

The Tennessean

Saturday, 07/15/06

Psychologist investigates stigmata claims worldwide

Opinion

By RAY WADDLE

Mario Martinez follows the trail of blood to one of the biggest mysteries in religion — the human capacity to produce stigmata, the "wounds of Christ" on the hands, feet and forehead.

Martinez is a Nashville-based clinical psychologist who has traveled the world investigating stigmata claims. He was featured last week on the National Geographic Channel examining the crucifix-like wounds of a 53-year-old Catholic woman in Mexico City.

On the program "Is it Real? Stigmata," the bloody shape of a cross is visible on her forehead. Martinez's interrogation convinces him it's not fraud, self-mutilation or hysteria, the usual explanations. Blood samples confirm it's hers. He's impressed by her spirituality and humility.

"As a scientist, I rule out possibilities," he says. "But I stay open. If I come in and say I believe this or refuse to believe that, I introduce a bias."

Debunkers say stigmatics are faking it, perhaps by using chemical compounds or cutting themselves. There are approximately 30 stigmata claims in the world at any time. But the most intriguing cases, like the Mexico City woman, leave Martinez saying, "I believe that she believes it."

Martinez, who grew up Roman Catholic in Miami, says he can't prove stigmata signify divine intervention, but they suggest the ability of rare individuals to identify with Jesus by suffering like him.

"I don't think Christ picks and chooses people to suffer," Martinez says. "Christ opens people to all possibilities of finding him."

Martinez has a larger mission than the paranormal. He thinks the stigmata phenomenon points to a deeper psycho-spiritual truth — the power of mind and belief to affect the body, for better or worse, and our ability to improve health by understanding the "mind-body code."

"We have the ability to do incredible things. I'm interested in how thoughts, emotions and beliefs affect the immune system. If the mind can wound or micromanage the body, it can also heal."

Martinez' new novel, "The Man from Autumn," is a "navigational chart" for his theories of the mind-body relationship. His book is especially popular in Celtic-minded Ireland, where he regularly spends time lecturing.

Martinez leads a Nashville workshop July 22 on "The Psychology of Stigmata: How the Mind Wounds and Heals the Body." It's for anyone exploring how to improve health (and understand the debilitating role of stress, depression, shame) by deep relaxation techniques, imaging, the power of magnanimous love, compassion, self-esteem and more. To register, call 736-5654 or see www.biocognitive.com. Cost is \$50/person, \$90/couple, \$35/students.

Martinez, investigator of stigmata, eventually came to see a bigger story — 6 billion people who could awaken to their own mind-body potential for wellness. •