

Pope John Paul made rod for his own back

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AT THE beautiful papal residence overlooking Lake Albano outside Rome, a sound would occasionally emanate from the Pope's private chamber. It was John Paul II, flagellating himself.

"Several times he would put himself through bodily penance," said a Polish nun, Tobiana Sobodka, who worked in the Pope's Vatican apartments and summer residence. "You could hear the sound of the blows when he flagellated himself."

Monsignor Slawomir Oder, the Vatican "postulator" in charge of John Paul II's canonisation process, confirmed that testimony this week, saying the Polish-born Pope would whip himself as a bishop in Krakow and continued after being elected pope in 1978.

"In his wardrobe, among his vestments, there hung on a clothes hanger a special belt for trousers, which he used as a whip," said Monsignor Oder, describing self-flagellation as "an instrument of Christian perfection" to emulate the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

There are references to self-flagellation in the scriptures; many scholars interpret St Paul's words "I chastise my body" as the earliest reference to the custom.

"Until recently nobody would have thought the fact that a pope practises self-flagellation as exceptional at all," said Carole Cusack, of the department of religious study at Sydney University. "In the Christian tradition physical comfort has been identified with sin and self-indulgence, while suffering and pain are virtuous."

Ms Cusack said that while both popes before John Paul II spoke positively of self-mortification, the custom may have peaked during the 14th century.

"In the Middle Ages flagellation grows from a desire to do proper penance for your sins and was very noticeable during times of crisis, such as the Black Death, when people thought God was punishing them," she said. "At the height of the plague, some would even bleed to death or die from the shock or trauma of their wounds."

It is thought that few Catholics continue the tradition, which has moved away from a form of penance to a symbolic way of sharing the sufferings of Christ. Even in Opus Dei - one of the only branches of the Church where self-flagellation is encouraged - the practice is rare.

"It's lived by some people in Opus Dei but they're probably a minority," said a spokesman for the group, Richard Vella. "It's a small token of appreciation or love for Jesus but probably involves less discomfort than losing weight or taking exercise to lose weight."

The Opus Dei website says some members may self-flagellate for a few minutes a week, using a string woven from cotton designed to cause discomfort but not draw blood.

But while whipping for religious purposes may be in decline, Father Brian Lucas, the general secretary to the Catholic Bishops Conference, says many believers continue with practices that have similar spiritual benefits.

"I don't know if that form [self-flagellation] is common but some sense of denial is common for people who have aspirations to an integrated spiritual life."

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