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## Response to “Marks of the Church; Market by the Body of Christ. A Lutheran Approach to Practices” by Martha Ellen Stortz

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I would like this response to become a personal confession, making me vulnerable in front of all of you. I would not want it to be just an intellectual exercise. Many have thought that the best way of making theology is when we abandon theory and share our life with a spirit of confession.

This presentation has unleashed in me all the memories of many years walking together with people living with HIV or AIDS. In that context the word “stigma” took a new, deep and personal meaning. It is not something that happens to others, to the communities or to the institutions, but it is part of a personal experience. Stigma is the clue to interpret this epidemic. I am not moved to action and to communion by the weak strength of a virus, which by the way is similar to many other viruses, but I am moved by seeing and living the stigma and discrimination under which sisters and brothers live. This stigma showed me that HIV is not a merely medical issue for the church, but a reality which challenges theology, confessional identity and pastoral action. In the context of this epidemic I learnt that it became a new hermeneutical tool which illuminates a new way of understanding Scriptures, Lutheran identity and ecclesiology, searching for a radical inclusiveness.

This new reading of the Gospel helped me to discover that stigmas, the marks of all crosses taken on by Jesus of Nazareth, are his business card, his I.D., his way of revealing himself to the disciples. The resurrected Christ is always the crucified Christ. Stigmas are his identity. Consequently, the simple presence here and now of a person or a group living under stigma imposed both by society as well as by faith communities, alerts me to the mysterious real presence of the One who took on all the stigmas and is revealed to me in the faces and lives of the people we do not want to see.

These stigmas are not mere decoration. They are consequence of a previous process of provocations and challenges carried on in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Stigmas are consequences of communions and ruptures, of challenges and proposals. Tables shared with those who are excluded, impure and suspicious have been the road map to the cross and the stigmas. They are the cost of the communion with all the margins of history and the criticism to all centers of power, both political and religious. The communion table of Jesus of Nazareth is full of stigmatized people, considered politically and theologically incorrect. From the moment of his baptism, Jesus of Nazareth headed to stigmas. His dialogue with those who were vulnerable made him vulnerable.

The name of St. Francis of Assisi in this presentation also unleashed all the forces of a discipleship lived in the amazing grace of God. The physical stigmas in the body of Francis are part of a process of commitments and are consequence of previous options, and of painful and dangerous options. The kiss and the embrace to that solitary leper who appeared in the way of that young and fun man at the beginning of his life of discipleship, produced unexpected effects, not so much for the leper but for Francis himself. Overcoming own fears, other people's silences, multiple complicities, changing his life. We have no information and no clue of what could have happened to that anonymous leper, but we know very well what happens when we are ready to embrace and to kiss, in a radically inclusive and unconditional way someone who is considered liturgically impure, socially excluded and pastorally marginalized. When we embrace

the margins of all our stigmas we are changing our way of being community because we open ourselves in all our vulnerability to the one who is different, strange and foreigner.

Stigmas are related to the theology of the cross, which is the only possible theology and the only alternative against the theology of glory. In it we recognize that our paradigm is the process of vulnerability initiated by the incarnation, where Christ left behind all situation of power, abandoned his divine condition, took the human nature, put himself in the place of the oppressed slave and died the death of a subversive to all the oppressive systems. In the cross, we have a God who is always revealed in a paradoxical way; never in temples or palaces, but choosing as a theological space of revelation the margins of the reality; there were we have put all those who are imperfect and victims of all our stigmas. It is in the communion with those spaces where the One who sends Jesus of Nazareth is paradoxically revealed and where He / She dares to become radically vulnerable to build an unconditionally inclusive body.

In the pastoral accompaniment to people who live with HIV or AIDS, I also had to put in practice, against all my will, that stripping of myself, which I hope one day will be transmitted to my faith community. I could not be opportunistic and utilize situations of vulnerability to approach with proselytizing intentions people who live with HIV. First, I had to strip myself of the clerical collar, because people and groups affected by HIV have had very bad relationship and dialogue with the churches. Also, clerical clothes are signs of power which did not facilitate the approach. Then, I had to strip myself of my pastoral title, because that was also a protecting fence, since it could be interpreted that I was different from them. It was only when the Spirit, with a thunder, threw me down from the horse of self-righteous feelings that I was able to start walking in an equitable and respectful recognition of all identities. Only then I was able to be a pastor, a counselor and a friend.

As faithful follower of the One who invites us to take him as the way, Francis also stripped himself of all dignity. He sat amidst the beggars and mentally alienated to experience reality from there and from there have a new image of God, the church and our communions. In order to be faithful to his baptism, he chose to do theology from the margins. The process of receiving Christ's stigmas always has a previous, silent and hidden start. Those spaces at the side of those who are vulnerable to all the stigmas, are the spaces which the HIV epidemic and our theology of the cross call us to take up in order to renew the understanding of the Scriptures, of the Lutheran identity and of the pastoral action. Through baptism each one of us has received the imprint of the stigmas of Christ. We are the people of the stigma because of our communions, and our letting behind silences and complicities. Baptism and stigma go together. The sign of the cross, which is the sign of the stigmas, is the first mark that the church does on a baptized person.

The community which celebrates stigmas in order to end with all the stigmas, also has five wounds from which life springs up, as in the incarnated body of Christ. In his writing “*On the Council and the Church*” Luther reminds us about the marks or stigmas which reveal the communion with the One who in the moment of most vulnerability, transforms the creation. The first stigma or mark is the proclamation of the Word. We remember always that the Word of God is a person and not a book. I have to confess that I do not believe in the Bible, that I consider it a historical record of the experiences of the people of God in relation to the creator. I believe in the person of which the Scriptures give testimony. The way, the truth and the life are always a person who became vulnerable for me and for us and who invites us also to be vulnerable in order to end with all the vulnerabilities.

That prophetic proclamation of the real presence of a resurrected crucified in the midst of our assemblies lead us to the following two marks or stigmas. That proclamation also creates tables of communion and inclusiveness with all those who are stigmatized by political and religious systems. Those celebrations happen in the context of absolution, which is another of

the marks of the Mystic Body of Christ. Only the absolution which becomes visible in the sharing of the peace allows us to be a reconciled community in the diversity that reflects the Trinity. Proclamation, sacraments, absolution need servants and for this, the community set apart people to be instruments of those marks.

I took as hermeneutical tool a brief treaty of Luther which points me to what do I have to look for in the Gospels. There he warns me clearly that I should never confuse Jesus with Moses, the Gospel with the Law. Moses commands and orders, Jesus suggests and advises. We Lutherans have always a bifocal look over all the realities. We distinguish, without separating, word and spirit, law and gospel, deeds and faith, sinners and righteous at the same time.

We have a new commandment for our life, which occupies all the second table. The new commandment is to love one another as the One who loved us up to the cross. In the new creation only love on the cross is a commandment. The cross of communion and the unconditional inclusiveness with the diversity of identities over which a voice coming from the depths of the heavens announces that they are the beloved children of God. That love is our main stigma because the world has to be surprised of how we who are different and divers, love one another.