

Visible and Invisible Wounds in Christian Mystical Experience

The battered and bleeding body of Christ has long haunted Christian thought and vision. Yet for the first few hundred years of Christianity, the cross was bare of Jesus' form; until the thirteenth century, depictions of the crucifixion showed an erect, shining, staring Christ, facing outwards, his flesh firm and whole.^{1,2} Into the fifteenth century, his form began to sag; blood spurted from his side, where now stood a gaping wound, under Christ's head bowed in pain.³ What is the significance of this explicit presentation of the wound, and of the wound itself as a concept in Christianity? How do visible and invisible wounds feature in Christian mystical experience, and how are they defined and distinguished? And how does the wound-cult relate to Christian concepts of humanity and divinity?

The definition of a wound is not straightforward. It need not come by harm or pain of the flesh; for instance, during the ecstasy of meditation on Christ's Passion, St. Lutgard's body produced "bloody sweat... flowing down her face and hands."⁴ It need not at all be physical: bent in prayer before the Cross, St. Catherine of Siena "beheld bleeding jets coming directly upon [her] from the five openings of the Sacred Wounds of our Lord; they were darting towards [her] hands, [her] feet and [her] heart."⁵ Initially visible, these stigmata vanished upon prayer and did not appear again until after her death.⁶ Such invisible wounds are not limited to unseen marks on the body, but extend to conceptual "gifts" from God: in her account of sixteen visions of Christ's Passion, anchoress Julian of Norwich describes her desire for "the wound of

¹ Illich, Ivan. "Hospitality and Pain." Paper presented at McCormick Theological Seminary, 1987. Retrieved from <https://chamberscreek.net/library/illich/hospitality.pdf>. p.12.

² Schiller, Gertrud. *Iconography of Christian Art*, tr. Janet Seligman. London: Lund Humphries, 1971.

³ Earls, Irene. *Renaissance Art: A Topical Dictionary*. Greenwood Press: 1987, p. 73.

⁴ von Görres, Johann Joseph. "The Stigmata: A History of Various Cases." *Die christliche Mystik*. tr. Rev. H. Austin. London: Richardson and Son, 1883. p. 19.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 49-50.

⁶ Poulain, Augustin. "Mystical Stigmata." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912.

contrition, the wound of compassion, and the wound of longing with [her] heart toward God.”⁷ From these examples, we may derive three principal functions for a mystical wound: that it might localize interactions between the body and spirit; that it might redeem the flesh through suffering; and that it might mirror the wounds of Christ, to nurture our understanding of him.

The original wounds of Christ are those he sustained due to flagellation, due to crucifixion and due to his crown of thorns.⁸ Masses in their honor often circle themes of redemption: the Salem Manuscripts in Heidelberg record that if the Golden Mass of the Five Wounds is said five times after someone has died, their soul might be released from purgatory.⁹ The prayers of St. Gertrude and St. Mechtilde involve various devotions in which each of the five wounds of crucifixion are kissed, and with each kiss the soul achieves another degree of forgiveness:

I kiss the wound of thy left foot, in expiation of all the sins that have ever been committed in thy whole Church by thought or desire or intention...

I kiss the wound of thy left hand, in expiation of all the sins of word and of deed, committed by the whole world...¹⁰

Of these five wounds, the one in Jesus’ side is an object of special devotion. It was sustained last, at the point of a lance, which pierced Jesus’ heart and brought blood and water from it.¹¹ This spear-wound is the final location of Christ’s redeeming love, which is visibly situated in the last offense he suffered for man. It condenses his Passion into the image of a heart “encircled with thorns and on fire with love.”¹² This fire leaves invisible marks in the hearts of his followers: in the visions of Colette of Corbie, drops of blood from Christ’s thorns “seemed to change into swords and lances, which pierced her heart through and through.”¹³

⁷ Julian of Norwich. *Showings*, tr. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. Paulist Press, 1978.

⁸ Holweck, Frederick. "The Five Sacred Wounds." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912.

⁹ Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, Cod. Sal. VII, 70: *Pugna Spiritus*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.7261>

¹⁰ *Preces Gertrudianae: Prayers of St. Gertrude and St. Mechtilde of the Order of St. Benedict*, tr. Thomas Alder. London: Burns and Lambert, 1861.

¹¹ John 19:34, New Revised Standard Version.

¹² Grassi, Joseph A. *Healing the Heart: The Transformational Power of Biblical Heart Imagery*. New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

¹³ von Görres, Johann Joseph. "The Stigmata: A History of Various Cases." *Die christliche Mystik*. tr. Rev. H. Austin. London: Richardson and Son, 1883., p. 21.

