

Stigmata: September 17

(*Legenda Minor* of St. Bonaventure)

Two years before Francis, the faithful servant of Christ, gave his soul back to God, he was alone on the top of Mt. Alverna. There he had begun a fast of forty days in honor of the archangel Michael and was immersed more deeply than usual in the delights of heavenly contemplation. His soul became aglow with the ardor of fervent longing for heaven as he experienced within himself the operations of grace.

As he was drawn aloft through ardent longing for God one morning near the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross [September 14], and was praying on the mountainside, he saw what appeared as a seraph with six bright wings gleaming like a fire descending from the heights of heaven. As this figure approached in swift flight and came near the man of God, it appeared not only winged but also crucified. The sight of it amazed Francis and his soul experienced joy mingled with pain. He was delighted with the sight of Christ appearing to him so graciously and intimately and yet the awe-inspiring vision of Christ nailed to the cross aroused in his soul a joy of compassionate love.

When the vision vanished after a mysterious and intimate conversation, it left Francis aglow with seraphic love in his soul. Externally, however, it left marks on his body like those of the Crucified as if the impression of a seal had been left on heated wax. The figures of the nails appeared immediately on his hands and feet. The heads of the nails were inside his hands but on top of his feet with their points extending through to the opposite side. His right side too showed a blood-red wound as if it had been pierced by a lance, and blood flowed frequently from it.

Because of this new and astounding miracle unheard of in times past, Francis came down from the mountain a new man adorned with the sacred stigmata, bearing in his body the image of the Crucified not made by a craftsman in wood or stone, but fashioned in his members by the hand of the living God. [Francis was the first person in the history of Christianity to receive the sacred stigmata. The Franciscan Family celebrates the Feast of the Stigmata on September 17.]

Possible questions and answers:

1. “The sight of it amazed Francis and his soul experienced joy mingled with pain.” When have you had this experience? [When a family member marries, they are beginning a new life and your relationship may change; saying goodbye to a friend who has been fighting cancer, their pain is over, but you will surely miss them; making a decision not to drive any more, giving up another freedom, but knowing you want others to be safe; etc.]
2. What does it mean to have an intimate conversation? [Your mind, heart and very being are open to the words being exchanged. You listen not only to the words being spoken, but also to how it is being said and the body language of the person speaking. There are a lot of clues which surround a conversation, we just need to be open to seeing them. One of the greatest gifts you can give another is that of listening. The person feels heard, respected and loved.]
3. What struck you about the description of the Stigmata? [I hadn’t realized that anything extended beyond Francis’ flesh, like the nail points bent backwards. No wonder it was so difficult for him to walk!]

