

The Cross, La Verna, and the Stigmata

by Bret Thoman, OFS

The month of September is replete with Franciscan feasts and memories of the cross. On September 17, 1224, something extraordinary took place, leading to the Feast of the Stigmata.

It happened on the mountain of La Verna, sometimes referred to as Alverna, in southern Tuscany. Those who visit the hermitage today are often struck by the rugged harshness and austere beauty of the mountain. St. Francis felt the same way.



The one with the steps is a cave where Francis used to pray.

Some years earlier, while Francis was preaching at a banquet, a nobleman named Count Orlando was so enflamed by Francis' words that he was inspired to offer him part of the mountain towering over his fiefdom of Chiusi. Francis went and knew immediately that it would be the perfect place for penance, prayer, and contemplation.

Francis came here six times in his life. It was the last time, in 1224, two years before his death, when the event took place. He was in La Verna fasting and praying a forty-day Lent in honor of the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14) and St. Michael the Archangel (September 29).

Francis was deeply devoted to the cross his entire life, beginning when the crucifix of San

Damiano spoke to him telling him to "Rebuild My House."

The Legend of the Three Companions said:

From that hour [after the locution at San Damiano], therefore, his heart was wounded, and it melted when remembering the Lord's passion. While he lived, he always carried the wounds of the Lord Jesus in his heart. [...]. From then on, he inflicted his flesh with such fasting that, whether healthy or sick, the excessively austere man hardly ever or never wanted to indulge his body. Because of this he confessed on his death bed that he had greatly sinned against "Brother Body.".... We have told these things about his crying and abstinence in an incidental way to show that, after that vision and the message of the image of the Crucified, he was always conformed to the passion of Christ until his death. (5: 14-15)

Thomas of Celano said that the cross that was imprinted internally on his soul at San Damiano would manifest itself externally on his body: "From that time on, compassion for the Crucified was impressed into his holy soul. And we honestly believe the wounds of the sacred Passion were impressed deep in his heart, though not yet on his flesh." (2 Celano 10: Book II: 249)

With this deep devotion to the cross, St. Francis was in La Verna.

According to the Third Consideration on the Stigmata, in the *Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Francis prayed for two graces: to feel in his body the pain that Jesus felt during his Passion and to know in his heart the love which Jesus felt for all humanity.



The chapel where the stigmata took place

Then the following took place:

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.... 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. 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. (Bonaventure, *Major Life*, chapter 13)

After La Verna, the life of Francis was inexplicably and mysteriously united to that of Christ. The Incarnation of Christ, the “masterpiece” of God’s creation, indeed, the whole purpose of creation (in the words of later theologian, John Duns Scotus) culminated in the Passion

and crucifixion as the highest expression of God’s love, charity, and mission: “When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, ‘*It is finished.*’ And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit” (John 19:30).

Thus, the life, love, and mission of Christ were marked by the two great feasts of Christmas and Easter. Similarly, Francis’s life and devotion to Christ were defined by the two great events of the nativity scene in Greccio (incarnation) and the stigmata at La Verna (crucifixion).

The mystery of what happened on Mt. La Verna is something for us to reflect and meditate on. Ultimately, there is something greater than the wounds of Christ, which St. Francis shared in; for the cross is merely the pathway to the Resurrection. Without the cross there is no Resurrection; unless Christ comes down in the world, there is no way to go up to Heaven.

In the end, then, suffering does not have the final word: the Resurrection does. By embracing the cross, Christ shows us the way. And Francis, in receiving his wounds, give us an example to follow.



The one of the complex shows the original church and cloister in La Verna.