



SISTER SUSAN KURUVILLA, CIRCA 2003

SISTER SUSAN KURUVILLA STIGMATIST NUN OF SOUTH INDIA

THIS ARTICLE WAS FIRST PUBLISHED BY VIKTORAS KULVINSKAS AND RICHARD G. TASCA, JR. IN THEIR BOOK LIFE IN THE 21ST CENTURY, 21st Century Publications, 1980. IN NOVEMBER, 2004, RICHARD G. TASCA, JR. TRAVELED TO INDIA TO MEET WITH SISTER SUSAN KURUVILLA AND WITNESSED EVENTS SIMILAR TO THOSE DESCRIBED HEREIN. HE HAS FOUNDED THE MERCY FUND INCORPORATED (WWW.THEMERCYFUND.ORG) TO ASSIST SISTER SUSAN IN HER CHARTIABLE MISSION TO THE POOREST OF GOD'S CHILDREN.

*Dear Viktoras,
I am a professional journalist, and made very close scrutiny of Sister Susan during Easter, 1978. I am convinced she is an absolute servant of love.
With brotherly wishes and love, Richard Allen,
Author and Journalist. December 26, 1979*

On the coast of the Arabian sea, in the flat green tropical state of Kerala in South India, there exists a unique blending of the spiritual traditions of the East and with the oldest form of the Pentecostal message of Jesus Christ. Hidden in this isolated region flourishes the ancient ritual of the tiny Syrian Orthodox Church. Consisting of but a few hundred thousand members, who trace the origin of their ministry to St. Thomas the Apostle, the church claims to have been founded in 52 A. D. In the rural village of Mulanthruthy, as if bearing witness to the spiritual vigor of Thomas' Church, lives Sister Susan Kuruvilla, a fifty-two year old Syrian nun who bears on her body the stigmata of Christ.

As a journalist and student of yoga, I spent most of 1978 in India. When the Easter season drew near. I decided to check first hand the reports I had received about the nun. Specifically, I had heard what seemed to me a miraculous outline of Sister Susan's life. She received the stigmata when she was thirteen, and for the past 27 years had taken neither solid nor liquid food, except for a rare glucose injection. Every Tuesday and Friday the wounds she bears bleed slightly as she re-experiences the death of Christ. During Easter Week, I learned. she relives the entire passion of **Christ**, culminating on Holy Saturday with her receiving a miraculously materialized "Manna from Heaven" to renew her strength. Through my own early Catholic upbringing, I knew that stigmatism is an extremely rare phenomenon, and more or less unheard of outside the Roman branch of the church. The word derives from the Greek word "Stigma", meaning a puncture, mark, or brands.

Stigmatists develop wounds on palms and feet, as well as, often, on the head. back, and sides, corresponding to the biblically described wounds inflicted upon Jesus Christ during His Crucifixion. Only 60 of the 330 stigmatists chronicled by the Roman Catholic Church have been beatified, or declared saints - among them St. Catherine of Sienna, St. Francis of Assisi, and Saint Veronica Guilani. The Syrian nun thus seemed to represent a truly remarkable case of spiritual power.

So on March 17, 1978, I found myself outside the humid coastal city of Ernakulum, careening by bus through scrub, jungle, green fields, broad sweeps of rice paddy, coconut plantations - the village world of central Kerala, the half -forgotten enclave of oriental Christianity.

I outlined my request: to visit for 10 days and be present with the stigmatist nun through the Easter Passion. "You are welcome here," smiles Matthew the Ashram Secretary. "Consider this your home". Almost immediately a deep voice comes from within, speaking Malayalam. "That is Sister there," he continues. "She said you must consider all of us here as our own family".

Soon the nun herself steps out to greet me warmly. The slight white sari clad figure (she weighs only 80 pounds) framed by the door jam was bouncy, erect and sparkling, appearing younger than her years. I was struck by the high cheekbones, luminous eyes, and the detached air she projected. Handing me a glass of tea and some food, she spoke to me very kindly in English. "I am your sister in Christ, and you are my brother. While you are here you must consider us all the same as your blood kith and kin".

