

## **Corporal Relationship, Corporal Conformation - Female Forms of Following Christ around 1200**

*Daniela Blum, Aachen*

*“Why do those who show amazement at the worms which swarmed from the wounds of Simeon and at the fire with which Antony burnt his feet not astonished at such fortitude in the frail sex of a women who, wounded by charity and invigorated by the wounds of Christ, neglected the wounds of her own body?” (VMO I, 22)*

Jacques of Vitry wrote this sentence in his Life of Mary of Oignies after describing her secret self-stigmatisation. It serves as an illustration for body concepts in the perspective of a 13<sup>th</sup> century hagiographic source. In my postdoc project, I am analysing the Life of Mary of Oignies as well as 26 other vitas of men and women living in 13<sup>th</sup> century Flanders and Brabant. The protagonists were laypersons and religious, nuns and recluses, beguines and lay brothers. I read the Lives as normative and theological texts: They show possibilities of Christian life in 13<sup>th</sup> century Brabant.

In this presentation, I will describe the forms and interpretations of bodies and suffering and analyse the ambivalence of physical suffering as, on the one hand, a way to God and salvation and on the other hand, as a dangerous way and a way of representation. Finally, I will scrutinize the ambiguous relation between suffering, salvation, love and body legendary literature. The already mentioned Life of Mary of Oignies, the Life of Ida of Nivelles and the Life of Christina Mirabilis will be referred back to as examples.

### **II. Bodies and suffering**

The hagiographical sources often present their protagonists in their corporal dimension, but they nearly always present suffering bodies. Suffering is the omnipresent theme of these sources. The protagonists truly yearn for pain. But they practise their suffering in different ways:

Ida of Nivelles, called the Compassionate, zeals for the salvation of souls. Her Life tells us that she prays intensively for the salvation of individuals she knows and even spits blood when she is in fear about a soul. She is permanently attacked for her lifestyle, but she herself interprets every kind of adversity as a sacrifice for her beloved Lord. When she does not

experience hostility, she enters a church and asks Christ on the cross, why he does not give her difficulties. At the end of her life, she suffers from a severe illness sent by God: *“The Lord, who ... had guarded her [Ida’s] body in his holy service, wished now to call her from the darkness of this mortality to the lightsome mansion of the city on high, and therefore he so flogged her with a bodily illness that she lay bedridden continually.”* After having suffered for a year, she asks the Lord to intensify her suffering. And indeed – the Lord obeys.

Mary of Oignies leads the ascetic life of a beguine, but one day, she remembers that she was forced to eat meat and wine during a serious illness in her youth. She is disgusted, until she has recompensed for those delights:

*“From the fervour of her spirit and as if inebriated, she [Mary] began to loathe her flesh when she compared it with the sweetness of the paschal Lamb and she needlessly cut out a large piece of her flesh with a knife which she then buried in the earth from a sense of reticence. She had been so inflamed by a overwhelming fire of love that she had risen above the pain of her wound, and, in ecstasy of mind, she had seen one of the seraphim standing close by her. After she had died, the women who were washing her corpse were amazed when they found the places of the wounds, but those who had known of this event through confession understood what the scars were.”* (VMO I, 22)

The life of Christina Mirabilis (1150-1224) is difficult to categorize. She lived as a penitent near her hometown of Sint Truiden and was prophetic. Her contemporaries classified her as possessed. Christina's life is completely under the sign of vicarious suffering for others. Her vita begins with her death. During her Requiem, however, she gets up from the coffin and tells that after her death she was first led to purgatory and hell and then to heaven. The Lord gave her the choice to stay in paradise or to return to earth and suffer for the souls in purgatory. Without hesitation, Christina returned and began a life of physical suffering for others. She tormented herself in fire, in the waters of the river Mas, in thorn bushes and brambles, on wheels and hung herself on the gallows. Her sisters and friends were greatly embarrassed and thought that she was possessed by demons.

The Cistercian Ida, the beguine Mary and the penitent Christina are described to bear up against pain and to yearn for physical or mental suffering. They flagellate themselves, they search to top their bodies, they receive the wounds of Christ, they sustain themselves only on the Eucharist, they transform their illnesses into corporal prayers. Their suffering is not only physical – as in many hagiographical writings of earlier centuries. Their suffering is a

part and a result of the intensity of their inner lives. The question is: Why do they want to suffer?

