

Above and Beyond

The Church's Teaching on Miracles

Issue: What is a miracle? What is the purpose of miracles?

Response: Traditionally understood, a miracle is a supernatural sign or wonder, brought about by God, signifying His glory and the salvation of mankind. As a sign, a miracle is perceived by the senses and makes present the supernatural order, God's governance of nature, and His loving plan of salvation. Miracles are a call to faith.

Discussion: The word "miracle" is used broadly in common speech to signify the wondrous, the improbable, or the newly discovered. When speaking of miracles, people often refer to natural events such as the sunrise, seasons, birth, and coincidence. People perform "miracles" in circus acts and magic shows. People refer to the miracle of modern medicine, science, or technology. People sell miracles: nutritional supplements, fitness machines, hearing aids, and sundry "miracle drugs." Many of these items are in some way wondrous. Some even point to God and His plan of salvation. To apply the term "miracle" to any of these, however, is to omit the most distinctive feature of a miracle: God's direct intervention in the world.

Nature and Supernature

Nature is the created universe, both corporeal (man, animals, plants, earth) and incorporeal (spirits). Throughout the ages, man has observed the normal movements of corporeal nature such as thought, time, cycles, and bodily motion. From these observations man has learned about the causes of natural events and has derived laws describing what should always happen.

Sometimes, however, man observes an event that cannot be explained by science because the normal powers of nature have been exceeded. The occurrence cannot be attributed to natural causes nor can the laws of nature explain the outcome. Miracles occur in nature but are also truly *supernatural* because the normal powers of nature have been surpassed.

Sometimes miracles surpass natural processes. Miraculous cures, for example, are effected in harmony with the body's potential for health. While the powers of nature could not have brought about such a restoration, divine power influenced the natural forces beyond normal capacity. This is also what happened in the case of Jesus' first miracle. Water naturally and with man's agency can become wine—from moisture in the clouds



photo by Beth Hart

absorbed by grapes, pressed and fermented—but God’s power bypassed that process at Cana.

Sometimes miracles exceed nature’s normal capacity. The plagues that befell Pharaoh and Egypt have been explained according to this supercharging of the natural with the supernatural. A number of scholars look at the plagues as natural phenomena, albeit with intensified or new effects, brought about by supernatural means.¹ Simple pestilence, drought, famine, and general hardship were not unknown to the Egyptians (cf. Gen. 41). The miracle of the plagues was that God exercised control over nature and the very creatures that the pagan Egyptians worshipped. At the movement of the rod (known to the Egyptians as an instrument of magicians) of Moses, God caused these phenomena to occur, demonstrating His authority. Thus, the purpose of the plagues was not to bring on horrifying, grotesque, heretofore unthinkable afflictions, but to convince Pharaoh of God’s authority.

Sometimes miracles counter nature. At Fatima, following the miracle of the sun, the crowd and ground that were soaked by the rain were dried instantaneously. In Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego survived the fiery furnace (Dan. 3:15-23). In both cases God countered the effects of nature much like a protective shelter might protect its inhabitants.

As supernatural wonders, miracles can be authenticated only by those who have a grasp of nature and her normal workings. Scientists can verify that a wondrous event has “no known natural cause.” Scientists can also see that miracles do not annul or abolish the laws of nature, but instead go beyond them.

Most people have a better grasp of gravity than of aerodynamics. They can see better how a passenger jet might fall from the sky than how it can fly. A

physicist knows that the flight of a passenger jet does not abolish or annul the laws of gravity. The power of aerodynamics can surpass, as it were, the power of gravity. In a similar way, the power of the Lord surpasses the powers of nature. Thus, the levitations of St. Joseph of Cupertino show God’s power over His creation.

Mankind survives in this world by countering or controlling the tendencies of nature. Water reservoirs counter the natural movement of streams. Agriculture brings a quantity of food that far surpasses what the earth would otherwise yield. Shelter counters wind, precipitation, and temperature. A caesarian section can save two lives where nature may have taken two lives. In these efforts we do not say that mankind is annulling or abolishing the laws of nature. Miracles are different in that they draw upon God’s omnipotence, but they are similar in that they do not annul or abolish the laws of nature.

