Stigmatic women in modern Europe: An exploratory note on gender, corporeality and Catholic culture

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Studying stigmatics

In 1873, Dr Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre published a two-volume work entitled *Les stigmatisées*. While the first book was primarily dedicated to a discussion of the Belgian stigmatic Louise Lateau de Bois-d’Haine and the second volume focused on Palma Maria Matarelli, the two volumes mentioned, in total, no less than 321 stigmatics. Imbert-Gourbeyre was driven by profound piety and political motives (he was a monarchist and supporter of the Count de Chambord) and the breadth of his selection (or his lack of selection) illustrates the eagerness and credulity with which he approached the cases. Louise Lateau (1850-1883, stigmatized in 1868) and Palma Maria (1825-1888, stigmatized in 1857) were his contemporaries, but he discussed them in the same, almost hagiographic, terms he used to describe stigmatics known from previous centuries. As such, the accounts reveal his preference for stigmatics associated with prophecies concerning the imminent triumph of the Church and the restoration of the French monarchy. Imbert-Gourbeyre’s book, with the long list of female stigmatics he believed to have traced and his ulterior motives for doing so, makes a compelling case for their inclusion in the discussion of Catholic women and feminine identity. This article provides a brief overview of the different types of stigmatics and their popularity and suggests how their study may contribute to our understanding of Catholic women and femininities in the modern era. An overly strong focus on the stigmata

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266 Klanczay, 2013; Bouflet, 1996, p. 524, 532; Maître, 1996, p. 86: ‘Catholics everywhere saw Lateau’s stigmata and ecstasy as a symbol of their oppression and a confirmation of their faith. She had begun to exhibit her marks at a time of tension between Catholics, Protestants and liberals’. See also O. Weiss, 1995, p. 76.

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themselves, that is, the corporeal epiphenomena of mysticism, has often obscured the fact that the reports about stigmatics also provide information that reflects a particular view of the body and of women’s roles.\textsuperscript{267} At the same time, the cases of these stigmatics also tell us something about Catholicism (and its opponents), Catholics and the place of mysticism within Catholic culture.\textsuperscript{268}

Our focus here is on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a golden age for stigmatics throughout Europe. While the dynamics of Catholicism differed in each country, the increase in the number of reports of stigmatics has also been linked to a more ‘general’ evolution. Otto Weiss, for example, suggests that this might be explained by referring to the romantic sensibility of the era and as a symptom of the modernist crisis within Catholicism: a flight from the increasingly unstable secularizing world into the certainty of mysticism, or what was perceived as mysticism.\textsuperscript{269} This evolution stood in stark contrast to a more critical attitude towards stigmata that had developed throughout the eighteenth century under the influence of Enlightenment tendencies. The religious revitalization of the early nineteenth century was characterized by a more positive attitude of the Church and clergy towards popular piety and its taste for the miraculous, cults and the veneration of relics.\textsuperscript{270} As Tiago Pires Marques also notes, the ultramontane piety that developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, including its positive evaluation of expiatory suffering and the miraculous, almost acts as a counterbalance to the tendency to minimize the marvellous (observed since the seventeenth century).\textsuperscript{271} The second half of the nineteenth century is now well known as a mystical era populated by stigmatics, ecstatics and visionaries; it was a period in which the divine became tangible in corporeal phenomena.\textsuperscript{272} In addition, as Nicole Priesch has noted, the reports on the stigmatics may have also supported religious developments such as an intensification of Eucharistic piety. The

\textsuperscript{267} PRIESCHING, 2012 p. 27 ; for a more general introduction to the dynamic relationship between Catholicism and the somatic culture of the nineteenth century, see : Corbin,2005.


\textsuperscript{269} WEISS, 2013, p. 117.

\textsuperscript{270} FORD, 2005, p. 102.

\textsuperscript{271} PIRES, 2010, p. 63.

\textsuperscript{272} LACHAPELLE, 2004, p. 79.
stigmatic Maria von Mörl, for example, became ecstatic after receiving the Holy Communion and thus underlined the importance of the Sacrament of the Altar.  

