

Miracles of Bodily Transformation, or How St. Francis Received the Stigmata

Arnold I. Davidson

Introduction translated by Maggie Fritz-Morkin

No brief discussion of stigmata can hope to take account of the many, and sometimes conflicting, dimensions of this historically datable, and relatively recent, religious phenomenon. A more appropriate title might have been “Miracle, Mysticism, Malady: The Iconography and Philosophy of Stigmata.” A thorough discussion of stigmata ought to consider them in the contexts of the history of the miraculous, the history of mysticism, and the history of psychiatric explanations of stigmata. In this essay, however, I will concentrate almost exclusively on interpretations of the stigmata as miraculous, for reasons that I hope will soon become clear. Furthermore, I will restrict my discussion to the stigmatization of St. Francis, a limitation whose motive will become evident as I develop my argument. I would like to begin with a few brief observations on points of view that I will not consider here.

From the perspective of the history of mysticism, Francis’s stigmata

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In providing English translations here I have consulted some already existing English versions as well as the Latin originals.

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represent the beginning of a new form of mysticism, in which mystical experience is no longer merely spiritual but is accompanied by phenomena and transformations that are physical. Stigmata, levitation, bilocation, fasting, and transverberation are physical events that became associated with mystical experience. These phenomena contrast with older forms of mysticism *not* expressed in the body. For example, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in Sermon 74 on *The Song of Songs*, alludes to this older form when he writes:

So when the Bridegroom, the Word, came to me, he never made known his coming by any signs, not by sight, not by sound, not by touch. . . . In the renewal and remaking of the spirit of my mind, that is of my inmost being, I have perceived the excellence of his glorious beauty.¹

As many historians have maintained, the introduction of this new form of mysticism must be linked to a changed attitude and a new devotion towards the humanity of Christ, his Incarnation, his Passion and, more generally, the corporeal existence that characterizes him as human. However, we must avoid interpreting this new kind of mystical experience as simply the consequence of a new theoretical elaboration regarding Christ's humanity because it reflects a different way of living and experiencing the humanity of Christ; it is an experience that has theoretical foundations, but cannot be reduced to them. As Pierre Hadot has argued, it is necessary to distinguish between the rational theological discourse on the transcendent and the spiritual experience of the transcendent. Mystical ecstasy must not be confused with theological argumentation and discourse; the methods and procedures of philosophy and theology were traditionally in the service of a new way of life that required a transformation of one's very being.² Regarding the new forms of mysticism, we may appropriate the

1. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, trans. Irene Edmonds, 4 vols. (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1971–80), 4:91. See Chiara Frugoni, "Le mistiche, le visioni e l'iconografia: Rapporti e influssi," in *Temi e problemi nella mistica femminile trecentesca*, ed. Centro di studi sulla spiritualità medievale (Todi, 1983), pp. 148–49 n. 27. Frugoni uses the terms *old* and *new* mysticism.

2. See Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris, 2002). For ancient

ARNOLD I. DAVIDSON is the executive editor of *Critical Inquiry* and the Robert O. Anderson Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago.

MAGGIE FRITZ-MORKIN is a doctoral candidate in romance languages and literatures at the University of Chicago. She is preparing her dissertation on excrement imagery and rhetoric in medieval Italian literature.

words of Giangiorgio Pasqualotto, spoken in a quite different context: “it never concerns only intellectual knowledge, but a knowledge that at every moment involves one’s whole existence, that is, which determines not only a new theory, but a new *experience*.”³

I will discuss many, as it were, theoretical texts on St. Francis’s stigmata, which nonetheless aim, at least to a certain extent, to represent the spiritual experience and practice of St. Francis. I do not wish to give the impression that I think the *theory* of mysticism should always take precedence over practices and phenomena that manifest themselves in mystical experiences. Francis was far from being a theorist, as his medieval biographers well knew, and as is demonstrated by Thomas of Celano: “he sought out and most piously longed to know in what manner, by what way, and by what desire he might cling perfectly to the Lord God according to his counsel and according to the good pleasure of his will. This was always his highest philosophy.”⁴ I am, therefore, entirely in methodological agreement with Massimo Raveri’s thesis, according to which:

In the analysis of the relation between the theory and the practice of the sacred, it is no longer possible to judge the former as the highest expression of spirituality and the latter—practice—as a phase of transposition into less significant forms, more opaque with respect to speculation, often incoherent and at times simply incomprehensible. More sophisticated instruments of anthropological and semiotic investigation allow us to confirm that this is not true. In lived religious experience, religious practice reveals itself to be an inexhaustible source of experimentation and religious renewal, with its expressive, specific, and autonomous codes that transmit messages of profound spirituality.⁵

The texts and images that I will discuss are in constant dialogue with the “expressive, specific, and autonomous codes” of Francis’s religious practice.

Let me conclude these introductory remarks by merely pointing out

Christianity, see esp. pp. 75–98; on mysticism, see pp. 239–52. See also Hadot, “Structure et thèmes du traité,” in Plotinus, *Traité 38* (Paris, 1988), pp. 13–69, esp. pp. 44–58.

3. Giangiorgio Pasqualotto, “La mistica del vuoto nel buddhismo Zen,” in *Forme del mistico*, ed. Paolo Lanaro (Vicenza, 1988), p. 106. Pasqualotto also refers to Hadot.

4. Thomas of Celano, *Vita prima di San Francesco d’Assisi*, in *Fonti Francescane: Editio Minor*, ed. Feliciano Olgiati et al. (Assisi, 1986), §91, pp. 274–75; hereafter abbreviated *VP*.

5. Massimo Raveri, *Il corpo e il paradiso: Esperienze ascetiche in Asia Orientale* (Venice, 1992), p. 36.

that, from the epistemological perspective of psychiatric explanation, it is not necessary to attribute a symbolic value to the stigmata. For example, a psychiatric explanation requires that one find some psychological mechanism to explain the production and recurrent hemorrhaging of a wound in the side that is not the result of an external causal agent. The fact that the wound is on the right or left side is irrelevant to the structure of the explanation. But from a theological perspective the symbolic value of a wound on the right side is incommensurably different from a wound on the left side. What must be explained from a psychiatric point of view often turns out to be distinct from that which needs to be interpreted theologically or historically.

As will become clear in the course of my essay, I am interested in the history of the textual and pictorial *representations* of the stigmata. I do not intend to explain nor am I interested in what the stigmata really are. I will not submit Francis to psychoanalysis, nor will I try to extract the real, historical Francis that underlies the various representations of him. Since I will present stigmata primarily as a cultural representation, it is not necessary for me to have access to Francis's unconscious or to some originary autobiographical description. The cultural representations of the stigmata are in effect fundamental, not only because they provide us with information about Francis the individual, but because they, just as importantly, reveal many significant characteristics of both high and popular culture of the late Middle Ages.

To force oneself to choose between spirituality and psychiatric illness leads one down a methodological dead end. Nobody has recognized this more clearly than Mino Bergamo, who in his brilliant commentary on the letters and ascetic practices of Louise du Néant, the most significant mystic locked up as a madwoman at the Salpêtrière, articulated a methodological approach which I fully share:

How does one in fact discern, in cases such as this, what belongs to spirituality and what belongs to illness? How does one succeed in distinguishing, at the origin of such actions, the role of devotional desires from the drive of perverse instincts? Evidently it is a nearly hopeless undertaking. And it is, without a doubt, the reason for which Catholic historians, even when speaking of the "holy madness" of asceticism, generally prefer to speak of it as little as possible, enshrouding this type of mortification in a veil of discrete silence. Now, I maintain that we must do the exact opposite, not in order to exhume that age-old question of the pathological character of a certain religious experience, but rather to break free from the old alternative of devotion

and illness, or devotion and perversion, formulating the problem in a completely new way. I therefore propose that we ask ourselves . . . about the meaning that these features acquire, insofar as they are represented in a given textual landscape, and insofar as they become part of a determined contextual landscape.⁶

Such attention to the textual and contextual representations of meaning allows us, as Bergamo maintains, “to bring into view, in fact, a network whose existence we otherwise could never even have imagined.”⁷ The networks of meaning revealed by Francis’s stigmata are the ultimate aim of my essay.

