

WHAT ARE MIRACLES?

People often casually refer to events and miracles, and others deny their very possibility. This article will describe what we mean in the Catholic Church by a miracle and why we should believe in them.

I. WHAT IS A MIRACLE

As St. Thomas Aquinas explains, miracles occur when God, the author of nature, chooses for the sake of salvation, to make events occur that are contrary to the usual laws of nature. See Summa Theologica, part I, question 105, article 7. As such, they are distinct from two sorts of events that are also wondrous, but not strictly speaking miracles. At one level, there are great and wondrous events and actions within the realm of nature. The creation of complex machines, the writing of glorious literature, the finding of helpful medicines and the like are glorious, but still human activity. Likewise, majestic mountains, inspiring sunsets, eclipses and supernova are wonderful natural activities, but explainable by science. (St. Thomas describes eclipses as natural, albeit unusual phenomena; the common cavil that medieval theologians attached superstitious significance to astrological events is simply false.) At the greatest level, there is the creation, repentance, salvation and the justification of human souls. Such events, especially the conversion of seemingly hardened, sinners, are sometimes called moral miracles, but are in fact greater than miracles, for the justification and sanctification are the goal towards which the laws of nature and miracles are designed.

God governs all things according to His eternal law, to make all things participate in His goodness. See Summa Theologica Part I, question 103, article 2. The laws of nature, discovered by experience and science, glorify God by showing His artistry and by giving us a stable environment in which to exercise freedom. As the Psalmist says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the sky proclaims its builder's craft." Ps. 19:1. Thus, the study of science is also the study of God's own handiwork, and there can never be any final conflict between true science and faith, for God is the author of both realms. See Catechism 159. However, God may, for His own purposes, choose to override the usual laws of nature for the sake of His greater order.

There is nothing inconsistent about God generally working through the laws of nature, but sometimes choosing to override them. In his book Miracles, C.S. Lewis draws a famous analogy to explain this point. He says that good writers generally act in accordance with the rules of grammar and poets with the standards of poetry; they do not accidentally depart from them. But there is a deeper

grammar and deeper principles of poetry which no grammar book or poetry manual can capture; and this deeper order sometimes justifies what seems contrary to grammar or poetry. Likewise, there are the often observable laws of nature that science can describe. But there is a deeper order that sometimes comes into play to override the lesser one. A character in his science fiction book That Hideous Strength compares miracles to the genius of Shakespeare. When Shakespeare first wrote, most academics thought that he was clever, but often random because his plays sometimes broke the conventions of poetry in unexpected ways; and they explained these violations as a lack of skill. In 1811, Samuel Coleridge argued that these apparently random deviations were really part of a deeper order. The argument prevailed, and Shakespeare's reputation as the greatest of English poets was established. God is the great author of heaven and earth. He never violates the eternal law that governs all things. But to point us towards that eternal law, He sometimes overrides the lesser poetry we know as the laws of nature. Next week's article will argue that it is perfectly consistent with the scientific method to believe in such miracles.

II. MIRACLES AND SCIENCE

A common objection to a belief in miracles is that this belief is opposed to a science or objective historical research. However, not only is a belief in miracles not opposed to science, it follows from a reasoned view of science and allows for a more objective view of historical evidence by opening the mind to evidence without prior prejudice.

First, as regards science, if a belief in science did mean a belief that everything is controlled by the laws of science and thus all knowledge can be reduced to science, then a belief in miracles would be opposed to science. But that such a view is an exaggeration of true science, just as the belief that everything can be explained by theology is an exaggeration of theology, and contrary to Catholic doctrine. As Professor Robert Hazan, of George Mason University and the Carnegie Institute explains in his lecture CDs on science, the fields of science are one way of knowing among other ways, and themselves cannot explain such things as the just society, freedom, love, or the meaning of life. Other fields of knowledge must deal with them. And, as Fr. Stanley Jaki, former President of the Pontifical Academy of Science, writes in his book The Bible and Science, in order to believe in human free will, one must posit a realm that is not determined by the laws of science. Otherwise, all decisions would be determined by fixed laws and there would thus be no reason to credit or blame people for their behavior. In his book Miracles, C.S. Lewis makes a similar point and adds that science itself assumes that the universe is orderly, with consistent laws throughout space and time, that our senses do not deceive us and that our reasoning process is valid. But without an orderly God, who would establish such order and make our senses and reasoning reliable, such an assumption has no basis. For this reason, the pagans did not develop much in the way of

science, for they believe in chaotic gods and thus a chaotic universe. But with an orderly God, who establishes the laws of the universe and would not deceive, we have a valid reason for believing that there are coherent principles of science, comprehensible to the human intellect. And, as last week's column explained, that same belief implies that a personal God may make exceptions to the usual rules for a greater order, as a great author may make exceptions to the usual rules of grammar or poetry to express a point, or holidays make exceptions to the usual workweek for the sake of humanity.

