

St. Paul and the Stigmata

St. Luke recalls Jesus' familiar instruction regarding the conditions of discipleship:

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23).

The importance of this lesson is reflected in its repetition in the Gospels (Mt 10:38; 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 14:27). But what does it mean to carry our cross?

Often our cross is understood as the trials and tribulations each of us experience in the course of our life. Saint Paul would not reject that idea, but his understanding goes far beyond it. This great Apostle viewed the cross as a reality that permeates the very being of a Christian. This essay examines his insight.

In his concluding remarks to the Galatians he wrote:

"But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14).

This statement brings up a host of associations. For one thing, to what extent has the world been crucified to us and we to the world?

In this letter the Apostle rejects circumcision and the Mosaic law as a means of salvation on the one hand and the works of the flesh on the other. His language is forceful. Thus he asks:

"Are you so stupid? After being with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh" (Gal 3:3)?

Subsequently, he reminds the Galatians and us how we came to be in the Spirit:

"For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal 3:26-27).

The awesome reality of being clothed with Christ in baptism reveals a transforming reality that makes us a "new creation" (Gal 6:15). This penetrating reality is so deep and complete that St. Paul was inspired to add:

"For I bear on my body the *marks* of Jesus" (Gal 6:17).

The Greek word that is translated as "marks" is *stigmata*! This is significant.

In the ancient world slaves were branded with a *stigmata* of ownership. Paul so surrendered his heart to Jesus that he voluntarily became Christ's slave (Rom 1:1). Then, too, the physical scars from his many persecutions formed a kind of visible *stigmata* on Paul's body (Acts 14:19; 16:22; 2 Cor 11:23-29). Ultimately, this would culminate in his martyrdom. I believe, however, that St. Paul's reference to the *stigmata* goes beyond his wounds, because he understands it in connection with baptism.

This Apostle first experienced the power of baptism when it removed his sins as he became a Christian:

“And now why do you wait [Ananias to Saul]? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).¹

However, baptism does more than remove sin, as great as that is. It elevates the Christian to share a whole new life (Gal 6:15) through Christ, which ties in with the topic of this discussion. Reflect, for example, on the following pertinent passages from St. Paul’s letters:

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism in to death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might *walk in newness of life*” (Rom 6:3-4).

“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col 2:11-12).

Therefore if any one is in Christ, he is a *new creature*, the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17).

What is the nature of this new birth, this *new life* that makes us a *new creature*? St. Peter revealed the astounding good news. It makes us “*partakers of the divine nature*” (2 Pet 1:14). In baptism the Christian is radically changed.

What is the relevancy of all this in our lives? We are rapidly approaching our celebration of the events of Holy Week when Jesus, the Lamb of God, suffered, died and rose from the dead to redeem us from sin and to bring us new life. The distance of two thousand years does not diminish the power of Jesus’ amazing self-sacrificing love:

“Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13).

At the same time we are witnessing a stark contrast with the events surrounding the present economic crisis spawned and fed by greed, deception, self-interest, and wild spending by men and women at the highest levels of business and government in collusion to aggrandize themselves at the expense of the trust they betray.

Jesus’ exemplifies a radically different life in the Spirit, which is a life of complete self-giving:

“This is my body which is given for you” (Lk 22:19).

St. Paul understood that in baptism he was saturated through and through with Christ crucified. He would write of himself:

¹ For other passages that speak of baptism removing sins see: Acts 2:38; Heb 10:22; 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:25-26; 1 Pet 3:21; Titus 3:5.

“I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal 1:19).

Then writing to the Corinthians he wrote that Christians are:

“Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2 Cor 4:10).

So just as the resurrected body of Jesus showed the *stigmata* of his crucifixion when he confronted Thomas (Jn 20:27), and he continues to bear the *stigmata* as the eternal priest and victim in paradise (Rev 5:6), we too bear an invisible *stigmata* on our body and soul. This spiritual reality was reflected in the visible *stigmata* of St. Francis of Assisi and Padre Pio.

In the Book of Revelation God’s faithful servants are “sealed” (Rev 7:30 14:1; 22:4). This imagery draws from the “mark” in Ezekiel 9:4 which protected those who were faithful to the Lord. This “mark” is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the *tav* which is shaped as a cross. In this connection the Presbyterian scholar David Chilton affirms: “Holy Baptism, the Seal of the Spirit (2 Cor 1:21-22; Gal 3:27; Eph 1:13-14; 4:30; cf. Rom 4:11), marks these believers as the covenant-keeping **bond-servants of our God**, who will be preserved from God’s wrath as the ungodly are destroyed.”²

In baptism we are stigmatized with the crucified Christ. This identification should propel us to reject the “empty, seductive philosophy according to human tradition, according to the elemental powers of the world and not according to Christ” (Col 2:8) that destroys the life of grace in our souls, our families, and our society. Lent is a season of mortification, a word that comes from two Latin words *mors, mortis* – death, and *facio* – to make. Prayer, alms giving, and fasting aid us in dying to the world and its allure so we can live more fully in Christ. Furthermore, the invisible *stigmata* we bear challenges us to embrace the self-sacrificing love that is the only measure of an authentic Christian (Jn 13:34-35). In the words of St. Paul “only faith working through love” (Gal 5:6) matters.

In the *stigmata* we discover the paradox of the cross:

“foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18).

Saint Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, Picayune, MS
<http://www.scborromeo.org>

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² David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, p. 206, emphasis in the original.