In this essay I hope to show how the texts and images of St. Francis of Assisi’s stigmatization built on one another to provide a persuasive representation of this miracle, a representation, that is, that would actually persuade thirteenth- and fourteenth-century readers and viewers of its reality. A detailed examination of the techniques and modalities of persuasion employed by these writers and artists can help us gain access to a set of profound and wide-ranging stakes that were at issue in these representations and were located at every level of culture. Thus, studying the strategic intervention of discourse and painting in this historical context allows us to understand why the battles fought around Francis’s stigmatization were so intense and long-lasting, and why so many different resources of rhetorical and pictorial persuasion were deployed around this miracle.⁸ No less historically significant, since Francis’s stigmatization crucially contributes to making theologically and culturally possible a whole new range of bodily miracles, understanding its representations is a cornerstone in helping us articulate a changing medieval sensibility.

The stigmatization of Francis allegedly took place on 14 September 1224. As a result of the fact that, and the way in which, this event has become so firmly lodged in the history of Western culture, it is all too easy to forget how extraordinary, exceptional, and even unique an event it was initially considered to be. First of all, it should be remembered that the vast major-

6. Mino Bergamo, “Architettura di un romanzo epistolare,” in Louise du Néant, *Il trionfo delle umiliazioni: Lettere*, ed. Bergamo (Venice, 1994), p. 107.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 120. See also p. 116 n. 44.

8. My focus on the strategic dimensions of discourse and painting is indebted to some much-underappreciated ideas of Michel Foucault. For discussion of these ideas, see Arnold I. Davidson, “Structures and Strategies of Discourse: Remarks towards a History of Foucault’s Philosophy of Language,” in *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, ed. Davidson (Chicago, 1997), pp. 1–17, esp. pp. 2–5.

ity of miracles found in the lives of saints are healing miracles.⁹ Considered overall, the miracles of saints are generally represented as falling into characteristic types, the prototypes of which are found in the Bible, which increases the authority of the miracle.¹⁰ However, there is no biblical prototype for Francis's stigmatization. The word *stigmata* appears only once in the New Testament, in Galatians 6:17, where Paul proclaims, "I bear on my body the marks of Christ" ("ego enim stigmata Iesu in corpora meo porto"). Whether or not one interprets this remark as referring to actual physical marks of ill treatment, there is no evidence that Paul is referring literally to the five wounds of Christ. The context of Paul's declaration makes it clear that the marks of Jesus he bears are not to be taken simply as outward impressions, like circumcision, but rather show symbolically that the world has been crucified to him and he to the world.¹¹ What is central is "the new creation," the fact that Paul belongs to Christ, and these are what his "stigmata" mark; they are not themselves Christ's wounds, nor are they in any way miraculous.

Francis's stigmatization was represented, both textually and iconographically, as a unique miracle, indeed a miracle greater than any other miracle. It marked, one could say, a new stage in the history of the miraculous. Its purported novelty, its supposed status sui generis, provoked deep hostility and incredulity by many different groups of people. Other early-thirteenth-century cases of purported stigmatization were unequivocally rejected by Church authorities, attributed to self-infliction, surrounded by an air of scandal and even heresy.¹² To counter the doubts and denials concerning Francis's stigmatization no fewer than nine papal bulls were issued between 1237 and 1291, three of them in 1237 by Gregory IX, the great patron of the Franciscans, who canonized Francis in 1228.¹³ In his bull of 11 April 1237, *Usque ad terminus*, Gregory IX condemned a Cistercian bishop in Bohemia who had expressly denied the stigmatization of Francis and prohibited its iconographical representation. The bishop had claimed

9. For the predominance of healing miracles, see Pierre-André Sigal, *L'Homme et le miracle dans la France médiévale, XIe-XIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1985).

10. See Baudouin de Gaiffier, "Miracles bibliques et vies des saints," *Études critiques d'hagiographie et d'iconologie* (Brussels, 1967), pp. 50–61.

11. See, among others, Antonio Royo Marín, *Teologia della perfezione cristiana*, trans. and ed. Guido Pettinati et al. (1960; Milan, 1987), p. 1094, and Pierre Adnès, "Stigmates," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, ed. Marcel Viller et al., 17 vols. (Paris, 1932–95), 14:1211–12. See also the terminology used in 2 Cor. 4:10–11.

12. For a discussion of earlier rejected cases of stigmatization, see André Vauchez, "Les Stigmates de Saint François et leurs détracteurs dans les derniers siècles du moyen âge," *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 80, no. 2 (1968): 598–99; hereafter abbreviated "S."

13. The best discussion of this topic remains "S." See also Rona Goffen, *Spirituality in Conflict: Saint Francis and Giotto's Bardi Chapel* (University Park, Penn., 1988), esp. pp. 13–22.

that “only the son of the eternal Father was crucified for the salvation of humanity and the Christian religion should accord but to his wounds alone a suppliant devotion” (quoted in “S,” p. 601). In censuring this bishop, Gregory IX referred to Christ’s adornment of Francis as “the great and singular miracle” (“grande ac singular miraculum”), words repeated by Alexander IV in 1255.¹⁴ Nor did papal defenses of the stigmata, in response to widespread hostility, end in the thirteenth century. When the Dominicans, unable to counter the official approval of Francis’s stigmata, put forth some of their own members as having received this divine gift, they threatened the uniqueness of the miracle worked on Francis’s body. In the bull *Spectat ad Romani* of 6 September 1472, Sixtus IV thus was led to prohibit the representation of St. Catherine “*cum stigmatibus Christi, ad instar beati Francisci*” (“with the stigmata, in the likeness of blessed Francis”) (quoted in “S,” p. 611 n. 4).¹⁵ As late as 1522, the author of the *Dialogo del Sacro Monte della Verna*, Mariano da Firenze, was still defending the reality, the uniqueness, and the singularity of Francis’s stigmatization. To a doubting Thomas’s citation of Galatians 6:17, invoking Paul as a prior case of stigmatization, the author responded that Paul was not speaking literally. This could be established from the fact that Paul is *never* painted with the stigmata: “Paul was painted without them: but as for Francis you see him with the stigmata.”¹⁶

These few examples already indicate how central visual representations were to debates about the stigmatization. Artistic representations played an important role in the diffusion of the theme of Francis’s stigmata, and opposition to the stigmata often took the form of opposing such representations or mutilating those that already existed (see “S,” p. 624). Chiara Frugoni’s remark in an article on the relation between iconography and female mystical visions can be applied as well to the specific case of Francis’s stigmatization: “Precisely because the multitude of people are nourished on images and not books—they go to church, look at paintings, hear the exegesis of them in the sermons, but don’t directly read the Bible—it is a world of images that is the nourishment of their spiritual life.”¹⁷ In order

14. The words of Gregory IX are quoted in Goffen, *Spirituality in Conflict*, p. 97 n. 24. For Alexander IV’s bull, see “Bolle di papa Alessandro IV in testimonianza delle stimmate di san Francesco,” in *Le stimmate di santo Francesco: dagli scritti del XIII e XIV secolo*, ed. Marino Bernardo Barfucci (Arezzo, 1975), pp. 36–37.

15. Millard Meiss has argued convincingly that although Francis’s stigmatization was the model for Catherine’s stigmatization, her vision more resembled the paintings of the subject than the texts. See Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton, N.J., 1951), p. 117.

16. Quoted in Goffen, *Spirituality in Conflict*, pp. 20–21.

17. Frugoni, “Le mistiche, le visioni e l’iconografia,” p. 152.

to understand Francis's stigmata and their role in the history of miracles of bodily transformation, we must make use of both images and texts.

I will argue here, although the argument could be extended at even greater length, that as Franciscan hagiography of Francis developed, representations of the stigmatization focused on its unparalleled and wondrous character and had the effect of heightening its miraculous status. In response to recurrent doubts and denials, as well as to more general hagiographical and political pressures, these representations were meant to stabilize the status of the stigmata, dispelling any hesitations about its being a singular miracle, special even within the category of the miraculous. The production of these textual and visual depictions culminated in a virtual divinization of Francis, portraying him as a figure whose stigmatization marked him out as distinct even among saints, viewing him as a new Christ, an *alter Christus* (see "S," pp. 621–23).¹⁸ In turn, the presentation of Francis as a new Christ could not but provoke further hostility and incredulity.

