

Embodying the Pain of Others. The Shared Pain Model in Catholicism of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

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Abstract

Scholars working on Catholic conceptions of pain have primarily emphasized that pain is meaningful according to Catholic teachings. Pain and ailments can be salutary or soul-cleansing illness and injury have meaning; and physical and emotional suffering could be God-given and an opportunity for the soul to grow. Rather than focusing on the individual benefits to be gained through suffering, this article focuses on the intersubjective aspect of Catholic conceptions of pain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Analysing the shared pain model in Catholicism, we show that this social aspect went beyond merely communicating about and perceiving pain: it also included suffering on behalf of others. We explore three case studies of apparent vicarious suffering, focusing on women bearing the wounds of Christ: Walburga Zentner, Marie Jalhay-Munzbach and Therese Neumann. In doing so, we gain a more nuanced understanding of what that shared pain model entailed. More specifically, we will see that this notion of suffering 'on behalf of others' not only concerned the latter's spiritual well-being, with the sufferer atoning for the sins of others. It could also refer to their physical well-being, where the suffering was seen as a means to alleviate the pain of others, with the mystic becoming the substitute for someone else – entailing a transfer of pain. Thus, instead of studying the efforts these women were thought to be making for society as a whole as new Christs, we explore the more intimate social exchange between these women and the people, dead or alive, for whom they suffered.

Keywords

Catholicism, stigmatization, intersubjectivity, pain economy, substitute suffering

1. Introduction

1.1 Catholic Views on Pain

[...] Therese Neumann's suffering became a profession, [...]. From 1918 onwards, her suffering never ceased, and it was transmitted to her in the most diverse forms. Suffering for sinners, suffering for souls, suffering for the sick, etc. The voice from the light had warned her: 'Many more and harder sufferings will come.'¹

As this fragment from a short biography of Therese Neumann shows, the idealization of suffering was a central element in the semi-hagiographic accounts of the life of the German stigmatic, who displayed the wounds of Christ from 1926 until her death in 1962.² The suffering of stigmatics such as Neumann has gradually drawn more attention from historians exploring topics such as the public setting of their reliving of Christ's Passion; the transfer of pain from Christ's male body to that of the predominantly female mystic; and the changing physicality of this type of supernatural suffering (e.g. from invisible stigmata to visible wounds).³

This article focuses on the social side of Catholic conceptions of pain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, described in the case of Therese Neumann above as her suffering "for sinners, suffering for souls, suffering for the sick". More specifically, the following pages will explore the substitute suffering of three stigmatics and focus on the pain experiences that were thought to be of supernatural origin. In doing so, we will see that some stigmatics were believed to actually embody and (re-)live the suffering of others. This notion of reliving someone else's pain adds a new layer to the research on intersub-

1 "Zooals reeds gezegd, is het lijden van Therese Neumann een beroep geworden, het beroep van: lijderes. Vanaf 1918 hield het lijden nooit op en werd het haar overgezonden onder de meest verscheidene vormen. Lijden voor zondaars, lijden voor zielen, lijden voor zieken enz. De stem uit het licht had haar verwittigd: 'Nog veel en zwaarder lijden zal komen'. Richard Dewachter: *Therese Neumann*. Turnhout 1932, 64.

2 See Joachim Seeger: *Resl von Konnersreuth (1898-1962). Eine wissenschaftliche Untersuchung zum Werdegang, zur Wirkung und Verehrung einer Volksheligen*. Frankfurt am Main 2004, 55.

3 See Paula Kane: Stigmatic cults and pilgrimage: the convergence of private and public faith. In: Tine Van Osselaer, Patrick Pasture (eds.): *Christian homes. Religion, family and domesticity in the 19th and 20th centuries*. Leuven 2014, 104-125; Tamar Herzig: Stigmatized holy women as female Christs. In: *Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà* 26 (2013), 151-175 [special issue on "Discorsi sulle stimmate dal Medioevo all'età contemporanea", ed. by Gabór Knaliczay]; Xenia Von Tippelskirch: "Ma fille, je te la donne par modèle". Sainte Catherine de Sienne et les stigmatisées du XVIIème siècle. In: *Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà* 26 (2013), 259-278, 274-277 [special issue on "Discorsi sulle stimmate dal Medioevo all'età contemporanea", ed. by Gabór Knaliczay].

jectivity in lived religion and, in particular, Catholic devotional culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In studying ‘lived religion’, we follow Meredith McGuire, who sees it as a useful term to distinguish “the actual experience of religious persons from prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices”.⁴ For her, lived religion is inherently intersubjective: “Although lived religion pertains to the individual, it is not merely subjective. Rather, people construct their religious worlds together, often sharing vivid experiences of that intersubjective reality”.⁵ As we are studying Catholic devotional culture, it is important to keep in mind that it is not only human beings with whom the faithful construct their reality. As Robert Orsi has stressed, “the intersubjective goes beyond the merely human. The intersubjective encounter with the sacred other(s) is always [...] an engagement with oneself and one’s world in all the modalities of being”.⁶

By focusing on this relational aspect of the religious subject, we also follow the lead of Mary Dunn, Brenna Moore⁷ and Constance Furey, who have all emphasized the need to turn towards the “relational subject”, “the subject enmeshed in the thick of interpersonal bonds, such as friendship, parenting, and kingship”.⁸ As Constance Furey writes, “still, all too often in our work, the religious subject stands alone in a crowd. [...] In our quest to better understand subjectivity, we have isolated the subject”.⁹ Attention has primarily been paid to the relationship between the individual subject and society, rather than to

4 Meredith McGuire: *Lived religion. Faith and practice in everyday life*. Oxford 2008, 12.

5 McGuire, *Lived religion*, 12, see also 112-113: “Intersubjectivity refers to the apprehension of another’s subjective experience, for example emotion, that is not mediated by conscious thought – in which the other or the other’s experience is the object of thought”.

