

Christ and His Deeds as Credal- Signs

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When our Lord commanded the reluctant Thomas to "be not unbelieving, but believing," he expressed God's wish for us to be united to him in faith. The act of belief spans the abyss between the created and the creator, and allows man to encounter God in a way which is consonant with God's saving purpose. Hence the belief-act, the act of faith, is an actual reality uniting man with God, drawing the misguided creature back to the perfection of his fashioner. Without the act of faith, regardless of how implicit its content might be, man cannot be conjoined to God in a salvific manner. Neglecting this act, man rejects the gift which ennobles his nature, which makes him a "son of God." As a result the act of faith, as Christ commanded, is absolutely necessary in order to join our finite nature with that of the Infinite God.

But what constitutes this important act of a believer? Can he make it without sacrificing his own rationality, the very thing which makes him a man? Is it even possible to stamp the certitude of faith upon any of man's actions in this life? Rather than an act of certitude could not faith be classified, as Kierkegaard maintained, as an absurdity, a leap of trust in God in spite of all appearances to the contrary? It seems that this "dark" type of faith, a sort of groping act, is the act of faith described in Sacred Scripture. We need cite only one instance which is put forth in the Letter to the Hebrews. Here the author, extolling the faith of Abraham, says of him: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going." (11:8) It is this irrational "not knowing where we are going" which seems best to describe the act of faith made by man on earth.

Yet the same Letter to the Hebrews also contains a careful delineation of the realm of faith: "... the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things unseen." (11:1) In this simple statement appears the very essence of faith. The "substance of things to be hoped for" indicates all those things which are revealed by God; the belief-act is directed toward and settled within these truths. The "evidence of things unseen" designates the way in which the content of our act of faith is given to us. Since the content of our act of faith contains the truths and mysteries of God, this content so far surpasses our minds as to be imperfectly intelligible in this life. We shall see how being imperfectly intelligible is not to be equated with being irrational or totally unintelligible; concomitantly then, man does not make an act of faith whereby his rational nature is entirely abnegated and destroyed. In fact, it is elevated.

We have already seen how the act of belief has both a human and a divine dimension; the act requires God revealing and man assenting with his whole being to what is revealed. The problem now under discussion is not so much what God reveals, the content of faith, but how man should assent to this revelation. Is man's act rational or an irrational leap, or is it both? First of all, we might insist that if man is to assent, he must operate intellectually; he must act in accord with the exigencies and powers of his rational nature. However, this does not mean that faith must be a development of pure reason alone. Any encounter with God is a personal event, a whole of human ex-

perience. However, and this is the crux of the problem, such an encounter must be reasonably justified if we are to be sure it is not just an illusion. Consequently, in the encounter of man with God in faith, there are two poles. On the one hand, man can only be aware of an encounter; it is not something logical precisely because it is above logic. It is this pole, this aspect of the act of faith which could be referred to as the "folly" of faith. On the other hand, man could never make the act of faith unless his doubt about an illusionary encounter be cleared up. In this sense, the other pole of the belief-act must follow a reasonable preparatory stage.

As a result of this preliminary discussion, we become cognizant of this fact: in the act of man assenting to truths beyond his comprehension, something must precede the act which would be within his comprehension in order that it be a rational act. Although this "something" need not enter directly into the act of faith, it does serve to fertilize the mind, making its subsequent assent rational. In this way man operates from his nature toward God his creator, accompanied at all times by the gratuitous gift of faith. Let us call this preceding "something" a credal-sign, and examine the books of Sacred Scripture for its existence.

Types of Credal-Signs in the Bible

We have just seen that, in order to seek "those things which are above," man must make an act of faith, an act in complete harmony with his God-endowed rational nature. This harmonious conjunction of the rational with the belief-act, as was indicated, seems to require a credal-sign.

In Sacred Scripture itself, many different types of these required signs appear. We are now aware that for both the Old and the New Testament authors, all of reality was considered a *sacramentum*, a holy sign of the presence of God. For the Hebrews then, all of nature proclaimed the glory of God. Creation bespoke its creator; there was no question of not believing in God. Nature itself pointed to Him and man naturally assented to His goodness and kindness. We might call this first type of credal-sign the *natural* motive for believing in God, simply because a man denying any God whatever would have seemed to the ancient Hebrew or a personage in any of the ancient cultures to be irrational, unnatural.

