

THE TREATMENT OF MIRACLES IN FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY

Few people today would deny the possibility of a miracle—it is within God's power. It's that simple. God rules the universe, and if He can daily multiply the grain of wheat planted in the ground, why could He not multiply the loaves and fishes? The question is would He and did He? It would seem that normally (as Augustine repeatedly points out) it is not necessary to manifest His power or His goodness, for these are clear from His ordinary Providence. Why then would He? For a specific purpose, such as to guarantee His revelation, or even to reveal.

If God speaks to men, He must do so in a way that men will be able to know that these are words of God. If He deems it necessary (*moraliter*) to make positive revelation of His will, it would be done in such a way that men would be sure that these are the words of God making clear the will of God. Otherwise it would be useless to reveal anything for the public good (of course, immediate revelation is of so convincing a nature that there never seems to be doubt—cfr. Abraham, Isaias). The words of God then are guaranteed by acts of God, observable and recordable, so that men may ever after know that this is the will of God.

If God were to work a miracle, properly so called, in approbation of a definite doctrine—ah, then, the whole world would believe that doctrine. Yet we know that He did repeatedly endorse the teachings of His Divine Son with such approbation. What then keeps the modern man from accepting them? At various times men have had different difficulties: textual, conceptual, or scientific; difficulties which ended up with making the acts of healing purely natural and denying the “cosmic miracles”; or difficulties brought up because of the dignity of God, the laws of nature, the “similar” acts in every other religion (*sic!*), from a similarity with faith healing, and so on endlessly.

Today the difficulties seem to stem from two sources, scientific knowledge and a failure to see the purpose of a miracle.

1. *Difficulties in showing a miracle to be a miracle:*

A. Could one say that the progress of science will some day soon explain away the miracles of Christ?

Science is a wonderful thing. It has already performed many marvelous things. But it always has been marvelous, not miraculous, and new developments do not increase my personal amazement—I'm just as amazed at a crystal radio set as I am at color television. The ability to cook a hot-dog with infra-red heat has not changed the nature of man, nor the nature of his relations with his Creator.

But is there any way we can answer this objection about future knowledge? Henri Bouillard ("The Christian Idea of the Miraculous," in *New Problems in Medical Ethics*, Dom Peter Flood, ed., Newman, 1953, pp. 247-259) seems to say that the healing at Lourdes are naturally done, except for one important element—their instantaneousness; nor should this be surprising, since God normally uses natural means to achieve His results among men. Benedict XIV, too (*De Beat. Servorum Dei*, IV, p. 1, c. 8) required that the cure be "sudden". But while this is a useful indication, it is not conclusive, and for Benedict it is but one of seven such indications in physical cures.

Science can help us. Scientists are no more interested in detecting false "miracles" than theologians. They can at times tell us, "This is not beyond the power of natural forces today", but they can never tell us "*Digitus Dei est hic*"—at best they can merely say that in the present state of scientific knowledge, this fact is on the basis of physical science alone inexplicable.

Do we as theologians have any presentation to show an otherwise inexplicable marvel as a miracle? Yes, the argument *ex circumstantiis*, from the absence of evil and the presence of good, and especially from the religious context in which the event is placed. It is an argument the man of science can understand: when a fact occurs only in the presence and with the concurrence of certain other facts, there is a necessary relationship (if not necessarily a causal relationship) between these facts. The Abbe Bros wrote (in 1906):

Besides the strangeness of miracles, there is a single characteristic which gives them a distinctive mark. It is that either before or during or after the event, they are connected with religious phenomena. Of course, these phenomena are not always the same. Sometimes it is a prayer, sometimes a command in God's name, or even a simple act of trust in a supernatural power. But all of these religious phenomena have one common mark, and this is striking enough to be noted by an impartial scholar. In this situation you have indications of a causality that can perhaps be easily discovered.

For we are more free than those who deny all miracles *a priori*; we admit all that they admit as possible causes or explanations for all wonderful deeds, but we have an additional possibility—divine action in the world. We are quite willing to grant all sorts of marvels: the amazing feats of ESP, the superhuman strength displayed in frenzy, traumatic cures, the purely natural psychological influence of prayer on the one who prays. We have the freedom of the sons of God. "In many cases, which might, but do not necessarily have to be explained by the supernatural, we have the right of withholding our judgement. But those people never have such a right. Once they find themselves face to face with some wondrous happening or account . . . they must come out with a dogmatic negative, no matter what kind of witnesses are on hand, no matter what may be the condition of the text, its origin, the obvious meaning of the author, or his sources of information." (B. Allo).