6 Robert Orsi: *History and Presence*. Cambridge, Massachusetts 2016, 244. See also Robert Orsi: *Between Heaven and Earth. The religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them*. Princeton 2005, 2. For Orsi, apart from recognizing the intersubjective nature of “individual, social, cultural, and religious identities and indeed of reality itself”, the study of lived religion should also acknowledge the “intersubjective nature of research and religion”: “Our lives and stories are not simply implicated in our work; they are among the media through which we encounter and engage the religious worlds of others”. Robert Orsi: Is the study of lived religion irrelevant to the world we live in? Special presidential plenary address. Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Salt Lake City, 2 November 2002. In: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42 (2003), 169-174, 173-174.

7 Mary Dunn, Brenna Moore: Introduction. Recovering relationships as a path through the modern Christian West. In: Idem (eds.): *Religious Intimacies. Intersubjectivity in the modern Christian West*. Bloomington 2020, 1-23, 10.

8 Ibid.

9 Constance Furey: Body, society and subjectivity in religious studies. In: Dunn and Moore, *Religious Intimacies*, 24-45, 26.

“the relational subject, formed and enacted through sustained affiliations and intense encounters”¹⁰

Pain seems to be an excellent entry point for studying such relations. As Leona Toker and Esther Cohen have noted: “[b]elief in some form of intersubjectivity is the root of all attempts to connect with the pain of the ‘other’. Compassion, pity, sympathy, empathetic attention, attempts to help – all these are based upon our acknowledgement that others suffer and that we know that they do”.¹¹ In Catholic thinking about pain, the intersubjective seems to go beyond acknowledging the pain of others, as it may also include taking on someone else’s pain. While this could be shared pain, such as a stigmatic’s compassion for Christ (a sharing of his wounds), the stigmatic’s suffering for others could also lead them to take over other people’s illnesses and ailments. This article approaches this line of thinking through the comparative study of three cases. The terms ‘pain’ and ‘suffering’ are used interchangeably as there is no sharp distinction in the sources between physical pain and emotional suffering, and the authors of the sources we study here also use them interchangeably.¹²

When studying Catholic conceptions of pain, it is important to remember that pain is meaningful according to Catholic teachings: pain and ailments can be salutary or soul-cleansing illness and injury have meaning; and physical and emotional suffering may be God-given and an opportunity for your soul to grow. As many scholars, such as Roy Porter, Joanna Bourke and, recently, Steven Wilson, have pointed out, disease and bodily pain have been interpreted “in terms of [their] divine function, whether it be instruction, expiation, test, or even grace”.¹³ While this is indeed an important feature in the interpretation of Catholic experiences of pain, this article does not focus on this aspect of personal growth through pain and the salutary effects of pain for the sufferers themselves.

10 Furey, *Body*, 26.

11 Leona Toker, Esther Cohen: Introduction: In despite. In: Toker Leona, Cohen Esther (eds.): *Knowledge and pain*. Amsterdam 2012, VII-XVIII, X. On the historicity of feelings such as sympathy and how they fluctuate in accordance with ideas of race and gender, for example, see Javier Moscoso: *Pain. A cultural history*. London 2012, 55-67; Caroline Arni, Marian Füssel: Editorial. In: *Historische Anthropologie* 23.1 (2015), 5-10, 5-6.

12 On the need to reflect on whether the sources make a distinction and, for example, present a “comingling of emotional and physical suffering” in terms such as “dolor”, see Rob Boddice: *Pain – a very short introduction*. Oxford 2017, 6; Rob Boddice: Introduction: hurt feelings. In: Idem (ed.): *Pain and Emotion in Modern History*. Houndmills 2014, 1-15, 1.

13 Roy Porter: The patient’s view: doing medical history from below. In: *Theory and Society* 14.2 (1985), 175-198, 193; Joanna Bourke: *The story of pain: from prayer to painkillers*. Oxford 2014, 88-130; Steven Wilson: Connecting medicine and religion in modern French literature. In: *Modern & Contemporary France* 28.4 (2020), 357-364, 357. “Pain was always the thoughtful prescription of the Divine Physician”. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 21.

Instead, the focus is on what we might call the Catholic pain economy, where suffering becomes something that can be exchanged.¹⁴

In his book on the history of ritual pain, Ariël Glücklich described the concept of shared pain as: “The victim of pain may suffer it on behalf of others, while the others are deeply affected by this pain”.¹⁵ The scapegoat is a good example in this regard. “This vicarious property of physical suffering stands at the centre of Christian life, beginning with the sacrifice of Christ and running through the capacity to imitate the suffering of Christ”.¹⁶ This article focuses on nineteenth and early twentieth-century examples of such vicarious suffering. This period was the golden era of the phenomenon of “victim souls” – predominantly women who voluntarily accepted the illness and corporeal afflictions sent to them by God.¹⁷ Their vicarious suffering could be natural (wounds, illnesses) or supernatural (going through Christ’s Passion, an exchange of hearts with Christ), as well as involuntary or voluntary (self-flagellation, wearing of a cilice). Scholars working on this ‘heroic’ suffering in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have shown how these figures believed that through their pain they could atone for the sins committed by others, or society as a whole – through what is known as reparatory suffering.¹⁸

The following pages focus on supernatural suffering – pain and ailments that were not self-inflicted nor had natural causes. This type of suffering includes the visible/invisible wounds of the stigmatics and their reliving (and physically and emotionally embodying) of Christ’s Passion; burning pain in the chest after a mystic exchanged hearts with Jesus;¹⁹

14 For thinking about pain as something that can be exchanged for pleasure, for example, see M. Christine Benner Dixon: *The Pain Economy: Mark Twain’s Masochistic Understanding of Pain*. In: *American Literary Realism* 47.1 (2014), 71-87, 71: “The exchange of pain and pleasure amounts to what I will call the ‘pain economy’, and it carries with it a strict reckoning”. In our cases, the counterbalance seems to be gratitude rather than pleasure.