During the course of religious history, however, other types of

credal-signs have been readily discernible. Besides the natural credal-sign mentioned above, there is another which might be called the *authoritative* sign; the authority of God revealing evokes in the faithful man a rational certitude of faith. In this sense we see how faith is not a leap into some darkness, but a true surety, a security out of which man can draw an abundance of noble deeds, even to the point of dying for his faith. It was this type of credal-sign which prompted the Jewish nation to believe in the One God because He revealed Himself to them as such. Later in the New Testament, many people came to believe in Jesus Christ "because of the words which He spoke to them."

Although we have not been speaking here of the acceptance of an interior gift of the Holy Spirit (for example, Christ's commending of St. Peter in Matt. 16:13), the authoritative credal-sign might leave something to be desired in the search for a sign which would be a rational preparatory event preceding the act of faith. The reason for this is that it is still a mystery why God would act this way. Why does God bother to reveal Himself to us? The answer to such a question lies beyond our powers of understanding, and hence the authority of God revealing, as a credal-sign, might remain in some sense "irrational," beyond reason unaided by faith.

There is yet another kind of credal-sign which guided the Apostles and Disciples in their belief in the Messiah—a command by the Anointed One himself. One such command, namely to Thomas, has already been cited. However, Christ's words to Thomas were not meant for him alone. This becomes evident from an examination of other admonitions in the Gospels, e.g.: "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a man believes and is born again, he shall not have life in him." (John 5:24) Distinct from the authoritative class of credal-signs, such admonitory commands would be closely related to the response of obedience, like that of Abraham mentioned earlier. It is important to note, however, that an obediential response on the part of man, unless accompanied by some other sign, would not necessarily be a response made in total understanding. In fact, we often are asked to obey some authority without previously ascertaining the reasons behind the command. In this sense, faith would truly be a leap into the unknown, an act of pure will power uniting the "believer" with the will of the authority. Under this aspect, though, faith is reduced to what has been called *fiducia*, a trust, an act of the will

and not of the reasoning power. If this were the only act man would be able to make in conjunction with God it would not complete his whole person since it would neglect man's reason. But faith, we find, does perfect the *whole* man in his encounter with God.

Consequently we are interested in another type of credal-sign offered in Sacred Scripture. This preparatory sign, for example a miracle or a prophecy, remains secondary and confirmatory to the truth. Even children can believe on the basis of such a sign for it does not require closely-reasoned arguments. Yet it is rational because it compliments the usual process whereby man arrives at some truth. As we have pointed out, man's mind cannot grasp the supernatural mysteries and truths revealed in this life. The external credal-sign offers instead some moral certitude about revelation. As an externalization, evident to the sense, the confirmatory credal-sign renders the expression of belief reasonable; by such a sign or signs, revealed religion becomes credible, worthy of belief by divine faith. They are not the ultimate reason why man makes an act of faith, but they contribute the rationale, the reason which dispels the doubt about whether or not what was revealed was an illusion. Let us now turn to Christ and His deeds as examples of this type of credal-sign.

Biblical Miracles as Credal-Signs

"Not by bread alone does man live, but by every word which comes from the mouth of God." Man must accept the words, works and deeds of God to live spiritually, that he may dwell in His truths and mysteries. To make us live in the truths of faith was Christ's difficult mission on earth as the mediator between God and men. In order to perform this saving task, He had to establish Himself as the expected Messiah. Thus, the principal problem facing Christ during the course of His earthly life was to establish His authority as the Anointed One. One of the means He used was specific proof-deeds or miracles which confirmed the truth of His words (John 5:19). Miracles, then, are intended to be external credal-signs, pointing to the truth of revelation. They had, as their purpose for Our Lord, first to show that He was the authentic messenger of the Father and secondly, to prove that He brought the salvation promised in the Old Testament which was to come through a Messiah.

In the case of Christ, as we shall see, miracles become something more than mere external signs which lead man to belief. Because

Christ was in fact the Word made Flesh, His deeds themselves revealed not just His authority, but His very nature, and that of God. In this latter sense, brought out particularly well by St. John, Christ's deeds and Christ himself were intimately linked. Each miracle points beyond itself to a mystery, just as nature was considered to do by the Hebrews. The proof-deed becomes also, in the hands of St. John, a *sacramentum*, an event which always expresses a deeper significance. This symbolism of John's approach to events leads to sacramentality.