Ida is presented as one of God's chosen, "a lamb on a candle-stand" (Niv. Prol. a). Jacques of Vitry warns his readers not to imitate the penitential practices of Mary and advises to "admire rather than imitate" her. Her "excess" is told to be a "privilege of grace", a privilege for a few that "does not make a common law" (I, 12). The hagiographical sources are not neutral towards the body performance of their actors; they scrutinize different practices of actively sought suffering and advise the reader not to follow these practices.

### III. Suffering as *intercessio*

The negative didactics of the authors show how dangerous this way of suffering indeed is. And they give us a final answer to our question for the reasons why Christina, Ida and Mary yearn for suffering. Above all, the explanation has to be searched for in their *imitatio Christi*, their imitation of Christ who has suffered and who died. In these hagiographical sources, *passio* is always directly linked to *com-passio*, to compassion with Christ. Caroline Walker Bynum has interpreted Mary's wounds as a case of self-stigmatisation. Mary endeavours to reach the depth of Jesus' humanity – right in the moment when this humanity was cruellest, in the moment of his death.

But the religious virtuosos do not only suffer with Christ. Instead, they also suffer physically for others, because Christ has sacrificed his life for others. So, by suffering with Christ, they suffer with their brothers and sisters. They complete their *imitatio Christi* by charity which often means using their own bodies for others. Christina's resurrection in her earthly body after her first death is justified exclusively on this basis. The *Vita* tells us, the Lord said to her after death:

*"Certainly, my dearest, you will be with me here, but I now offer you two choices, either to remain with me now or to return to the body and undergo there the punishment of an immortal soul in a mortal body without damage to it and by these your sufferings to deliver all those souls on whom you had compassion in that place of purgatory and by the example of your suffering and your way of life to convert living men to me and make them turn aside from their sins."* (VCA 7)

Christina's suffering is thus justified by her compassion. As Christ has suffered because he loved humankind, our protagonists suffer because of charity. Goswin praises Ida's virtuous "charity and compassion" (Niv. 29) and formulates the relation between charity and suffering like this:

*"And the signs of perfect charity are these: in kindness it stretches itself out to relieve a neighbour's need; poverty is no burden for it; injuries it does not resent; ill-treatment it scoffs at; wrongs it ignores; death it accounts a gain. She [Ida] aimed to adapt herself to everyone in accord with God's charity. [...] And if she saw, or otherwise knew, some to be enmeshed in sins, she [...] compassionated them affectionately from the heart, hoping soon to hear better things about them, things nearer to their salvation."* (Niv. 30b)

And again, charity is not a virtue, but a gift of God's grace (Niv. 30i) – the gift to suffer with Christ for others. The essential concept discussed here, so my thesis, is *intercessio*, representation. Our protagonist can bear the punishments for the sins of others because of their charity and because God has elected them.

Representation, of course, is a dangerous concept. It can slip into a satisfaction theory on the one hand, into a magical form of compensation or replacement on the other hand. However, the hagiography presents a very biblical founded concept of representation. The Servant Songs in the Old Testament and, moreover, the Evangelists and Paul interpret Jesus' demeanour as representation. The Johannine Jesus, as you can see here, explains that greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. Joseph Ratzinger even called the whole New Testament Theology as first and mainly a theology of representation. This theology got lost, because antiquity did not know an appropriate philosophical concept to think representation. In the Lives of Mary, Ida and Christina, the authors present the idea of a free, personal, non-magical but corporal representation that includes intercessional prayer, warning endangered persons, but also physical suffering to assume the pains of others' sins. Ida even shares the punishments of purgatory with the soul of a sister's Father:

*"One day, [...] it was revealed to her [Ida] that the soul she had been pleading for to the Lord had been awarded purgatorial chastisements. Given this revelation, she so compassionated the soul's torment that she petitioned the Lord to inflict on her any infirmity he might wish, if only the soul's purgation would be alleviated. The Lord responded favourably to this prayer, and at that very moment a fever invaded Ida, a fever so potent that for six weeks to come she was racked with its sickening effects."* (Niv 5a)

Goswin of Bossut also reports that Ida prays for another woman's salvation. The woman's state seems perilous and Ida cannot hold back a copious vomiting of blood. Suddenly, she is snatched away to the purgatorial places. There she recognizes the woman in the foul water. She clasps the woman's hand in her own to drag her along over a saving bridge and bring her to Christ who stands on the other side of the bridge. But the woman is terrified. Thereupon, Christ says to the woman: "*Suffer it, sweet daughter, that a saving suffrage be thus invested on your behalf. And do not lose sight of all that I myself have suffered to redeem you from the everlasting torments of hell.*" (Niv. 9b.) But the woman is too terrified and Ida does not manage to drag her along. In the end, Ida crosses the bridge alone and leaves the woman in the water. In this tale, Goswin of Bossut subtly interweaves Christ's suffering, the saving suffrage of Ida and the free will of a person who does not reverse to Christ.