B. A more basic objection is brought up by the Heisenberg principle of Indeterminism. Roughly, this states that man is not able and will not be able to know all the factors entering into any result. (Actually, the principle simply states that we cannot measure position and velocity simultaneously.) One would never be sure, then, that any fact could be *extraordinarium*.

In deterministic mechanics, it was always supposed that were it possible for a man to know the entire state of a physical system at any given instant, he could then accurately predict its state at any future instant by determined physical laws; now, only probable predictions can be made, for laws are not absolute but only

statistical probabilities. The present Holy Father, Pius XII, pointed out in his Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, April 24, 1955 (TPS, II, 2, p. 119):

Quantum mechanics and its fundamental principle of indeterminism with the challenge to the principle of causality which it supposes, appear as scientific hypothesis influenced by currents of philosophical thought . . . Many illustrious thinkers . . . claim that it is necessary to be satisfied with the simple verifying of facts, and striving to have these included in formal presentations.

Later, the Holy Father said (in an Address to the International Thomistic Congress, Sept. 14, 1955 (TPS, II, 3, p. 222):

Treading on this false path, some people have gone still further, attributing to the particles of the microcosm a sort of "free will". They have thus come to believe that they are casting doubt on the principle of causality. But . . . the *philosophia perennis* admits the existence of active intrinsic principles in the nature of bodies whose elements, in the space of a minimum interval, react differently to the same external actions and whose effects consequently cannot be determined in a univocal fashion.

As contemporary physicists are accustomed to say, the law of causality no longer applies in nature. But obviously, causality does not have the same meaning for the physicist as for the philosopher. For the latter, it means entitative dependence; for the former it means the predictability of events from a knowledge of their previous states (V.E. Smith, *The Philosophical Frontiers of Physics*, CUA Press, 1947, p. 38).

Basically, is this indeterminacy subjective or objective? Scientists disagree: Eddington and Jeans hold with Heisenberg that the principle is objective; Planck and Einstein "have insisted that indeterminism is only subjective, an inexactitude in our knowledge of nature, but not an indeterminism in nature itself; a temporary barrier, but not a permanent limit" (Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 40). Perhaps the simplest statement is Bertrand Russell's (*The Scientific Outlook*, New York, 1931, p. 105): "The Principle of Indeterminacy has to do with measurement not with causation (the order of nature)."

In the second of the two addresses quoted above, the Pope gives an example:

The relationship expressed in the formula $E = Mc^2$. . . does not yet permit anyone to say that matter is changed into energy . . . (But) one can legitimately conclude today that there exist phenomena in nature in the course of which a portion of matter loses its characteristic of mass and radically modifies itself in its physical properties while remaining wholly matter. It happens that the new states which the latter assumes escapes the experimental methods which have been used to determine the value of the mass. Correlative with this change, a certain amount of energy frees itself and appears, giving origin to facts which one can observe and measure in the ponderable matter.

If then, according to the principle of Indeterminacy, there are no mechanistic laws of nature but only compilations of statistical probabilities, how can we show a marvelous fact to be impossible to "merely human powers" or "Transcending human powers" (phrases from Pius XII's Decretal letters of Canonization of Jeanne of Voilois, *AAS*, XLIII, 1951, 247-248; quoted in Hardon, "Concept of Miracle from St. Augustine to Modern Apologetics," *TS*, XV, 1954, 2, p. 249)? The question does not concern the possibility, but the demonstrability of a fact. If the miracle were to concern a physical cure, for example, the probabilities are almost infinitely opposed to such a cure; and when this miraculous fact is placed in its religious context (within which and only within which framework such a cure takes place), then practical certitude is obtained.

For both of these objections, then, it would seem that an answer can be found in the circumstances which surround a miracle. As Father John Sweeney has pointed out ("Recent Developments in Dogmatic Theology," *TS*, 17 [1956], 3, p. 374): "The religious circumstances surrounding a miracle offer an intelligible explanation of its exceptional character; the miracle does not simply happen; it is willed by God operating in a sphere that transcends statistical analysis and computation, and for a purpose that is made understandable by the religious context". It was not a surprise to Christ that the water became wine; it was the direct result of His action. In the modern world, a miracle is not an isolated phenomena

unrelated to other events, flashing across the sky and attracting attention like a meteor and being just as useless. It is a deliberate act of God, transcending the normal order, occurring in a religious framework for His good purpose.