The first description of the stigmata themselves, although not of the stigmatization, occurs in the *Epistola encyclica* of Brother Elias of 3 October 1226, announcing the death of Francis:

And now I announce to you a great joy, a new miracle. The world has never heard of such a miracle, except in the Son of God, who is Christ our Lord. A little while before his death, our brother and father appeared crucified, bearing in his body the five wounds, which are truly the stigmata of Christ. His hands and feet were as if punctured by nails, pierced on both sides, and had scars that were the black color of nails. His side appeared pierced by a lance, and often gave forth drop-lets of blood.¹⁹

Starting with the claim that this is "a new miracle," Elias unambiguously identifies Francis's wounds with the true stigmata of Christ, thus at once demarcating Francis's uniqueness in terms of his bodily conformity to Christ. Bodily similitude is here inextricably linked to proof of Francis's status. Although the passage from Galatians is alluded to, we see that from the very beginning Francis's stigmata are interpreted to have no precedent "except in the Son of God, who is Christ our Lord." Elias's description

18. See also Stanislao da Campagnola, *L'angelo del sesto sigillo e l'Alter Christus* (Rome, 1971).

19. Brother Elias, "Lettera di frate Elia," in *Fonti Francescane*, p. 195. For a discussion of Elias's description of the stigmata, see H. Berger, "La Forme des stigmates de saint François d'Assise," in *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 35, no. 1 (1939): 60–70. For an exhaustive bibliography and discussion, see Octavian Schmucki, *The Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi: A Critical Investigation in the Light of Thirteenth Century Sources* (Saint Bonaventure, N.Y., 1991), esp. pp. 263–325.

clearly implies that only Francis's side wound bled, while the apparent nail wounds in his hands and feet have in themselves little of the miraculous about them, appearing as blackened scars that might look like nails. Although the description is certainly framed in terms of the greatness of the miracle, it does not itself invoke the miraculous structure of the wounds that will be so prominent a part of later descriptions.

Thomas of Celano's *Vita prima S. Francisci*, the first biography of Francis, written between 1228 and the beginning of 1229, contains an extensive description of both the stigmatization and the stigmata.²⁰ Here are the most important relevant passages:

When he was staying in a hermitage, called Alverna from the place where it stood, two years before he gave his soul back to heaven, he had a vision from God. There appeared to him a man, like a Seraph with six wings, standing above him, with his hands extended and feet joined, fixed to a cross. Two wings were raised above his head, two were extended for flight and two covered his whole body.

When the blessed servant of the most High saw these things, he was filled with the greatest wonder but he did not understand what this was supposed to mean to him. Still he rejoiced very much, and was exceedingly happy because of the kind and gracious look with which the Seraph looked at him, whose beauty was beyond estimation, but at the same time he was frightened in seeing him fixed to the cross in the bitter pain of suffering. Francis arose, if I may say so, sad and happy, such that joy and grief alternated in him. He anxiously meditated on what the vision could mean, and for this reason his spirit was greatly troubled.

While he was unable to come to any understanding of it and his heart was entirely preoccupied with it, this is what happened: the marks of the nails began to appear in his hands and feet just as he had seen them before in the crucified man above him.

His hands and his feet appeared to be pierced in the center by nails, whose heads were visible on the inner side of his hands and on the upper part of his feet, while the pointed ends protruded from the opposite sides. The marks on his hands were round on the inner side and elongated on the outer, and small pieces of flesh looked like the ends of the nails, bent and beaten back and rising above the rest of the

20. I shall not discuss Brother Leo's remarks about the stigmata, written by him on the parchment that contained Francis's "Lodi di Dio altissimo" and "Benedizione a Frate Leone," since this was not intended to be a public document. Despite its historical importance, for my limited purposes here it can be left aside. For the document, see *Fonti Francescane*, p. 134 n. 1.

flesh. In the same way the marks of the nails were impressed on his feet, and raised above the rest of the flesh. His right side was also pierced as if with a lance, and covered over with a scar, and it often bled, and his tunic and his undergarments were often sprinkled with his sacred blood. [*VP*, §§94–95, pp. 277–78]

Thomas's description of the stigmata also states that only the side wound bled, but, unlike Elias, his representation of the nail wounds takes on a truly extraordinary character. The wounds themselves assume the appearance of nails, the nail heads and points seeming to come out of the flesh. But not wanting his readers to think that actual nails were driven through and left in Francis's hands and feet, he later makes it clear that "it was wonderful to see in the middle of his hands and feet, not the holes of nails, but the nails themselves formed from his flesh and having the color of iron" (*VP*, §113, p. 293). One is led to believe that a glance at Francis's hands and feet would produce the impression that real nails protruded from him, but on closer examination one would see that his flesh was miraculously configured into the shape of nails.

Let me turn immediately to the representation of the stigmatization itself, making only a few points that are most central to my arguments. First, I want to emphasize, as other commentators have, that, according to Thomas, Francis's stigmata begin to appear in his hands and feet after the disappearance of his vision "that he had seen a little before in the crucified man."²¹ Second, Francis was standing when he received the stigmata—he "arose." Third, Francis did not understand the meaning of his vision; its significance was made known to him by the appearance of the marks of the nails themselves. Fourth, Thomas gives us no causal account whatsoever, natural or supernatural, of the appearance of the stigmata. He describes the vision, Francis's state of mind, and the appearance of the marks of the nails. Nothing he says allows us to approximate the cause of the stigmata, and, specifically, he does not designate the seraph as the cause. Finally, let me very briefly take up Thomas's representation of Francis's vision.

The vision is of a man who appears as a seraph, his hands extended and feet joined together, in a standard iconography of crucifixion, and he is affixed to a cross. The six wings of the man-seraph are arranged so that two of them are extended above his head, two are extended for flight, and two are wrapped around his whole body. The most obvious source for the vision of a seraph is Isaiah 6, where Isaiah's vision of the Lord on his throne

21. See Étienne Gilson, "L'Interprétation traditionnelle des stigmates," *Revue d'histoire franciscaine* 2 (Oct. 1925): 467–79. As Gilson argues, the Latin makes clear the temporal separation between the vision and the appearance of the stigmata.

includes seraphs who “stand in attendance of Him.” Without here tracing the narrative and iconographical convergences and divergences between Isaiah’s and Francis’s visions, I want simply to recall that although the New Testament never mentions a seraph, Pseudo-Dionysius’s *Celestial Hierarchy* places the seraph at the head of the first rank of heavenly beings, consisting first of seraphs, then of cherubs and thrones. The seraph has “the highest place because he is placed immediately next to God, and thanks to this proximity he receives divine revelations and initiations.”²² Pseudo-Dionysius tells us that the seraph that appeared to Isaiah “was able to elevate him to the sacred contemplation that allowed him to see, to speak in symbols the highest essences placed under, next to and around God” and that, specifically, “the angel that had imparted the vision to him transmitted, as far as possible, his own knowledge of the sacred mystery” (*GC*, chap. 13, §4, pp. 73, 74). Furthermore, the seraph is “the principle that comes immediately after God of all sacred knowledge and of all imitation of Him” and thus seraphim are the highest transmitters of divine illumination (*GC*, chap. 13, §3, p. 72).

In his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Pseudo-Dionysius describes the seraphim as standing in assembly around *Jesus*, looking upon him and receiving his spiritual gifts.²³ The appearance of a seraph to Francis would have been a sign of a truly exalted divine vision, a vision conveying the highest divine illumination. Moreover, the derivation of “seraph” from “burning,” which indicates “their fiery nature” (*GC*, chap. 13, §4, p. 74) and which can be found in both Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory the Great, will play an important role in the mystical interpretation and symbolism of the stigmatization of Francis (see *GC*, chap. 7, §1, p. 47).²⁴ The appearance of the seraph in Francis’s vision is thus theologically overdetermined, and we shall see that the iconography of the stigmatization raises even further issues of interpretation.