15 Ariël Glücklich: *Sacred pain. Hurting the body for the sake of the soul*. Oxford 2001, 29.

16 Glücklich, *Sacred pain*, 29. On this “shared-pain model”, see also Peter Jan Margry: *The passion of the Christ revisited: de school van Padre Pio*. In: Willem Speelman (ed.): *Wondtekenen, wondertekenen. Over de stigmatisatie van Franciscus*. Assen 2006, 140-168, 162-163.

17 Paula Kane: “She Offered Herself up”. The victim soul and victim spirituality in Catholicism. In: *Church History* 71.1 (2002), 80-119.

18 See Gábor Klaniczay: *Illness, self-inflicted body pain and supernatural stigmata: three ways of identification with the suffering body of Christ*. In: Christian Krötzel, Katarina Mustakallio, Jennu Kuuliala (eds.): *Infirmity in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Social and cultural approaches to health, weakness and care*. Farnham 2015, 119-136.

19 See e.g., the description of Margaretha Maria Alacoque’s heartache after her heart was set on fire by contact with the “burning stove” of Jesus’ heart. Théodore Boulangé: *Leven en openbaringen van de eerwaardige Margarita Maria Alacoque*. Gent 1867, 100.

or the pain caused by attacks of the Devil. These forms of suffering concern the transfer of pain from one person to another; a transfer that contemporaries believed to have been mediated by divine intervention.

By focusing on this social aspect of the supernatural suffering of mystically inspired women, we obtain a more nuanced understanding of what that shared pain model entailed. Suffering 'on behalf of others' not only referred to the latter's spiritual well-being, with the sufferer atoning for the sins of others, it could also refer to their physical well-being. Suffering on behalf of others could also be a means to alleviate their pain, with the mystic becoming the substitute for someone else. Rather than studying the efforts these women made for society as a whole, we explore the more intimate social exchange between these women and the people for whom they suffered – those whose pain they felt.

1.2 Three Cases of Substitute Suffering

Focusing on this substitute suffering, we study and compare three cases from the start of the nineteenth until the early twentieth century. Our analysis of how these women physically embodied the pain of others will offer new insights into the ideas on suffering and intersubjectivity that were at play. We will see how different ideas motivated the pain exchanges and that what looks similar at first glance becomes more complex on second look. The three mystical women highlighted here all had material published on them during their lifetimes; however, some are more well known than others. The three cases were selected from a database of stigmatics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They are found there as *alteri Christi*, already taking on the pain of Christ.²⁰ We chose these three cases to cover the entire timespan and complexity of the phenomenon of substitute suffering, and while each mystic takes on the suffering of others, they do so under slightly different circumstances and in different modalities.

To begin with, Walburga Zentner²¹ (mystical phenomena c. 1830) was a servant from Waalhaupten who created some public commotion due to her visions and stigmata. Some believed her to be a witch, others saw her as a saint and prophetess. We find extensive comments on her case in the autobiography of the theologian Dr Magnus Jocham (1808–1893), *Memoiren eines Obskuranten. Eine Selbstbiographie* (posthumously published in

²⁰ See <https://mediahaven-stigmatics.uantwerpen.be/> (14.7.2023).

²¹ See Bernhard Gißibl: *Frömmigkeit, Hysterie und Schwärmerei*. Frankfurt am Main 2004, 63, 97.

1896), who offers important insights into the religious life of Bavaria (and especially Swabia) in the nineteenth century.²² He narrated Walburga Zentner's story shortly after describing the era as a period of the flowering of mysticism:

And indeed, striking phenomena were heard about from different places. There was someone who had lived for years only on air and water; there was another who, having been placed in a so-called higher state, admonished the people with urgency. Elsewhere, there was talk of visions and extraordinary effects.²³

Jocham had heard about Zentner's visions, stigmata and clairvoyance, but was not particularly impressed when he first saw her. He later concluded that it was all the result of an unhealthy imagination and her tendency to brag.²⁴

In contrast, the texts that were published on Marie Jalhay-Munzbach (1807–1881) have a more positive, almost hagiographic tone. Jalhay-Munzbach was a mother of seven who lived in Petigny (near Couvin, in the Belgian diocese of Namur). She became well known to the Belgian public after her miraculous cure from an illness that had lasted twelve years, and she considered that her cure was due to the intercession of the Virgin Mary on 13 January 1865. Two months later she started to display the stigmata and had daily ecstasies.²⁵ Her story is captured in texts on her miraculous cure (in praise of the Virgin Mary) and a biography that also narrates her struggle with the devil, her ecstasies,

22 Magnus Jocham (1808–1893) studied theology and philosophy in Munich becoming a priest in 1831. He held positions in Kaufbeuren, Ebenhofen, Hinterstein and Frankenhofen. From 1841 onwards, he was Professor for Moral Theology at the Archbishop's Lyceum in Freising. He was in contact with the Munich circle of the Allgäuer Erweckungsbewegung and a very prolific writer (circa fifty publications). Rosmarie Mair: Magnus Jocham. In: *Digitaler Literaturatlas von Bayerisch Schwaben DigiLABS*. <https://www.literaturportal-bayern.de/autorinnen-autoren?task=lpbauthor.default&pnd=119134926> (4.4.2023); Jakob Laucher: Jocham, Magnus. In: *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* 50 (1905), 676-679 [Online-Version]. <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd119134926.html#adbcontent>. Part of his depiction of Zentner had already been published under the name Johannes Clericus (his pseudonym): *Schildereien aus dem Pfarrerleben*. In: *Katholische Trösteinsamkeit* 8 (1856), 23-188, see in particular 98-104.

