

Exploring the truth behind 'holy wounds' of stigmata

By Sinead O'Neill

Ever since Christ's crucifixion, the medical and spiritual worlds have been fascinated with the stigmata phenomenon. The so-called 'holy wounds' - supposedly located on the hands, feet, head, back and side - have reportedly appeared on more than 300 people, the majority of whom have been exposed as fakes or hoaxes. Some however, such as Padre Pio, have defied explanation and passed medical assessment, leading many to regard stigmata as a miraculous event which can only be attributed to the hand of God. It's an issue which has defined the Catholic church for many decades, provoked public debates and helped propel men like clinical psychologist Dr Mario Martinez into the public arena. As one of the few professionals deployed by the church to examine reported cases of stigmata across the globe, Dr Martinez has investigated dozens of occurrences of Christ-like wounds during the course of his work. "I was initially asked by a local bishop, who was familiar with my background, to investigate stigmata cases," says the American-based psychologist. "Incidences of stigmata are often accompanied by hysteria and spontaneous healings of other people, so the church was keen to find out what was going on. "My job is to examine the medicine behind the stigmata and debrief the community in order to help them remain calm." Dr Martinez's work has taken him around the world where he has encountered scores of fraudsters who have pretended to exhibit crucifixion wounds in an effort to attract attention or as a result of deeper medical problems. However, he also believes he has come across several genuine cases of stigmata, most notably Padre Pio himself. "I do believe Padre Pio exhibited stigmatic wounds - in fact, he bled almost a pint of blood per day," he says. "His medical results show there was nothing sinister going on - he showed no signs of infection yet his cuts refused to heal over. "He appears to have, quite genuinely, bled profusely from Christ's wounds." Dr Martinez's acceptance of Padre Pio's infliction and his own interest in stigmata stems from his belief in biocognition, a theory which states that a person's religious and cultural upbringing plays a pivotal role in their health. The biocognitive model emphasises the importance of historical background in the development of certain health conditions, a factor which is largely neglected by modern medical practitioners. "Psychoneuroimmunology examines how outside events impact upon the immune system and anthropology looks at how culture and genetics relate to our health," says Dr Martinez. "There is no one field however that looks at how mind, body and culture work together to produce good or bad health. "The aim of biocognition therefore is to show how our belief system impacts upon our immune system and directs the way in which we respond to and treat illness." Describing stigmata as "the epitome of cultural response", Dr Martinez explains how Christ-like wounds are merely a reaction to a 'model of suffering' instilled in Catholics as a means of becoming closer to God. "98 per cent of reported stigmatics are Catholic," he says. "That's because they have been surrounded by a culture which celebrates Christ's suffering and which, subconsciously, translates itself into our everyday lives. "Unlike ordinary people, stigmatics welcome the suffering because it brings them closer to God. "Instead of giving themselves permission to heal, they give themselves permission to suffer." In following his own biocognitive model, Dr Martinez believes stigmata occurs when a person's bio-informational field - their knowledge of illness, their genetics and their cultural and spiritual background - is expanded as a result of upheaval in their lives, such as death, illness or change. If a person is religious, he says, their bio-informational field can be expanded to incorporate

God's love or suffering. While most people will identify with the path of love, others - particularly those with a strong religious background - will feel an affinity with Christ's suffering. The result can be the development of stigmata wounds as the mind works in tandem with the individual's beliefs. It sounds like hokum but Dr Martinez's work is largely accepted by medical professionals who believe it offers a more rational explanation for stigmata than so-called 'divine intervention'. Furthermore, scientific tests show that, in the majority of stigmata cases the psychologist has investigated, wounds were not self-inflicted and were immune from infection, suggesting little evidence of physical ill-health. Dr Martinez's theories are also popular with the public - an Irish tour exploring biocognition and its relevance to everyday life was a huge success last year and he has already lined up a series of workshop dates for later this month. "The Irish are extremely open to mind, body, spirit issues and are particularly interested in the religious question and the topic of stigmata," he says. "Ireland is also a country which carries a lot of guilt so my workshop in Galway for example will deal with forgiveness and how we can learn to forgive ourselves for things that have happened in the past." His book *The Man From Autumn*, which explores his theories in depth, has also proved a hit with readers.

For further details on Dr Martinez's work, see www.biocognitive.com.

Dr Martinez presents *The Psychology Of Stigmata: How The Mind Wounds And Heals The Body* at the Stillorgan Park Hotel, Dublin on November 24 from 7.30-9.30pm.

For more information, see www.seminars.ie or call 00353 1 287 5524.

He will also host a full day workshop in the Clybaun Hotel, Galway on November 27.

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