I realize that Sister Susan Kuruvilla is totally unselfconscious about the three inch gash of caked blood on her forehead, or the small cross-shaped incisions, surrounded always by a slight red stain, on each hand. Her suffering for this, the Friday prior to Holy Week, is over; always, it is only a temporary manifestation, seeming to cause no permanent harm. Now her spirit is bubbling over - friendly, intelligent, talkative, curious. Amazed by such a warm welcome, I fall into the family spirit of Mar Gregorios. Sister Susan is the center of energy, her days kept busy with prayer, correspondence, cooking and serving food, and supervising the 18 (Editor's note: over 125 in 2006) ashram residents. Surely, I think to myself, she must eat something to keep up such a pace.

I notice that everyone follows her example of constant work. Carpenters are busy roofing a house, constructed under ashram auspices for a tubercular patient. Women are washing, cooking, gathering firewood; orphan children are keeping crows away from coconut bits drying in the hot sun. Several cattle are being tended, and the ashram's scant acreage is thoroughly husbanded. Two very small tikes walk about purposefully, carrying a large wicker basket between them and picking up all stray leaves which have fallen on the ground during the night.

For the next several days I recuperated from my'journey, participating in garden work and attending the Syrian Orthodox mass on Palm Sunday. Poor neighbors, beggars, the sick, hungry children whose parents can't afford to feed them that day, always people are stopping by for help and comforting. Orthodox priests regularly visit to lead prayers. The tiny nun never seems too busy to counsel, feed, or pray over the sick.

With each passing day, I find Sister Susan's humility and accessibility more heartwarming. In response to my inquiry, the nun allows me to examine the stigmatic wounds. On both hands and feet, they are very pronounced, cross--shaped, the blood coagulated except in, her times of pain. The gash across the forehead is the same, giving evidence of the crown of thorns. The wound in her left side is kept tightly bandaged to prevent loss of blood. Non of the punctures has ever become infected."Sister, don't you ever eat, or at least drink water?" I ask. "Nothing", she replies, with a radiant and childlike smile. "Isn't it a wonder!"

I asked about her healing powers, and how she came to Mulanthuruthy to live such a remote life. "When I first received these wounds, there was no publicity", she answered. "God told me `You must show your love for me by acts, not words' I lived for a long time in my native place, near Parumala Church, where the tomb of St. Gregorios (the only Syrian saint, aside from Thomas the Apostle) lies. All during those years, I experienced the wounds, the pain and healings. But healings only come to those who have firm faith in God. Those who only claim that faith don't get well".

"All night, during meditation, Christ speaks to me, just as you and I are speaking now. At these times I experienced very deep concentration. In 1973 He told me that as my patron saint had been born in

Mulanthuruthy but had died in my birthplace, I should now go live and do Christ's work in his place. He told me that the time had come to start an ashram and orphanage, to feed the poor and help the suffering. So I have begun as directed".

The nun's life, as I piece it together through conversation, reveals a strong pattern of humility and devotion.

She was born in 1927. While still a child, praying in church, she heard a voice saying "Go and mend my broken church. Observe lent, prayer and fasting for 41 days, for I would make you a useful weapon for me". During the evening's prayer, she beheld Christ moving on the crucifix on the wall and heard him ask "Are you willing to follow me whenever I call you to take up my cross?" Affirming her belief and love, she received a sense of spiritual uplifting which has never left her. After 41 days of fasting, she was overwhelmed by what she calls "grace power" - her voice became deep and resonant, she moved her hands in gestures of priestly ritual, and suggested remedies for people who were ill. Because of these trances, her parents felt she was possessed by epilepsy or hysteria. Her father in particular ridiculed her. With the support of her uncle and her Bishop however, she was encouraged to continue her growth in the life of prayer.