The first pictorial representations of Francis receiving the stigmata occur on two enamel reliquaries from Limoges in 1230 (fig. 1).²⁵ In every

22. Pseudo-Dionysius, *La gerarchia celeste* [Celestial Hierarchy], in *Gerarchia celeste, Teologia mistica, Lettere*, ed. Salvatore Lilla (Rome, 1986), chap. 7, §1, p. 47; hereafter abbreviated *GC*. Pseudo-Dionysius is speaking here of the entire first order of angels, at whose head stand the seraphim.

23. See Pseudo-Dionysius, *La gerarchia ecclesiastica* [Ecclesiastical Hierarchy], ed. Lilla (Rome, 2002), chap. 4, §5, pp. 107–8.

24. See also Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in evangelia*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1844–55), 76:1251, 1254.

25. The most complete discussion of these reliquaries remains Henri Matrod, *Les Stigmates de Saint François: Deux Émaux franciscains au Louvre, leur plus ancienne représentation connue* (Paris, 1906).

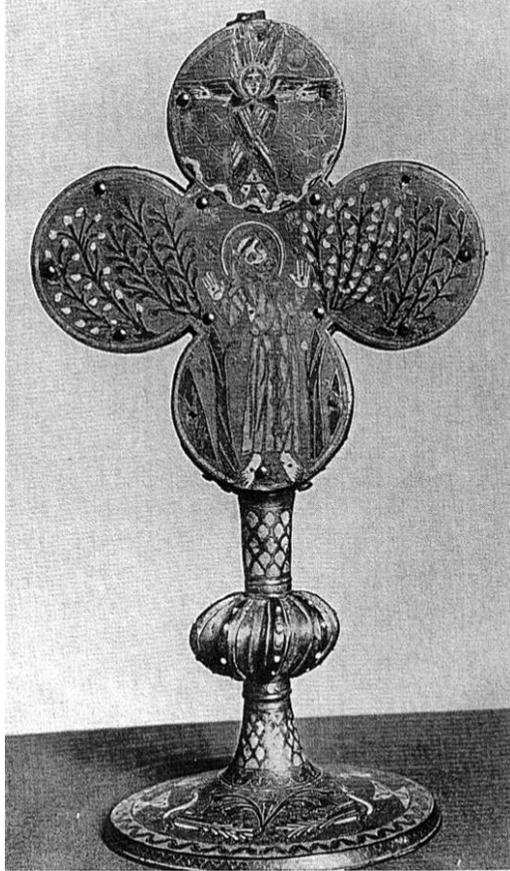


FIGURE 1. Reliquary. Louvre Museum, Paris.

respect, except for the absence of the seraph's cross, these earliest depictions faithfully reproduce the verbal account of the stigmatization found in Thomas's *Vita prima*, the only account written before 1230. In these enamels we notice first that unlike the vast majority of depictions, the physical milieu of the stigmatization is not that of a mountainside; this detail is explained by the fact that Thomas speaks directly only of the "hermitage" called Alverna, nowhere referring to the mountainside that appears in later accounts. Moreover, Francis is standing, as in Thomas's account, his posture and gestures those of the *orans* position of prayer. Francis faces the viewer, his head tilted upward and toward the left, and he is obviously not looking at the seraph, who is placed directly overhead. The seraph is in the sky, the celestial space being indicated by the clouds and heavenly bodies that surround him. The seraph is depicted with six wings arranged as

Thomas describes them; he has four wounds, on his hands and feet, but the wound on his side is not represented, and he is not affixed to a cross. Francis bears all five wounds of Christ, represented by red dots, and, in contradistinction to the visual depictions that were immediately to follow, the side wound is clearly visible. Most importantly, the artist of these earliest images has tried to indicate that the vision of the seraph and Francis receiving the stigmata are not contemporaneous. Not only the placement of the seraph overhead, but, even more significantly, the fact that the scene of the seraph is separated from that of Francis by a red line etched in the metal, serve to represent the temporal separation of the vision and the imprinting. This separation of the two scenes and the arrangement of the two figures follow precisely Thomas's account. We see no causal interaction between the man-seraph and Francis and so no depiction of the precise cause of the stigmata. These images articulate knowledge, but they have their gaps.

The early- and mid-thirteenth century produced a significant number of panel paintings of the life of Francis. Here I will only briefly comment on the earliest panel, signed by Bonaventura Berlinghieri and dated 1235 (a detail showing the stigmatization scene is in fig. 2).²⁶ This painting, done for the church of San Francesco in Pescia, contains six scenes from the life of Francis, including the first known paintings of Francis preaching to the birds and receiving the stigmata. The background of the stigmata scene contains the hermitage mentioned in Thomas, but the physical surroundings are those of a mountainside. It is possible that Berlinghieri knew that Alverna was a mountain, but, more likely, the depiction of Francis on a mountainside was used to convey deep symbolic significance. Three crucial events in Christ's life took place on mountains: the Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, the Agony in the Garden on the Mount of Olives, and the Crucifixion on Mt. Calvary. References to all three of these events were implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, incorporated into the paintings of Francis receiving the stigmata. In this case, I believe that I can show that the most obvious reference is to the Mount of Olives. The seraph is depicted as described in Thomas, his wings red and brown, but he is not fixed to a cross. He is looking straight ahead, not down at Francis, and there is no real interaction or even emotional connection between the seraph and Francis. However, a viewer who did not know the details of the story would have to have concluded that the appearance of the seraph and the receiving of the

26. On Berlinghieri, see E. B. Harrison, "A New History of Bonaventura di Berlinghiero's St. Francis Dossal in Pescia," *Studies in the History of Medieval Italian Painting* 1 (Autumn 1953): 69–78. Harrison is very helpful on the history of the painting, but has little to say about its iconography.



FIGURE 2. Bonaventura Berlinghieri, stigmatization scene from *Francis of Assisi* (detail from upper left), 1235, wood panel painting, church of San Francesco, Pescia.

stigmata were contemporaneous, since Berlinghieri has telescoped the two separate scenes without giving any indication that they were temporally distinct. This simultaneous depiction of the seraph and Francis, the mountainside, and even Francis's praying posture makes this scene an unmistakable iconographical reference to Christ's Agony in the Garden. A thirteenth-century viewer of this painting would have easily made this reference, recognizing the adaptation of this scene to the Agony in the Garden as specifically narrated by Luke. In the Lucan account, when Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives to pray to his Father, he is described as "having knelt down and prayed" and "then there appeared an angel from heaven to strengthen him"; finally, "gripped by anguish he prayed more intensely;

and his sweat became like drops of blood that fell to the ground” (Luke 22:41–44).²⁷ Thus Francis kneeling and praying on a mountainside when an angel appears to him, followed by an extraordinary physical transformation, directly evokes this scene in Jesus’ life that occurs immediately before his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion.²⁸ Moreover, Francis is not standing in this scene. His prayer gesture, kneeling with hands (almost) joined, is a posture that was not common until the thirteenth century.²⁹ The primary meaning of the joined hands, of recollection and of offering oneself in concentrated surrender to God, especially in conjunction with kneeling, was used to express intense devotion to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist.³⁰

Thus Francis’s posture would indicate a great intensity of prayer. Francis’s head is raised and tilted toward the right, his eyes rolled back as if in devout meditation. He is not looking at the seraph, but seems to be recollecting himself and giving himself up to God, exactly as Christ does at the Agony in the Garden. Furthermore, only during the thirteenth century did the prayer gesture of kneeling with the hands joined become common in the iconography of the Agony in the Garden, as opposed to the earlier representations of Christ’s prayer showing him with hands outstretched rather than joined. Greater focus on this episode in Christ’s life in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is, no doubt, related to the increased theological reflection on, and devotion to, Christ’s humanity. While the Agony in the Garden, with the angel who comforted Christ, served to humanize him, the stigmatization served to divinize Francis. Berlinghieri contributes to this divinization by having Francis’s prayer on Alverna parallel the iconography of Christ’s prayer on the Mount of Olives, thus brilliantly adapting the appearance of the Isaiahan seraph to a New Testament theme. The miracle of the stigmata is the culmination of Francis’s life as he reenacts the life of Christ.

The representation of the stigmata themselves, by four black dots on Francis’s limbs, is relatively understated compared with later paintings, although the marks are unmistakably visible. This painting, while visually representing the fact of the stigmata, frames it by an interpretation of the whole event of the stigmatization, maintaining this physical fact within the

27. The accounts in Matthew 26 and Mark 14 both omit the angel and give a different description of the posture of Jesus praying.