23 "Und wirklich hörte man von verschiedenen Seiten her auffallende Erscheinungen. Da war Eine, die schon jahrelang nur von Luft und Wasser lebte; dort war eine Andere, die, in einen sogenannten höhern Zustand versetzt, den Leuten gar eindringliche Mahnungen gab. An einem andern Ort sprach man von Visionen und ausserordentlichen Wirkungen". Magnus Jocham: *Memoiren eines Obskuranten. Eine Selbstbiographie*. Kempten 1896, 213.

24 See *ibid.*, 223.

25 See Joachim Boufflet's edition, 1996, of Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre: *La stigmatization*. Grenoble 1894, 522-523. After she lost her first husband Munsback or Munsbach, she married Jalhay. Her maiden name was Gilson.

stigmatization and many virtues.²⁶ Both types of text are of relevance here, as the cure relates to ailments she suffered on behalf of others.

Finally, we will look at Therese Neumann (1898–1962) from Konnersreuth, who is by far the most famous name on the list. She became bed-ridden (after a series of accidents) and blind in 1919, but regained her sight on 29 April 1923 (on the day of the beatification of Therese of Lisieux), and from May 1925 onwards she was no longer paralysed. On 4-5 March 1926, she received the stigmata, ceased eating and started having visions of Christ's Passion. Thousands of visitors went to see her, and the devotion to her is still ongoing. In 2005, the process of beatification was opened.²⁷ Numerous books and newspaper articles were published both for and against her;²⁸ however, our focus here is on the work of her supporters.

As these short summaries show, the supernatural episodes in the lives of these women went beyond a mere substitute suffering and also included visions and miraculous cures. While all three displayed the stigmata, their religious suffering comprised more than the experience of the wounds of Christ, while their substitute suffering took on different forms and meanings.

2. Embodying the Shared Pain Model

Before exploring the different cases, it is important to mention that during the era in question a new type of mystic emerged, whose fame depended not on the visions they had or the teachings they communicated but on the fact that their bodies showed traces of the supernatural.²⁹ This also held true for supernatural suffering. The victim souls – predominantly women – suffered visibly, showed traces of wounds and illnesses on their bodies and explained these by referring to mystical experiences as the cause of the ailments.

26 See [Anonymus]: *Esquisse d'âme. Biographie de Mme Jalhay, d'après les souvenirs d'un fils (1807-1881)*. Liège 1911; for the miraculous cure, see: *Guérison de Madame Jalhay opérée le 13 Janvier 1865. Relation authentique*. Paris, Leipzig 1866; [Anonymus]: *Une guérison très récente par l'intercession de Marie*. In: Terwecoren (ed.): *Collection de précis historiques. Mélanges littéraires et scientifiques*. Bruxelles, Paris 1865, 233-243.

27 See Seeger, Resl von Konnersreuth; Joachim Boufflet: *Thérèse Neumann ou le paradoxe de la sainteté*. Mesnil-sur-l'Estrée 1999.

28 For an overview of the most popular works, see Christiane Köppl: *Mystik und Öffentlichkeit. Der Kult der Therese Neumann*. Aachen 1997, 104-138.

29 See Nicole Priesching: *Mystikerinnen des 19. Jahrhunderts – ein neuer Typus?* In: Waltraud Pulz (ed.): *Zwischen Himmel und Erde. Körperliche Zeichen der Heiligkeit*. Stuttgart 2012, 79-97.

The unusual growth in the number of women displaying signs of the supernatural on their bodies in this period can be linked to at least two factors. First, women were associated with their bodies (not with their minds, as men were) and religiosity and, therefore, as Otto Weiß remarked, women were “destined more than were men, to realize their Christian identity through their body”.³⁰ This tallies with the findings on stigmatics in five European countries (Germany, Belgium, France, Italy and Spain) who lived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of the 245 cases studied, the majority were women (95.5 percent of the cases).³¹ The second significant factor concerns the broader Church context – this was an era that was eager for ‘proof’ of the supernatural: visible signs that could be tested and used in debates with opponents of Catholicism as evidence of God’s intervention in the world.³²

The visibility that these two factors fostered also had consequences for the relationship between these new mystics and the devotees. For example, these women’s bodies were made available to the gaze of others, and this was heavily criticized.³³ There was, however, also much to be gained from their public suffering through Christ’s Passion, as their visible suffering was thought to have a positive effect on the visitors. Seeing these women suffer through Christ’s Passion was considered an edifying experience, with the sight of the physical torment and emotional distress reminding the onlookers of the pain Christ had suffered on behalf of humankind. Ideally, it was thought that seeing the pain that these women suffered would inspire onlookers to lead a better life.³⁴ As Johannes Brinkmann, O.S.B., phrased it in the *Chronique de Konnersreuth* in 1929, when reporting on his visits

30 “[...] mehr als der Mann dazu geschaffen, das Christsein in ihrem Körper zu verwirklichen”. Otto Weiß: Stigmata. In: Hubert Wolf (ed.): *Wahre’ und ,falsche’ Heiligkeit. Mystik, Macht und Geschlechterrollen im Katholizismus des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Oldenburg 2013, 111-125, 119.

31 The number of stigmatics we have uncovered (related to stigmatics as a general category, not just the stereotypical stigmatic) has grown since the publication of our book, see e.g. our database: <https://media-haven-stigmatics.uantwerpen.be/> (with additions also from other countries; bringing our current total to approximately 280).