The pierced heart is a manifest wound of compassion, as Colette exclaims “Give me those thorns, Beloved, for they should be mine, not thine!”¹⁴ The transpierced believer suffers with the desire to replace Christ’s pain with her own, for she loves him and despairs at his suffering.¹⁵ By her love she is wounded in her heart, in perfect mirror of Christ.

This concept is expanded in *The Interior Castle* by St. Teresa of Avila, in which she likens the soul to a castle of seven mansions. Through a lifelong process of purification, one may accede to the innermost chamber, which is the seat and home of Christ. Part of this process is transfixion:

I saw in [the angel’s] hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron’s point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it.

The love of Christ actively manifests as pain; the burning destruction of Teresa’s heart is “a caressing of love so sweet, which now takes place between the soul and God.” The physical image of the heart houses the spiritual image of union, while its spiritual wound is deepened by each shot of God’s love: “The soul is inflamed with love [and] the heart receives, [knowing] not how or whence, a blow as from a fiery dart,” which “wounds us severely – not, I think, in that part of our nature subject to physical pain but in the very depths and centre of the soul, where this thunderbolt, in its rapid course, reduces all the earthly part of our nature to powder.”¹⁶ It follows that the invisible wound of love erodes the entire sinful aspect of the body, leaving the denuded soul to rejoice in Christ.

This idea is reinforced in the visions of St. Veronica Giuliani, who recounts that “the Child Jesus touched [her] head with the summit of the [burning] sceptre, and set the point of the lance upon [her] breast, which was instantly, as [she] felt, transpierced... He looked on [her] tenderly, and made [her] understand

¹⁴ von Görres, Johann Joseph. “The Stigmata: A History of Various Cases.” *Die christliche Mystik*. tr. Rev. H. Austin. London: Richardson and Son, 1883. p. 21.

¹⁵ Julian of Norwich. *Showings*, tr. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. Paulist Press, 1978.

¹⁶ Teresa of Avila. *The Interior Castle*. London: Thomas Baker, 1921.

that henceforth [she] was united to him in a very intimate way.”¹⁷ The innocence of Child Jesus emphasizes the redemptive power of the wound, which is a locus of intimacy with Christ; its flaming corona brings to mind the licking, consuming force of purity, as if the burning pain of those same flames could banish the shadow of sin.

Sin itself may be considered an invisible wound, by the opening or closing of which one may near or stray from God. Julian of Norwich suggests that sin befits man, for it provides us an opportunity for true repentance. Through the pain and hardship of our penance, we become more similar in nature to God than to the lower elements of the flesh.¹⁸ Similarly, St. Augustine argues that when saints come to recall their sins, they better appreciate God’s glory and greatness, that he would be able to forgive such faults against him.¹⁹ The invisible wound as locus of contact with God is reflected in the parable of the Good Samaritan: when a passerby pulls a poor man out of the physical, visible mud, he becomes like Christ who pulls us “[from] the mud of sin. That moment of touch is Christ’s taking on flesh... the contact between human and divine in the incarnation.”²⁰ Thus the filth of the ground mirrors the filth of the soul. Due to this filth, the physical contact between man and Christ cannot pass into the spirit; the sensation of Christ’s touch is muted by the painful wound of sin.

Translations between visible and invisible wounds are central to the sinner’s atonement. Pain and sin are strongly coupled: those who sin are sent to Hell, which is defined by eternal torment. To avoid this, one must repent while still on Earth; one approach is to imitate Christ by “[participating] in [his] death and resurrection.”²¹ To understand Christ’s Passion requires suffering, which purifies the soul for divine union.²² Each degree of relief from sin is a degree come closer to Christ, which is an ecstasy to she who

¹⁷ von Görres, Johann Joseph. “The Stigmata: A History of Various Cases.” *Die christliche Mystik*. tr. Rev. H. Austin. London: Richardson and Son, 1883. p. 29.

¹⁸ Julian of Norwich. *Showings*, tr. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. Paulist Press, 1978.

¹⁹ Augustine of Hippo. *City of God*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871.

²⁰ Healy-Varley, Margaret. “Wounds shall be worships: Anselm in Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love*.” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 115(2). 2016. p. 206.

²¹ Pate, C. Marvin, *From Plato to Jesus: What Does Philosophy Have to Do with Theology?* Kregel Academic Press, 2011.

