

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

One day St. Francis went into the mountains near Assisi to pray. Suddenly he saw a vision in the sky. There appeared one of the angels that the prophet Isaiah had seen close to God and singing Holy, Holy, Holy. Francis saw a seraph with six fiery wings descend toward him. Then in the middle of the wings there appeared the image of a man fastened to a cross. Jesus Christ was looking at him, which filled Francis with joy, but Francis was looking at the suffering Christ, which also filled him with sorrow. When the vision disappeared, Francis noticed the marks of crucifixion on his own hands, feet and side. The miracle is called the stigmata, the Greek word for “marks,” which appears in today’s second reading, taken from St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. After Francis, hundreds of people claimed to have the stigmata, but they have all been controversial, even Saint Pius of Pietrelcina, better known as Padre Pio. Here in northeast Kansas City near the end of the nineteenth century, the diocese opened a church named St. Francis Seraph, which commemorated this ancient vision, and the beauty of the cross of Christ. In 1991 that parish closed and was merged along with St. John the Baptist and Assumption to become St. Anthony Catholic Church. We still have some members here who once belonged to a parish named after the day that St. Francis of Assisi received the stigmata.

At the end of his Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul wrote, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” He then wrote, “I bear the marks of Jesus on my body.” Some people wonder if St. Paul had the stigmata in the same way that St. Francis received it more a thousand years later. Probably not. Paul was probably speaking about the scars he bore from his many sufferings: hunger, thirst, cold, exposure, shipwreck, floating a full day on the sea, imprisonments, beatings, and 39 lashes with whips on five different occasions. It would have been hard to spot only five wounds on the body of Saint Paul. Enemies inflicted his wounds, but Paul wore them with pride as the marks of Jesus Christ.

Many people carry marks on their bodies. Some have wounds they sustained in war, signs of sacrifice for their country. Many women bear marks from childbirth, signs of the joy and sacrifice of motherhood. Some received injuries at work or while playing sports. All these marks of weakness become signs of sacrifice and strength. Some people authorize marks on their own bodies with tattoos. These show what they love and to whom they pledge their life. Some actually get tattoos promoting evil and violence, which is not at all what St. Paul and St. Francis wore.

In Paul’s day, some masters tattooed their slaves, marking them for life as personal property. Paul chose to be a slave for Christ, so the marks on his body showed his service to the one to whom he pledged his life.

Some of the marks we carry are emotional. You may have been wounded when someone in your family abused you, when a spouse cheated on you, when alcohol took over your life, or when tragedy stole a young person you loved. Those events may have increased your faith and trust in God. Like St. Paul, perhaps you too bear the marks of Jesus. Our physical and emotional scars signify that he understands our suffering, and that we belong to Christ.