most sadistic men to perform vicious fantasies known

only to men who get their marching orders from demons.[21]

The word "scourging" comes to us in English from the medieval French word *escorgier*, which means "to whip."[22] But the word fails to capture its innate ferocity. The victim's wrists were tied to a post so that he could not defend himself against the weapons of torture, and then the beating commenced. In his book The *Wars of The Jews*, Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37–100) writes about the infliction of "stripes" before crucifixion, recounting that a woman was "torn to pieces with the stripes."[23] This was standard by design. One of the most popular devices used to scourge victims was the "scorpion." This was a multi-thronged leather whip with affixed bone or metal. It was designed to hack into flesh and tear off the flesh to the bone. Numerous writers in antiquity affirm this fact, including Josephus, who wrote about the scourging of a man who "was whipped till his bones were laid bare."[24]

Scourging was often conducted in such a way as to inflict the absolute maximum possible amount of pain without killing the victim; however, many victims of scourging died in the process. One researcher notes that "Livy, Suetonius, and Josephus all report cases of flagellation in which the lictors went too far, and their victims died while still bound to the post."[25] Nevertheless, the Romans often took it upon themselves to nail the scourged, dead bodies to crosses for public display. There were also instances in which the scourgers lost all interest in keeping their victims alive; with demonic ferocity, the soldiers simply beat them to death. And beyond death. The historian Eusebius gives us the account of eyewitnesses at the scene when a group of St. Polycarp's contemporaries were scourged to death: "For they say that the bystanders were struck with amazement when they saw them lacerated with scourges even to the innermost veins

and arteries, so that the hidden inward parts of the body, both their bowels and their members, were exposed to view; and then laid upon sea-shells and certain pointed spits, and subjected to every species of punishment and of torture, and finally thrown as food to wild beasts."[26]

Stage Two: Carrying the Cross. For those who did survive the initial scourging—and the vast majority seem to have done so—the next step was forcing the victim to carry the wood of the cross to the designated place of death. For our purposes here, there is no need to go into great detail regarding this process other than pointing out the following: carrying the wood of the cross to the place of death deliberately compounded the suffering already inflicted by the scourging.[27] The shoulders, already ripped open by scourging, then had to endure carrying a massive piece of wood. This weight deeply compounded the pain of the open shoulder wound. The scourged shoulder would have been inexpressibly painful with even the slightest touch; the pain of putting a hundred pounds on that wound—and feeling it boring an even deeper wound—is unimaginable. It is grimly telling that the Roman philosopher Seneca, in observing the swelling of the crucified with "ugly weals on shoulders," considered suicide as a preferable option to crucifixion.[28]

Stage Three: Nailing to the Cross.* After recounting the pro-

* Perhaps in an effort to defeat the integrity of the New Testament, some modern writers, historians, and even some anti-Catholic Christians have sought to illustrate that the Romans used a pole—rather than a cross—for crucifixion. But it was most certainly a cross. Confirmation of that fact is evidenced by Scripture, including each of the Gospels. As Woodrow Michael Kroll points out, "In the New Testament, the word "cross" (Greek: σταυρός; *stauros*) occurs twenty-seven times in twenty-seven verses." That it was a cross is further evidenced by the early Church fathers. Beyond that, the fact that the Romans routinely used crosses for crucifixion is evidenced by contemporary non-Christian historians such as Flavius Josephus.

cess of scourging and carrying the cross, it is striking that some ancient writers consider this the most violent stage of Roman crucifixion. Though victims were sometimes tied to their crosses, they were typically nailed to the cross. In what seems to have been deemed a particular form of cruelty, "some were crucified upside down."[29] But they were not left to die alone. As Barbet notes, a Roman guard remained—in part—to ensure that the crucified man was not rescued by friends or family by the dead of night.[30] But some guards occupied their time in sadism. Some of the crucified continued to be beaten and jeered on the cross as they approached their deaths. It also occurred that visiting wives, children, and friends of the crucified had their throats slit as the crucified men watched helplessly from their crosses. (This might shed new light on the reluctance of the apostles to visit Jesus on the cross and provide an increased appreciation of Mary, Mary Magdalene, and John the apostle who stood at the foot of the cross.) One of the most significant variables was how long it took for the victim to die: some died quickly; others survived for days. Typically, the Romans allowed, by design, birds and wild animals to eat the crucified carcasses for food; however, the Romans did sometimes allow families to claim the bodies.