It is in these events enveloping the miracle that we can see clearly that God is acting. Preceding the event, we find petitionary actions; in the event itself, faith and hope; after the event, thanksgiving following recognition of the Divine action. The miraculous draught of fishes, for example, is miraculous only in its circumstances—in itself there is nothing surprising in professional fishermen catching an unusually large netful of fish. But the moral circumstances of the persons involved, the manner in which the action was directed, the effect produced—as well as the physical fact that these men has fished all night and netted nothing—are all directed to preparing them to accept the Petrine primacy instruction which follows. The action becomes recognizable as Divine in and because of these religious circumstances and motivations. Were this draught of fishes to occur outside of such a combination of circumstances, it could well be interpreted as just an unusual catch, a stroke of luck in finding a school of fish so close to the shore and only at the end of a night's fishing.

Is it possible to demonstrate absolutely in every case that a miracle is truly an act of God? No. In some cases, perhaps—when the action is equivalent to the creation or destruction of matter, or when one substance is changed directly into another; or when the circumstances are of such a nature that the explanation of "hidden but purely natural causes" is automatically ruled out. But this involves the whole question of certitude, which leads us to the second section of this introduction.

2. What is the Apologetic value of miracles today?

Assuming that a marvelous fact has been shown clearly to be a miracle, and has been accepted as such, then what? God has acted in His world. Why? The fact of the miracle itself is not the end of the story. Both the Pharisees ("He casts out devils by Beelzebub"—

Luke 11:15) and the Apostles ("And they believed in Him"—John 2:11) saw the same facts, the same marvelous deeds; the Pharisees rejected the interpretation of the deeds and rejected Christ, but the Apostles were led to accept the deeds and Christ.

The probative force of the argument from miracles is not worked in a vacuum, upon some strange sort of pure intellectual being; it must be exercised with men as they exist in reality. Man is a complex creature, essentially religious, for he was created by God and destined to return to God and constantly directed to that destiny by divine aids. And it is to a complete man with this religious awareness that this argument is most effective. The Vatican Council tells us (Capit. III, De Fide, DB 1790):

In order that the service of our Faith should be agreeable to reason, God has willed to join to the internal helps of the Holy Spirit some external arguments for his revelation, namely, divine deeds, especially miracles and prophecies, which, inasmuch as they plainly show forth the omnipotence and infinite knowledge of God, are most certain signs of revelation and are suited to the intelligence of all. Wherefore, both Moses and the prophets, and above all Christ the Lord himself, performed many and most manifest miracles; and we read of the Apostles that "they, going forth, preached everywhere, the Lord working withal and confirming the word with signs that followed."

The interpretation of a physical prodigy calls into play the whole character of a man. A miracle (again) is not an isolated phenomenon—it is a religious event, placed in a religious context, "interwoven in a totality of religious history" (Father Vincent O'Keefe, S.J.); as such, its interpretation needs a man with a certain receptivity to religious ideas. This is not the credulous awe-struck wide-eyed fanatic; it is a complete man, using his intelligence to weigh the facts observed and recorded, sifting the evidence, using the knowledge of nature we have acquired—but not blind to the religious character of the event, not judging with a preconceived prejudice against the very possibility of such a miracle. This, I think, is part of what the Vatican Council meant by the "internal helps of the Holy Spirit," to which the external arguments of the miracles are joined. Miracles in themselves are indeed "most certain signs" and

“suited to the intelligence of all”; one need not be a nuclear physicist to detect that a man born blind can now see, or to observe a withered hand become straight and strong. But these facts are extrinsic to the truth of revelation; they could be accepted as facts, without application to the truth, if a man studies only their physical nature. But when the marvelous fact becomes but a part of a religious event, then it can be seen for its true value. This is not an appeal to the “eyes of Faith,” to the type of vision that allows a love-sick swain to see his inamorata as the most beautiful woman in the world; it is rather the appeal to an open-minded man, conscious of his dignity as a creature of God, aware of the fact of God’s providence and activity in His world, who can see the fact as it actually is in its setting.

These are just some ideas on Miracles and their use in Apologetics today. We have time for a great deal of discussion on this general topic. Some of the questions we might try to answer could be

— What is a miracle?

