

SAINT THOMAS ON MIRACLES*

To those who are in the habit of thinking that the Middle Ages were times of ignorance and superstition, when credulity outran the course of sound reason, when a mysterious veil hid from unenquiring minds the workings of natural science, to those who look upon the Ages of Faith as dark and pitiful, it may perhaps be surprising to learn that the champion exponent of the Catholic belief of the thirteenth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas, has given with his usual lucidity in the course of his various writings a most reasonable explanation of the nature of miracles, a convincing presentation of the rational foundation on which they rest, and a clear statement of their evidential value and utility.

Much of the misapprehension experienced at the thought of the miraculous is doubtless due to a faulty or inexact notion of what a miracle really is. The word miracle conveys not infrequently a vague idea of something marvelous, as the invention of the telephone or wireless telegraphy. Again, it is often confused with the notion of the magical, or the strange, or the mysterious. Yet all these notions are far from correct, and cause much misunderstanding. Saint Thomas defines the exact nature of a miracle. "A miracle," says the Angelic Doctor, "is a sensible effect produced by God, which transcends all the forces of nature."¹

Let us, first of all, consider our definition, and what it implies. We are going to consider the reasonableness of miracles, but we must start by getting a complete idea of what constitutes them, and then we can pass judgment on the possibility of their being something real and true. Putting all preconceptions aside, then, we ask ourselves what is the meaning of our definition.

When we say that a miracle is a sensible effect, we mean that it is in the sphere of phenomena, that is, something that can be experienced by the senses, and therefore subject to the laws of evidence. Science comes to us through the senses. It is based upon facts observed. Hence miracles, being sensible facts, can

* Cf. *Le Miracle d'après Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, R. P. Folghera, O. P. Revue Thomiste, Vol. XII, p. 318.

¹ St. Thomas: *Contra Gentiles*, III, C, CI. *Summa*, 1a pars. quæes. CV, Art. VII.

be judged with the same kind of certitude as the objects of natural science.

A miracle is an effect. But an effect must have a cause, for things do not happen by chance. We have said that this cause is God. Now, God is called the cause of the universe, its Creator, and as such must be the cause of all that is in the world. Manifestly we do not here speak of God as the cause of miracles in this respect. Whereas the created causes of nature are distinct from God, and yet in a very intimate way subordinate to Him, their effects are said to be indirectly attributed to Him. But in miracles God causes a particular effect to proceed directly through Him as its cause—although He may employ some agent as the medium of His will.

The last part of our definition states that a miracle transcends all the forces of nature. A miracle does not contradict, destroy, antagonize, or violate the forces of nature. It is an effect which exceeds all the inherent powers of the forces of nature. It is something that happens as an exception to the regular working of the established order. God, who made the forces of nature, can cause something to happen at His will which gives evidence of His dominion over these forces. Just as an engineer who regularly runs his train at a speed of forty miles an hour in a given circumstance may increase the speed to sixty miles an hour, so God, in an instant, can produce an exceptional effect without prejudice to His preestablished laws or accustomed manner of dealing with the world. Those who would deny this power to God would make Him less than a finite cause—a mockery.

With our definition clearly understood, we proceed to consider the principles underlying it. They are not quite a half-dozen. "Moreover, these principles, being fundamental to all movement and thought, are so simple that they are undeniable. Their simplicity, however, is not the shallowness of being, but its fullness: one of God's highest attributes is what the thinkers nobly name 'Simplicitas.' It is with miracles as with machinery. Simple machinery, the parts of which are few and movements many, is far more baffling to study than complicated machinery whose many parts make analysis easy. And therefore if the study of miracles presents difficulties, this is due rather to the subtle nature of the principles involved than to their number or complication. The principles involved in miracles besides being

simple are readily acceptable; they are Matter, Spirit, Free Will and God.² They are realities. Matter, infinite possibility; God, infinite Being; Spirit, the power behind matter, and Free Will, the highest manifestation of that spirit. Apply these principles to our definition, and we see them connected thus. God is an infinite, personal Spirit with free will, in whose nature the human soul with its faculty of free will weakly participates. Now, since the human soul with its finite faculties can produce wondrous effects on matter, God, of whom the soul is merely a reflection, can produce effects infinite in variety upon the infinite possibilities of matter. Deny God the power to straighten a crooked limb or to arrange for a shower of rain and you make Him almost less than the man with the surgeon's knife or the garden hose."