Although a large number of stigmatics were recorded in the modern era, suggesting a certain openness to it, or at least tolerance, the Catholic response to these women was certainly not unanimously positive. Some Catholics explicitly distanced themselves from these suffering women and the mystical phenomena they reported. The intra-Catholic debates about the stigmatics may give us an idea of the different strands of Catholicism with which they were associated (e.g. traditionalists) and the meaning attached to these differences. An eloquent example is the case of Theresa Higginson (1844-1905), who first reported stig mata in 1874. As Mary Heimann explains in her article on this English schoolteacher, the modern ‘mystic’ represented everything with which English Catholics did not want to be associated. Her reports on stigmata, visions and bilocation emphasized aspects of Catholic culture that sat uncomfortably with the prevailing Protestant culture of Victorian Britain. When her cause for beatification was initiated in the 1930s, an intense discussion among English Catholics ensued.

In addition to these intra-Catholic debates, discussion of the stigmatics in general also tells us something about the evolution of Catholicism and its changing contexts. The popularity of these women fluctuated over time, and while some might not have attracted much attention or support during their lifetime, this could alter when the setting changed. A telling case in this respect is that of Dora Visser. In his study of Visser, Peter Nissen demonstrates how the publication of her story in the local newspaper instigated the cult of the Dutch stigmatic a century after her death.

**Suffering women**

The majority of the stigmatics traced by Imbert-Gourbeyre were women. From a gender perspective, this imbalance may seem somewhat surprising, as stigmatization is generally synonymous with displaying the wounds of Christ’s Passion and thus imitating a male body. However, while

274 Heimann, 2013, p. 346. Similar efforts by Catholics to integrate in the US by distancing themselves from such mystical reports have been examined by Kane., 2013, pp. 8-12.
the first stigmatic, Saint Francis, was a man, very few male stigmatics have been reported (with the notorious exception of Padre Pio).\textsuperscript{277} As Bettine Menke notes, the gender shift occurred gradually: "über die "weibliche" Wundenmystik des Hochmittelalters und die Theatralisierung im Barock in den Ekstasen der Teresa de Avila, zum neuen und zumindest ganz vorwiegenden Auftreten der Stigmata am weiblichen Körper im 19. Jahrhundert".\textsuperscript{278} The preponderance of female stigmatics was not new to the nineteenth century, but given the Catholic culture of the time (and its opportunities for women) it calls for an explanation (or at least a more detailed contextualization). Historians have linked the high number of female 'mystics' (stigmatics, but also visionaries and others) in the modern era to what has been called the feminization of religion. This 'feminization' has been given various meanings, but for our discussion it suffices to say that in the nineteenth century religion was perceived as 'a woman's thing' and more women than men observed religious practices. Women's preponderance in all things mystical thus forms a logical parallel to this story.\textsuperscript{279} However, as Otto Weiss accurately remarks, at that time Catholic women were already engaged in socially active religious orders, while the passive religiosity of the stigmatics seemed to come from another era. In their versions of the Passion, they referred more to the mysticism of the Cross of the mediaeval cloisters and thus they seemed 'regressiv und retardierend'.\textsuperscript{280} Nevertheless, given the nineteenth-century conceptions of men's and women's bodies, women's suffering through Christ's Passion made sense. In an era of increasing gender polarization, men were linked to the rational mind and women to the non-rational body. Men's and women's characteristics were inscribed in their bodies and were 'naturalized'. Women were thus, to a certain extent, 'mehr als der Mann dazu geschaffen, das Christsein in ihrem Körper zu verwirklichen'.\textsuperscript{281}

Moreover, the Church seemed to take a more positive stance towards women's mystical capacities. During the Enlightenment, visionary women were accused of a lack of self-discipline and unbridled fantasy (making them vulnerable to diabolical intervention), but in the wake of the anti-rationalist religious revitalization movement, their aptitude for the

\textsuperscript{277} On Padre Pio, see: Krass, 'Stigmata'; and Marigry, 'Merchantising' and 'The Passion'; and Bouillet, Les stigmatisés, p. 8, mentions four male stigmatics in the twentieth century. Weiss, 'Stigma', p. 114: about 90\% of the stigmatics were women.

