**THE STIGMATIZATION OF ST FRANCIS**

***Excerpt from Emmett O’Regan,* Unveiling the Apocalypse**

St. Francis received his stigmata while he was on spiritual retreat to observe St. Michael's Lent on Mount La Verna (Alverna) with three of his Franciscan brothers. The Stigmatization of St. Francis occurred when he received a vision of a crucified seraph, and although the exact date was not stipulated by his earliest chroniclers, it was said to have taken place around the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross on 14th September 1224, just two years before his death.

The Stigmatization of St. Francis was commemorated in a feast day of its own on 17th September, before being removed from the General Calendar in 1969. However, as we shall see, there is good reason to believe that St. Francis received the stigmata on the 15th of September - the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows (which commemorates when the Blessed Virgin partook of the suffering of her Son).

Below is an excerpt from St. Bonaventure's Legenda Minor:

*Two years before Francis, the faithful servant of Christ, gave his soul back to God, he was alone on the top of Mt. Alverna. There he had begun a fast of forty days in honour of the archangel Michael and was immersed more deeply than usual in the delights of heavenly contemplation. His soul became aglow with the ardour of fervent longing for heaven as he experienced within himself the operations of grace.*

*As he was drawn aloft through ardent longing for God one morning near the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, and was praying on the mountainside, he saw what appeared as a seraph with six bright wings gleaming like a fire descending from the heights of heaven. As this figure approached in swift flight and came near the man of God, it appeared not only winged but also crucified. The sight of it amazed Francis and his soul experienced joy mingled with pain. He was delighted with the sight of Christ appearing to him so graciously and intimately and yet the awe-inspiring vision of Christ nailed to the cross aroused in his soul a joy of compassionate love.*

*When the vision vanished after a mysterious and intimate conversation, it left Francis aglow with seraphic love in his soul. Externally, however, it left marks on his body like those of the Crucified as if the impression of a seal had been left on heated wax. The figures of the nails appeared immediately on his hands and feet. The heads of the nails were inside his hands but on top of his feet with their points extending through to the opposite side. His right side too showed a blood-red wound as if it had been pierced by a lance, and blood flowed frequently from it. Because of this new and astounding miracle unheard of in times past, Francis came down from the mountain a new man adorned with the sacred stigmata, bearing in his body the image of the Crucified not made by a craftsman in wood or stone, but fashioned in his members by the hand of the living God.*
(*Legenda Minor* of St. Bonaventure, *de Stigmatibus sacris*, 1-4; ed. Quaracchi, 1941; pp.202-204)

Many commentators have debated whether Gal 6:17 suggests that St. Paul had borne the stigmata, and tradition in the Early Church is silent on this matter. So, the Stigmatization of St. Francis of Assisi is widely regarded as the first instance of this miraculous phenomenon in recorded history.

The fact that St. Francis had borne the five visible wounds of Jesus on his own body led the Church Doctor St. Bonaventure to conclude that he should be associated with the angel of the sixth seal in the Apocalypse, who bears "the seal of the Living God":

*After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on earth or sea or against any tree. I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, saying, “Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.”* (Rev 7:1-3)

Fr. Joseph Ratzinger (future Pope Benedict XVI) explains St. Bonaventure's prophetic interpretation of the stigmatization of St. Francis of Assisi in his 1971 book, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*:

*Even more important, however, is another event - the Stigmatization - which stood as something unique and unparalleled; it all but cried out for an interpretation. Such an interpretation offered itself based on Apoc. 7, 2. Had not the seal of the living God - the figure of the crucified Christ - been impressed on the body of the Saint? Does not the image of the Apocalypse acquire here its real coloration and significance?*

*As for the full actuality and the moving probability of this interpretation, this was to come in the encounter of this event with the entirely independent prophecy of the Abbot of Fiore who had in brilliant words predicted the coming of the angel with the seal of the living God. He had seen in this angel the* novus dux de Babylone [new leader from Babylon] *and the* universalis pontifex sanctae Hierusalem [universal high priest of holy Jerusalem]*. He would receive "full freedom for the renewal of the Christian religion". In view of the amazing coincidence of the factors, it is no longer surprising that the identification of Francis with the angel of the Apocalypse should have become an historico-theological axiom of practically unimpeachable certitude.*
(Ratzinger, J. *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, p.35).

St. Bonaventure departed from the mainstream Patristic view that the Elijah to come was to be a literal return of the biblical prophet from heaven, by associating St. Francis himself with this figure. As Fr. Ratzinger states:

*Francis had called himself the "Herald of a great King." Taking this as a point of departure, Bonaventure sees Francis as the eschatological* praeco Dei [herald of God]*, as the resurrected John the Baptist. The word "Herald," which was originally used without any theological significance, easily provides a bridge to a new theological interpretation in which the word is applied to one who in fact is a "Voice crying in the desert." This one is the Herald of the Kingdom of God which has come upon us. From here, a further connection is obvious: The Lord Himself had called John the returned Elias (Mt. 11, 1; also Mk. 9, 12ff., and Lk. 1, 17). Consequently, the two figures remain related to each other forever.
For this reason, when Francis has been designated as John the Baptist, it is only natural that he should be seen as Elias as well. The two names are used interchangeably to express the same idea.*

*But this alteration of names is not without significance, for the name of Elias points more clearly to an eschatological dimension than does the name of John the Baptist. The prophecy of Malachy, which was so important in the New Testament, was connected with the name of Elias, and not with that of John. "Behold, I send you the prophet Elias, before the great and terrible day arrives..." (Mal. 3, 23). From this citation, it is fully clear what Bonaventure means when he says: In Francis, Elias has appeared.*(Ratzinger, J. *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, pp.32-33).