But it may be objected that a miracle is a new fact, and God is immutable. How are we to reconcile this antinomy? First of all, let us consider that God can know things other than those He has made. His vision sweeps over the full range of the possible, and all that has happened, is now happening or will ever happen is eternally present to His all-seeing eye. He not only sees all things as they are, but also sees how they could be realized after another fashion—which thought is briefly put in the scholastic formula: The laws of nature are contingent, antecedently to their realization. "The order of things, according as it is preconceived, in the divine intelligence directs them in much the same manner as, in human affairs, we see a mayor impose on a city an order that he has premeditated. But the divine intelligence is not in the least necessarily determined to the existing order in such a way as to be unable to conceive another, since we ourselves are able to conceive how God formed a man out of the slime of the earth instead of by human seed."³ St. Thomas elsewhere discusses this objection against the immutability of God with respect to miracles in the following words: "When God operates contrary to the established order, this does not argue a change in His will, for from all eternity God has foreseen and willed what He should do in the course of time. He has accordingly instituted the course of things, but at the same

² Lecture on Miracles. Vincent McNabb, O. P. "The Wayside," 1916, London.

³ *Contra Gentiles* Liber III, C. 99.

time He has preordained in His eternal decree what He should do aside from the regular course of nature."⁴

But the Angelic Doctor is not content with this *a priori* response. Then he goes on to give one that is taken from the natural order. If, within the laws of nature, we find some exceptions which do not in the least militate against the Providence of God, as for example, an earthquake, we should not think a miracle, which is a kind of exception, does any more violence to the will of God.⁵

The possibility of a miracle without prejudice to the immutability of God having been thus briefly established, we shall proceed to consider the operation of God in the miraculous from a positive viewpoint.

God's power over nature is absolute. It penetrates into the very marrow of every being, and sustains and operates each in a very direct and real manner. If God has ordained that created substances should be real causes with particular potencies and operations, He has not renounced the right whereby He may increase or diminish this created activity to suit His own purposes. The divine power has ordained that fire should burn, and yet in the miracle of the three boys, who remained unharmed in a fiery furnace, He has willed that in this particular instance the fire should not affect the boys, without ceasing to be real fire. All creation is more subject to God than the body is to the soul. The soul, through a lively imagination and violent passion, can produce a change for good or evil in the body, without even the intervention of the corporal principles which bring about sickness or health. Leave an organism to itself. It will follow a regular development and a gradual decline; the hair will whiten as old age advances. But let a violent emotion of fear or grief upset the soul; the hair will become white in a night.⁶ What the soul does in the living organism in which it manifests so sudden an intervention, God does in the entire domain of nature. A miracle may again be likened to a work of divine art. "The divine art is far from being revealed entirely in creation; even as the human artist, after his first production, can make a second different from the first, so God Himself can operate in the universe

⁴ St. Thomas—De Potentia quæst. VI. ad lum, ad 6um.

⁵ Contra Gentiles, Liber III, C. 99.

⁶ Revue Thomiste—Folghera, O. P. Le Miracle d'après Saint Thomas Aquinas. 1904—p. 324.

through manifestations of His power different from His ordinary action." ⁷ God has in reserve an infinite array of ideas and energies; He is not an artist impoverished by a single idea and a single manner of manifesting Himself.

With keen theological and philosophical insight, Père Lacordaire has thus expressed the divine action in miracles: "God operates on the universe as we do on our bodies. He applies to a particular cause the force which is necessary to produce an unaccustomed effect; it is a miracle, because He alone, in the infinite reservoir of His will, which is the center of all created and possible forces, can command enough of the elements to bring about instantly so great an effect. If he please to arrest the sun, to use a common expression, He opposes to its own force of projection a force which counterbalances this and which, by the mere virtue of a mathematical law, produces repose. So it is with all other miracles: a question of force." ⁸

Thus far we have seen that in the abstract there is nothing in the idea of a miracles, properly defined, which is repugnant to reason. In a word, we have seen that God, the all-powerful Creator, a personal and free Spirit, is able to operate on creation to produce miracles when and how He wills to do so.

Now, from the abstract consideration of miracles we come to the concrete fact of their occurrence—the proof of their actual happening. To prove a miracle is to establish that a particular phenomenon is above and beyond a natural cause—taking natural cause in its broadest sense as inclusive of all created forces. It must be remembered that what appears wonderful to us, and as beyond the power of natural causes, may not be miraculous in the proper sense, since such things may appear so because of our ignorance of the laws of nature. Even the marvelous action of the spirits of the preternatural realm, be they good or evil, are not strictly miracles, but works of art or prodigies. Now, we know from revelation that there are both good and evil spirits, angels and devils. So far as the good spirits are to be considered, it is certain that their action always conforms itself to the will of God, and although their action, due to the pure nature of their intelligences, surely surpasses the action of rational creatures, nevertheless, this angelic action is of such a nature that it can

⁷ St. Thomas. *De Potentia*—*quaes.* VI ad 12um.