THE UNIQUE WOUNDS OF JESUS

Jesus bore some injuries in common with most others who endured Roman crucifixion, but he also had unique wounds. To understand subsequent cases of stigmata, we must first grasp Jesus' suffering and wounds—which we might call the first stigmata. To determine the extent and particular nature of Jesus' injuries, it would be reasonable to first turn to Scripture. The difficulty, however, is that the scriptures are not very detailed. For instance, regard-

ing the hyper-violent and bloodthirsty scourging of Jesus at the pillar, the Gospel of Matthew simply states, "Then he released for them Barab'bas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified" (Matt. 27:26). Regarding the Crucifixion, Mark's Gospel simply states, "And they crucified him" (Mark 15:24). Luke's Gospel gives more attention to the burial of Jesus than to the specifics of his injuries. We may reasonably ask, *Why is there such a lack of details?* The answer given by Barbet, is simple. He writes, "The Evangelists certainly had no need to be more explicit. For the Christians who had listened to the apostolic teaching, and who later on read the four Gospels, these two words, 'scourging, crucifixion,' were all too full of meaning; they had firsthand experience, and had seen scourgings and crucifixions; they knew what the words meant."[31]

As will be shown later in this chapter, scourging and crucifixion continued for three centuries after Jesus' death and resurrection; thus, the early Christians were presented with physical reminders of Jesus' torment until the time of Constantine—who abolished crucifixion in the Roman Empire. Subsequent ages, however, increasingly lost sight—and understanding—of these terms. Simply, relying on Scripture alone does not provide us enough insight in the third millennia after Christ. Thus, we need to turn to more sources. Regarding crucifixion generally, we have already referenced ancient historians and archaeological findings for details. Moving on, we will examine several more sources for clues and explanations—notably, the writings of the Church Fathers, approved private revelation, and the Shroud of Turin. We can also touch upon the advantage of the advances in science and medicine. In some respects, from the perspective of modern medicine, we now know more about Jesus' wounds and sufferings than ever before. The most logical

way to proceed in an understanding of the first stigmata—the stigmata of Jesus—is to look at them from a chronological perspective, beginning with the events of Holy Thursday and culminating with the Resurrection.

THURSDAY NIGHT/FRIDAY PRE-DAWN

The Sweating of Blood. After the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, and just before his arrest, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives to pray. The Gospel of Luke informs us, "And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground" (22:44). Until recently, sweating blood was considered a physical impossibility. Many skeptics have denied the episode entirely. Even many devout Christians over the centuries have sought to explain Luke's passage as a mere metaphor. For instance, Aquinas cites the late Father of the Church, Theophylact, who opined, "Or this is *proverbially* said of one who has sweated intensely, that he sweated blood; the Evangelist then wishing to shew that he was moistened with large drops of sweat, takes drops of blood for an example"[32] (emphasis added).

Other Christians have regarded it as a miraculous occurrence. In his commentary on that verse, St. Bede writes that "it is contrary to nature to sweat blood."[33] Meanwhile, many others, such as Francisco Suarez and St. Augustine, accept this event as natural.[34] At the same time, Augustine gives a mystical explanation *why* Jesus sweat blood: "Our Lord praying with a bloody sweat represented the martyrdoms which should flow from his whole body, which is the Church."[35]

Though the claim of sweating blood has often been doubted for over two millennia, it should be noted that sweating blood was a phenomenon that occurred in others as

well during those times—and even prior. In his treatise, *The History of Animals*, Aristotle even stated that when "animals fall sick . . . the blood then turns into . . . a liquid so thin that it at times has been known to exude through the pores like sweat."[36] Leonardo da Vinci referenced a soldier who sweat blood before battle.[37] Fr. Andrew Breen also noted several other cases in Europe: one woman under immense fear of being sexually assaulted, a man condemned to death in Germany, and another condemned man in France.[38] The common denominator was intense anxiety. When Breen's book was published in 1908, such claims may have been doubted. But that brings us to the present day, which provides ample new evidence and casts aside all reasonable doubt about the reality that one can sweat blood.