\textsuperscript{278} MENKE, 2004, p. 32.

\textsuperscript{279} PRIESEHING, 2004, p. 28.

\textsuperscript{280} WEISS, 2013, p. 118.

\textsuperscript{281} WEISS, 2013, p. 119.
divine was evaluated more positively.\textsuperscript{282} In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the readiness with which female stigmatics were accepted can also be linked to an idealization of suffering. In an article on the ‘heroic victim’, Paula Kane links vicarious suffering in the modern era to an idealized type of Catholic womanhood that presented woman as eager to sacrifice herself and suffer on behalf of others. Corporeal suffering (whether self-inflicted, e.g. through fasting, or not, e.g. illness) was a means for these women to help others; they suffered for the sins of their fellows.\textsuperscript{283} Women’s embodiment of Christ’s Passion was, in this respect, the ultimate atonement. Reparatory suffering was not a new idea in the nineteenth century, as Thomas Kselman notes: ‘the doctrine that suffering is redemptive is, after all, the basis for the Christian religion. The devotions of the nineteenth century suggest, however, that this traditional theme was receiving new emphasis’.\textsuperscript{284} Furthermore, the stigmatics’ voluntary suffering and corporeal ascetic practices (including self-mutilation) made them into embodiments of the feminine ideal of obedience, modesty, and humbleness – the personification of the virgin idealized in the puritan nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{285}

Those who came to see these women in ecstasy – as numerous pilgrims did\textsuperscript{286} – knew how to interpret the bodily signs. Each pilgrim would have their own interpretation horizon (e.g. ideas about the political situation of the Catholics in his or her country) and specific ideas about what a body could express and mean. As Michaela DeSoucey and her colleagues demonstrated in their work on the bodies of martyrs, a body can give ‘physical form to a cause, value, or belief system, serving as a concrete reputational symbol for the suffering faced by its supporters’.\textsuperscript{287} The perception and interpretation of a body (one’s own or that of another) depends upon the specific historical and cultural context, and there is little doubt that religion heavily influences the way in which people experience their own and other people’s bodies.\textsuperscript{288} In the case of the modern stigmatics,
this meant believing that corporeal phenomena were a sign of divine intervention. Similar ideas can be found in the Middle Ages and early modern times, but as noted above, scepticism had grown since these times. As Waltraud Pulz has noted, while it is difficult to trace the vicissitudes of the ideal of women’s somatic piety and thus explain how it ‘survived’, it is apparent that in the nineteenth century there was a revitalization, if not invention, of corporeal religion. In certain Catholic circles, the bodies of stigmatised women were not perceived as ‘sick’ or ‘hysterical’; rather, in the light of the idealization of women’s virtues and their corporeal aspects, they began to be regarded as the vessels of potential saints. Thus, visiting these women and seeing them go through Christ’s Passion could be interpreted as a religious experience (the meaning and importance of which was socially constructed).

It should not come as a surprise that the ways in which Catholic visitors interpreted these bodies differed largely from that of their non-Catholic contemporaries. As Nicole Prieschting notes concerning the perception of Maria von Mörl and other Tyrolean stigmatic women:


The fact that it was primarily female stigmatics who were reported upon made it easier for anti-Catholics to ridicule the phenomenon. It was generally accepted that women were more emotional than men and thus more prone to ‘hysteria’. Scholars such as Jan Goldstein (France) and Manuel Borutta (Germany and Italy) have pointed out how the nineteenth-century redefinition of ‘hysteria’ was linked to anti-Catholicism and the creation of liberal government. Religious phenomena such as stigmata were

which the body is both active agent and yet shaped by each social moment and its history’.