Seeing Is Believing

The word “miracle” comes from the Latin word for wonder and, literally means “a sight to behold.”

Miracles require divine intervention. The merely remarkable, improbable, or in today’s parlance “awesome” is not enough to qualify. A true miracle by definition is a *supernatural* phenomenon.

Most miracles are evident to the senses. As *signs* of God’s presence, they must in some sense be perceptible. In Isaiah 7:14, we hear that God promises a sign to indicate the birth of the

Messiah: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel.” The explicit fulfillment of this prophecy is the miracle of the virgin birth (cf. Mt. 1:18-25), a singularly clear indication that the “fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4) was upon us.

Conversions and other intensely personal and spiritual miracles are truly wondrous manifestations of God’s power, but they usually are not directly perceptible to anyone other than their recipients, though the good that comes from such miracles of grace should be evident and lead others to God (cf. Mt. 5:16). Sometimes, however, conversions are more overtly miraculous, such as the occurrence experienced by Saul and his companions on the road to Damascus (cf. Acts 9:3-9). There was an observable flash of light, a voice (only Saul saw Jesus), and Saul’s blindness.

The sacraments are signs, but the supernatural part—the occurrence of grace coming from the sign—is not perceptible by the senses. For this reason, sacraments are not considered miracles in a strict sense. Transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ would be an example. A “Eucharistic miracle,” on the other hand, would entail, for example, a healing directly related to receiving the Eucharist or, more famously, the substance of the Body and Blood taking on the appearance of flesh or blood.

Theologians have identified three categories of divine interactions under the general heading of

The Authenticity of Miracles

“If anyone says that all miracles are impossible, and that therefore all reports of them, even those contained in Sacred Scripture, are to be set aside as fables or myths; or that miracles can never be known with certainty, nor can the divine origin of the Christian religion be proved from them: let him be anathema” (Vatican Council I, *Dei Filius*, no. 3).

miracle: (1) physical (the traditional notion), (2) moral, and (3) intellectual. Moral and intellectual miracles are no less wondrous, but they do not occur in a physical way. The fact that they are miracles only becomes known after people perceive that what has been accomplished is beyond human capability. Moral miracles occur in the areas of virtue and right conduct, and enable people to overcome obstacles that would otherwise stunt their moral or spiritual growth.

The Church is an example of a moral miracle. A religious society, convention, or congregation of like-minded people is a natural, human occurrence. However, the Bride of Christ, the Church, has persevered as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic in a way that goes well beyond human experience and understanding. The ongoing con-

duct of the Church according to these four principles indicates to the observer that only God could have brought about this success—by His intervention.

An intellectual miracle takes place when the mind has received from God knowledge or foreknowledge. Prophecy is an example of an intellectual miracle, the words being given to the prophet's intellect prior to being heard by the intended audience.

Christ Is the Center

Miracles are learning experiences for us. They point to something that God wants us to know or believe about Himself and His loving plan of salvation. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is Himself God's revelation. The most fundamental miracle is the Incarnation. It is the fundamental example of God's love for us and His glory

(cf. Jn. 1:14, 3:16). Further, as the Holy Father teaches, all of salvation is rooted in the Incarnation, and so it is with miracles:

This reality-mystery embraces and surpasses all the miraculous happenings connected with Christ's messianic mission. It may be said that the Incarnation is the "miracle of miracles," the radical and permanent "miracle" of the new order of creation. God's entrance into the dimension of creation¹ is effected in the reality of the Incarnation in a unique way. To the eyes of faith it becomes a sign incomparably superior to all the other miraculous signs of the divine presence and action in the world . . .²

Signs of Faith

While the Incarnation is the root miracle of salvation, the Resurrection is the definitive and ultimate sign. "The empty tomb and the linen cloths lying there signify in themselves that by God's power Christ's body had escaped the bonds of death and corruption" (Catechism, no. 657). The Resurrection is "the definitive proof" of Christ's divine authority (*ibid.*, no. 651).

However, as with all signs, some people are able to understand and some are not. Christ used the three years of His public ministry to teach people of His kingship and prepare them for the Resurrection. He used miracles to teach and to touch people with the gift of faith. Through His miracles Jesus called people to faith, bringing before their eyes a meeting of nature and supernature. St. Augustine wrote, "The miracles worked by our Lord Jesus Christ are divine works which raise the human mind above visible things to understand what is divine."³ The people who experienced these miracles understood that there is more to truth than what is found in the natural order:

The Signs of the Kingdom of God

—from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 547-50.

