

St. Francis of Assisi receives the stigma on his liver

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A remarkable painting of St. Francis of Assisi is on display in the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, USA, painted by the Italian master Pietro da Rimini around 1330 (*Figure 1*) (1). The painting is entitled ‘Saint Francis receives the stigmata’, and depicts the saint experiencing a vision as he prays. He sees Christ, bearing the wounds from his crucifixion, flying with an angel-like creature called a seraph. The wounds of Christ represent the four places where nails were driven through his hands and feet during his crucifixion, each denoting a stigma. A fifth stigma

appears as a wound on the right side of his chest, where he was stabbed with a lance between the ribs by the Roman soldier who wanted to ascertain his death.

A bleeding wound is typically depicted in the 5th or 6th right intercostal space in the many works of art that show the crucified Christ. This suggests that Christ was stabbed through the narrow interpleural space in that area, directly into the right liver lobe (2). The wound and the injured liver in this context are reminiscent to the wound of Prometheus on the right side of his chest. In Greek mythology,



Figure 1 Painting by Pietro da Rimini entitled ‘Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata (around 1330). Christ flying with a seraph, appears to St. Francis who bears the stigmata, i.e., the wounds of his crucifixion. The fifth stigma represents a wound on the right side of his chest at the level of the liver. Rays of light from the wounds strike the saint’s body, miraculously producing wounds on corresponding sites, including the fifth wound reaching out to the liver. *Indianapolis Museum of Art, Newfields, Indianapolis, IN, USA.*

Prometheus, the icon of liver regeneration, was chained to a cliff as a punishment and was tormented every day by an eagle who ate part of his liver through the wound in his right chest (3). In ancient civilizations, an injured liver had significant symbolic meaning as it was believed that the liver was the seat of life.

In the vision of St. Francis seen in Pietro da Rimini's painting, the wounds of Christ as he is carried by the seraph, emit rays of light striking the saint's body, miraculously producing wounds on corresponding sites, including the fifth wound on the right side of his chest. His robe is torn apart revealing the intercostal wound in his chest wall reaching out to the liver, the seat of life.

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