MIRACLES—TRUE AND FALSE

BRO. GREGORY O'CONNOR, O. P.

THERE is an opinion common among those outside the Church, that Catholics are ready to claim any unusual triviality as a miracle. The truth is that, when it comes to making any pronouncement on the matter, and these pronouncements are indeed rare, the evidence must be so convincing and conclusive as to solve all doubt.

St. Thomas defines a miracle as "An effect divinely produced apart from the order usually observed in nature."[1] This effect must exceed the powers of any created nature, and it therefore follows that only God, Who is the author of nature, and has established its laws, can suspend the operation of these laws, and thus perform a miracle. Christ, by His own divine power, worked miracles, and the Saints in His name have done likewise. The fact proves the possibility of miracles, but the question arises, how are we to determine what constitutes a miracle, and how are miracles to be distinguished from the wonders performed by human and even by diabolical agents? The Vatican Council has set forth very clearly the position of the Church in regard to miracles, and has declared that miracles are possible and are not to be relegated to the realm of myths and fables, that miracles can certainly be recognized, and that they show clearly the divine origin of the Christian Religion.[2]

The Church was founded not only for the learned and cultured but also for the ignorant and uncouth. The Savior intended His miracles to be motives of credibility for all, so it is reasonable to presume that a miracle must be something sensibly evident and accomodated to the intelligence of all.[3] Some Rationalists and Positivists agree in admitting the possibility of miracles, but claim that they cannot be distinguished from extraordinary natural happenings. In the introduction to his *Life of Christ,* Renan says, "We do not say that miracles are impossible, but up to this time no miracle has been truly demonstrated." He modestly sets forth the conditions which would satisfy him as to

[1] St. Thomas, *Summa Contra Gentes,* lib. 3, cap. Cf.
[2] H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symborlorum et Definitionum,* No. 1813.
[3] Denzinger, *op. cit.,* No. 1790.

the reality of miracles. It would convince him, if a thaumaturge were to appear before the Parisian Academy and raise the dead to life, not once or twice, but several times, and under various circumstances. These conditions if fulfilled might be more of a hindrance than a help to those who might not understand the accompanying explanation.

David Hume said that no testimony could prove miracles, for it would be more probable that the testimony is false, than that the miracle is true. He did not seem to admit that, provided an adequate cause exists, a proportionate effect can follow. Furthermore, our experience testifies only in regard to singular things, and reason weighs these facts without prejudice, whether they be natural or supernatural. All natural science is based on testimony, and Hume arbitrarily prejudged any testimony regarding the supernatural to be untrue. The objection also rests upon the supposition that all the laws of nature are known. Experience has shown this to be false. The principle, that experience, internal or external, is the only source of knowledge, is untenable. Moreover, a miracle is not a violation of the laws of nature, as Hume supposed, but a special intervention of God outside these laws.

The Modernist Le Roy dismisses the subject of miracles by asserting that, considered physically a miracle does not differ from any extraordinary natural fact, and the effect, considered as miraculous, is the result of a vehement faith. For example, a sudden cure is to be attributed to the faith of the sufferer, and thus manifests the power of the spirit over matter, and this cure may be indirectly attributed to God inasmuch as faith is a gift of God.[4]

The principal objection against miracles is based upon the fact that we do not know all the laws of nature. Therefore it is impossible to know with certitude when a fact exceeds these laws since what is inexplicable by the known laws might be intelligible by those which are unknown. The Agnostics add that we have no knowledge of the laws of nature as they exist in things outside the mind, and therefore what might appear to be a derogation of the laws as they exist in things, might only be a derogation of these same laws as they are conceived by us.

It can be readily admitted that we have not an intuitive and comprehensive knowledge of the essences of things, but all must admit that we have some knowledge, imperfect and abstract though it may be. This general knowledge has been secured by the process of in-

[4] E. Le Roy, *Annales de Philosophie Chretienne; "Essai sur la notion de miracle."* Oct. 1907.

duction. Without this inductive process of reasoning not one of the physical sciences could exist. We can claim in all fairness that our knowledge of these laws of nature is as solidly grounded as that of our opponents, and that their objections are inconsistent, based as they are upon a knowledge which they say we do not possess.