This hagiographical concept of representation is founded on the full transparency between God's plans of salvation and his beloved saints: The protagonists permanently experience an immanent God who can be seen, heard and felt. And the hagiography shows transparency between earth and the afterlife places. Ida and Christina have been in purgatory and in paradise, obviously even corporally since they can smell the purgatorial stench and feel the cold.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

A specifically feminine form of following Christ seems to be the imitation of Christ's physical suffering on the cross, with the function of suffering like Christ for the sins of others. I wanted to show that the hagiographical concept of representation is on the one hand, deeply rooted in the Bible and, on the other hand, really corporally. Ida, Mary and Christina complete their imitation of Christ by suffering for others. But is their representation not presumptuous? Yes and no. Yes, because Christ has suffered for all. His representation and his sacrifice was total and does not need any addition. But, on the other hand, the evangelists and in particular Paul and the Johannine writings already extend the representational service of Christ to the life of single Christians. The real suffering and love of a human is understood as a diaconal service of representation. In our hagiographical sources, representation does not happen without approval: The sinner recognizes his guilt and asks the religious virtuoso for his suffering.

There is one exception: When a sinner is loved by another person. Strictly speaking, if the sinner does not or cannot repent, the love of another person is enough to mobilize the protagonists to engage corporally for the beloved person. Somehow, being loved replaces personal contrition. The 13<sup>th</sup> century hagiography presents the idea of a Christian community in which elected Christians invest their own bodies for others who repent or who are loved. Body, prayer, love and charity are deeply interconnected.

The body is depicted in a deeply ambivalent way. This is described in Christina's vita:

*“Immediately, she threw herself before the altar as if she were a sack filled with dry bones. Then, wailing bitterly, she began to beat her breast and her body most often and said, ‘O miserable and wretched body! How long will you torment me, miserable as I am? What are you doing with me? Why do you keep my wretched soul in you for so long? Why do you delay me from seeing the face of Christ? When will you abandon me so that my soul can return freely to its Creator? Woe to you, most miserable one! And woe to me who am united to you!’ As she said these and similar things, she would beat her body. But then, taking the part of the body, she would say, as if to the spirit, ‘O miserable soul! Why are you tormenting me in this way? What is keeping you in me and what is it that you love in me? [...]’ As she said this, she would sigh and gasp and weep. She then rested a little in silence and, burning most purely with a holy thought directed toward God, she dissolved into a most sweet smile. Then, taking her feet with both hands, she kissed the soles of her feet with the greatest affection and said, ‘O most beloved body! Why have I beaten you? Why have I reviled you? Did you not obey me in every good deed I undertook to do with God’s help? [...]’ Then doubling her kisses, she said, ‘Now, O best and sweetest body, endure patiently. The end of your labour is at hand.’” (VCM 48)*

As an instrument of salvation, the body is wonderful and corresponds with the Christ. If we read these hagiographical sources, we need to have in consideration Christ on the Cross.

Actually, Mary, Christina and Ida do not engage their own bodies but that of Christ who has already suffered for all. This correlation can be observed most obviously in the case of the stigmatisation of Mary of Oignies. Christ’s body and human body merge in the representation for the sinner.

In the important field of penance, women cannot hear confessions and pronounce absolution like the priests. But they can bring their bodies. Interestingly, in these rites, the female body consistently moves in the sacramental context, including in this quotation, right in front of the altar. Caroline Walker has already pointed out the connection to the Eucharist. But it is also the second decisive clerical action of the Middle Ages, penance, that is played in. The female body moves between the Eucharist and penance and thus actually in clerical fields of action, without requesting them - at least on a verbal level. On a performative level, one can certainly discover in the hagiography requests to a clerically sharpened church after the Gregorian reform.