On Good Friday at the age of thirteen while at church she had a severe attack of pain all over her body and received the stigmatic wounds for the first time. They healed after three months, but a similar event recurred for four consecutive years. During her sixteenth year, she was subjected to spiritual scrutiny and test by the Syrian church hierarchy, and during these meditations the bleeding wounds and regular Tuesday and Friday manifestations of pain followed by "grace" became permanent.

After undergoing the orders of her church and passing three years in a Catholic convent, the stigmatist became a nun. At the age of 23 she stopped taking food, after praying for respite from this basic human function because "food draws by *mind* outward to worldly things. and I never liked food greatly, even as a child". The need for sleep also left her at this time, although she lies down during late night hours for 3 hours of meditation, during *which* she has regular visions and conversations with Christ.

Concerning her apparently miraculous life energies, she says, "I am alive only through the grace of God. I ask his mercy to help endure the pain. For if it is God's will, then I must endure it But we can suffer to any extent through God".

During her time of pain for half an hour twice each week, she relives a measure of the agony Christ endured at His Crucifixion. Most Christians who meditate upon their beliefs prefer the promises of the Last Supper and Resurrection to reflect upon the genuine suffering Jesus bore.

It is 11:30 a. m., Sister Susan is bathed. The blood upon her forehead, other days caked in a dark coagulated streak, is thickly sticky, obviously fresh. Already groaning, she hobbles to a clean pallet spread before the small chapel's altar; suddenly her entire body goes through a wrenching spasm. Loud cries come from her as, surrounded by attendants, she begins thirty minutes of the most incredible suffering I have ever witnessed. The bloody patches upon her feet are large and fresh, as are the scars on the hands. Her throat is choked in pain and she must expectorate constantly. The name "Jesu. Jesu" or "Ishwara" (Sanskrit for Lord) is continually on her lips. The nun's writhing, moans, tears, and anguish require four people to hold her down.

Everyone present is engaged in the repetitive soothing drone of liturgical chanting; several followers are crying softly. Fanning Sister Susan, they massage her twisting limbs and small, tortured body. Jaws tightly clenched, the nun pulls frantically on her fingers.

One prays for it to end, and inevitably, in some form, enters into a new, entirely heart-opening relationship with Christ. There is a loud cry, a gasp, and nun's body shudders into quietness. Though she is exhausted, a beatific light seems to surround her. She is draped in a cool white cloth, and suddenly conveys a radical sense of peace and repose.

There is a sense of high relief, exhausted exhilaration, sadness, thanksgiving and renewal.

Soon the nun opens her tired eyes. Holding the silver cross of the Syrian Church she speaks in a sepulchral, trancelike voice, first in what seems to be Aramaic (the language spoken by Jesus), then in Malayalam. This is the period of grace, when those seeking healing, or Sister Susan's prayerful intercession with Christ, speak to her either publicly or privately.

Later she rests again for a quarter of an hour alone. Then she struggles out to return to her daily round of duties. I ask how she is feeling. "Today I feel a little tired", she admits with a wan smile. Later, she describes the pain she undergoes. "It feels like pin pricks all over the body, but magnified a thousand times".

Yet a scant 15 minutes later, she is stooping, bustling, carrying out huge dishes of rice to each inmate and visitor, and asking what special dish they will take to eat. Her form is erect, there is the familiar bright sparkle in her eye. Seeming totally *self-effaced*, yet more present than anyone else on the premises, she is relieved, at least for the next 72 hours, of her stigmatic burden.

Good Friday dawned to the sound of chanting. From 11:30 a.m. until "*about the third hour*", at 2:53 p.m., I witnessed the agony of Christ's death through Sister Susan Kuruvilla, dressed in a wine-colored sari. Very quickly a supernatural -seeming energy possesses her small frame. Otherwise, for one whom this observer never saw eat or drink or sleep during ten consecutive days of intimate contact, there can be no rational explanation for the stigmatist's strength sufficient to bear the obvious wracking pain, which continues without letup for three and one half hours.