²² Julian of Norwich. *Showings*, tr. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. Paulist Press, 1978.

longs for him. St. Catherine of Siena, who forewent food unto death, would rather drink the pus of dying women; this abjection and deprivation of her body turned their disease into “food [and] drink sweeter [than any].”²³ The invisible wound of sin therefore closes at the opening of visible wounds of the flesh. Greater suffering permits greater understanding of Christ, who suffered “more pain than would all men together, from the first beginning to the last day.”²⁴ Through contact with the wounds on and beyond our own body, we may suffer and ingest boundless pain. This opens and deepens the invisible wound of compassion, which counters that of sin.

As the focal point of pain, the wound becomes a vehicle of liberation for the soul. Physical suffering is limited to the flesh, which must remain on earth as the soul moves on in death. The term “ecstasy” appears in the writings of Thomas Aquinas “to connote the alienation from the senses that occurs during an encounter with a higher spirit.”^{25,26} On a related note, theologian Ivan Illich argues that “pain can be borne, suffered and endured only as long as this evil that has come upon me is not altogether I, as long as it hurts.”²⁷ We thus find an explicit connection between the joy of departure from the “lower” self and the pain that drives this departure, which must be endured by the abandoned flesh. If we can endure this pain, what has departed must be the true, unharmed, essential “I”, which is not altogether the same as what stays behind and – in Illich’s terms – is stricken by “evil.” The site of pain is the site of evil, as sin translates from the soul to the physical wounds of atonement. The mortal world is shown to be an inessential mask, lifted by wounding pains that wring the body of the soul, and let the soul go free.

²³ Walker Bynum, Caroline. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food To Medieval Women*. London: University of California Press, 1987. p. 172.

²⁴ Julian of Norwich. *Showings*, tr. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. Paulist Press, 1978. p. 144.

²⁵ Hollywood, Amy. “The Mystery of Trauma, the Mystery of Joy,” in *Monument and Memory: 4th Nordic Conference in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jonna Bornemark, Mattias Martinson and Jayne Svenungsson. LIT Verlag Munster, 2015. p. 91.

²⁶ Elliot, Dyan. “The Physiology of Rapture and Female Spirituality,” in *Medieval Theology and The Natural Body*, ed. Peter Biller and A. J. Minnis. York: York Medieval Press, 1997. p. 142.

²⁷ Illich, Ivan. “Hospitality and Pain.” Paper presented at McCormick Theological Seminary, 1987. Retrieved from <https://chamberscreek.net/library/illich/hospitality.pdf>. p. 17.

Early Christians were able to sustain the mortal wounds of martyrdom in close imitation of Christ. Illich argues that this path became impossible under Constantine, at the end of Christian persecution, and so those who could not be martyred “[tried] to die to the world... by mortifying the flesh.”²⁸ In this view, the experience of Christ’s death would be recreated throughout a faithful life.²⁹ The three invisible wounds of Julian of Norwich are explicitly fashioned after the visible wounds of St. Cecilia; her “three wounds in the neck from a sword, through which she suffered death,” are mirrored by Julian’s “three graces by the gift of God.”³⁰ This cascade of imitations, predicated on the nature and the number of similar wounds, is a means for “truer recollection [and bodily sight] of Christ’s Passion.”³¹

The most obvious manifestation of this experience is the reception of the stigmata. These bleeding wounds are not means or marks of penance, but rather grant the truly faithful the special honor of sharing in Christ’s final and most crucial appearance. During his Passion, he at once achieves ultimate humanity and ultimate divinity: because he suffers with compassion, he is human; to bear so much suffering, he must be divine. Early depictions of Christ’s strong, radiant Passion reflect this divinity; later iterations emphasize the humanity of his drained, wasted body. It is this suffering Christ who gives his flesh and his blood to be eaten and to be drunk by those who love him. The miracle of transubstantiation is the translation of his humanity to our divinity, that when we eat Christ’s human flesh, our body grows similar to his divine body. This physical communion is made possible only through the wounds of Christ, from whence came the blood and by which was killed the eaten flesh. By awareness and sensation of these wounds, through meditation and contemplation of them, the Christian soul grows closer to Christ’s soul – so close that it might carry the same marks as his.

In the *Showings*, Julian fixes her gaze on a crucifix across the room, in complete fascination with Christ’s Passion.³² By not moving her eyes from the Cross, she avoids sight of the surrounding darkness,

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Julian of Norwich. *Showings*, tr. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. Paulist Press, 1978. p. 125.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 126.

³² *ibid.*, p. 143.

which would inflame the invisible wound of sin. Thus the visible wounds of Christ serve as locus of spiritual experience. They grace his body as the mark of divinity, and yet are also a morbid reminder of human death. This emblem of his dual nature discerns the soul who receives Christ, a soul that has suffered for Christ and so stands worthy of the mark of him.