⁸ Lacordaire—38th Conf. of Notre Dame.

be easily distinguished from a divine act, which is required for a miracle. "A double proposition," St. Thomas writes, "contains all there is to be said; angels can perform prodigies, they cannot perform miracles. It is of course true that angels are much better acquainted than we are with physical laws, with the circumstances which accompany their exercise, and that they can communicate to them their superior energy with a maximum of efficiency. These words suffice to explain the marvels that angels can perform."⁹ But the marvels will never be miracles truly and properly so called, for the simple and conclusive reason that miracles always exceed natural causes (in the complete sense of the word, all created activities) and an angel is included among natural causes.¹⁰

With regard to the limitations of the powers of angels, St. Thomas argues that they are restricted by the physical determinism to which all things are subject. This physical determinism includes a limitation of the subject (1) to determine modifications, (2) to the action of determined causes, (3) to a determined process of development."¹¹ Because of this universal determination of nature, an angel cannot bring about effects to which the subject is not naturally susceptible. Consequently, when the water of Lourdes, for example, which is chemically like any other water, will produce effects absolutely divergent from those which water naturally produces—this certainly argues a special divine virtue that operates through this medium. Angels could not do this.

These differences of the physical order between angelic works and divine works are not always, it must be confessed, clearly distinguishable. It is necessary, therefore, to have recourse to differences of the moral order. Now, since the good angels always conform to the divine will, their works will never deceive. To discern the diabolical from the divine action, we may examine the subject of the extraordinary occurrence, the processes by which it is performed, and the end for which it has been done. If all these are found to be edifying, and beyond the power of a natural cause, the event is truly a miracle.

With regard to the evidence of the miraculous, it may be observed that a scientific, methodical criticism of each detail is

⁹ St. Thomas. *De Potentia quae*. VI ad 3um.

¹⁰ *Contra Gentiles*—Liber III, C. 102.

¹¹ *ibidem*.

not necessary. The value of the consensus of opinion of the common people testifying to the fact of a series of phenomena, A, not miraculous, as for instance, the fact that the sun has always risen every morning, should be quite as valid in testifying to the fact of another series of phenomena, B, miraculous, as for instance, the fact of a cure at a shrine.

Finally, we come to treat of the utility of miracles. Why does God see fit at particular times to perform miracles? He, who is all wise, must have very good reason for causing these exceptions to the laws of nature. At the outset we must guard against the exaggeration of those who would see in their occurrence the abolition of science. In this case it is certainly true to say that the exception proves the rule. "God, through a miracle, does not suppress the universal order of the world, which is its perfection, but changes the relation of a particular cause to its own particular effect."¹²

By the performance of miracles God in a special way manifests His sovereignty over the world, as He does in an ordinary way by providence. Miracles manifest the divine power; there is no better way of showing the subjection of all nature to the supreme will than by operating in a divine manner outside of the laws, for it then becomes evident that all order in the universe comes of God, not in virtue of a natural necessity but rather of His free will.

Furthermore, in the order of finality, the usefulness of miracles appears from the following argument of the Angelic Doctor: Through a miracle God is rendered perceptible by man. But since all the lesser creatures are ordained to man as to their end, while man is ordained to know God, what is there astonishing in an unexpected modification of the laws of nature—if thereby God is made better known to man?

In the hypothesis of Revelation miracles serve the useful office of confirming the words of God's appointed teachers with divine sanction. Christ had on His lips the words of heavenly wisdom and in His hands the power of God.

What we have touched on in our consideration of St. Thomas' teaching on miracles may be thus briefly summarized:

1. Miracles are possible: God, without the least injury to His immutability, and in virtue of His eternal will and eternal

¹² St. Thomas—De Potentia quæ. VI ad 7um.

activity, without touching physical laws, can operate in the universe, even as man does in a limited way.

2. The fact that miracles exist can be established: they are distinguished from effects of natural and spiritual causes by certain differences of the ontological order, and from diabolical effects by certain moral differences.

3. Miracles are useful in manifesting God as our Creator and Lord; and in the hypothesis of Revelation, they give a sanction to the words of God's ministers. They lead men to God, according to those words of the Apostle, "omnia propter electos."

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