293 On the medical history of male neurosis, see: Micale, Hysterical Men, p. 280.
pathologized, reduced to purely physiological phenomena and hence 'secularized'. Defining someone as 'hysterical' also implied questioning the Church and religion. In a universalist approach, saints, witches and the possessed were retrospectively re-evaluated and described in pathological terms, suggesting that exaggerated religiosity could damage one's physical health. In summary, at the same time as the phenomena was gathering strength in Catholic circles, there was a 'hysterization' of mystical phenomena by atheist medics or free-thinkers.294

However, we should be careful not to postulate a strict divide between 'science' and religion. The Catholic Church kept track of new medical findings and employed medical expertise, for example, in canonization processes or in examinations of stigmatics.295 As Sofie Lachapelle has noted, interest in the physical processes behind the stigmata increased throughout the nineteenth century. Rather than studying the soul of the stigmatic, the focus was on the 'body of the receiver'. Thus, while there was growing interest in these phenomena in the medical field, the Church also consulted scientific experts who used medical observations (e.g. measures of bodily functions) in an attempt to understand the physiological processes behind the stigmata.296

The bodies of stigmatic women were thus often publicly viewed by both the faithful and medical experts. In numerous cases, we have reports of pilgrims travelling to the homes of stigmatics, waiting for their turn to see them suffer through Christ's Passion and perhaps collect some of the blood with a handkerchief they had brought along for the purpose. Viewing stigmatics was somewhat similar to viewing fasting women, a phenomenon that had also been recorded in previous centuries.297 In its nineteenth and early twentieth-century settings it reflected what has been called the 'culture of spectacle', in which observing hysterical fits during public lectures (e.g. at La Salpêtrière) was just as acceptable.298 The bodies of women who had been miraculously cured, the miraculées, were also put on display (e.g. in photographs depicting their bodies before and after the cure). These bodies

294 Goldstein, 'The hysteria diagnosis', p. 210; Borutta, 201, p. 76; Velle, 1995, p. 11; Edelman, 2003, p. 208. The pathological explanation of stigmata was not new in the nineteenth century. Since the beginning of the modern era, three explanations for stigmatization had been in circulation: 1) divine intervention, 2) diabolical intervention and 3) 'seelische Erkrankungen' (Weiss, 'Stigmata', p. 124).
were just like those of the stigmatics: visible, testable ‘proof’ of divine intervention. 299 Nevertheless, as Paula Kane rightly suggests, this habit of visiting the stigmatics to see them in the flesh begs the question of how this accords with the idea of feminine modesty that was predominant in that era. How could looking at a female body and intruding into the domestic sphere of the stigmatics be an acceptable thing to do? How were these women viewed in terms of the domestic ideology of the time? In her study of the pilgrimages made to see three well-known stigmatics (Anna Katharina Emmerick, Louise Lateau and Theresa Neumann) Kane concludes:

... that while ‘women’s embodiment of Christ’s suffering allowed them to subvert numerous conventions of domesticity: living as unmarried women outside the cloister, they demonstrated that women could imitate the austerity of convent life and endure its privations as meaningful forms of vicarious suffering at home on behalf of others in the public domain. 300

However, as Kane adds, these women ‘still affirmed the cultural values of domesticity by their obedience to authority, their pious and pure demeanours, and their submission to their parents, pastors and confessors’. 301

‘Types’ of stigmatics, ‘types’ of women?

The bodies that the visitors came to see were certainly not all alike. Two pictures of Tyrolian stigmatics document this in a wonderful way. The images were painted by Luigi Gonzaga Giuditti (after the drawings of Luis Gaston de Séguir) and are preserved in the Wellcome Collection. 302 Both pictures represent stigmatics on their beds, but the first, Maria Domenica Lazzari, is covered in blood, while the other, Maria von Mörl, is shown in ecstasy and only displays small traces of the stigmata on her hands. 303 To the onlooker, L’Estatica (‘Woman of Ecstasy’ as she was called) appeared, according to William Schupbach, ‘less spectacular than Lazzari, her feature being her ability, when in a trance, to kneel at an angle without keeling over

299 On the miraculées and their photographs, see: Kaufman, Consuming Visions; for more general information about the miraculées and Lourdes, see: Harris, 2005.
300 KANE, 2014, p. 123.
301 KANE, ‘014, p. 123.
— well captured in the watercolour».  