This concept of stigmata recurs in unusual configurations. Alicia Spencer-Hall likens the leprous wounds of Alice of Scharbeek to “a form of stigmata; she bears the marks of Christ’s crucifixion across her body.”³³ She points out the pleasant odor of her lesions, which recalls the sweet smell of other stigmatics.³⁴ In Margaret of Oingt’s *Meditations*, Christ is tormented “until he looked like a leper... the unjust traitors had spat at [his] beautiful face, so that [he], beautiful above all else, seemed to be a leper.”³⁵ When Angela of Foligno swallows a leprous scab, she likens it to sacrament.³⁶ The leper’s flesh is like Christ’s flesh; the leprous wound disfigures and transfigures the human form, becoming the means of transubstantiation.

Alice’s religious experiences penetrate her physicality. Accounts of her disease dovetail with those of spiritual longing, by which “every vein in her body [suffers] violence to the breaking point.”³⁷ This unseen pain finds expression in disease. She bears the marks of it like so many gifts from God, as delicate physical intimacies that are their own reward.³⁸ Dotted and blotched by the pain of her body, dotted and blotched by her heart, Alice is subsumed into a single wound; her flesh suppurates into a continuum of pain, pure pain, an endless and inescapable meditation on the Passion.³⁹

Within such meditations, the wounds of man may even work as means for Christ’s relief. When Bernard of Clairvaux asked God about his hidden suffering, he responded that he “had on My shoulder,

³³ Spencer-Hall, Alicia, ‘Christ’s Suppurating Wounds: Leprosy in the Vita of Alice of Schaerbeek († 1250).’ *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Kelly DeVries and Larissa Tracy. Leiden: Brill, 2015. p. 22.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ Spencer-Hall, Alicia, ‘Christ’s Suppurating Wounds: Leprosy in the Vita of Alice of Schaerbeek († 1250).’ *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Kelly DeVries and Larissa Tracy. Leiden: Brill, 2015. p. 13.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 38.

while I bore My Cross on the Way of Sorrows, a grievous wound, which was more painful than the others, and which is not recorded by men.”⁴⁰ Years later, Clare of Montefalco received a vision of Jesus “overwhelmed by the weight of the cross, [showing] signs of fatigue.”⁴¹

He said to her: ‘I have looked all over the world for a strong place where to plant this Cross firmly, and I have not found any.’ After she reached for the cross, making known her desire to help him carry it, He said to her: ‘Clare, I have found a place for My cross here. I have finally found someone to whom I can trust Mine cross,’ and he implanted it in her heart.^{42, 43}

The invisible wound in Clare’s heart relieves Christ of the invisible wound on his shoulder, the great and only secret wound of his crucifixion; she receives the wound in exchange for Christ’s most painful burden. The defining symbol of Christ is thus passed into her care, which honors and torments her, and quickens her compassion for Christ as he nears death.

These accounts unite the wound’s three roles as locus of experience, as mirror of Christ, and as vehicle of redemption. Invisible wounds reflect the soul’s qualities, and are sustained through experiences of the soul. The true believer feels true compassion for Christ, and her spirit is impressed by the intensity of it. At its highest degree, these impressions parallel the wounds of Christ’s body. These wounds honor the stigmatic, who feels Christ’s touch by her soul’s true qualities and sees the vision of Christ who is praising and consoling, thrilling and tender. The pain he delivers is like a rushing kiss, a point of naked contact with him, and can pass into the skin as visible stigmata. Fixation on his wounds is defiance of sin, defiance of its darkness, which leaves upon the soul an invisible wound. Unlike the hot, moving, transverberated heart, this wound will be a dull and heavy burden that weighs down the soul, that keeps it away from God. It may be erased by pain of the flesh, which represents man’s lower nature: disease and

⁴⁰ Ball, Ann. *Encyclopedia of Catholic Devotions*. Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2003.

⁴¹ “Saint Clare of Montefalco Receiving the Cross in her Heart.” *Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender Index*. University of Iowa Press. Retrieved from https://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/DetailsPage.aspx?Feminae_ID=31984

⁴² Tardy, Lorenzo. *Life of St. Clare of Montefalco, professed nun of the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine*. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1884.

⁴³ “Mysterious Heart of Saint Clare of Montefalco.” *Anointing Fire Catholic Ministries*. Retrieved from <https://www.afcmmedia.org/Mystical-07.html>

degradation change the substance of the body, drawing it close to Christ. Then by the wounds of compassion and longing, by the invisible wounds that shoot through the spirit, the body leaves the body and joins Christ in his divinity.

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