This belief in miracles thus not only flows from a belief in an orderly and personal God, but also allows for an objective view of history. As Fr. Jaki points out, if one denies the possibility of miracles, one cannot view historical claims of miracles objectively. The believer can consider, as the Church does, the evidence presented, whether the witnesses are credible or not, whether the claimed miracle makes sense, and whether a natural explanation is more likely. By contrast, the atheist must say that, however credible the witnesses are and no matter how much the event (e.g., a cure or vision) has no natural explanation, either the witnesses must be false or there must be some mysterious force at work, even if we do not know about it and cannot observe or describe it. Such an unwillingness to take witnesses seriously or such a faith in unknown and unobservable forces would be needed if miracles were not possible, but the insistence on that approach without justifying the assumption is unreasonable. By contrast, the Church, when she considers claims of miracles, follows a careful, reasoned approach.

III. AUTHENTICATION OF A MIRACLE

the process the Church uses to investigate whether a claimed miracle is actually a miracle performed through the intercession of the candidate for canonization. As described below, it is a thorough and rigorous evaluation, and the Church only confirms a miracle when the evidence is clear.

When people wish for an event, which is usually but not always a healing, to be declared miraculous, they contact the local bishop. If the bishop agrees, he appoints a court of experts, which would include both medical and theological professionals, to open an investigation. This court questions witnesses to see if it can determine exactly what happened. If the relevant facts are clearly established, the court also considers whether the event that could be a miracle both: (1) does not have a natural explanation; and (2) is theologically the sort of event that would be a miracle. One has to have clear facts regarding the event and the prayers for the proposed saint's intercession, no natural explanation, and theological consistency in order for there to be an affirmative conclusion. Thus, for example, if the medical records are unclear, or if the connection to prayers with the proposed saint cannot be definitively established, the event could be a miracle, but the court cannot clearly affirm it. Likewise, if a healing was astonishing, but could have

occurred naturally, it also may be a miracle, but the court would not advance it as one. On the theological side, the court would not consider a proposed miracle if it involves does not make sense that God would intervene in such an extraordinary fashion, such as the winning of a contest or sporting event. But if the court can establish the facts clearly and decides that the event (e.g. a cure or a vision) cannot be explained naturally and is consistent with the idea of a miracle, it would give an affirmative report to the bishop.

The bishop could then forward the report of the claimed miracle, with all of the records, to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in the Vatican. (Often, especially in the case of well known figures such as Pope John Paul II and Blessed Mother Theresa, there are so many reports of miracles that the Congregation only has time to consider the most likely ones.) If the Congregation takes the case, it appoints a relator to be in charge of the investigation and two panels to investigate the claimed miracle. One panel is the Medical Consulta, which is composed of five scientific consultants, as well as two experts from the Congregation's regular staff. The scientific consultants are chosen from a group of sixty outstanding professors, department heads of universities, or chief medical directors of leading hospitals, mostly in Italy, but sometimes from other countries. That panel meets to determine whether the event could have a natural explanation. If a majority concludes that the event has no natural explanation from modern science, the case then proceeds to the Theological Consulta. The Theological Consulta considers whether the facts can be clearly established, whether there is a clear connection to prayers for the intercession of the proposed saint, and whether the proposed miracle makes theological sense. If the majority of that panel agrees that the event was a miracle, it then forwards all of the medical and theological findings to the panel of cardinals and bishops that is considering the declaration of a person to be a Blessed or a Saint. If that panel agrees with the findings, it then forwards the request to the Pope for his approval. When the Church confirms a miracle, the faithful are not absolutely required to believe the event was in fact miraculous, but this process does give very strong evidence in that direction.