— How has the concept of miracle developed?

— Are the miracles of Christ all extrinsic to the doctrine, or are they acts of revelation in themselves? (In Mark, ch. 6-9, they seem a development on the theme of faith.)

— If the miracle confirms the doctrine and the doctrinal setting demonstrates the miracle, are we involved in a vicious circle?

— Can the man of science ever (as such) affirm or deny a miracle? Or is this religious fact to be judged by the man of religion? (Not a dichotomy of personality, but of fields of knowledge.)

— Is François Tayman’s definition the best? (“A perceptible event which the normal course of nature does not explain, but which God produces in a religious context as a sign of the supernatural”— in “Le miracle, signe du surnaturel,” *NRT* 77 [1955]; *Theology Digest* 5 [1957], 1.)

— What does a miracle prove?

— Can a miracle be shown to be a divine act?

— Does the apologetic proof from miracles force conviction by itself?

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Digest of the Discussion:

The discussion centered mainly on the alleged vicious circle of establishing the miraculous character of the event from the religious context of the event. Father Brennan, C.M., of Our Lady of the Angels, Niagara Falls, began by stating this objection. Father Van Antwerp replied by distinguishing between the specific and the generic religious context. It is not the particular doctrine in support of which the miracle takes place which is here meant, but rather the general religious background and context of the human beings who witness the miracle. Monsignor Shea of Darlington inquired as to whether the point at issue concerned the preternatural or strictly supernatural. Father Brennan answered that he had in mind an instantaneous cure, a modal miracle, determined as such by the circumstances. The religious circumstances alone would be insufficient. Monsignor Shea said he had in mind religious circumstances taken in a wide sense, for example, the ensemble of the miracles of Christ in various times and contexts, whenever and wherever He wished.

Father Biasotto, O.F.M., brought up the circumstances which exclude apologetic value of the miracles related in the apocryphals. Father John O'Connell of Chicago asked for a determination of what was exactly meant by a miracle with an apologetic purpose. What of a miracle in answer to a prayer? Father Palmer, S.J., of Woodstock, Md., commented on the unreliability of accounts of miracles not personally witnessed. This impairs their apologetic value. Father Van Antwerp cited the example of Alexis Carrel personally witnessing a miracle at Lourdes and remaining unmoved. The explanation did not seem to be bad will. There must be another explanation. Carrel's reaction was different after the return of his Faith. If we do not have such a background of our Faith, would our reaction be like that of Carrel at first? Father Palmer suggested that the basic prejudice here is the practical consequences for daily life. Hence the person is looking for any escape rather than admit the implications for his life and religion. The objections arising therefrom to the miracle will not be real objections. Brother Luke of Manhattan College commented on the fact that while miracles occupy so important a place in scientific apologetics, they often do not succeed in this role with scientists in practical apologetics.

Father O'Rourke of Overbrook remarked on the good faith of many of the opponents of Our Lord, due to the shock of His doctrine to their religious presuppositions. They applied our criterion of religious circumstances and came to a wrong conclusion, namely to diabolic intervention. Father John Smolko of Washington called attention to the importance here of the "*instinctus interior*" in regard to the culpability of the Jews. Father Brennan said that God cannot allow a person in good faith to be deceived in such a matter. There must have been some defect in

the subject. They must have in some way had had sufficient means to discern the truth from error. Brother Luke remarked that in regard to the total picture of Christ's miracles, that it could hardly give any impression of the diabolical. Father O'Rourke commented that primitive peoples are so easily deceived by wonders, for example by black magic. We are able to perceive the evil in the circumstances but do they? Father Brennan said that it would be hard to decide this in particular cases but he held that they still have the ability in general to do so. Miracles must be able to be discerned as such. If they are not, there must be some fault present or previous.

Father Smolko brought up the matter of the miracles of Mohammed. Father Glimm of Pontignan cited the case of a young boy claiming visions. Thousands of people even including priests and bishops are taken in. There have been many such instances. How are we to explain the deception of these good people? Father Brennan suggested that time usually dissolves such cases. The proper criteria could have been used but were not. They were instances of precipitation. Father Palmer said that in some cases no great spiritual harm had come about.