As we have just indicated, John's orchestration of miracles differs from the interpretation given them by the synoptics. It would help toward an understanding of the function of miracles in the New Testament briefly to examine how miracles are treated differently by the various authors of the books, and wherein lies their common function as proof-deeds. The deeds of Christ receive a unique emphasis, depending upon the sacred writer's personal background and his purpose.

Matthew was the tax-collector and a Jew himself. He wrote from the experience of his Jewish faith for the Jewish Christians. Having as his main purpose the proof that Jesus Christ was the Messiah whom the prophets had foretold, his gospel has often been called the gospel of the Church. The reason for this comes out in the way he treats themes, at all times trying to show how Christ, as the new mediator and Messiah, established a new kingdom of God on earth, a new chosen people, a new Church. We would expect Matthew to treat miracles in some relation to his theme of the kingdom of God on earth, and he does. For him, the miracles and deeds of Christ are all attacks, direct and powerful, upon the kingdom of satan. For example, in the eighth and ninth chapters of his gospel he has recorded an extensive list of miracles, all of them being interpreted as attacks upon satan's power, except that of the calming of the waves. Christ Himself confirms this theme, this aspect of His deeds in Matt. 12:28.

Mark was also Jewish, a student of the apostle Paul and thereafter of Peter. His account, written down in Greek, expresses the message of Jesus as Peter had announced it. Luke, too, although a pagan originally and writing for the pagan converts, conveyed a similar account because of his friendship with Paul. Both Luke and Mark have similar purposes, to show the transcendence of Christ, that is, to show how this man was really God. Hence, miracles, for these two synoptics, are treated as eye-openers, as the credal-signs leading

to astonishment with the transcending power of the man Jesus, e.g., the miracle of the calming of the waves. (Mark 4:7)

John emphasizes Jesus as the Son of God who truly became man for our sake. His gospel, written down much later than those of the synoptics, was intended to fill-in and complete aspects left out in the earlier accounts of Christ's life and message. Having the advantage of more years during which to mediate upon the meaning of Our Lord's life on earth, John was able to set down Christ's deeds as symbols of Christ himself, as revelations of God in the personal actions of the man Jesus. Here then, the multiplication of the loaves indicates, upon the natural level, a much more profound truth, namely, that of the Eucharist; the curing of the blind man (John 9:1) becomes a sign of Christ as the light of the world; the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-45) prefigures Christ's own resurrection from the dead. In each case the natural signs, evident to all, are indicative of similar truths on a much more profound level which only the eyes and ears of faith could perceive.

Despite the fact that the sacred authors have approached the proof-deeds in the context of their own background and specific purpose, the miracles of Christ, as recorded in the Gospels, are all unified under the common characteristic of external signs, pointing to the truth of revelation, whether this be by the *words of Christ* (as expressed by the synoptic emphasis) or the revelation by the *Christ as Word*, as Son of the Father (according to John's emphasis). Miracles were intended by Christ to establish His authority and to indicate His own nature.

There are many specific instances of Our Lord's purpose mentioned in the Gospels. Christ cured the centurion's boy, commending the official for his disinterestedness in visible show, by the simple *word* of healing. (Matt. 8:5-13) The paralytic was cured with these explicit words of the Lord: "But to convince you that the Son of Man has the right on earth to forgive sins. . . ." (Matt. 9:2-8) (Also see Mark 2:5-12.) When Christ cured the two blind men, He asked them: "Do you believe that I have the power to do what you want?" (Matt. 9:27-31) Speaking loudly before raising Lazarus from the dead, Our Lord said: "That they may believe that you have sent me . . ." (John 11:41-3, note John's emphasis coming out here.) Furthermore, there are abundant examples of cases of cures performed because of the faith of the recipient, or admonitions

against the unbelief of many by words and deeds (Matt. 8:23-7; 9:22; 14:31; 15:28; 21:19-22; Mark 4:40; 5:34; 10:50-2; 11:21-3; John 11:40-2).

A miracle, nominally, means that which causes wonder. This was truly the case in the minds of the contemporaries of Christ. Many wondered and then refused to believe. Others wondered and subsequently attributed the works they were witnessing to the power of the devil. Still others wondered, and then believed in the Messiah; but they all wondered. We can see that the astonishment of the people was centered about the authority of Christ, the very purpose which he intended by performing the miracles. "What sort of man is this, that even the wind and sea obey Him?" (Matt. 8:23-7) "The people were filled with awe at the sight, and praised God for granting such authority to men." (Matt. 9:8) "Where does He get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" (Matt. 13:53) "What is this? A new teaching! He authoritatively orders even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." (Mark 1:27) "When Jesus finished this discourse the people were astonished at His teaching; unlike their own teachers, He taught with a note of authority." (Matt. 7:29) If we but remember the insight of Aristotle, that wonder is the beginning of knowledge, then we can be justified in attributing to Christ's miracles the characteristic of credal-signs preparing the way from ignorance to the knowledge of faith.