28. There is no purely textual way to determine whether Luke considered this bloody sweat to be supernatural. For discussion, see Marín, *Teologia*, pp. 1101–3.

29. See Gerhart Ladner, “The Gestures of Prayer in Papal Iconography of the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries,” *Images and Ideas in the Middle Ages: Selected Studies in History and Art*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1983), 1:209–37.

30. See *ibid.*, 1:214, 234.

spiritual significance of the event. Equally visible is the absence in Francis's right side of any wound whatsoever. Indeed, none of these early panel paintings depicts a wound in Francis's side, despite Thomas's description. This absence, I believe, itself carries deep symbolic significance, having to do with the symbolic import of Christ's own side wound. Following Thomas but adding their own innovations, artists' early representations of the stigmatization exhibit the attitude of unparalleled importance that surrounded this miracle, an attitude that would eventually make Christ the only possible parallel for Francis.

In light of what I have said about these early texts and images of the stigmatization, how could one further increase its status as a miracle? How could one depict it even more miraculously than these early representations did? An answer to this question can be found in the writings of Bonaventure and in the paintings of Giotto.

Bonaventure was commissioned to write a biography of Francis in 1260 at the general chapter of Narbonne. This biography was completed by 1263, and in 1266, at the general chapter of Paris, Bonaventure's biography was officially approved. Moreover, a decree was passed ordering the destruction of all earlier biographies. Bonaventure's *Legenda maior* decisively influence almost all future representations, both textual and visual, of Francis. Nowhere is this innovation more evident than in Bonaventure's discussion of the stigmatization. Here is the passage from Bonaventure that parallels the one I have already cited from Thomas. After describing the "seraphic ardor of the desires" of Francis, Bonaventure writes:

On a certain morning about the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, while Francis was praying on the mountainside, he saw a Seraph with six fiery and shining wings descend from the height of heaven. And when in swift flight the Seraph had reached a spot in the air near the man of God, there appeared between the wings the figure of a man crucified, with his hands and feet extended and fastened to a cross. Two of the wings were lifted above his head, two were extended for flight and two covered his whole body. When Francis saw this, he was overwhelmed and his heart was flooded with a mixture of joy and sorrow. He rejoiced because of the gracious way Christ looked upon him under the appearance of the Seraph, but the fact that he was fastened to a cross pierced his soul with a sword of compassionate sorrow.

He wondered exceedingly at the sight of so unfathomable a vision, realizing that the weakness of Christ's passion was in no way compatible with the immortality of the Seraph's spiritual nature. Eventually he understood by a revelation from the Lord that divine providence

had shown him this vision so that, as Christ's lover, he might learn in advance that he was to be totally transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified, not by the martyrdom of his flesh, but by the fire of his soul.

As the vision disappeared, it left in his heart a marvelous ardor and imprinted on his body marks that were no less marvelous. Immediately the marks of nails began to appear on his hands and feet just as he had seen them a little before in the figure of the man crucified. His hands and feet seemed to be pierced through the center by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing on the inner side of the hands and the upper side of the feet and their points on the opposite sides. The heads of the nails in his hands and his feet were round and black; their points were oblong and bent as if driven back with a hammer, and they emerged from the flesh and stuck out beyond it. Also his right side, as if pierced with a lance, was marked with a red scar from which his sacred blood often flowed, moistening his tunic and his undergarments.³¹

Unlike Thomas, Bonaventure describes Francis as *praying* on a *mountain-side* and does not describe him as standing when he received the stigmata. Like Thomas, Bonaventure writes that the vision disappeared before the stigmata began to appear on Francis's body ("As the vision disappeared," "just as he had seen them a little before"). As for the stigmata themselves, Bonaventure follows Thomas in describing them as "formed from the flesh itself," and even further increases, in ways I shall not discuss here, their miraculous configuration (*LM*, 15.2, pp. 641–42).

Turning now to the most important differences between the *Vita prima* and the *Legenda maior*, we see that in the latter the subjective cause of the stigmata is the fire of Francis's love consuming his soul ("the fire of his soul").³² Bonaventure, for the first time, also attributes a causal role to the vision, which acts as the, so to speak, objective cause of the stigmata: "As the *vision* disappeared, it left in his heart a marvelous ardor and *imprinted on his body marks* that were no less marvelous" ("et in carne non minus mirabilem signorum impressit effigiem"). Thus Bonaventure's causal attribution has two components: the subjective state of Francis's soul and the objective nature of the vision itself that, in some unspecified way, im-

31. Bonaventure, *Leggenda maggiore (Vita di San Francesco d'Assisi)*, in *Fonti Francescane*, 13.3, pp. 627–28; hereafter abbreviated *LM*.

32. This aspect of Bonaventure's account develops chap. 98, §135 of Thomas's *Vita secunda*, a topic to which I shall return at the end of this essay. See Thomas of Celano, *Vita secunda di San Francesco d'Assisi*, in *Fonti Francescane*, p. 437.

presses the stigmata on Francis's body. As regards the vision, Bonaventure does not speak merely of a seraph and a crucified man but, absolutely decisively for the later representations of the stigmatization, identifies this crucified man with Christ himself. Thomas's "he rejoiced very much, and was exceedingly happy because of the kind and gracious look with which the Seraph looked at him" is transformed into "he rejoiced because of the gracious way Christ looked upon him under the appearance of the Seraph." The language of Bonaventure's description is extremely important; the Latin uses the words "*Christo sub specie Seraph.*" This phrase is highly significant because it echoes the language of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, which became dogma in 1215. In *The Tree of Life*, Bonaventure refers to Christ *sub specie panis*, and Aquinas explains that although Christ is really present in the Eucharist he is seen not under his own proper species (*sub propria specie*) but rather "*sub specie panis et vini.*"³³ Thus representing Francis as having seen Christ "*sub specie Seraph*" reinforces the idea that Francis had a vision of the real presence of Christ, even if "under the appearance of the Seraph."

As Carlo Ginzburg has argued, in speaking of the Eucharist after 1215, one should not merely speak of a contact with the divine but of a *presence* of the divine in the strongest possible sense of the word, a "*sur-présence.*"³⁴ Next to this presence, other manifestations of the sacred pale in comparison. In light of Francis's own devotion to the Eucharist, as expressed for example in the first *Admonition* ("And as he showed himself in the true flesh to the holy apostles, so also he now shows himself to us in the consecrated bread"),³⁵ and of Bonaventure's insistence on the intensity of this devotion ("His very marrow burned with fervor for the sacrament of the Lord's body. . . . Tasting, as if intoxicated in the spirit, the sweetness of the spotless Lamb, he was often rapt in ecstasy" [*LM*, 9.2, p. 595]), the description of Francis's vision as of Christ *sub specie Seraph* serves to emphasize the reality of the vision, exactly as if Christ were present "in the true flesh."

The new description of Francis's vision and the claim that the vision itself was an agent of Francis's stigmatization are reflected in the iconographical transformations that came in the wake of the *Legenda maior*. Giotto (or Giotto and his assistants—I leave problems of attribution aside) produced three paintings of Francis receiving the stigmata: a fresco in the

33. See Bonaventure, *The Tree of Life*. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (Westminster, Md., 1981), vol. 5, qq. 75–76, pp. 2439–56.