Finally it is finished. About fifty devout followers stand or kneel in awe, many sobbing or trembling in sorrow, surely having borne the most excruciating witness to Calvary available in the contemporary world. Sister Susan sinks back silent at last.

On Holy Saturday morning, under the influence of her power of grace, Sister Susan prayed that God's mercy shower down on the assembly of worshippers. The "manna", when it came, appeared sporadically in small flecks, none of them larger in size than a dime. The flecks came singly and in two's and three's, sprinkling at wide-spaced and random points upon a white veil which had been spread to receive them, but also upon the floor and under the altar table before which Sister Susan prayed.

Seen very clearly in the bright, fluorescently-lit room, they could only be described as materializing out of thin air. About half the pieces materialized directly on the floor. Other flecks would drop suddenly out of mid-air, several seeming to materialize directly from the flat silver cross held in the nun's hands.

The flecks came during the nun's final 20 minutes of prayer: at first they appeared semi-transparent, like small flat bits broken from a communion wafer. Gradually they seemed to swell, or push themselves up, forming small crystalized granules, yellow and white in color. A total of about 21 small pieces of "manna" were finally collected and Sister Susan distributed five or six to those who attend her so devoutly during her times of pain. Flashing her radiant smile, she placed one of the granules upon my tongue. By now it had a rock-candy hardness. Its taste was fresh and sweet, but with an aftertaste more difficult to describe. As the author of Exodus writes (Ch. 16:31): It (manna) was like a small white seed, and tasted like a biscuit made of honey".

As night falls, I try to impose a rational model upon what I have observed. The Roman Catholic Church has always taken a low-key attitude toward reported stigmatics, and the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, while validating the existence of the phenomenon, cautiously denies that the wounds stem from supernatural means. Skeptics have gone so far as to charge stigmatics with self-infliction of the wounds.

But a team of New Jersey doctors examined Sister Susan in October 1977 during her only trip to North America. Based on blood samples, x-rays, cardiograms and encephalograms, the three medical men, while attesting to "some slight evidence of bleeding of the stigmata on a Friday, 'unanimously' denied the likelihood that the cross-shaped wounds were self-inflicted. Their x-rays showed the nun's stomach to be completely empty. Dr. Eugene Ged of Patterson, N.J., told the "Toronto Star": "We don't think the woman is a sham, but scientifically it doesn't add up. This business of her not eating or drinking really puts us in a dilemma as doctors".

Dr. Samuel Phillip, of Irvington, N.J. reported that during Sister Susan's three month stay in his household she was never seen to take food of any kind or perform any normal excretory function. In ten days' close observation. I was unable to disprove these statements. Although I often retired after midnight and awakened to the 5 a.m. noise of kitchen workers, I never saw Sister Susan asleep. On four occasions I woke in the still hours of the night to relieve myself. Each time the slight noise of my opening the door outside brought a quiet in quiry from the meditating nun in the next room.

As the time came for me to leave Mar Gregorios, I felt caught in paradox. On one hand I was warmed by an intense sharing of Christ's spirit with a group of otherwise foreign people, yet I felt an intimate, even horrifying awareness of what it really means to co-participate in that deepest mystery, the awareness of suffering, which is the very center of Christ's message I found myself thinking of the stark Presbyterian Sunday services where attendance was mandatory when I was at college, of the more elaborate ritual of Episcopal high mass at Washington's National Cathedral, and of other holy weeks I spent as a boy in the Roman branch of the Catholic Church - each experience purveying a completely different flavor of meaning to Christ's death and resurrection. Not one, I realized, could duplicate the intense and agonizing nearness to Jesus Christ which I experienced in this obscure corner of Christendom at the loving and self-surrendered hands of Sister Susan Kuruvilla.