We claim to have at least a negative knowledge of the powers of nature, that is we are sure that there are certain things beyond natural agencies, effects which can only be attributed to God. It is admitted by all that no natural power can raise the dead to life or give sight to a man blind from his birth. No human voice of itself can calm the tempest, nor can the human hand cure the leprosy by a mere touch. These effects can only be attributed to the Divine Author of nature.

God alone can create. A universal effect, such as *being,* must be derived from a universal cause, and God is the most universal cause, since He is Being Subsistent. It follows then that if only God can create, He alone has supreme power over what is created.[5] Only divine power could suddenly change water into wine. The Angelic Doctor tells us that although the conversion of water into wine is not above the power of nature as far as the substantial fact itself is concerned, nevertheless it is beyond the power of any natural agent to produce this change suddenly as Christ did. In the ordinary natural process this change would take place in time, through the action of the water in the process of maturing the grape. This miracle as narrated by St. John took place in an instant and merely by the word of the Savior.[6] Since God has supreme power over matter and form, there is nothing repugnant in the statement that God can restore the dead to life. This would imply the reuniting of the soul, which is the substantial form of the body, with the matter which it had previously animated. God performed this miracle while He was on earth. In God's name, St. Dominic performed a like miracle. The power of God has not lessened in the course of years, and He can still call back the dead to life. The same argument holds for the cure of blindness. Congenital and incurable blindness may be considered as a partial death, because there is no life in the organs of vision. We have physical certitude that none of these effects can be produced by any natural agency; the disproportion between cause and effect would be insurmountable.

Other difficulties arise regarding miracles related to the sudden cure of an organic disease ordinarily considered fatal. How does the

[5] St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica,* Ia. q. 45, a. 5.
[6] St. Thomas, *II Sententiarum,* d. xviii, q. 1, a. 3, ad 4am.

Church ascertain when there is a miracle in such a case? First as to the fact. Miracles must be sensibly evident. If a person, whose condition has been regarded as incurable by expert medical authority, is suddenly restored to perfect health, and the sworn testimony of doctors is secured, there is good reason to believe that a miraculous cure has taken place. This testimony, secured from the same physicians who had regarded the case as incurable, shows that there is no reason to doubt that the cure has been wrought by some means unknown to medical science. That the event was extraordinary does not diminish its certainty. It is the province of the historian simply to record these events without distortion or explanation. From the testimony of these and other witnesses of known integrity, we have physical certitude as to the existence of these facts, and it cannot be proved that the senses are not to be regarded as witnesses of truth. Furthermore, the Church demands much additional evidence to prove the lack of fraud or deception in these cases.

To prove that these happenings are due to a supernatural agency, all the physical and moral circumstances connected with the event must be considered. Benedict XIV has laid down the physical conditions, all of which must be met before a cure can be considered miraculous. The ailment must be grave and extremely difficult or even impossible of cure. It must not have reached such a stage that a cure might follow naturally. Medical treatment must not have been given, or if it has, no curative effect shall have followed. The cure must be sudden and perfect. No notable crisis or evacuation of the disease must have preceded the cure, and the disease must not manifest itself anew.[7]

The moral circumstances attendant upon an event that appears miraculous are also considered by Catholic authorities. A miracle, since it is the work of God, must be ordained to the glory of God. It would be contradictory to the divine wisdom and goodness to permit any created agent to perform a true miracle which would tend to confirm error or immorality. The extraordinary event is to be considered miraculous only when it confirms revealed truth and moral practice. If the effect produced seems to have no other end than the satisfaction of the curiosity of the people, it is to be rejected. Christ refused to pander to the desires of the multitude who asked for a sign. If the wonderful event serves to lessen the peace and concord of society, its miraculous nature is questionable. All of the so-called

[7] Benedict XIV, *De Beatificatione Servorum Dei,* 1, IV, c. 8, No. 2.

wonders of Paganism, Mohammedanism and Buddhism fail to meet this test of the miraculous and are not to be regarded as miraculous. If the fact is something palpably untrue, dishonest or ridiculous, it is not to be considered. The character of the agent must also be taken into account. If this is a person of vicious life and habits, the prodigies which he may perform are open to question. St. Thomas mentions that miracles may be performed by evil agencies but only in the name of God, and in confirmation of divine truth, and these are not to be taken as a commendation of the life of the agent whom God uses simply as an instrument.[8] True miracles are always produced by God or in His name, and the use of any blasphemous or unbecoming means in the production of some marvel would exclude it from being considered as miraculous. Nor are the works which are produced without any real necessity, as are many of the marvels of the Spiritualists and devotees of hypnotism, to be classed as true miracles. Christ would not perform a miracle to satisfy the curiosity of Herod.