34. Carlo Ginzburg, "Représentation: Le Mot, l'idée, la chose," *Annales ESC* 46 (Nov.–Dec. 1991): 1230.

35. Francis, *Ammonizioni*, in *Fonti Francescane*, p. 77.



FIGURE 3. Giotto, Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, ca. 1300, fresco, church of San Francesco, Assisi.

fresco cycle in the upper church of Assisi, an altarpiece with predella for the Church of San Francesco in Pisa, now in the Louvre, and a fresco in the fresco cycle for the Bardi Chapel in Santa Croce in Florence. All three paintings merit detailed discussion, especially as regards their differences, but for my purposes here I shall focus on the Assisi fresco, which is Giotto's first such painting, is based directly on Bonaventure, and served as a prototype for many later depictions of this scene (fig. 3). The Assisi fresco shows, I think it is fair to say, a perfect representation of Christ *sub specie Seraph*. (The other paintings decrease this impression.) The six wings of the seraph are arranged in the standard manner, although more of the upper body is exposed, making it clear that there is a human form beneath

the wings. Although the face of the man is now faded, it is clearly Christ, his beard and hair as traditionally depicted and his halo fully visible. As if to dispel any doubt whatsoever about the nature of the vision, the caption to the fresco tells us that Francis “*vidit Christum in specie Seraphim crucifixi.*” We are told in this caption that Francis was praying on the side of Mt. Verna when he received the stigmata, although his posture here is not that of any traditional prayer gesture. His hands appear to be in an *orans*-type position, although he is kneeling on one knee. All commentators interpret this posture, and especially the position of the hands, as that required by the way in which Francis’s reception of the stigmata is depicted. But they fail to remark that his hands exhibit the gesture of wonder toward a miracle and are in this respect an exaggerated form of the gesture found in Giotto’s painting of Francis and the cross of San Damiano, where the moment depicted is that of Francis hearing the miraculous voice that descends from the image of the crucifixion. Not only are the vision and the receiving of the stigmata contemporaneous (as in the earlier iconographical tradition), but the vision of Christ (under the appearance of the seraph) is also shown to be what I have called the objective cause of the stigmata. The caption again tells us that it was Christ under the appearance of the crucified seraph who “*impressit in minibus et pedibus et etiam in latere dextro stigmata crucis,*” and it goes on to identify these stigmata as those of Jesus Christ. This is the first painting to depict the physical process of stigmatization, five rays of light descending from Christ’s stigmata to produce Francis’s stigmata. There is no *textual* precedent at all for the depiction of these rays of light. They are, I believe, a complete innovation of the artist.³⁶ Although the luminosity of saints is often used to represent a divinization of the soul and although some depictions of the Transfiguration show rays of light descending to the disciples, it is unprecedented to see these divine rays of light being used to, in effect, divinize Francis by wounding him with the stigmata.³⁷ As extraordinary as these rays are, it is difficult to know how else one could visually represent the impression of the stigmata on Francis’s body by the Christ/seraph. They are a modality of transmission that accurately captures a sense of *impressit*, while at the same time emphasizing pictorially that these impressions are supernatural. From this time forth, this objective cause of the stigmatization will be continually depicted, while the subjective cause, Francis’s burning love for Christ crucified, will recede into the background, at least as far as visual representations are

36. I see no reason to invent lost textual sources to account for the innovations in this painting, as does Umberto Milizia in his *Il ciclo di Giotto ad Assisi* (Anzio, 1994), pp. 115–16. There is every reason to believe that Giotto was as great an innovator as Bonaventure.

37. For the significance of luminosity, see Marín, *Teologia*, pp. 1125–28.

concerned. And since one is here trying to depict the miraculous, moreover a new and singular and disputed miracle, then the visible, indeed tangible, manifestation of the supernatural is necessary. To depict the stigmatization after the vision had disappeared, as the texts describe it, would decrease the effect of the painting as an unambiguous representation of the miraculous. And to fail to imagine the modality of the transmission would allow doubts or questions about precisely how Francis received the stigmata, doubts that are thoroughly dissipated by this painting. By depicting Christ supernaturally and materially transmitting his stigmata to Francis, the miraculous character of the stigmatization is made the focus of the painting. A viewer of this painting could not have failed to have been filled with the wonder of this miracle. The visual innovations of this fresco successfully and magnificently served this purpose. Before I consider one further aspect of this painting, let me note that all five stigmata are visible on Francis's body, including the wound in the right side seen through the opening in his tunic.

Another major innovation in this painting, which also will have profound consequences for later representations, consists of the figure in the lower right-hand corner, Leo, a witness present at the very event of Francis's stigmatization. Again, there is no textual precedent at all for the presence of anyone but Francis at the stigmatization. All of the texts have Francis praying alone on the mountainside. Of course, in his insistence on the reality of the stigmata, Bonaventure was greatly preoccupied with the question of witnesses. In *Legenda maior* he had written:

Now, through these very certain signs not only corroborated sufficiently by two or three witnesses, but superabundantly by a multitude of persons, God's testimony about you and through you has been made overwhelmingly credible, removing from unbelievers any veil of excuse, strengthening believers in faith, lifting them with trustworthy hope, inflaming them with the fire of charity. [*LM*, 13.9, p. 634]

Bonaventure, alluding to Deuteronomy 19:15 and Matthew 18:16–17, both of which require the evidence of two or three witnesses to sustain a charge, transposes the concern with witnesses from criminal law to the authentication of miracles. In the case of Francis's stigmata, we have confirmation not merely by two or three witnesses, but rather confirmation "superabundantly by a multitude of persons."

In his sermon on Francis, preached in Paris on 4 October 1255, Bonaventure refers to the *plurality*, the *authority*, and the *holiness* of the witnesses, and he goes on to give a detailed explanation of why these stigmata could only have been miraculous. In speaking of the plurality of

witnesses, he tells us that “more than one hundred clerics corroborated with their testimony” these marks on Francis’s body.³⁸ Bonaventure is not overly preoccupied with distinguishing between those witnesses who saw the stigmata on Francis while he was alive, those witnesses who saw the stigmata on his body after Francis’s death, and any witnesses who might have seen the process of stigmatization itself. He does, however, give us examples of the first and second categories of witnesses (see, for example, *LM*, 13.8, pp. 632–33 and 15.2–3, pp. 641–42), but nowhere mentions anyone who would have been an example of the third type. Since Bonaventure considered the very form of the stigmata to be miraculous, seeing them should have been sufficient to convince one that a miracle had transpired, for one would have seen nails formed from Francis’s own flesh. But, even given this miraculous form, how much more compelling would have been a witness to the very event, testifying to the appearance of the Christ/seraph and to the transmission of the stigmata, serving vicariously, as it were, to allow us to witness the event?

In fact, strictly speaking, Brother Leo is not the first depicted witness of the stigmatization. In a painting from around 1280, done by a follower of Guido of Siena, Francis is shown kneeling on both knees, receiving the stigmata from a seraph (not depicted as Christ) who is nailed to a cross. To his right are two small bears. One of them seems undisturbed by the event, but the second bear is unequivocally depicted as a witness to the stigmatization. Although his back is toward Francis, he has turned his head as far as possible toward the left and is looking over his shoulder at the apparition of the seraph. There is no way to interpret the unnatural posture of this bear except to say that he is turning toward the event, straining his head to look at something that has roused him.

Giotto’s Assisi fresco does, however, give us the first depicted human presence (besides Francis) at the stigmatization. Leo is in a position to be a confirming witness of what happened during Francis’s stigmatization; he fulfills the role of the most proximate possible witness to the event, present while it takes place. It is as if in addition to Bonaventure’s claims about the plurality, authority, and sanctity of the witnesses, Giotto has added a claim of proximity on behalf of Francis’s closest companion and confessor. But even while the fresco incorporates the most possible proximate witness, the function of this witness remains ambiguous. Were Leo to look in front of him, he would see Francis receiving the stigmata; were he to look directly above, he would see the upper part of the Christ/seraph. But he is not

38. Bonaventure, “Le stimmate autentico e confermano la dottrina e la regola di San Francesco,” in *Le stimmate di Santo Francesco*, p. 159.

watching the event; he is reading. He has thus become a potential or virtual witness, present at the stigmatization and so *capable* of seeing it as it happens, yet absorbed in reading, at least at this precise moment apparently oblivious to the event.

Although I believe I could show that Leo's reading carries profound symbolic significance, I will not here traverse the detailed hermeneutical path necessary to uncover all of the layers of significance. Most generally, the contrast between Francis praying and Leo reading invokes the contrast between prayer and the study of sacred theology made by Francis in his letter to Anthony of Padua.³⁹ (The most plausible hypothesis is that Leo is reading the Gospel.) Furthermore, Bonaventure has Francis contrast reading and studying with prayer "after the example of Christ of whom we read that he prayed more than he read" (*LM*, 11.1, p. 607). As in Christ's life, prayer takes precedence over reading, so Francis prays on the mountain-side while Leo reads, and Francis's praying culminates in his stigmatization, while Leo's reading distracts him from a vision of the supernatural.

