



Celebrating the Stigmata of St. Francis

The two sources given to us to ponder are the first life of Celano and the Major Legend of St. Bonaventure. Both accounts have similarities in their accounts of what happened when St. Francis received the Stigmata, as well as some interesting differences worth noting.

In the first excerpts below, both accounts speak of a profound experience of prayer and union with God that St. Francis experienced shortly before receiving this wondrous gift.

Bonaventure

When according to his usual custom he had begun to fast there for forty days in honor of Saint Michael the Archangel, he experienced more abundantly than usual an overflow of the sweetness of heavenly contemplation, was on fire with an ever-intense flame of heavenly desires and began to be aware more fully of the gifts of heavenly entries.

Celano

He felt pouring down on him from above a sweetness and delight rarely given to even a few, and it made him lose himself completely. He was filled with such joy that he wished by any means to pass over entirely to that place where, in passing out of himself, he had already partially gone.



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Upon experiencing such an intense infusion of God within his soul, he wanted to understand exactly what it was that God was asking of him in this moment of his life.

Celano

Bonaventure

Through a divine sign from heaven, he had learned that in opening the book of the Gospel, Christ would reveal to him what God considered most acceptable in him and from him. After completing his prayer with much devotion, he took the book of the sacred Gospels from the altar and had his companion, a holy man dedicated to God, open it three times in the name of the Holy Trinity. All three times, when the book was opened, the Lord's passion always met his eyes. The man filled with God understood that, just as he had imitated Christ in the actions of his life, so he should be conformed to him in the affliction and sorrow of his passion, before he would pass out of this world

Rising from prayer in a spirit of humility and with a contrite heart, he prepared himself with the sign of the holy cross. He took the book from the altar and opened it with reverence and fear. When he opened the book, the first passage that met his eye was the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ that tells of the suffering he was to endure. To avoid any suspicion that this was just a coincidence, he opened the book a second and a third time. Every time he found either the same text or one that was similar. This man filled with the spirit of God then understood that he would have to enter into the kingdom of God through many trials, difficulties and struggles.



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With the seraphic ardor of desires, therefore, he was being borne aloft into God; and by compassionate sweetness he was being transformed into Him Who chose to be crucified out of the excess of his love.

Bonaventure

On a certain morning about the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, while Francis was praying on the mountainside, he saw a Seraph having six wings, fiery as well as brilliant, descend from the grandeur of heaven. And when in swift flight, it had arrived at a spot in the air near the man of God, there appeared between the wings the likeness of a man crucified, with his hands and feet extended in the form of a cross and fastened to a cross. Two of the wings were raised above his head, two were extended for flight, and two covered his whole body. Seeing this, he was overwhelmed, and his heart was flooded with a mixture of joy and sorrow. He rejoiced at the gracious way Christ looked upon him under the appearance of the Seraph, but the fact that He was fastened to a cross pierced his soul with a sword of compassionate sorrow.

Celano

...two years prior to the time that he returned his soul to heaven, he saw in the vision of God a man, having six wings like a Seraph, standing over him, arms extended, and feet joined, affixed to a cross. Two of his wings were raised up, two were stretched out over his head as if for flight, and two covered his whole body. Is 6:2 When the blessed servant of the most High saw these things, he was filled with the greatest awe, but could not decide what this vision meant for him. Moreover, he greatly rejoiced and was much delighted by the kind and gracious look that he saw the Seraph gave him. The Seraph's beauty was beyond comprehension, but the fact that the Seraph was fixed to the cross and the bitter suffering of that passion thoroughly frightened him.

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He marveled exceedingly at the sight of so unfathomable a vision, knowing that the weakness of Christ's passion was in no way compatible with the immortality of the seraphic spirit. Eventually he understood from this, through the Lord revealing it, that Divine Providence had shown him a vision of this sort so that the friend of Christ might learn in advance that he was to be totally transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified, not by the martyrdom of his flesh, but by the enkindling of his soul. As the vision was disappearing, it left in his heart a marvelous fire and imprinted in his flesh a likeness of signs no less marvelous.

Bonaventure

For immediately the marks of nails began to appear in his hands and feet just as he had seen a little before in the figure of the man crucified. His hands and feet seemed to be pierced through the center by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing on the inner side of the hands and the upper side of the feet and their points on the opposite sides. The heads of the nails in his hands and his feet were round and black; their points were oblong and bent as if driven back with a hammer, and they emerged from the flesh and stuck out beyond it. Also, his right side, as if pierced with a lance, was marked with a red wound from which his sacred blood often flowed, moistening his tunic and underwear.

Celano

His hands and feet seemed to be pierced through the middle by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing on the inner part of his hands and on the upper part of his feet, and their points protruding on opposite sides. Those marks on the inside of his hands were round, but rather oblong on the outside; and small pieces of flesh were visible like the points of nails, bent over and flattened, extending beyond the flesh around them. On his feet, the marks of nails were stamped in the same way and raised above the surrounding flesh. His right side was marked with an oblong scar, as if pierced with a lance, and this often dripped blood, so that his tunic and undergarments were frequently stained with his holy blood.