If these and other circumstances, physical as well as moral, give indication of a divine causality, we can be sure that the wonderful event is a miracle. Theologians are agreed that Angels can only use their powers with the consent of God. This surely is made more certain when we consider the infinite goodness, wisdom and veracity of God. He cannot deceive us nor can He be deceived, and will not permit what is false to be regarded as true in a matter which would permit his enemies to triumph over the Church which He has promised to protect.

The assertion, that the cures which we claim to be miraculous are due to suggestion, is groundless. No amount of suggestion has ever reunited a fractured bone or instantly cured a serious disease. God, the author of miracles, selects His own time and place to manifest His power, and this accounts for the fact that many of the recorded miracles occur at such places as Lourdes and St. Anne de Beaupre, and also shows why devotees of suggestion accomplish nothing miraculous in their own sanctuaries. Hypnotism cannot account for real miracles, its effects at best being but transient.

The Fourth Lateran Council has defined the existence of evil spirits, and it is to these malign agencies that many of the wonders of Spiritism are to be attributed.[9] Evil spirits can simulate miracles in two ways: by utilizing the powers of nature unknown to us by means of local motion, and also by affecting the imagination and external

[8] St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica,* IIa IIae, q. 178, a. 2.
[9] Denzinger, *op. cit.,* No. 428.

senses of man, so that something appears different from what it really is.

According to St. Thomas, works performed by evil spirits can be distinguished in three ways from the works performed by the good Angels. First, the works performed by good Angels are produced only immediately and have God as their principal agent, while on the contrary, evil spirits simulate works which are beyond their powers, the effects of which are of but short duration. Secondly, works performed by good spirits are beneficial, while those proceeding from evil agents are vain and useless. Thirdly, the wonders performed by the Angels are ordained to a good end, while the works of evil agencies are usually to the detriment of faith and morals. These works also differ according to the manner in which they are performed, for the works performed by the Angels produce their effect through the pious and reverent invocation of God's holy name, while the effects emanating from malign agencies are not the result of prayer but are produced out of malice and hatred towards God.[10]

The deeds performed by Spiritists cartainly cannot be classed as miraculous. Without a doubt they prove the existence of spirits, but these same spirits, commanded in the name of God to reveal their names, have invariably confessed their diabolical nature. The havoc wrought by these evil agencies is almost unbelievable. Insanity, immorality and the ruin of soul and body have followed in the wake of Spiritism, till some of the ablest exponents of this pernicious practice have turned away in horror, to find a refuge in the Church against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail. The Catholic Church presents divine credentials, but the credentials of Spiritism show plainly the wicked influence of diabolical agents.

Do miracles occur in this age? Unquestionably they do. The pilgrimages to Lourdes are still made, and when God wills, a miracle takes place. Over sixteen hundred years ago St. Januarius was martyred and a vessel containing his dried blood is still preserved. Scientists have offered various unsatisfactory explanations as to why this blood liquifies. Scientists and artists alike are mystified when they examine the picture of the Blessed Virgin which miraculously appeared on the cloak of a poor Indian of Gaudeloupe in Mexico. Miracles cannot be explained nor accomplished by created agencies, and show plainly the finger of God. This is the teaching of the Catholic Church, and to those outside of her fold who scoff at her

[10] St. Thomas, *II. Sententiarum*, d. 7, q. 3, a. 1, ad 2am. *Summa Theologica* Ia., q. 114, a4., ad 2am.

claims and who doubt, only because they do not wish to believe, she can use the words first uttered by her Divine founder to those who scoffed at His claims to Divinity. "If I do not the works of my father, believe me not, but if I do, though you will not believe me, believe the works." (John x, 37-38).

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