32 “[...] almost obsessive craving for physical proof of the direct intervention of angels and demons in our world”. (“[...] einer fast schon obsessiven Begierde nach physisch greifbaren Beweisen für das direkte Hineinwirken der Engel und Dämonen in unsere Welt”). Nils Freytag, Diethard Sawicki: *Verzauberte Moderne. Kulturgeschichtliche Perspektiven auf das 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. In: Idem (eds.): *Wunderwelten: religiöse Ekstase und Magie in der Moderne*. München 2006, 7-24, 17.

33 On the problematization of gazing at a female body, see: Tine Van Osselaer in collaboration with Andrea Graus, Leonardo Rossi, Kristof Smeyers: *Between saints and celebrities. The devotion and promotion of stigmatics in Europe, c. 1800-1950*. Leiden, Boston 2020, 81-82. doi.org/10.1163/9789004439351.

34 See Tine Van Osselaer: *Pain, Passion and Compassion. Writing on Stigmatic Women in Modern Europe*. In: Johannes Ljungberg, Alexander Maurits, Erik Sidenvall (eds.): *Cultures in conflict. Religion, History and Gender in Northern Europe c. 1800-2000*. Berlin 2021, 59-84.

to Therese Neumann: “What stone do we carry in our chest where the heart should be, to see such suffering and still commit new sins?”³⁵

However, what was the precise nature of the pain that the visitors witnessed? The suffering of the stigmatics seems to have fluctuated in accordance with the liturgical year, in particular in relation to feast days associated with Christ’s Passion (such as the Holy Week) or that of St Francis (17 September, which was the day of his own stigmatization).³⁶ Their pain referred to biblical stories of the past *and* events in the present; for example, stigmatics such as Louise Lateau (1850–1883) were said to suffer more intensely whenever the Church or the clergy were under attack (e.g. during the Piedmontese invasion of the Papal States; during profanations in Paris – the Paris Commune – in the Holy Week of 1871).³⁷ In other words, these women not only atoned for the sins of others, but their bodies also exhibited the pain of others: Christ’s Passion obviously, as shown in the wounds they bore, but also the clergy’s pain. The latter was not linked to a specific corporeal element but more generally concerned an intensification in the degree of pain shown.

This correlation is repeatedly stressed in booklets on the Belgian stigmatic Louise Lateau: “In the same way, Louise feels the agony caused by the marks on her body to a much greater degree whenever great crimes are committed in the world, especially when the Church is harassed by its enemies”.³⁸ Similarly, Anton Jor, a priest banned from Trier during the German culture wars, wrote about the correlation between Louise Lateau’s suffering and the political context: “This is particularly evident in certain events that have seriously offended God or caused great suffering to the Church, its leader and its faithful servants”.³⁹

35 “Quelle pierre portons nous donc dans notre poitrine à la place du cœur, pour voir une telle souffrance et cependant commettre de nouveaux péchés?” Johannes Brinkmann, O.S.B., in *Visites*. In: *Chronique de Konnersreuth* (1929), 234-257, 246.

36 See Van Osselaer et al., *The devotion*, 88.

37 See Tine Van Osselaer: *Stigmata, prophecies and politics: Louise Lateau in the German and Belgian culture wars of the late nineteenth century*. In: *The Journal of Religious History* 42.4 (2018), 591-610, 599. doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12545.

38 “Ebenso empfindet Louise die Qualen, welche die Male ihres Leibes verursachen, noch in ungleich höherem Grade, so oft große Verbrechen in der Welt geschehen, insbesondere dann, wenn die Kirche von ihren Feinden bedrängt wird”. [Anonymus]: *Ein Besuch bei Louise Lateau der mit den Wundmalen des Heilandes begnadigten Jungfrau in Bois d’Haine. Ein Trostbuchlein für das katholische deutsche Volk*. Dülmen 1874, 25. See also Paul Majunke: *Louise Lateau, ihre Wunderleben und ihre Bedeutung im deutschen Kirchenconflicte*. Berlin 1874, 17.

39 “Das zeigt sich besonders auch bei gewissen Ereignissen, wodurch Gott schwer beleidigt oder der Kirche, ihrem Oberhaupte und ihren treuen Dienern großes Leid verursacht wurde”. Anton Jor: *Louise Lateau die wunderbar begnadigte Jungfrau von Bois d’Haine, zur Belehrung und Erbauung für alle Stände*. Regensburg 1878, 75, see also 85: “How much she may already have suffered because of the German

3. The Pain of Others

Our focus here is on mystics who also incorporated the pain of specific people. We examine transactions of pain that are more personal than suffering for the pains afflicted on 'the Church'. Peter Jan Margry has briefly touched upon such personal pain transfers in his study of the devotees of the stigmatic Padre Pio. Margry describes how, among the devotees, there was also someone who claimed healing capacities. Apart from suffering Christ's wounds, she also took on the suffering of those who visited her. In so doing, she could function either as an intermediary between Christ or between Padre Pio, or as their substitute.⁴⁰

The main idea in this case was that the stigmatic's embodying of the pain of others would help them to heal. While we can see similar lines of thought in the texts of the cases studied here, this logic does not seem to have played any role in our first case – that of Walburga Zentner. Rather than taking on the pain that a person was suffering at the moment she met them, she relived the person's entire medical history. She adopted their traits and relived the illnesses and afflictions from which the other person had suffered. Thus, during her episodes, she literally 'embodied' the person she was 'fighting for'. Magnus Jocham, who met Walburga Zentner around 1832, described her behaviour as follows:

Whenever she was vividly reminded of a person or saw someone before her in whom she took a special interest, she had to fight for that person; that is, adopt and relive their whole life, all illnesses and pains, all their concerns, and this through horrific sufferings. In this state, she imitated the whole way of speaking and acting, and all the habits and vices of the personality of the one for whom she fought, and so accurately that one believed they were present before one's own eyes and ears. This was also the case even if she had never seen the person in question.⁴¹

Kulturkampf! The many tears of the religious sisters banished from their quiet asylums of prayer and pious activity, the expelled religious and secular priests, the banishments and imprisonments for religious practices, the lamentations of the orphaned congregations, the destruction of so many souls through the 'culture war' and its consequences, especially since the May laws of 1873, are probably the reason for the increased suffering of the stigmatised of Bois d'Haine". ("Wieviel mag sie schon gelitten haben wegen des deutschen Kulturkampfes! Die vielen Thränen der aus ihren stillen Asylen des Gebetes und frommer Wirksamkeit verbannten Ordensschwwestern, der vertriebenen Ordens- und Weltpriester, die Verbannungen und Einkerkierungen wegen geistlicher Amtshandlungen, die Klagen der verwaisten Gemeinden, der Untergang so vieler Seelen durch den ‚Culturkampf‘ und seine Folgen, zumal seit den Maigesetzen von 1873 sind wohl der Erklärungsgrund für die seitdem vermehrten Leiden der Stigmatisirten von Bois d'Haine".).

40 See Margry, *The passion of the Christ*, 163.

41 "So oft sie lebhaft an eine Persönlichkeit erinnert wurde oder Jemanden vor sich sah, der sie besonders interessirte, so mußte sie für diese Persönlichkeit kämpfen, d.h. das ganze Leben derselben, alle ihre Krankheiten und Schmerzen, all ihre Anliegen sich selber aneignen und durchleben und dieß unter entsetzlichen

When Jocham met Walburga Zentner she also suffered through all the illnesses and pains that he had ever experienced in his life, and, as he stressed, she did so in the right chronological order (toothache, earache, pain in the chest, etc.). However, at the end of the episode, she also started to bleed from her hands and head, like the wounds of Christ, from which Jocham had never suffered.⁴² Jocham mentions that he did not know “what the use of all of this was”.⁴³

He reflected on the meaning of her suffering a little more in his later descriptions of Zentner’s career. Apparently, by then she had gathered around her a circle of twelve men, “for whom she had to pray and fight”.⁴⁴ These men were predominantly friends and students of the Regensburg bishop, Johann Michael Sailer, and the bishop of Comana and auxiliary bishop of Regensburg, Georg Michael Witman. Zentner seems to have thought of them as her apostles, who would spread the news of her mystical phenomena.⁴⁵ Jocham explained that: “the struggles she has to endure on their behalf are not to atone for them, but to help them bear the many sufferings that befall them”.⁴⁶ Zentner’s case is, therefore, a good example of how this personalized suffering could have other consequences. The one-on-one relationship could inspire gratitude and encourage the afflicted to stay on the right track, but it could also create dependence. In the latter scenario, instead of thanking God and seeing the mystic as a mediator, the mystic became the point of reference.

Zentner’s case is essentially different from the two others, where the mystic’s suffering brought an immediate physical benefit for the others involved. The private substitute suffering of Marie Jalhay-Munzbach (1807–1881), for example, benefitted her family members. This suffering started in 1852, when her husband and six of her children fell victims

Leiden. In diesem Zustande ahmte sie ganz die Redeweise, die Aktion und alle Arten und Unarten der Persönlichkeit, für die sie kämpfte, so getreulich nach, daß man dieselbe vor sich zu sehen und zu hören glaubte. Dieß war auch dann der Fall, wenn sie eine Persönlichkeit nie in ihrem ganzen Leben mit eigenen Augen gesehen hatte”. Jocham, *Memoiren*, 217-218.

42 See *ibid.*, 219.

43 “Wozu aber das Alles dienen sollte [...]”. *Ibid.*, 219.

44 “[...] für die sie zu beten und zu kämpfen hat.” *Ibid.*, 221.

45 “Ihr Geist hat ihr in den Kopf gesetzt, durch diese Männer müsse ihre Angelegenheit der Welt kund gethan und ausgebreitet werden”. *Ibid.*, 221.

46 “[...] die Kämpfe, welche sie für dieselben auszustehen hat, dienen nicht dazu, für dieselben zu büßen, sondern ihnen die vielen Leiden, welche sie treffen, tragen zu helfen“. *Ibid.*, 221. See on these so-called “love fights” (“Liebeskämpfe”), also Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv München, Ministerium für Kultur- und Schulangelegenheiten, 719, religiöse Schwärmerei der Walburga Zentner, Waalhaupten (5 Wunden Christi), letter to the king, 24 October 1830 from the Präsidium der k. Regierung des Oberdonaukreises.

to an epidemic of scarlet fever.⁴⁷ Jalhay-Munzbach, whose own version of the story was included in one of the reports on her cure, described how when two of her children were on the verge of dying, she sought divine assistance. Her “motherly heart broke with pain”⁴⁸ and she threw herself at the feet of Jesus and Mary, exclaiming:

Oh, my dear God! You can see what my sorrow is! I love your hand though it strikes me; but if one of us has deserved this punishment, oh! I implore you, strike only me, let it all fall on me. My dear God! Return my husband to me, return my children, and then strike as it pleases you, I will bear it without complaining.⁴⁹

Her prayer was answered and her husband and children were cured. Eighteen months later she herself started to suffer from a horrible combination of ailments: back pain, terrible cramps, stomach aches, continuous vomiting, heavy bleeding and insomnia (she could not sleep for two and a half years).⁵⁰ Jalhay-Munzbach stressed that, because of the promise she had made to God, she would not pray for her own cure. Whenever she felt like complaining, she dismissed the thought as a temptation: “never again did I want to pray for that goal; I would have broken my promise; the only thing I asked for was to have the courage to bear my sufferings in a Christian way”⁵¹

She endured the afflictions until her miraculous cure on 13 January 1865, due to the intercession of the Virgin Mary. However, the cure was not the end of her suffering. Three days after the Virgin’s intervention, Jalhay-Munzbach had a vision while in church, in which she saw all her faults of the past. She offered herself as reparatory victim, and from

47 See [anonymus], *Une guérison très récente*, 233.

48 “mon Coeur de mère se brisait de douleur”. [Anonymus], *Esquisse d’âme*, 71.