In July 2009, *The Indian Journal of Dermatology* issued a report confirming sweating blood. The study noted a patient who had repeatedly sweat blood, speculated to be the result of "continuous mental stress for two years due to family feud."[39] They mentioned others, including "six cases in men condemned to execution, a case occurring during the London blitz, a case involving fear of being raped, a case of fear of a storm while sailing."[40] The physicians conclude, "Acute fear and intense mental contemplation are the most frequent causes."[41] Similar case studies were reported in the past two decades including articles in *Blood*, the official magazine of *The American Society of Hematology* (2013),[42] and DermNet (2021). Moreover, though the condition is exceedingly rare, cases continue to surface. In 2023, an article in *Dermatology Reports* confirmed that a young girl was afflicted with sweating blood, the cause of which was deemed to be "separation anxiety disorder during COVID-19 quarantine."[43]

Though it took nineteen centuries to provide, we now have firsthand medical confirmation for the naturalness—

albeit rarity—of the malady of sweating blood. We also have a name for it: *hematohidrosis*. Further, we have a great insight into its cause: extreme emotional distress. St. Luke, a physician by trade, noted the reality and confirmed the cause of hematohidrosis nineteen centuries ago.

Why take pains to point out that sweating blood is a *natural* occurrence rather than a *miraculous* one? Because to appreciate the passion and death of Jesus more fully, it is essential to understand that Jesus did not simply *appear* to suffer; Jesus actually suffered and died on the cross. Though miracles indeed occurred during his passion, there can be no doubt that Jesus—who took on human nature to save us from our sins—suffered in his humanity more than anyone before or since.

The Wounds of Jesus' Arrest and Trials. After Jesus was comforted by an angel, he was arrested by a group of angry soldiers and archers directed by Judas. The Gospel accounts do not provide much detail about his arrest, but we can assume violence, especially considering the incident of Peter cutting off the ear of Malchus. In the writings detailing her visions, Bl. Anne Catherine Emmerich provides specific details:

> The archers, who now proceeded to pinion Jesus with the greatest brutality . . . They tied his hands as tightly as possible with hard new cords, fastening the right-hand wrist under the left elbow, and the left-hand wrist under the right elbow. They encircled his waist with a species of belt studded with iron points, and to this collar were appended two leathern straps, which were crossed over his chest like a stole and fastened to the belt. They then fastened four ropes to different parts of the belt, and by means of these ropes dragged our Blessed Lord from side to side in the most cruel manner . . .

> They led him along the roughest road they could select, over the sharpest stones, and through the thickest mire; they pulled the cords as tightly as possible; they struck him with knotted cords, as a butcher would strike the beast he is about to slaughter.[44]

Emmerich goes on to describe that Jesus was beaten so hard that he was knocked off a bridge before being retrieved. She continues,

> It was not quite midnight when I saw the four archers inhumanly dragging Jesus over a narrow path, which was choked up with stones, fragments of rock, thistles, and thorns, on the opposite shore of the Cedron. The six brutal Pharisees walked as close to our Lord as they could, struck him constantly with thick pointed sticks, and . . . his bare and bleeding feet were torn by the stones and briars.[45]

Thus, Jesus suffered immensely even before his appearance at his trial—the most famous and infamous show trial in history. The illegal proceedings began by taking Jesus to the former high priest Annas.[46] The Gospel of John tells us that an officer struck Jesus during this meeting (18:23). After Annas questioned Jesus, he was taken to the Sanhedrin to face the high priest, Cai'aphas, where he was questioned, mocked, and beaten. Matthew recounts, "Then they spat in his face, and struck him; and some slapped him" (26:67). Mark states that "the guards received him with blows" (14:65). Luke's Gospel clarifies that Jesus was repeatedly assaulted while blindfolded.