He adds that prints of Lazzari, nicknamed L’Addolorata, ‘Woman of Pain’, were available for visitors to buy.  

As these two women were contemporaries, they are a good illustration of how different the physical component could be. Their cases are only a small fragment of the wide variety of stigmata: some were imitative (copying Christ’s wounds), while others were figurative (with other images, such as a Cross or heart, found on the body of the stigmatic); some were visible (as in the case of the Tyrolian stigmatics), while others were invisible or somewhere in between (e.g. a Belgian male stigmatic claimed that you could feel the hole but the skin was still intact). Moreover, apart from their physical appearance, there were differences in their social status (lay or religious) and mobility (some needed to stay in bed, ‘grabataire’, while others could still walk).

In addition, the stigmatics assumed different roles, and these could differ extensively. While some claimed to receive divine messages and even gave consultations to members of the clergy (e.g. Louise Beck and Dora Visser), others made no such claims (Maria von Mörl). The ‘authority’ with which the stigmatics could speak was experience-based and thus differed from the ‘traditional’ hierarchical religious authority. The stigmatic women could thereby emphasize how they had a merely passive role: they underwent the Passion; received the messages; and they sometimes saw supernatural beings. Criticism of their central role could be countered by referring to the fact that they did not actively seek such experiences. They were chosen and had their bodies to prove that.

While their suffering could be empowering, some caveats have to be mentioned here, as not everyone interpreted these experiences in the same way. They were sometimes considered a product of their imagination and used as an argument for the restriction of women’s autonomy. As Paula Kane noted, women’s victimhood ‘did not convey

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304 Schupbach, 2011.
305 Schupbach compared the writings of those who had visited both.
307 Weiss, 2011.
310 Lux-Sterritt and Mangion, ‘Introduction’, p. 11: ‘the language of surrender could be used as a discursive tool to deflect criticism or perhaps exhibit agency’. Ann Taves notes how experience can become a source of theological authority, undercutting traditional sources, Taves, Religious Experience, p. 4.
311 Bednarowski, 2005, p. 185; Lux-Sterritt and Mangion, ‘Introduction’, p. 12: ‘Following both the Enlightenment’s dedication to reason and the Catholic Church’s efforts to contain modes of spirituality which evaded its control, the status of
any clerical or sacramental authority upon women.\textsuperscript{312} In other words, any emancipatory interpretation of stigmatic women and, more generally, female stigmatics, has to be treated with caution. Monique Scheer has discussed this view in greater detail in her historiographical overview of studies on women and mysticism, where she notes that while mediums (in this case the stigmatics) opened a ‘corridor to heaven’ and represented an immense power resource, we should be wary of adopting the ‘romanticism of resistance’ by heroicizing the ‘little’ man/woman. These so-called rebellious agents often did not question the existing order and adopted an ultraconservative discourse supporting what might be perceived as their own oppression. This, in turn, invites questions about agency, which should not only be interpreted as resistance but also as voluntary submission to painful suffering and the giving up of autonomy.\textsuperscript{313} Nicole Priesching prefers to think of stigmatic women as fitting somewhere in between emancipation and instrumentalization. Contrary to, for example, mediaeval mystic women, these women were not a part of the tradition of intellectual mysticism. They rarely wrote their own texts and, as we will discuss more elaborately below, some were ‘managed’, that is to say, controlled by male clerical supporters (who could speak with a certain self-evident authority).\textsuperscript{314} As Priesching notes about Anna Katherina Emmerick and Maria von Mörl: ‘Beide wurden von ihren Betreuern in gewisser Hinsicht mündtig gemacht’.\textsuperscript{315}