49 “O mon Dieu! Vous voyez quelle est mon affliction! J’adore votre main qui me frappe; mais si quelqu’un de nous a mérité un châtement, oh! je vous en conjure, ne frappez que moi seule, faites tout retomber sur moi. Mon Dieu! rendez-moi mon mari, rendez-moi mes enfants, et puis frappez-moi comme il vous plaira, je supporterai tout sans jamais me plaindre”. [Anonymus], *Une guérison très récente*, 240. Slightly different phrasing, but essentially the same description in: [Anonymus], *Esquisse d’âme*, 71 (letter from Mme Jalhay in Pétigny, 21/2/1865, to the redemptorist Deleval in Tournai).

50 See [anonymus], *Une guérison très récente*, 235: “maladie de l’épine dorsale, accompagnée d’accès nerveux et de crampes terribles, souffrances atroces près de l’estomac, et tellement douloureuses que le plus léger frôlement sur cette enflure me donnait des accès nerveux; vomissements continuels, et auxquels plus de vingt fois j’ai failli succomber; en outre, depuis un mois, j’avais eu trois fortes hémorragies”.

51 “jamais, non plus, je n’aurais voulu demander des prières dans ce but; j’aurais cru manquer à ma promesse; tout ce que je demandais, c’était le courage de supporter chrétiennement mes souffrances”. [Anonymus], *Une guérison très récente*, 241.

25 March onwards she had daily ecstasies and bore the stigmata (that she kept hidden with gloves) until her death in 1881.⁵²

The suffering on behalf of others was also a prominent theme in the literature of the world-famous stigmatic Therese Neumann. Apart from suffering for humankind as a whole,⁵³ she also took on the suffering of specific people. Her episodes seem to have been more or less a combination of the elements involved in the cases of the two other women discussed here. While Neumann suffered to alleviate the pain of others (as Marie Jahay-Munzbach had done), she literally embodied the physical pains of those who needed her help – her embodiment resembled the reliving of pains we see in Walburga Zentner's case.

According to her biographers, Therese Neumann sometimes knew in advance for whom she was suffering, sometimes only after she had suffered the events.⁵⁴ Moreover, she acted on behalf of the living as well as the dead.⁵⁵ She suffered, for example, from pneumonia for a young theologian across the border (in Czechoslovakia), who was in danger of losing his calling and was being tested by God. Similarly, when suffering for a soul in purgatory, she started to ask for food and drink. These requests did not fit into Neumann's normal comportment, as she allegedly had the ability to go without food (in-edia). For the people close to her, this seemed to be an indication that it was not 'her' asking. Usually, when offered food, she refused to touch any of it.⁵⁶ Another telling example of her embodiment of the people she suffered for is included in a short biography by Richard Dewachter of 1932. He described the moment when her family found her thirsty, smelling of alcohol and lying on the sofa. A little later they discovered that, around the same time, someone in another city had lived through inner torment and had, since then, sworn off alcohol and strengthened his love of Christ.⁵⁷

52 See Bouflet, *La stigmatisation*, 522-523.

53 See Sigismund Waitz: *Le message de Konnersreuth, La stigmatisée Thérèse Neumann*. Mulhouse (Haut-Rhin) 1930, 49; Chanoine L. Parcot: *Ce que j'ai vu à Konnersreuth. La stigmatisée Thérèse Neumann*. Paris 1937, 48.

54 See Odo Staudinger: *Die Leidensblume von Konnersreuth*. Salzburg 1930, 56; Jeanne Danemarie: *Le mystère des stigmatisés. De Catherine Emmerich à Thérèse Neumann*. Paris 1933, 198.

55 "Elle expie pour les âmes défuntes. Ce sont alors des souffrances spirituelles, une indescriptible tristesse, un désir ardent du Sauveur qui s'éloigne". Danemarie, *Le mystère des stigmatisés*, 198.

56 See Staudinger, *Die Leidensblume*, 56. "This was very striking, since Therese Neumann was known not to have taken any food since 1926 and not a drop of water since September 1927". ("Dies was sehr auffallend, da Therese Neumann bekanntlich seit 1926 keine Nahrung und seit September 1927 auch keinen Tropfen Wasser mehr zu sich genommen hat").

57 See Dewachter, *Therese Neumann*, 65-66.

According to these semi-hagiographic publications, Therese Neumann was keen to help, and when people asked for her support, her answer was always: “I will pray and suffer for you”.⁵⁸ Joachim Seeler, who wrote a history of the devotion to Therese, known as the ‘Resl of Konnersreuth’, stressed that, according to her supporters, she took on the suffering of others “out of overflowing neighbourly love” and “love of the Savior”, and by no means for the pleasure of pain. Her suffering on behalf of others could be corporeal, spiritual or a combination of both.⁵⁹ In the eyes of Neumann’s supporters, her suffering had an apostolic goal. As one contemporary put it: “Through suffering, more souls can be won than through glorious sermons”.⁶⁰

Thus, what we seem to find in the three cases is a combination of very specific pain (ailments others were suffering from, or had suffered from) and more general (symbolic) pain, such as suffering for the Church. The main idea conveyed is that pain could travel from one person to another, from the past to the present and between the living and the dead. Walburga Zentner, for example, relived people’s medical history, while the stigmatics suffered through Christ’s Passion or could suffer for souls in purgatory.

