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Stigmata and the cross we all bear

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By Anne Dempsey

Say the word 'stigmata' among film buffs and many will think of the 1999 horror movie of the same name starring Patricia Arquette and Gabriel Byrne as a Catholic priest. But for centuries stigmata has been a worldwide phenomenon as people down the ages claim to experience the wounds of Christ on their body. Many such claims are obvious hoaxes while others are seen by some as genuine. However, the condition is fascinating not just in the context of religion but from a psychological perspective. Doctor Mario Martinez, who works with stigmatics on pain management, believes there are links between the condition and how all of us can experience emotional pain. Martinez, who was in Dublin last week for a lecture on 'mind wounds', is a US-born psychologist who specialises in treating people with auto-immune illnesses. His interest in stigmata began when approached by the Catholic Church to investigate alleged cases of the phenomenon. So far he has examined 10 people worldwide. He concluded that five were genuine and five were fraudulent. A few weeks ago he was in Mexico interrogating Elizabeth, a lay Catholic in her 50s, who bears the marks of a cross on her forehead, had pain in her wrists and around whom local healings now occur. "She experiences excruciating pain with very little relief from medication. Like many others, she sees stigmata as a private revelation and welcomes it as a way of being closer to Christ. The model is to suffer." Martinez concluded that Elizabeth's wounds were not self-induced but is not drawn to say whether or not they are the result of divine intervention. For some years he was content to authenticate stigmata but he now works with stigmatics to lessen the pain. "If a person has a belief that Christ can be reached only through pain and suffering, then that is the only way He will reach him. I offer another option, to identify with the love model." His method - which has nothing to do with hypnotherapy - relaxes his subjects and brings them through a guided meditation, focusing on the site of the pain and envisioning it in a different way. He calls this re-imagining 'recontextualising' - learning to view an old situation and imbue it with new meaning. It's a lesson we can all learn. "Everyone is wounded emotionally by their culture and the three main wounds are shame, abandonment and betrayal." He says that as we go through life, we tend to view ongoing difficulties in the light of the original wound. So separation, unemployment and illness will, depending on our original wound, be seen as further shame, abandonment or betrayal. How can we help ourselves? "The healing response to shame is honour, to abandonment is commitment, and to betrayal is loyalty," he says. He has come to know that his own 'primal' wound is around the area of abandonment. "So if I were to go to dinner with a friend, and I find he's forgotten or not expecting me, my initial response could be to feel that abandonment again. "But I have a choice around commitment. I can recommit to that friend and trust him again, or I can commit to myself, decide he is not worth it and end the friendship." For further information on Dr Mario Martinez seminars and workshops in Ireland, please log on to www.seminars.ie

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