Jesus accompanies His words with many "mighty works and wonders and signs," which manifest that the kingdom is present in Him and attest that he was the promised Messiah (Acts 2:22).

The signs worked by Jesus attest that the Father has sent Him. They invite belief in Him. To those who turn to Him in faith, He grants what they ask. So miracles strengthen faith in the One who does His Father's works; they bear witness that He is the Son of God. But His miracles can also be occasions for "offense" (Mt. 11:6); they are not intended to satisfy people's curiosity or desire for magic. Despite His evident miracles some people reject Jesus; He is even accused of acting by the power of demons.

By freeing some individuals from the earthly evils of hunger, injustice, illness, and death, Jesus performed messianic signs. Nevertheless He did not come to abolish all evils here below, but to free men from the gravest slavery, sin, which thwarts them in their vocation as God's sons and causes all forms of human bondage.

The coming of God's kingdom means the defeat of Satan's: "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mt. 12:26, 28). Jesus' exorcisms free some individuals from the domination of demons. They anticipate Jesus' great victory over "the ruler of this world" (Jn. 12:31). The Kingdom of God will be definitively established through Christ's Cross: "God reigned from the wood" (Liturgy of the Hours, Holy Week, Hymn *Vexilla Regis*).

This “power from on high” (Lk. 24:49), namely, God Himself, is above the entire natural order. It directs this order and at the same time it makes known that—through this order and superior to it—human destiny is the kingdom of God. Christ’s miracles are signs of this kingdom.⁴

Miracles will always have as their primary purpose the glorification of God and the calling of people to salvation. The signs worked by Jesus attest to His divine authority and invite belief in Him (cf. Catechism, no. 548). After His Ascension and Pentecost, Christ’s disciples worked miracles in the name of Christ, thus giving the people signs of His divinity and proofs that He is who they said He is. In the same way later saints worked miracles to testify to a higher authority and that people are called to His kingdom.

Miracles can also have secondary purposes. They can attest to the divine authority of a mission. The miracles Moses performed not only showed that God wanted Pharaoh to release His people; they also showed that Moses was from God. Further, these miracles, indelibly inscribed in the memory of the Jews, prepared them to understand the signs given to show them that Jesus was sent by the Father. The miracle of the sun at Fatima was a sign to the people that the messages given through the children were of divine origin.

Miracles submitted in the process of canonization are an excellent example of primary and secondary ends of miracles. A miracle of healing associated with the intercession of one of God’s servants gives glory to God and manifests His saving mercy. These are primary ends. The beneficiary is given a temporal grace (sec-

ondary to eternal salvation) of better health. The miracle testifies to the sanctity of the intercessor and provides a clear sign of God’s intercession.

Miracles are supernatural signs that occur in the natural world. God’s miracles teach us about what is beyond creation. Some people invoke science in opposition to miracles. Yet, science allows us to know what is natural so that we can also know what is supernatural. While miracles communicate a specific message, they are essentially a sign of God’s glory and His loving plan of salvation. Finally, miracles are a call to faith—they appeal to our reason so that our faith may grow:

Their essential purpose is to indicate that the human

person is destined and called to the kingdom of God. These signs therefore confirm in different ages and in the most varied circumstances the truth of the Gospel, and demonstrate the saving power of Christ who does not cease to call people (through the Church) on the path of faith.⁵

¹ Dom Bernard Orchard, ed., et al., *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1953), 211-12. See also the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913), vol. XII, under “Plagues of Egypt.”

² Pope John Paul II, General Audience, January 13, 1988.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

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RECOMMENDED READING

Holy Bible (Catholic edition)

Documents of Vatican II

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Pope John Paul II, General Audiences,

Nov. 11, 1987 through January 13, 1988

(www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/alpha/index_en.html)

Ralph McInerney, *Miracles: A Catholic View*

(Our Sunday Visitor)

Catholic Encyclopedia (© 1911), Volume X, “Miracle”

C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (Collier Books)

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