But it is something different in the case of diabolic phenomena for example in Mexico in the story of the "divine mushrooms" which appeared in *Life* magazine. In such cases God would not allow persons to be inculpably misled. In the case of primitives and the poorly instructed, the culpability may not be theirs but ultimately that of our first parent Adam. The Jews were misled by tending to expect a different type of Messiah from the one who came. The culpability there belongs more to the whole nation than the particular individual. Father Van Antwerp remarked on the apologetic miracle of the Church itself. How many are affected by it and what is the culpability attaching to those who do not heed it? Father O'Keefe of Woodstock, Maryland, said that one must bring a scientific preparation if he is to accept or reject a miracle as scientific. We experience little difficulty because we are Catholic-minded but it is different for outsiders with different epistemological approach and background. Father Palmer mentioned the case of miracles taking place in response to prayers among Protestants and how these very occurrences in some cases were precisely what held them back from entering the Catholic Church. Father Biasiotto corroborated this, citing the case of a Methodist minister obtaining a miracle to prove the innocence of a man, saving him from the gallows. God was accepting the prayers of the Methodist minister but not in so far as they were in confirmation of his religion as such. Father O'Keefe commented on the isolation of the fact as compared with the cumulative value of the miracles in favor of Catholicity. Monsignor Shea concurred that cumulation is the main point. Father Palmer objected that what we want to prove is not the best Church but the one and only true Church. Such an emphasis

might rather favor the Branch Theory. Father O'Keefe said that the point under discussion was limited mainly to the miracles of the psychological order, not to those of the physical order. Father O'Rourke wished to know if there were any well attested miracles of the Orthodox Church. Father Van Antwerp mentioned John of Kronstadt.

Father Van Antwerp brought up the question of miracles constituting part of the message of Revelation, for example Mark VI-IX, the incident of the man born blind. Such miracles are connected with the content of the Christian Revelation. Father O'Rourke mentioned the Resurrection itself has both a dogmatic and an apologetic aspect. It is an object of Faith as well as the prime miracle of apologetics.

Father Tichner of Fort Wayne renewed the object of the vicious circle if we emphasize too much the context of miracle. Father Brennan said there is no circle. In one case we take the account as history; in the other as inspired.

Father Tichner admitted that it was all right to emphasize the physical circumstances in this respect but what about the moral circumstances. Father Malone of Maryknoll remarked that miracles as such are outside the order of Faith. The Resurrection is presented by Saint Paul, first as a motive of credibility and then as a doctrine. Father Glimm mentioned the fact of one's personal reaction to the Gospel when read, for example a person says to himself, "This is true" and does so instinctively. Father Brennan said that this could be a moral miracle if truly realized, an intervention of God. Father Glimm remarked that many a person comes to the Church uninfluenced by any such miracle. Monsignor Shea remarked that where we are in the presence of an adult mentality, we must look for higher certitude and such people will look more to the higher type of miracles. Along with strict miracles which are the credentials of the divine legate, which are indubitable divine signs, there are also miracles *secundum quid*, which may also be divine signs, for example certain natural events or series of such events in the physical, moral or intellectual order, for example, suppose the repetition of what happened in the case of the election of Matthias.

Father Van Antwerp mentioned that there are intrinsic criteria but that a miracle is normally extrinsic to man and even to religion with the exception of the Resurrection and certain others. Father Farally of Scranton said that John VI contains Christ's answer. They do not see because it is hard to believe. Father Malone mentioned the connection of the dispositions for Faith with credibility. Faith does give a docility. Father Van Antwerp objected that this can be pushed too far. Otherwise we have no "*rationable obsequium*." Father Smolko mentioned the prerequisite knowledge of the "*praeambula fidei*." Father O'Rourke mentioned the problem of how the motives of credibility are affirmed in the act of Faith. Monsignor Shea said the question reduces itself to:

"Do we or do we not have to have certainty of the fact of Revelation before we make the act of Divine Faith?" If we agree here on the affirmative, what type of certitude is it—strict or merely excluding prudent doubt? The latter seems to be acceptable to many theologians.

To achieve this certitude practically a cumulus of miracles is necessary. Father O'Keefe said that the impression is apt to arise that grace is being left out if the fact of revelation must be demonstrated. Those who saw the Risen Christ saw Him in the context of Faith. It was the real Christ but their experience was not identical with any other sense experience.

Father Van Antwerp asked were the wounds of Christ not always visible? Christ's Resurrection was different from that of Lazarus—Lazarus was reintegrated in a natural context,—Christ into a supernatural one.

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