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MARY



O'CONNOR

Uncovering the mystery of stigmata

Mention the term "stigmata" and many people will automatically think of Padre Pio, the Italian priest who was canonised in 2002 and who bore the mysteriously appearing wounds resembling those which Jesus received when crucified, for 50 years.

The world's most famous stigmatic, he bled almost a cup of blood a day without detriment to his health and long life, according to Dr Mario Martinez, an American clinical neuropsychologist who investigates cases of alleged stigmata for the Vatican and who will speak in Galway at the end of the month. He has also given numerous lectures to Catholic bishops and other clergy on how beliefs and emotions can affect the immune system and health.

"Padre Pio's wound did not get infected but he was in constant pain. It is alleged by three priests who were by his death bed, that one hour before he expired, the wounds began to disappear until they were gone at the time of death."

He says some people allege the Italian priest had powers of bilocation and was able to read people's sins.

"Many healings occurred around him and there are still reports of healings occurring in the town of San Giovanni Rotondo in Italy where he lived. He predicted that John Paul II would be pope when they met at the time the future pope was a bishop."

He explains that Padre Pio was canonised because of his life works and miracles, stigmata was not a criterion.

Dr Martinez, who lectures worldwide on his theory of biocognition (how cultural beliefs affect the immune system and longevity) describes stigmata as one of the most intriguing examples of "how biology can transcend normal function at the service of spiritual beliefs". Stigmata that defy scientific explanations are rare, he says.

Since the first Christ-like wounds of St Francis of Assisi in 1224, there have been more than 340 cases of stigmata recorded. Although some were self-inflicted to gain attention, in many other cases the wounds are immune to infection, resist healing and the bleeding does not present a health hazard, according to Dr. Martinez.

Reclusive people

Who are the stigmatics? Most are adult females who are religious and identify with the Passion of Christ, he says. "There was one black American young lady who manifested the wounds when she was an adolescent. She was of the Baptist faith and was one of the few exceptions. She is now in her 40s and lives in California without further incidents. There have been no stigmatic children. Contrary to the American film *Stigmata*, stigmatics are never possessed nor are any atheists."

About 98 per cent are Catholic, he says. "Some 75 per cent are women and they usually come from countries that are predominantly Catholic (Spain, Italy, etc). Some have been nuns and there have been around three or four priests. They are usually charismatic people, but some are very shy and reclusive. There have been more cases of stigmata in the 20th century than ever before."

The Catholic Church wants to avoid a "circus" atmosphere when a stigmata case is identified and it is usually handled through the local bishop, he explains.

"The Church wants to rule out psychiatric disorders, self-mutilation and other reasons. Although the Vatican does not consider stigmata a case of divine intervention, it wants to establish a scientific explanation first and then leave the interpretation to the individual. The information is then shared with Church officials and a decision is made as to how to address the issue with the individual and the parishioners."

He says the only stigmatic considered to be a case of "divine intervention" was St Francis of Assisi, declared by Pope Gregory IX.

"The position of the Vatican now is that divine intervention ended after the apostolic era, defining every other incident, including the visions of Joan of Arc, as 'private revelations' if science cannot explain them."

Dr Martinez, who will appear on *The Late Late Show* on



Stigmata expert Dr Mario Martinez who will appear on the *Late, Late Show* on November 25.

November 25, says he has investigated four cases of stigmata that did not appear to be caused by self-inflicted wounds or psychiatric disorders.

"My most recent case was a woman in Mexico City that I investigated for *National Geographic*. This case was very unusual because she had a wound on her forehead in the sign of a cross rather than the hands and feet. This is the first time in the history of stigmata that we have been able to obtain blood work that includes immunological profiles. Since our investigation the wounds have healed without any scars."

"This woman was able to heal a child with leukaemia and a man with prostate cancer. I interviewed the physician involved in the cases and she confirmed that both the child and the man who were healed remain symptom free months after the intervention from the stigmatic. It is not uncommon for spontaneous healings to occur around cases of stigmata."