Our Lord never performed a miracle for its own sake; the miracle was always to be a credal-sign, a motive for believing. "It is a wicked and godless generation that asks for a sign." (Matt. 12:39) However, for those disposed to believe, the sign is of paramount importance. After the Resurrection, Christ said to His followers: "Furthermore, these signs will accompany those believing." (Mark 16:17) In fact, these signs and wonders are so important that those who neglected to consider them earned a severe rebuke: "When you see a cloud rising in the western parts, at once you say, 'A storm is coming'; and it turns out so." (Luke 12:54-5) "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out devils, then be sure that the Kingdom of God has already come upon you." (Matt. 12:28) Even the blind man, whom Jesus cured, rebukes the unbelievers with these words: "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing at all." (John 9:33) Miracles, then, as St. John explicitly declares, are performed "so that we may believe." (John 20:31; 4:42; 6:14)

Christ's miracles were not like those of the Old Testament. We have already noted one way in which they differed, namely, in that they were performed by the very Word made Flesh. We will expand this notion in the next section. Here it is sufficient to note that in the Old Testament, God worked marvelous deeds which showed forth His tremendous power (earthquakes, storms, etc.). However, the New Testament bears witness to an even more astounding intervention into nature—a creative intervention, as when the water was changed into wine, or life brought back into the bones of those who were dead. Christ's miracles were of such a character, then, that man could reasonably conclude that God alone was the immediate cause of them. Unlike the Old Testament miracles, which science could explain on the natural level, Christ's often do not allow of this explanation. This fact lends greater credence to His authority and His person.

Our Lord's miracles, as we have observed, are something new and creative in nature, and in this sense are not *neutral* credal-signs. They are rather specific proof-deeds of Christ as a new mystery—the mystery of the Word. Christ's miracles were perceptible events, like any other datum of experience, but with this difference: they were always performed in a religious context as signs of the supernatural. From this fact we can deduce two essentials for every miracle. Each proof-deed must be first an event which is an exception in nature, a fact which the normal course does not explain. This causes the wonder and astonishment which leads to the knowledge in faith. Secondly, the miracle must be found in a religious context. This context offers an explanation of the new event in a new order, the higher order of faith.

The Gospels have shown us how Christ intended miracles to be used as credal-signs pointing to His doctrine and authority. We have also seen some of the reactions of the people to His deeds and Words. We may now examine the various kinds of miracles recorded in the New Testament, particularly stressing Christ himself as the ultimate credal-sign, an insight we owe to St. John's Gospel.

Miracle Types

It is obvious, of course, that some miracles are not as great as others; for instance, the curing of Peter's mother-in-law is not as noble a deed nor as difficult to produce as Christ's own resurrection!

Consequently, from the point of view of how the miracles in the New Testament surpassed the normal course of nature in varying degrees, we might divide miracles into four general categories.

Under the first heading of miracles would be found those which we, created beings, could produce in the materials at hand, but not in the way in which they were done. Thus the sudden curing of a disease, or the changing of water into wine might be possible for a doctor or a chemist, respectively, but not in so quick a way. A second kind of miracle would be one which we could produce, but neither in the materials at hand, nor in the way in which it was performed by Christ. An example of this type of miracle was that wrought by Christ in raising Lazarus from the dead. Creation can produce life, as our own parents did in begetting us, but never in a dead body, and never immediately complete and whole and perfect! When our Lord appeared after His resurrection to the Apostles by entering through a locked door, He produced a miracle against the natural impenetrability of bodies. A miracle of this sort is an impossibility for any created nature to perform, no matter how we might try to go about effecting it. Thus, this third type of miracle constitutes another class.