At a more abstract level, the iconology of this scene contrasts prayer and lack of watchfulness, which can be represented either by reading or by sleeping. In some later paintings Leo quite literally sleeps, while in others the postures of sleeping and reading are combined. So in the predella to Giovanni Bellini's Pesaro altarpiece, the witness to the stigmatization has his book propped up, but his head, heavy with sleep, rests on his hand and his eyelids are closed. Lack of watchfulness, represented by sleeping, clearly associates Leo, Francis's disciple, with the disciples of Christ, who slept during the episode of the Agony in the Garden and who, in the Lucan account of the Transfiguration, are also said to be "weighed down by sleep." So, on the one hand, while the sleeping or reading of the witness compromises his status as a witness, on the other hand, these very postures identify him with the disciples of Christ. Therefore, the praying Francis is even further identified, by contrast or in opposition to the disciple, with Christ himself, of whom he becomes a living effigy.

As one might expect, it did not take long for Leo's virtual witnessing to be transformed into actual witnessing. In Sassetta's often-copied painting, for example, we see Leo still with a book in his hand, but he is now watching the event of the stigmatization; no longer distracted by reading, his right hand raised in wonder, one of the traditional signs of witnessing a miracle. One could produce a multitude of examples of depictions of the actual witnessing of the stigmatization: seated witnesses, standing witnesses, witnesses hiding from Francis yet still viewing the event, witnesses

39. See Francis, "Lettera a Frate Antonio," in *Fonti Francescane*, p. 125.

spatially contiguous to Francis, and witnesses depicted at some distance from him. What these depictions have in common is the representation of an individual who sees what Francis sees (what we see depicted in the painting) and who reacts with the surprise and awe that one would expect, precisely the emotions that the paintings are intended to arouse in their viewers. Furthermore, if there could be one witness to the stigmatization, nothing should prevent there being more than one. And so, for instance, in Domenico Ghirlandaio's fresco of the stigmatization in Santa Trinità, Florence, proximity of witnessing and plurality of witnesses have been, as it were, joined, so that we see a number of witnesses viewing the stigmatization from different positions and different distances. All of these variations on the theme of witnessing, even with all of their significant differences, have as their overarching aim to attest to the reality of the miracle, to witness it and to allow us to witness it, and to convey symbolically Francis's uniqueness as the image of Christ.

Another important conclusion that we can draw from this iconography concerns the nature of the vision itself. According to a typology that goes back to Augustine, visions are divided into corporeal, imaginative, and intellectual. Corporeal visions involve an external sensible form; imaginative visions are sensible visions completely circumscribed within the imagination; intellectual visions involve a supernatural consciousness that is produced without the aid of internal or external impressions or forms.⁴⁰ None of the texts on Francis's stigmatization make direct reference to this typology of visions. There is no doubt that the vision does not conform to the model of an intellectual vision, but there has been much dispute about whether it should be classified as an imaginative or corporeal vision. Many commentators have agreed with Schmucki that the vision "did not affect the external but only the internal senses, and therefore it neither had nor could have had true eyewitnesses."⁴¹ Although I believe that Bonaventure's text describes the vision as a corporeal one, since only a vision of that kind could *impress* the marks of the stigmata on Francis's body, it would take a great deal of detailed exegesis to establish that conclusion.⁴² The iconography of the stigmatization much more directly depicts the vision as a cor-

40. See Marín, *Teologia*, pp. 1064–70.

41. Schmucki, *The Stigmata of St. Francis*, p. 196. See also p. 219.

42. The sermon of 4 October 1255 appears to describe the vision as a corporeal one. See Bonaventure, "Le stimate autentico e confermano la dottrina e la regola di San Francesco," p. 161, and Jacques Bougerol, *Francesco e Bonaventura: La legenda major* (Vicenza, 1984), p. 45. In addition, see Bonaventure, *Legenda minor S. Francisci*, 6.2, which describes the vision "*apparebat exterius*" and whose analogy with the impression of a seal seems to require an external impression. The description of the vision in Thomas is more ambiguous, but I think that even in this description there is some evidence that the vision was considered corporeal.

poreal one. An imaginative vision, being produced in the beholder's imagination, could not be seen by other people. If more than one person sees the vision, then it must be a corporeal vision, whereby the object seen exists outside the people beholding it.⁴³ Thus the witnessing of the stigmatization by persons other than Francis testifies to the corporeal nature of the vision. Here we have another reason to attend to the significance of the description of the vision as "Christ under the appearance of the Seraph." It was widely argued that after Christ's ascension to heaven he no longer appeared bodily, since that would have required him to leave heaven.⁴⁴ He either appeared imaginatively (or intellectually, of course) or under a species other than that of his own body, as when he appears in the Eucharist under the form of bread and wine. Thus there would be no theological problem in having Christ appear to Francis corporeally "under the appearance of the Seraph" since although bodily present, Christ is not so *sub propria specie*. As the iconography of the stigmatization develops and we find representations of the vision that depict Christ, with little and sometimes no indication whatsoever of the figure of the seraph, and that also incorporate actual witnesses, we are confronted with a theological paradox. For either it is an imaginative vision, for which there could be no witnesses, or it is a corporeal vision, and so cannot be a vision of Christ himself under the figure of his own body. To represent other people witnessing Francis's vision, which would require that the vision be corporeal, while at the same time making this a vision of Christ *sub propria specie*, is theologically incoherent. But then there is no reason why we should assume that the iconography must be subject to all of the rigid conceptual constraints of the theology. This situation makes Giotto's Assisi fresco all the more brilliant in its combination of a (virtual) witness and of Christ unequivocally "under the appearance of the Seraph."

We can arrive at a similar conclusion about the corporeal nature of the vision by examining Giotto's Bardi Chapel fresco of the stigmatization. In this painting there is no witness to the vision (except perhaps the falcon in the upper left-hand corner), and the Christ/seraph has become much more Christ-like and much less seraph-like. (He is dressed as Christ was after the crucifixion, and his human bodily features seem to take precedence over the angelic form represented by the wings.) Here the figure of Francis itself attests to the corporeal nature of the vision. Francis is turning toward the vision; the position of his legs and body indicates that he was

43. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 1, q. 51, art. 2, p. 265.

44. See *ibid.*, vol. 5, q. 76, art. 8, pp. 2455–56. See also Marin, *Teologia*, p. 1068, and Adolphe Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, trans. Herman Branderis, 2d and rev. ed. (Tournai, 1932), pp. 701–2.

praying with his back toward the direction of the vision; at the moment depicted he is in the process of turning his entire body counterclockwise to face the vision. As the rotation and placement of his right leg show, it is exactly as if, being disturbed by something behind and above him, he has been caught in the awkward position of still turning to confront the vision.⁴⁵ An imaginative vision would not provoke such an odd bodily posture; occurring within the imagination, it would not have required Francis to turn in this abrupt way. But if something were bodily present, and Francis were turning to see what it was, the position of his own body is easily understandable. Here again, even without represented witnesses, the iconography of the stigmatization helps us answer a crucial question about the event: What kind of vision was it taken to be?

St. Teresa, in recounting her transverberation in chapter twenty-nine of her autobiography, clearly takes the representations of St. Francis's stigmatization as the background literary model. The angel that appears to her is described as a seraph ("one of those angels very elevated in the hierarchy, who seems to burn completely with divine ardor"), although she calls it a cherub, admitting that the angel did not tell her its name and that there are many differences among the angels that she does not know how to express. But she is very insistent and unhesitant in emphasizing that this was a corporeal vision:

I saw next to me, on the left, an angel in corporeal form, something that I could not see except in rare circumstances. Even though in fact angels often appeared to me, I did not see them corporeally, but as in the vision of which I spoke before. In this vision it pleased the Lord that I see the angel in such a way [that is, corporeally].⁴⁶

This account is also good evidence that certain kinds of physical transformations (transverberation and stigmatization are often linked, so much so that Teresa is frequently placed on the list of those who have received the stigmata) were typically represented as produced by corporeal visions, even though from a theological point of view corporeal visions are not considered as elevated as imaginative or intellectual visions.⁴⁷

One reason why the representation of the vision as corporeal turns out to be so significant is that various attempts to deny the miraculous status of

45. It is all too easy to misdescribe Francis's posture. Jean-Claude Schmitt has said, "le saint pivote sur lui-même comme s'il voulait éviter les effets de l'apparition et s'enfuir," in his superb *La Raison des gestes dans l'occident médiéval* (Paris, 1990), p. 318.