While Priesching’s choice of the word ‘instrumentalization’ might be too strong to use in some of the cases (some women did have a say in the creation of their public persona), it is important to note that they did indeed become symbolic figures linked to various causes. Dr Imbert-Gourbeyre was not the only person to link stigmatic women to political and religious causes, and these women gained popular support in various European countries. The German stigmatic Therese Neumann, for example, came to represent Catholic opposition in Nazi Germany,\textsuperscript{316} while the French stigmatic, Marthe Robin, seems to have been turned into an apostle of the new lay religiosity (after her death) heralded by the Second Vatican Council,\textsuperscript{317} and Marie-Julie Jahenny had a political message (she opposed the ‘diabolical’ French

mysticism gradually diminished. Although forms of female mysticism survived into the nineteenth and even the twentieth centuries, they did not enjoy the same kudos as in centuries past, and were neither celebrated nor publicized’.

\textsuperscript{312} KANE, 2002, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{313} SCHEER, 2013, p. 170, 181-182.
\textsuperscript{314} BADONE, 2007, p. 465, suggests that due to their profession and status their voices had more impact; see also: N. Priesching, 2012, p. 96-97.
\textsuperscript{315} PRIESEHING, 2004, p. 84.
\textsuperscript{317} MICAUD, 1987.
Moreover, the symbolic function of the stigmatics was not necessarily limited to their own country. The Belgian stigmatic, Louise Lateau, functioned as a symbol of an oppressed – ‘suffering’ – Catholicism for German Catholics during the Kulturkampf. In an era of triumphant materialism and atheism they saw her as living proof of God’s presence. It is important to pause here for a moment, as the political significance of some of these women was not as self-evident as it might seem in hindsight. The stigmatic women we discuss here were reported on in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thus, at a time when Catholicism idealized two types of femininity: the religious woman and the angelic mother. These idealized types were not linked to political engagement, but were confined to the private spheres of the home (the angelic mother) and the cloister (the religious woman), although both types could also be socially engaged (e.g. through charity work). Nevertheless, the political and religious ideas of some stigmatic women were readily accepted by their supporters, as they were convinced that these women acted as mediums. In other words, it was believed that they were only passing on what a supernatural being had told them and not claiming that these were their own ideas.

In the same vein, we can ask ourselves whether or not some of these stigmatics can be seen as charismatic authorities that are said to emerge during ‘a time of crisis, dislocation or disorientation’. Such charismatic leaders can attract followers who, in turn, may become a core group of adherents. In some cases, the enthusiasm for the stigmatics did indeed develop into a more formal organization. The French stigmatic, Marthe Robin, inspired a worldwide lay order involved in contemplation and charitable work (Foyers de Charité), and references to such a ‘routinization of charisma’ can also be found in the case of Gabriele Bitterlich (Engelwerk). Further comparative research is needed to determine the precise role of the stigmatics in the creation of these movements. Does the more conventional scheme of the bedridden woman displaying her wounds at specific moments suffice? Or were they actively engaged in a cause (e.g.

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318 BOUFLÉT, 1996, p. 91.
319 FOX, 1883.
320 KANE, 2014, pp. 105-106, 123.
323 HALTER, 2011.
324 WEISS, 1995, p. 80.
for the poor, such as in the cases of Maria Bolognesi and Symphorose Chopin; or greater social justice, as in the case of Elena Aiello).\textsuperscript{325}

The response of the clergy and Church

Questions about the authority and attraction of the stigmatics and the movements that developed around them also pertain to the role of the clergy in these matters. The stigmatics' spiritual guides have been cast as their controlling and 'domesticating' managers, but also as their ghostwriters. This was not a new role: research on the Middle Ages has pointed to similar relationships between female mystics and their confessors.\textsuperscript{326} Moreover, 'by bleeding on prescribed feast days, stigmatics were conforming to the calendar of the Church Fathers'.\textsuperscript{327}

As noted above, the stigmata and other extraordinary corporeal phenomena are what made these women exceptional to their contemporaries. Due to these merely complementary, para-mystical phenomena they were perceived as mystics. What is more, some of them were seen as 'living saints'; that is, 'individuals considered saints by their contemporaries',\textsuperscript{328} who attracted a certain veneration, while the ecclesiastical authorities had not yet made any formal pronouncements on their case.\textsuperscript{329} The type of sanctity that the stigmatics represented was thus more the saint as a 'revelatory token' than the saint as a model of Christian life. Often the stigmata were the initial point of attraction, with other qualities (such as the

