

A Few Reflections on The Feast of the Sacred Stigmata



Rev. Joseph Henchey, CSS
2000



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[1] Quite remarkably, the meaning of this Feast in our spiritual lives is brought home to us by one of the Letters - it is numbered the 5th such letter in our collection of his letters ¹ – that Fr. Bertoni wrote – late in his life – on Jan. 29, 1840. It was written to a Fr. Louis Bragato – whom five years earlier, Fr. Bertoni sacrificed at the request of his Bishop, to be transferred far from the Community at the Stimate. The Austrian Emperor of the House of Hapsburg, had married an Italian Princess – and she asked the Bishops of northern Italy for an Italian Chaplain for her Royal Court – and one who would oversee the royal budget for its charitable purposes.

In 1835, there were very few *Apostolic Missionaries* – the Founder was almost in constant ill health – so, in compliance to the Stigmatine ideal of trying to be “Apostolic Missionaries for the Assistance of Bishops” – Fr Bertoni surrendered the one man, who might have been his closest confidant and most valued and perhaps, most competent collaborator, Fr. Bragato – who shortly thereafter, left for the Royal Court in Vienna, and never returned to the Community living in Verona.

At this time, the community numbered about 10 men: a sharp contrast in comparison to St. Ignatius, who saw 1,000 men follow his charism throughout Europe and India; and to Mother Teresa in our own day who would welcome nearly 1,000 Sisters in her lifetime. However, by the Founder’s lived example we learn a very central element of his charism: **ABANDONMENT TO GOD, AVAILABILITY TO THE CHURCH** – we are called to give the best we have, are and do: first to God and then to the Church: to God through the Church.

[2] A second lesson follows from this: our models and Patrons in this endeavor are the **HOLY SPOUSES, MARY & JOSEPH**. As would be noted from the date of this letter – January 29th, 1840 – the Community had celebrated her Patronal Feast on January 23rd, less than a week before the date of this 5th letter. What is also remarkable about this letter is that - this is the first and only time he refers in writing to the Patronal Feast, that was so important to his heart and to the early Community. This is what he wrote in effect to Fr. Bragato:

...thank you for your two letters: in the second of these you, Reverend Father, have expressed your sentiments of wanting to be present in spirit to take part in our Feast of the Holy Espousals, with the most tender affections of your heart.

And this is the second lesson regarding our charism: the **HOLY SPOUSES, MARY AND JOSEPH**, will help us to live perseveringly this marvelous definition of Canon Law regarding religious consecration:

¹ cf. *Epistolario* pp. 317, ff.

Religious life, as a consecration of the whole person, manifests in the Church, the MARVELOUS MARRIAGE established by God as a sign of the world to come. Religious thus consummate A FULL GIFT OF THEMSELVES, as a SACRIFICE offered to God, so that their WHOLE EXISTENCE becomes A CONTINUOUS WORSHIP of God in charity...²

And this is the second Lesson of the Stigmatine Charism: we are called to live the **PRINCIPLE OF TOTALITY**, following the example of Mary and Joseph.

[3] A Third Lesson is evident in the first letter that Fr. Bragato had written to Fr. Bertoni: our saintly Founder noted that his beloved Stigmatine brother had wished for him in his New Year's letter a few weeks earlier, '***...a thousand blessings for that new year, not excluding the crosses...***' this is simply the fulfillment of Luke's revelation: Unless you take up your cross daily, you cannot be My disciple [cf. Lk 9:23]. This means to take the **Crosses of life** – those of each day – sickness, failure, loss of loved ones, spiritual and apostolic reverses, apostolic exhaustion – all of these are a participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

This third lesson is that we are to ***offer the oblation of our lives, our work, our very selves, in union with Mary and Joseph, as an obsequium, a kind of Eucharistic offering*** [cf. Rm 12:1, ff.] – ***for consecration, to establish our communion with Father, Son and Holy Spirit for all eternity.***

[4] A Fourth and Final Lesson from this one remarkable source, can be found in our Founder's conclusion to his letter to Fr. Bragato of over 160 years ago:

“Lastly, be joyful, and when you are in need of some joy in your life, fly with the wings of your spirit over the miles and come to the community here – and fly to the GLORIOUS WOUNDS of OUR SAVIOR!”

This lesson is clearly based on Sacred Scripture, as may be read in the Gospel for 'Mercy Sunday' - the Second Sunday of Easter: ***He showed them His hands and His side – Receive the Holy Spirit – whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven ... do not be unbelieving, but believe...!*** [Jn 20].

This fourth lesson is: that by HIS WOUNDS, ALL OF OURS WILL BE HEALED! [cf. Is 53:5].

Conclusion

Christ's Death and Resurrection are the unique cultic event of the New Covenant:

- The **glory of God** goes from angelic choirs on Christmas night celebrating the birth of an infant to the Lord's washing of dirty feet.
- His **glory** culminates in His Ascension and our reconciliation to God.
- Christ's sacrifice is **the supreme Gift of Mercy!**

² Canon 687 § 1

The Mystery of the Sacred Stigmata opens up for us these clefts in the Rock from which the Church and her sacraments are born; the Wound in the Side is seen to be the opening of the Tabernacle of the Most Holy Trinity³.

As we read in the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter, “**Mercy Sunday**” - when Jesus showed His side, His hands and His feet, He breathed on the Apostles in a new and more sublime act of creation: **‘Receive the Holy Spirit... Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them...!’**

This is the God of Love Who comes to us in the most sublime way possible to us in Holy Communion: **God is love!**

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Rev. Joseph Charles Henchey, CSS was born in Woburn, Massachusetts, USA, not far from Boston, on June 2, 1930. He was ordained a Stigmatine Priest in Rome, Italy, on July 1, 1956.

He spent 32 years in Rome - 10 years as General Councilor - and also taught at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas [ANGELICUM] [PUST] in Rome for more than 20 years.

Returning to the USA in 2002, he was appointed as Assistant Spiritual Director at Blessed Pope John XXIII National Seminary in Weston, Massachusetts, for second career men, desiring to spend their last years as priests. From 2006 to 2009 he occupied the Paluch Chair of Theology at Mundelein Seminary, nearby Chicago, IL. In the fall of 2009, he was assigned as Professor of Theology and Spiritual Director at the St. Joseph Seminary [Dunwoodie], in the Archdiocese of New York. And on fall of 2015 he returned to Mundelein Seminary as Adjunct Spiritual Director.

For all of his Stigmatine life, Fr. Henchey has been a student of St. Gaspar Bertoni, the founder of the Congregation of the Sacred Stigmata, to whom he dedicated the website “A Tribute to St. Gaspar Bertoni” (www.st-bertoni.com).

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Note: This article is an excerpt of the study: ‘Stimate Integre’, by the Author, in the website: www.st-bertoni.com, under ‘Life & Spirituality’.

³ The Immolated Lamb has opened the Scroll of God’s Word [cf. Rv 5:1-9]. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us: ... *The Scripture has been opened since the Passion; since those who from then on have understood it, consider and discern in what way the prophecies must be interpreted ...* [cf. CCC n. 112].