He has also examined more than a dozen cases which were clearly self-inflicted. "Most cases are self-inflicted to seek attention or due to psychiatric dissociative disorders where a person (hysterical) does it without awareness in a state of disassociation."

Delicate process

Working with stigmatics is often a slow, delicate process, he says. The investigations can take several days and involve interviews with the stigmatic, their family and physician, as well as the community because there are usually spontaneous healings around a stigmatic occurrence.

Dr Martinez, a Catholic who lives in Nashville, became interested in stigmata about 10 years ago. "Because of my speciality in how cultural and spiritual beliefs affect our health and our longevity I was asked to investigate a case of stigmata. Later, others heard about my work and it became part of my clinical psychology practice and consultations. I have

investigated cases for the Catholic Church, the BBC and National Geographic."

Have the manifestations of stigmata changed over the years? "Some stigmata is only pain without wounds. These are called 'invisible stigmata'. The early stigmatics had the wounds on the palm of the hand and the more contemporary have them on the wrist. The early medieval paintings depicted Christ with the wounds on his palms, but now archaeological evidence suggests the Romans crucified on the wrists because the palm of the hand would tear with a weight heavier than 88 lbs. So it seems like even spiritual beliefs that may be causing the wounds follow the existing knowledge of the stigmatic."

Bearing stigmata is always "extremely painful" because of the "suffering model" stigmatics accept, he says. "Suffering is a key component in accepting as well as releasing stigmata. It is an identification with Christ through suffering."

Some people choose to be a stigmatic because they see it as a "blessing", he believes. "Since it is a medieval model of suffering, they feel closer to Christ by emulating His wounds. Some stigmatics pray for years to have the wounds. It usually increases the faith in the community and allows some to find 'permission' to heal themselves or give up addictions."

Stigmatics' health is not adversely affected by the phenomenon, he explains. Their immune systems can prevent infection occurring and the wound from healing. This happens because their beliefs are so strong that they can change the body's biology.

"They develop a 'superimmunity' that prevents infections. They have high levels of neutrophils (first order of defence immune cells) around the wounds. They also reproduce red blood cells faster than usual to compensate for the loss of blood and they have low levels of interleukins (molecules that trigger the repair of tissue)."

How does he help stigmatics? "There are two ways; if they want to resolve the wounds, I teach them to identify with the ascension of Christ rather than the crucifixion by using modern cognitive science methods of deep relaxation with imagery and other mind-body recoding. If they want to keep their wound because of their religious conviction, I help them reduce the pain and teach them coping skills to deal with the condition."

"In one case, we were able to reverse it because the person did not want the wounds. In other cases, I taught the stigmatics how to reduce the pain because they did not want to give up the signs. Some appear and disappear during holy days and some, like Padre Pio, have them with continuous bleeding for the rest of their lives."

Dr Martinez has learned a lot from working with these people, he says. "It has taught me that whether the phenomenon is divinely caused or not, the power of belief can both wound as well as heal the body. With what I have learned from stigmata, I have developed methods to treat autoimmune disorders like fibromyalgia, lupus, multiple sclerosis, post-traumatic stress disorders and other illnesses. The power of the mind has strengthened my belief in intelligent design rather than chance evolution."

Dr Martinez, who has just published a psychological novel titled *The Man From Autumn*, in which the main character investigates stigmata for the Vatican, will give a seminar entitled "The Effects of Toxic Thoughts and Allergic Memories: A Mind-Body Approach To Health" on Saturday November 26 from 2pm to 4.30pm at the Menlo Park Hotel. Tickets cost €50.

He will also give workshops on "The Psychology of Stigmata: How the Mind Wounds and Heals the Body" (morning) and "The Psychology of Forgiveness: Liberation From Self Entrapment" (afternoon) at the Clybaun Hotel on Sunday November 27 from 10am to 5pm. Tickets cost €150.

He is also available for private consultations during his visit here. For details call Denise at (086) 3933816 or e-mail bodymindspirit@eircom.net