

So why DID Pope John Paul II whip himself?

By Peter Stanford

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Pope John Paul II regularly carried out mortification of the flesh, according to Polish nuns

The image is as arresting as it is intriguing. Pope John Paul II, who died in 2005, regularly used to whip himself, according to one of the team of Polish nuns who looked after him.

'We were in the next room and we would hear the sound of the blows,' reports Sister Tobiana Sobodka, in evidence revealed this week by the Vatican Commission considering whether to declare John Paul a saint.

In Catholicism, there is a long tradition among saints, mystics and scholars of inflicting pain on your body as both a form of penance for sins, and in imitation of Christ's suffering at the hands of the Roman soldiers who whipped him before putting him to death on the cross.

So, to the members of the Vatican Commission making public these details of John Paul's life may have seemed a normal way of demonstrating what a holy man he was.

But to those outside the Catholic faith in our secular, sceptical age, mortification of the flesh, to give the practice its proper religious name, appears more than a bit strange.

In Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, for instance, the murderous albino monk, Silas, is depicted flagellating himself while praying, using a 'discipline', a cat-tail whip made of knotted cord, flung over the shoulder until it draws blood.

The clear implication of the scene is that he is a ghastly villain with perverse if not perverted habits.

Yet there is a long list of distinguished figures in the Church who mortified their flesh like Silas.

Saint Thomas More, the lawyer and statesman executed in 1535 by Henry VIII because he refused to accept the king usurping the Pope as head of the Church, regularly wore a hair shirt, as did the Nobel Peace Prize winning nun, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who died in 1997. The itching it caused was a daily punishment offered up to God.

Saint Therese of Lisieux, the 19th-century French saint whose relics drew such crowds when they visited Britain recently, was another who whipped herself regularly.

One biographer describes her as anxious to start mortifying her flesh when she was just three, and then, once she had joined a convent, 'scourging herself with all the strength and speed of which she was capable, smiling at the crucifix through the tears which bedewed her eyelashes'.

It sounds bizarre to modern ears, but her behaviour was, by Catholic standards, on the moderate side of devout.

By contrast, the 11th-century Italian saint Dominic Loricatus spent six days during the Church's penitential season of Lent administering no less than 300,000 lashes while reciting the Psalms. It was enough penance, he said, to last a lifetime.

And Catherine of Siena, in the 14th century, took to excess the fast that Catholics still undertake before receiving the bread and wine at the Eucharist.

She would eat only the communion host - save for water and some herbs - and said that, along with God's love, it was sufficient to sustain her. She starved to death at 33.

Catherine is sometimes labelled the first ever anorexic, and you might imagine that the Church would therefore be wary of holding her up as a role model given the damage eating disorders can do.

Yet that is to underestimate how well accepted the habit of mortification is within Catholicism. In 1970, it named Catherine a 'doctor of the church', one of the highest honours it can bestow.

The church authorities have always stressed that there is a balance to be struck with mortification. So they condemn the practice of Catholics in the Philippines who on Good Friday nail themselves to crucifixes to relive Christ's suffering.

What seems to have changed down the centuries with regard to mortification of the flesh is not the Church's attitude, but society's.



The Da Vinci Code character Silas, played by Paul Bettany, used self-flagellation

Once Sigmund Freud came along at the end of the 19th century and psychoanalysis became widespread, practices such as self-flagellation began to be considered a bit kinky.

Freudian analysis suggested it was a manifestation of sexual repression - and the fact that Catholicism traditionally preached that abstinence from sex was a virtue only fuelled this belief.

So it is understandable that the Catholic practice of mortification raises so many eyebrows in today's secular and sexually liberated society.

From its earliest days, Christianity insisted that the needs of the body must take second place to those of the soul. When Jesus came to Earth in a man's body, it was his divine status and not his flesh that the early Church preached about.

The notion of a virgin birth meant his holy spirit was unsullied by the corporeal world.

Christians have been taught down the ages that, in order to focus on the soul, they need first to conquer the demands and distractions of their bodies - which is where mortification came in.

In medieval times, the likes of the anorexic Catherine of Siena and self-flagellating Dominic Loricatus may have taken that message to extremes.

But while many of the excesses of the Catholic church disappeared after the Reformation and the establishment of the Protestant Church in the 16th century, mortification remained.

Indeed, one of the prime movers in launching the Counter-Reformation movement, Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, was a big fan of mortification of the flesh and had his own variation on it.

One approving biographer of him writes: 'He bought a pair of shoes of coarse stuff that is often used in making brooms. He never wore but one shoe because he was in the habit of wearing a cord tied below the knee by way of mortification.'

The truth is that the habit of mortification within Catholicism continues to be widespread today - as John Paul II's use of the whip shows. What has shifted within the Church, though, is the willingness of those Catholics who do it to own up publicly.

In the acres of books devoted to the life of John Paul, for example, this is the first time his self-flagellation has ever been mentioned.

Even within the ultra-traditionalist Catholic organisation, Opus Dei - spiritual home to Brother Silas in Dan Brown's fiction - there is a reluctance to admit that members use the whip and the cilice, a chain worn around the thigh which has spikes poking into the skin.

'It isn't nearly as common as people suppose,' Opus Dei spokesmen regularly repeat, 'and anyway it is entirely down to individuals'

But why are Catholics so ashamed of mortification? Even the most liberal appreciate the concept of doing penance for their sins, though usually it is a question of saying a couple of Hail Marys rather than inflicting 20 lashes. And fasting, another aspect of mortification of the body, is widespread each Lent.

Last Good Friday, I joined a group of pilgrims who carry a replica cross over the sands to the Holy Island of Lindisfarne.

It's hard work, but they would argue that by punishing their bodies a little, they gain new spiritual insights. Having done it with them, I can vouch for that.

Does that make me strange or awash with sublimated sexual desire? I don't think so. Certainly no more than Pope John Paul II.

Peter Stanford is a former editor of the Catholic Herald. His new book, The Extra Mile: A 21st Century Pilgrim is published early in 2010 by Continuum.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1230351/So-DID-Pope-John-Paul-whip-himself.html#>