There is yet a fourth kind of external credal-sign mentioned in the Gospels (especially in St. John's) which is usually neglected in a discussion such as this. Such neglect is unjustified, for this miracle is the prototype of all the others. It is the person of Christ himself. Although His ordinary appearance was not miraculous, for He was a man, His words and deeds were. Sometimes using a direct command: "I will it be made clean"; (Mark 1:41) and "Young man, I say to you, get up!" (Luke 7:14) The Messiah at other times simply touched the sick and they were healed. Often, too, He appealed to His Father in heaven, e.g., as at the tomb of Lazarus. These three methods show at once His Divine nature and His human nature as mediator. All the miracles wrought by Christ, then, had for their purpose the supreme manifestation and testimony of the Father that Christ is the Messiah, the Saviour. Consequently, all that Christ did as a man was also at one and the same time an act of the Son of God. Each of His actions was a divine act in human covering, in human and created form.

Precisely because the human deeds of Christ were at the same time divine actions, they carried with them a saving power from God.

They were sacraments, signs which saved at the same time they were performed, bringing salvation, causing grace. However, the supreme credal-sign for those who witnessed Christ's works and believed was not the miracles themselves but the person of Christ, who worked them. This is why His miracles produced wonder about His mission and His nature: "What sort of person is this . . . ?" (Matt. 8:27) "He has done all things well; He even makes the deaf hear and the speechless speak." (Mark 7:37) "We do not believe any longer on account of your talk; for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this man is for a certainty the saviour of the world." (John 4:42)

Besides being a credal-sign for His contemporaries by His deeds and words (which showed that He was God), Christ was a perceptible man as well, created in His humanity by God. This visibility made it easier for men to believe in God. Christ Himself then, and not only His deeds, is the primordial miracle, the ultimate credal-sign. Because the activity of Jesus was sacramental, that is, *saving* activity in visible form, we can speak properly but analogously of Him as a sign for believing in God. Just as in every human meeting, Christ encountered His fellows through the body. Christ was therefore a visible channel of grace, effecting a saving action through the natural obviousness of the body. Since Christ then is a sign, and His human nature was created outside of the usual operations of nature, He can be called a miracle, and indeed the most eminent miracle. That some should not accept Him as such is not surprising, since they did not accept His miraculous deeds either. This is what St. John tried to depict in his conception of the miracles of Christ. They were not only physical activities of a man but supernatural actions of God, revealing and healing in an order above the natural reasoning powers of comprehension. Yet precisely because Christ was a visible man, man himself could pre-comprehend rationally something of the very mysteries of the Trinity and God's operations with men.

After this consideration, we can now appreciate the importance of the resurrection as the one deed of Christ and God which lends the finest support to the truths revealed in our believing act. In fact we are, as Christians, witnesses of the resurrection (see Acts, chapter three). Until the end of the world, Christians will be witnesses of the resurrection; the resurrection established Jesus in His state as Lord and Anointed One. In other words, the ultimate confirmation

of Christ's words and His mission lies in His being raised-up from the dead. No other deed of God, during the whole of the history of salvation, so completely confirmed the truth of God's message to man. If a man were troubled about what Christ had said, and had hoped for much from Him (as did the two disciples traveling to Emmaus in dejection), and then saw this very Jesus now in a glorified state, perceiving Him nevertheless through his senses as something apart from him, what more could he ask? Since we know that no nation of men ever conceived of life after death with the same body which one had on earth (after all, the obvious corruptibility of the body would discount what would seem to be a fantastic belief), would it not have been unreasonable for any man not to have believed in Christ if he did see Him face to face, a living person even after He had died? This is why the Christian, the witness to the death and resurrection of Christ, has always felt his heart "burning within him," as did the disciples at Emmaus once Christ revealed Himself to them. In the light of the resurrection, faith becomes a real rational action.

As the Father's answer to the Son's offering His life on the cross, the resurrection makes Christ the Lord, whose dominion is upon His shoulders. The divine dominion is over a glorified humanity, a new creation. As a result of the Christian's share in the new creation, by faith through witnessing the credal-sign of the resurrection, man finds a new dignity of his whole person. The announcement of the victory over death which Christ accomplished for man provides man with an answer to the agonizing questions of life and death. The resurrection provides man with a direction to his life, revealing the full truth of human dignity now as a son of God. Suffering and death are no longer crushing enigmas, but aids for man in working out his own destiny.

In conclusion, we may say that the resurrection established Christ as the primordial credal-sign, the optimum sign of believability. In Jesus the man are found all three credal-signs: He is God revealing, God commanding faith by means of divine words clothed in human language, and a primordial credal-sign, a living and walking miracle, an externalization rendering belief reasonable, and non-belief irrational and condemnatory. Being all three at once, Christ stands at the beginning, middle, and end of every act of faith which man performs. He is the "miracle" of the ages.