46. Teresa of Avila, *Libro della mia vita* (Rome, 1975), chap. 29, §13, p. 258.

47. On transverberation, see Adnès, "Transvèrberation," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, 15: 1174–84.

the stigmata depended on describing the vision as imaginative and then giving, in effect, a purely psychological interpretation of the vision and its effects. Thus Petrarch in a letter to Tommaso del Garbo from 9 November 1366 writes:

Concerning the stigmata of Francis, this is certainly the origin: so assiduous and profound was his meditation on the death of Christ that his soul was filled up with it, and appearing to himself to be also crucified with his Lord, the force of that thought was able to pass from the soul into the body and leave visibly impressed in it the traces.⁴⁸

Strictly speaking, Petrarch leaves the vision entirely out of account and attributes the stigmata to the power of Francis's thought. But his description allows no possibility for any type of vision other than an imaginative one, and given widespread views about the powers of the imagination a psychologically interpreted imaginative vision would have only contributed to the passage of the thought into the body. Even fifty years before Petrarch, Petrus Thomae had to refute the arguments of those who saw in the stigmata only the effects of Francis's *vehemens imagination*.⁴⁹ This kind of proto-psychological explanation, typically invoking the power of the imagination, has its culmination in Pomponazzo's *De incantationibus*, where he claimed that even if one admits that Francis had the stigmata, they would not have been the result of a miracle but of the natural forces of an unbridled imagination (see "S," p. 625).

Such interpretations were made so much more inevitable by the fact that Bonaventure's description of the stigmatization makes explicit reference to Francis's "fire of his spirit" and his "marvelous ardor." *I fioretti di San Francesco*, following Bonaventure, invokes Francis's "fervor," "mental fire," and "extreme ardor and flame of divine love."⁵⁰ Although these descriptions were an essential part of what I have called the mystical interpretation of the stigmatization, it was all too easy to reinterpret psychologically these mystical states and to consider them as nothing more than excesses of the imagination. Mystical claims about the transformative power of divine love could thus be detached from their theological context and refashioned with the aim of undermining the miraculous nature of the

48. Petrarch, *Lettere senile*, trans. and ed. Giuseppe Fracassetti, 2 vols. (Florence, 1869–70), 1.8.3, p. 465. For discussion, see "S," pp. 624–25, and Vauchez, "La stigmatizzazione di san Francesco d'Assisi: Significato e portata storica," *Ordini mendicanti e società italiana, XIII–XV secolo* (Milan, 1990), p. 55.

49. See Gaudens E. Mohan, "Petrus Thomae on the Stigmata of St. Francis," *Franciscan Studies* 8 (1948): 285–94.

50. *I fioretti di San Francesco*, in *Fonti Francescane*, pp. 998, 1001.



FIGURE 4. Giovanni Bellini, *Saint Francis*, ca. 1480, tempera and oil on poplar panel, 49" × 55 7/8"; 124.4 cm. × 141.9 cm. The Frick Collection, New York.

stigmatization. Of course, correctly theologically interpreted, such claims were a crucial part of the account of the stigmatization; Francis's mystical state constituted what I referred to as the subjective cause of the stigmata. Without entering into the details of this mystical interpretation, one can understand how a tension might develop between the mystical and the miraculous interpretations of the stigmata, the result of too exclusive a focus on either the subjective or objective causes.⁵¹

Consider Giovanni Bellini's spectacular painting of Francis, now in the Frick Collection in New York (fig. 4). Bellini's painting is, I believe, an *exact* representation of the moment when the stigmata begin to appear as described in the hagiographical texts. It accurately represents the "extreme ardor and flame of divine love" left in Francis's heart as the disappearing vision left the stigmata imprinted on his body. It perfectly portrays the mystical state that was the subjective cause of the stigmata. It contains no

51. Many of my preceding and following remarks can be read, in part, as a response to Gilson's brilliant article, "L'Interprétation traditionnelle," which I believe focuses too exclusively on the mystical interpretation of the stigmata. The account of François de Sales, *Traité de l'amour de Dieu* (1616), bk. 6, chap. 15, has more to recommend it than Gilson allows.

seraph and, *a fortiori*, no representation of the causal process of stigmatization, and there is no depiction of Leo as a witness. All of these features are in complete agreement with the description of the moment of stigmatization found in the texts. But precisely because of the absence of the seraph, many historians have felt it necessary to deny that this is a painting of Francis receiving the stigmata.⁵² (I believe that a reference to the just-disappeared Christ/seraph can be found through an examination of the shadows in the painting, but I shall not discuss that here.) The painting has received three different titles: *San Francesco nel deserto*, *San Francesco in estasi*, and *San Francesco riceve le stimmate*. It is as if the power of the iconographical tradition has made it almost impossible to see the textual accuracy of this painting. Thus most art historians have focused on the depiction of the landscape or on Francis's facial expression without seeing how the painting could be related to the receiving of the stigmata. The only truth behind this reaction is to be located in the fact that however accurate the painting is to the texts it does not have the specific effect of underlining the miraculous status of the stigmatization, its supernatural causation. A person could view Giotto's Assisi fresco without knowing the textual details about Francis's stigmatization and be certain that he was witnessing the representation of a miracle. Viewing Bellini's painting in ignorance of the texts, the spectator is certainly moved and perhaps even recognizes, through Francis's countenance alone, that something of divine significance is transpiring, but he does not see the direct divine intervention that authorized and guaranteed the special status of Francis's stigmata. Bellini's painting allows doubts and uncertainties that Giotto's does not, and the two paintings visually exemplify the tensions that can result between the mystical and miraculous interpretations of the stigmata (fig. 5).

A satisfactory historical and philosophical interpretation of the stigmata would require taking into account both interpretations, since the mystical and miraculous dimensions of the stigmata both are central to understanding their full significance. But even putting aside compositional problems about the simultaneous visual representation of these two dimensions, during the Middle Ages and Renaissance when there were so many persistent doubts about the reality of the stigmata, a painting such as Giotto's—with Francis, a witness, the Christ/seraph, and the causal interaction between Francis and the vision producing the stigmata—was most

52. A thorough discussion of the painting can be found in John V. Fleming, *From Bonaventure to Bellini: An Essay in Franciscan Exegesis* (Princeton, N.J., 1982). I do not agree with Fleming's overall interpretation of the painting. I think the most compelling account of it can still be found in Meiss, *Giovanni Bellini's St. Francis in the Erick Collection* (New York, 1964).



FIGURE 5. Giotto, fresco, Bardi Chapel, Florence.

effective in addressing these doubts directly. For the unlettered, the doubts could be countered by the forceful visual details of the painting itself. As Giacomo da Vitry wrote, “to laypeople it is necessary to show everything concretely, as if they had it before their eyes.”⁵³ Moreover, by incorporating a recognizable iconography of the life of Christ into the representation of the stigmatization and its consequences, as Giotto also does in other frescoes in the Assisi series, it was possible to emphasize Francis’s uniqueness and his special proximity to Christ, as exemplified, above all, by the fact that Francis and Christ alone bore the stigmata of the Passion on their flesh. Furthermore, if we are to take the textual descriptions *literally*, Francis’s stigmata were unlike any other future stigmata. They were unique in character, never to be encountered again, miraculous even among stigmata.⁵⁴ Later descriptions of other stigmata, as well as later iconography, do not rival Francis’s from the point of view of the miraculous. Not all stigmata have been created equal, and Francis, both historically and theologically, remains the model to which all other examples must be compared.

53. Quoted in Frugoni, “Le mistiche, le visioni e l’iconografia,” p. 152.

54. See, for example, the remarks of René Biot, *L’Énigme des stigmatisés* (Paris, 1955); quoted in Ephrem Longpré, *François d’Assise et son expérience spirituelle* (Paris, 1966), p. 158. See also Herbert Thurston, “Some Physical Phenomena of Mysticism: Stigmatization,” *The Month* 134 (1919): 152.