How many people were beating Jesus at the show trial? By rule, there had to be at least twenty-three members of

the Sanhedrin present since that was roughly the number required to form a quorum.[47] But Anne Catherine Emmerich puts the number of Sanhedrin members at seventy, not to mention others, including "false witnesses."[48] Judging by their illegal actions at the trial, it is possible that many of these men hit or slapped Jesus, even taking repeated turns at Jesus. After the first trial, Jesus was thrown into prison, where he likely suffered even more physical abuse. Christians often think of Jesus' passion beginning on Friday with the scourging at the pillar. But it is clear that, by the time the sun rose on Friday, Jesus had already undergone immense suffering throughout his body.

GOOD FRIDAY

The Crowning with Thorns. We have already addressed the Roman process of scourging in detail, to which Jesus was subject, but there was an added brutality against Jesus that was unique: the crowning with thorns. To mock the idea that Jesus was the King of the Jews, the torturers of Jesus took it upon themselves to inflict this painful and bloody mockery. The Gospel of Matthew describes, "plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on his head." (27:29)

The fact that Jesus endured crowning with thorns is front and center in Catholic devotion to the passion of Jesus, but many Catholics may not be aware that the crown of thorns still exists and is currently held in France. Two millennia after the Passion, the crown of thorns was back in the news because of the fire in Notre Dame, in which a priest heroically rushed in to save the precious relic. Though some doubt that this is the actual crown, it should be noted that its existence has been referenced at least as far back as the year 409 by St. Paulinus of Nola (354–431) and confirmed by others such as Cassiodorus in 570 and St. Gregory of Tours

in 587.[49] How it came to be at Notre Dame has a fascinating history, but it seems to have been accounted for during sixteen centuries.[50] If the question remains about the four centuries before Paulinus, we might simply point out that Christianity was a capital crime in the Roman Empire until the fourth century under Constantine—thus, Christians could not prudently advertise their possession of relics.

When we look at the typical crown of a king or queen, we can see that only a tiny part of the crown touches the head. The circumference of the crown rests *around* the head but does not touch the rest of the scalp. At first glance, the surviving crown in Notre Dame seems to share that characteristic. Thus, when we read Matthew, we might naturally imagine that the thorns only pressed into the area around the top of Jesus' head. Yet, we must remember that thorns have been broken off the central portion of the crown; after all, over the centuries, various churches and persons have claimed to own and venerate individual thorns. But Barbet claims that the thorns of our Lord's crown covered his head on Good Friday. Though the crown was formed into a circular ring, the thorns were woven into a cap to pierce the entire top of his head. (The plant used to form the crown is known to botany as *Ziziphus spina-christi*, or in more layman's terms, Christ's thorn jujube.[51] When looking at that plant, it is easy to see how the soldiers could quickly form a crown.)

In his *Sermon on Good Friday*, the Dominican priest St. Vincent Ferrer (1350–1419) explains, "Shaping a crown of marine [*marinis*] thorns, which have sharper and longer spines than other thorns, they pressed it on his head, cruelly wounding it in seventy-two places. It was shaped like a cap [*ad modum pilei*] so that wherever it contacted the head, the spines penetrated to the skull."[52] St. Bridget of Sweden's apparitions confirm this number of seventy-two.

Of all the parts of the body, head wounds are the most potentially bloody because of the collection of veins that reside in the head. As the University of Utah Health states, "Your scalp can bleed profusely from even a minor cut."[53] The crown of thorns was no minor cut. Instead, the crown produced seventy-two deep punctures to the head, which caused Jesus' face to be drenched in blood and his hair to be dripping with blood. By this point, Jesus' face would have been nearly unrecognizable to any but his closest friends and his mother. It is no wonder that the Stations of the Cross remember particularly the bloodied face of Jesus under the guise of tender ministrations offered by St. Veronica.