\textsuperscript{325} BOUFLLET, 1996 p. 110: 'On assiste néanmoins à une évolution dans la lecture du signe que sont les stigmates: le phénomène s'estompe, le langage des signes fait place au message des œuvres, c'est évident chez Marthe Robin et, dans une certaine mesure, chez le Padre Pio et chez Thérèse Neumann'. More research on this and on the question of the authority and charisma of stigmatics will be conducted within the framework of the ERC starting-grant project, 'Between saints and celebrities. The promotion and devotions of stigmatics in Europe, c. 1800-1950'.

\textsuperscript{326} PRIESCHING, 2012, p. 83; Kane, 2002, p. 120; Weiss, 1995, p. 96; Kselman, Miracles, p. 110, suggests that a recurring pattern 'was for the prophet or visionary to entrust herself completely to a clergyman who functioned as a spiritual advisor'. Moreover, they often became members of a religious order; see also: Bynum, 'The female body', p. 171. However, as the case of the German poet Brentano and Anna Katherina Emmerick demonstrates, lay men could also take on this role; Brandstetter, 'Reliquienberg'.

\textsuperscript{327} MULVEY-ROBERTS, 2005.

\textsuperscript{328} KLEINBERG, 1992, p. 1.

capacity to heal) added to the stigmatic’s reputation in a later phase. The people who visited the stigmatics interpreted them as being powerful intermediaries between earthly and divine beings: they asked the stigmatics to pray with them for their cause (e.g. conversion) and believed in a ‘shared pain’ model (the stigmatic suffering as a substitute for the sick/afflicted).

For the Church, however, stigmatization is not sufficient cause to be declared a saint, as Prospero Lambertini (the later pope Benedict XIV) notes in his *De servorum Dei beatificazione et beatorum canonizazione*. Apart from a proven exemplary life and the heroic virtues of the candidate saint, there needs to be a *fama sanctitatis*, reverence of the deceased by a sufficiently large number of devotees, expressed in practices of veneration and invocation (vox *populi* as vox *Dei*). Moreover, only the miracles that a stigmatic realized after their death can be taken into account in these processes (those performed during their lifetime do not count). Not all of the stigmatic ‘cults’ survived the initial enthusiasm, but some of them proved to be sufficiently vibrant to lead to the beatification or canonization of the stigmatic: the official sanctioning of the Church. Several ‘modern’ stigmatics have been beatified or canonized in the last few decades (Maria Bologna was beatified in 2013; Elena Aiello in 2011; and Anna Katharina Emmerick was declared a saint in 2004) and the procedure has started for several others (including Marthe Robin, Louise Lateau, Maria von Mörl, Therese Neumann and Dora Visser).

**Epilogue**

Dr Imbert-Gourbeyre published a new version of his book on stigmatics in 1894, approximately twenty years after the original, with the new title *La stigmatisation, l’extase divine et les miracles de Lourdes: réponse aux libres-penseurs*. By this time, Rome had intervened and expressed disapproval of Palma Maria Matarelli. Thus, the pages concerning her are absent from this new edition. Her case is one of the many where popular enthusiasm eventually triggered a response from the ecclesiastical authorities. As this article has shown, studying her case and the cases of other stigmatics may improve our understanding of such interactions between what William Christian has called ‘religion as practiced’ and ‘religion as prescribed’. Their lives reveal how perceptions of mysticism could differ among Catholic contemporaries and how ideas on Catholic


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women and femininity were not as clear-cut as one might think. While similarities in their physical appearance might suggest a certain uniformity, the roles of the stigmatics, the corporeal aspects and the support they received were quite diverse. While this article is only the first step in the exploration of this rich field, hopefully it has demonstrated the importance of including female stigmatics in any volume on Christian women.

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