In the descriptions of Jalhay-Munzbach and Therese Neumann, the suffering was framed with references to reparatory ideals, love for humankind in general or specific individuals. Walburga Zentner’s suffering proved to be a little more challenging in this respect. Jocham explicitly noted that he did not think of it as atonement. Furthermore, rather than functioning as a mediator for divine beings and as a node in a devotee’s relationship to a saint or God, the relationship of dependence seems to have been between Zentner and the faithful.

We see a similar dynamic in the ways in which another stigmatic, Bertha Mrazek (1890–1967),⁶¹ collected followers. One of her contemporaries wrote that she was

58 “ik zal voor u bidden *en lijden*”. Dewachter, Therese Neumann, 67.

59 See Seeger, Resl von Konnersreuth, 103. He quotes Erwein v. Aretin: *Die Sühneseele von Konnersreuth*. Gröbenzell bei München 19603, 50 and Fritz Gerlich: *Die stigmatisierte Therese Neumann von Konnersreuth*. München 1929, 2 volumes, vol.1, 300-301 (referring to Therese Neumann’s own statement); see also Helmut Fahsel: *Konnersreuth Tatsachen und Gedanken. Ein Beitrag zur mystischen Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*. Berlin 1932, 93.

60 “Door lijden zijn meer zielen te winnen dan door de glansrijke predikaties”, “ik zal voor u bidden *en lijden*”. Dewachter, Therese Neumann, 11-12 and 67.

61 See Bertha Mrazek entered the public arena after her miraculous cure in the basilica in Halle in July 1920. Shortly after, she also started to exhibit the stigmata and became a prophetess. Her religious activities and the group she gathered around her generated suspicion from the ecclesiastical and the public authorities. Herbert Thurston: *Surprising mystics*. London 1955, 204-217.

practising medicine in secret and had convinced the people around her that she had taken the ailments from which they were suffering upon herself during a period of nine days (during which she also prayed a novena).⁶² In both Mrazek's and Zentner's cases, their behaviour and characters were heavily criticized. It is interesting to note that the transfer of pain that was judged in positive way in Neumann's and Jalhay-Munzbach's cases, was a point of doubt in their cases; although, it was not the transfer of pain itself that was questioned but the motivation behind it.

4. Conclusion: Embodying the Pain of Others

What do these three cases teach us about the Catholic model of shared pain? First, taking on suffering was not only a means to atone for the sins of society. Victim souls not only suffered for broader abstract ideas such as 'society' or 'the Church'. Pain could be transferred on a personal level, creating more intimate relationships with the mystic.

Second, pain could not only move from one person to another, but also across time, or a lifetime, and even death. Suffering in the past could become pain in the present. The fundamental suffering that needed to be relived again and again was that of Jesus Christ, but it is interesting to find that, at least in the case of Zentner, her mystical experiences seem to have consisted in reliving the corporeal memory of someone else's pain. Moreover, the pain economy also involved the dead, as mystics could suffer for souls in purgatory. In both cases, a love for humankind enabled the transfer of pain.

Third, the way in which this transfer of pain was described and evaluated depended on the reception of the mystic. For those evaluated in a negative way, their taking on the suffering of others was a means to create a relationship of dependence: it was considered religious community-building on false premises. For those mystics who were evaluated more positively, there was no reference to the interpersonal bond created through the transfer of suffering (apart from the physical and emotional effects occurring during the mystical experience). It appears that the transfer of suffering was not intended to attract 'followers'.

62 "[...] that M. practices medicine in secret and she makes the people who address her believe that she takes upon herself, during a period of nine days, the ailments from which she, with her art combined with a novena, delivers them". ("Votre Eminence n'ignore pas bien sûr, que Mlle M. pratique clandestinement la médecine et qu'elle fait croire aux personnes qui s'adresse à elle qu'elle prend sur elle, pendant une période de neuf jours, les maux dont, par son art qu'elle accompagne d'une neuvaine, elle les délivre"). Archives Archdiocese of Mechelen, Mercier, VII, 125 bis, Paul Vrancken, pastor of the Church of the Holy Cross in Elsene to Mercier, s.d.

Rather, in both the semi-hagiographic and hagiographic accounts of these new mystics, stories about pain transfer were used to emphasize the mystic's willingness to suffer for others.⁶³ The agency to heal remained thereby in the hands of God, Christ, the Virgin or the saints – the mystics were solely the intermediaries (not the 'miracle workers'), the link with the divine – an alternative path of healing for the sick.

Finally, alleviating the suffering of others did not mean that these mystics wanted to diminish their own suffering. As one biographer wrote in Jalhay-Munzbach's case, by healing her, the Virgin was not promising to save her from further physical and moral torment in the future, for: "Is suffering not the ideal gift for the sanctification of the select?"⁶⁴

In summary, while we might think of suffering as a very individual experience, for Catholic mystics it seems to have been an essentially social one. It gave them the chance to act on behalf of society and help others (whether dead or alive).

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63 "Ze stelt aan de wereld een levend voorbeeld van verdueligheid in het lijden, en van waren opofferingsgeest". Dewachter, Therese Neumann, 65-66.

64 "[...] la Sainte Vierge en la guérissant, n'avait nullement promis de lui épargner les douleurs ni physiques ni morales. La souffrance n'est-elle pas le don choisi entre tous pour la sanctification des élus?" [Anonymus], *Esquisse d'âme*, 101.