The Piercing of His Side and Heart. Matthew, Mark, and Luke's Gospels do not mention this particular posthumous event, but John's Gospel describes it in detail. The Roman soldiers, following the law, were given the job to ensure that all three crucified men were positively dead before their bodies could be delivered to their families. The soldiers broke the legs of the crucified men on both sides of Jesus; however, "when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water" (19:33–34). The very next verse highlights the extreme importance of this incident: "He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth—that you also may believe" (19:35).[54]

In this act of stabbing his side, the soldier intentionally also pierced Jesus' heart. How do we know? Though the Gospel of John does not explicitly tell us that Jesus' heart was punctured, we can infer it from his description of blood and water gushing forth. Barbet explains how we know and also how we know that the soldier pierced Jesus' right side. The soldier needed to ensure that Jesus was dead, but the

mere act of stabbing his side would not have definitively induced or confirmed death; as we have seen, Jesus had already suffered far worse and survived. Thus, the intention of the soldier was not merely to pierce Jesus' side but to drive the spear through his side, past his ribs, and puncture his heart. Barbet explains that this technique of fatally driving a spear into the right side of the opponent's heart was standard practice for Roman soldiers. Barbet explains,

> This blow at the heart from the right was always mortal, and must have become classical and have been taught in the fencing-schools of the Roman armies. . . . Blows into the intercostal spaces on the right edge of the breastbone do not allow of recovery, because they open up the very thin wall of the right auricle. And this is still true today, even when a surgeon can intervene quickly.[55]

Barbet explains that although people often consider the heart to occupy only the left side of the chest, sections of the heart also occupy the right: "Now, *and this is the important side of the question*, the part of the heart which extends to the right of the breastbone *is the right auricle*. And this auricle, which is prolonged upwards by the superior vena cava, and downwards by the inferior vena cava, is *in a corpse always filled with liquid blood*."[56] The fact that John testifies to water and blood provides further medical confirmation. Barbet explains that when a heart is punctured, pericardial fluid—which contains water—pours out. In sum, modern medicine evidences the process that John described.

There is one final point here that underscores John's eyewitness testimony about the heart wound. After his resurrection, Jesus—now with a glorified body—had been seen by some of the apostles; however, Thomas the apostle had not

seen him. Thomas doubted their accounts of seeing Jesus and was adamant in his doubt. Thomas said, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25). Note that Thomas does not say "in the mark of his side," but rather "in his side." Eight days after the Resurrection, when the apostles were gathered together, Jesus passed through the closed doors and stood before Thomas. Jesus invites Thomas to inspect his wounds: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing" (John 20:27). Consider that Jesus offers Thomas to put only a finger on his hand wounds but his entire hand in his side. The Gospel does not precisely tell us, but it is inferred that Jesus is inviting Thomas to feel the wound in his Sacred Heart.

When we discuss the major wounds Jesus received in his passion and death, it is essential to highlight that the Shroud of Turin serves as a detailed confirmation of the wounds described in this chapter.

THE GLORIOUS SCANDAL OF THE CROSS

In the following chapters, we will examine the lives and wonders of those men and women who miraculously bore the wounds of Jesus. But it is essential to understand that many early Christians bore wounds like those of Jesus. But their wounds were not produced mystically; instead, they were inflicted upon them by Roman leaders driven mad in an effort to eliminate Christianity. After the crucifixion of Jesus, the Roman governments proceeded to go on a crucifixion spree. And as we are about to see, the heroic response of the martyrs would inspire the world.

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, crucifixion was a common punishment for slaves; in fact, to crucify a man was

meant to re-affirm his status as a slave. As Hengel writes, "Death on the cross was the penalty for slaves, as everyone knew; as such it symbolized extreme humiliation, shame and torture."[57] Thus, the crucifixion of Jesus was not merely about punishing, mocking, and insulting Jesus. It was not merely to treat him as a subhuman slave. Beyond all that, his crucifixion was meant to send a warning to his followers: if you persist in Christianity, you will experience the same brutal, vile, and slavish fate. Of course, that warning was promptly, defiantly, and widely ignored. Men, women, and children practiced Christianity across the empire, and the empire struck back. The Romans were true to their threat.

Though many Christians think of being thrown to the lions as the standard method of execution, the *Roman Martyrology* recounts that in the infancy of the Church, crucifixion was common. Moreover, the Romans did not discriminate in deciding those who received such execution. Both old and young, both clergy and laity, both men and women—all groups were subject to death on a cross. The apostle Philip was crucified and stoned to death as he hung on the cross. St. Faustus suffered a similar fate and, after having the audacity to survive for five days on the cross, he was shot with arrows until he died. Under the tyranny of Diocletian, St. Agricola was crucified "with many nails."[58] Nero crucified rows of Christians and burned their bodies as human torches. St. Appolinus was crucified. Newlyweds Timothy and Maura were crucified together after a series of tortures that included blinding.

The martyrology speaks of many others: "At Ægæa, in Cilicia, the holy martyrs Claudius, Asterius, and Neon, brothers, who were accused of being Christians by their step-mother, under the emperor Diocletian, and the governor Lysias, and after enduring bitter torments, were fastened

to a cross, and thus conquered and triumphed with Christ."[59] Under Diocletian's terrorizing rule, in the year 287, Arabian twin brothers and physicians Cosmas and Damian underwent crucifixion, but their persecutors seemed to grow tired of waiting for them to die—eventually beheading them, along with their three brothers.[60] The list goes on. Thus, when we speak about those saints who bore the stigmata—the wounds of Christ—it is clear that some early Christians bore remarkably similar wounds as a result of their own crucifixions. In that respect, the first saint to bear the stigmata was indeed St. Dismas, the good thief who was crucified alongside Jesus—and canonized by Jesus while he hung on his cross.

The Romans had intended the cross to be a fearful scandal—a stumbling block—to following Christ, but the exact opposite occurred. The cross became a symbol of everlasting triumph. St. Paul says as much: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor. 1:22–25). The idea of someone making *the sign of the cross* would have seemed extraordinarily bizarre to everyone in the Roman Empire before the Crucifixion. From the perspective of the Romans, the cross was considered beneath the dignity of Roman citizens—even if they were terrible criminals.

But Christians held the cross in such magnificent esteem that they did not even consider themselves worthy of the cross. Of the crucified martyrs, the most notable was St. Peter, the first pope. Tradition holds that Peter made it clear to his persecutors that he was not worthy to die in the same manner as his Savior; thus, he insisted on being crucified

upside down. Peter and these early crucified martyrs realized the profound dignity of suffering like Christ, for their bodies embodied the suffering that their Savior underwent. They were, in a profound sense, sharing in his passion.

If the thought of a Christian uniting his suffering with Jesus seems odd, consider our English word "compassion." The word comes to English from the Latin and French words *com* ("together") plus *patir* ("to suffer"). Thus, *compassion* means "to suffer together," and it is broadly considered to be a noble virtue. What mother, seeing her child suffer, has not wished that she could take on some of her child's pain—to *suffer with* and alleviate the pain in some way? And this brings us to the role of Mary in the Passion. By divine design, no human nor angel will ever be as close to God as Mary, the Mother of God. As much as the stigmatists suffered from physical pain—and as we are about to see, they suffered immense physical pain—it stands to reason that Mary suffered more than any of them because of her closeness with her Son. Although she may not have sustained a stigmatic pain of the body, she undoubtedly suffered from mental and emotional anguish.

There are various prayerful and penitential ways to honor Jesus' passion and death. For instance, we Catholics pray the Sorrowful Mysteries, during which we ponder the suffering and crucifixion Jesus endured for us. But we can also honor Jesus' suffering by uniting it with our own. This point warrants an important point: though we Catholics speak about the value of suffering, we do not generally go around *searching* for ways to suffer. In a fallen world, suffering finds us, just as it finds the rest of humanity. But when we willingly accept our suffering and unite it with Jesus' passion, we see the good that can be gained through suffering. As we are about to examine, some suffer more than others.

This chapter has sought to examine the wounds of Jesus' passion and death because without having a solid knowledge of these, the wounds of the stigmatists would be confusing and inexplicable. Going forward, we will see that each of the significant wounds that Jesus suffered was experienced, in some measure, by one or more stigmatists—including, as we will see, heart stigmata. Though the stigmata vary from person to person, the common denominator is intense pain. As Fr. Charles M. Carty explains in *The Stigmata and Modern Science,* "The vocation of the stigmatists is to suffer a share of the passion of Christ—which exceeds all earthly sufferings."[61] As we will see, that is an accurate description.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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