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The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes (Lambert Lombard)
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Miracles always relate to the faith. That is why a belief in miracles is not a vacation from reason, a little holiday from the tedious demands of rational responsibility. Not

only is it reasonable to believe that miracles can and do happen, it is unreasonable to think they cannot and do not occur.”

— Ralph M. McInerney, [Miracles—a Catholic View](#)

”

SECTION 1: Introduction—What Is a Miracle?

Some 20 years ago when I was being catechized, preparing to enter into the Church, I was much troubled by the Eucharistic phenomenon, transubstantiation. As a physicist, I could not understand how the wafer could become the flesh of Christ and the wine His Sacred Blood.

The wise old priest who was instructing me asked: *“Do you believe in the miracle of Christ’s Resurrection?”*

I answered, *“Yes, of course—that’s why I’m going to become a Catholic.”*

He then said, *“Well, if you believe in one miracle, why not a second, or more?”*

And that answer made sense to me.

So the first property of a miracle is that it is related to faith in God, as an act or sign from God. Miracles are presumed to be rare events, supernatural—that is not brought by natural law. Certainly not all rare events are miracles. Winning the lottery is a rare event. But if you needed that win to pay for a cancer medication, then you might consider it a miracle. We’ll see below what evidence the Church needs to certify a rare event—a medical cure or other phenomenon—as a miracle. That evidence, validated by the Church, is required, follows from “it is reasonable to believe that miracles can and do happen.”

I present below examples of miracles, those accounted for in Scripture and those which happened and are happening after the Revelation of Scripture.

SECTION 2: Miracles—Some Examples

2.1 OLD TESTAMENT MIRACLES

The Old Testament abounds in miracles: the birth of Isaac, all the Exodus miracles, the miracles of the prophets, Elijah, Elisha, Daniel.

Some of these put the critical sense to the test, for example, the sun and moon stopping while Joshua fought the Amorites:



Joshua Stops the Sun (John Martin)

from [Wikimedia Commons](#)

“Then spake Joshua to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and He said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon. And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies.”

—Joshua 10:11 (KJV)

One can either regard this miracle as an allegory, or dredge up a semi-scientific explanations (see [“Joshua’s Long Day”](#)) such as the earth’s rotation slowing, the earth’s axis wobbling, God refracting light to make it appear that day was still going on,.... If we regard God capable of miracles, then it should be no more of a problem to regard God capable of giving the appearance of the sun standing still as it is for other miracles that we credit. However, there is less direct evidence to corroborate the ancient Old Testament miracles than that for modern and New Testament miracles, and that is a difficulty.

2.2 NEW TESTAMENT MIRACLES

We can classify the miracles described in the New Testament by their source: the miracles wrought by Jesus, and the miracles wrought by the apostles. The miracles wrought by Jesus can be further classified into miracles on material things, casting out of evil spirits, healing and bringing back to life. In all these, the miracles are meant to show that God’s authority is manifested, either directly through Jesus or conferred to the apostles. It’s also significant that it is the choice of Jesus whether to enact a miracle, not on request, but out of pity or as a fitting climax to an event.

The miracles of Jesus—material things.

Water into Wine (miracle at Cana); John 2:1-11

The Great Haul of Fish 1 (Peter is amazed); Luke 5:1-11

Stills the Storm (the disciples say “the Son of God”); Matthew 8:23-27

Feeds the 5000 (the loaves and fishes 1); Matthew 14:15-21
Feeds the 4000 (the loaves and fishes 2); Matthew 15:32-39
Withers the Fig Tree (a symbol for the Temple?): Matthew 21:18-22
The Great Haul of Fish 2 (the Lord is recognized); John 21:1-14

The miracles of Jesus—casting out evil spirits and demons

Casts out an Evil Spirit: Mark 1:23-28
Expels Demons into the Gadarene Swine (“My name is Legion”); Mark 5:1-13
Loosens the tongue of the dumb man: Matthew 9:32-33
Expels a demon: Matthew 12:22
Expels a Demon from a Boy: Matthew 17:14-21

The miracles of Jesus—cures the sick and raises the dead

Cures the Nobleman’s Son: John 4:46-47
Cures Peter’s Mother-in-law: Mark 1:30-31
Heals a Leper: Mark 1:40-45
Heals the Centurion’s Servant: Matthew 8:5
Raises the Widow’s Son from the Dead: Luke 7:11-18
Cures the Widow’s Daughter: Matthew 9:18-26
Cures the Woman who bleeds (“Your faith has cured you”): Matthew 9:18-26
Cures the Invalid at the Bethesda Pool: John 5:1-9
Restored a Withered Hand: Matthew 12:10-13
Cleansed 10 Lepers: Luke 17:11-19
Raised Lazarus from the Dead: John 11:1-46
Opened the Eyes of Two Blind Men: Matthew 20:30-34
Restored the Ear of the High Priest’s Servant: Luke 22:50-51

Acts of the Apostles—escape from jail, sick cured, dead raised, Holy Spirit

Holy Spirit Descends at Pentecost: 2:1-13
 Peter Heals the Lame: 3:1-11
 Ananias, Sapphira Struck Dead: 5:1-10
 Peter, John Send the Holy Spirit: 8:14-17
 Peter Restores Tabitha (Dorcas) to Life: 9:36-41
 Peter Freed from Prison by an Angel: 12:7-17
 God Smites Herod, who Dies: 12:21-23
 Saul (Paul) Sees Jesus and is Converted: 9:1-9
 Paul Heals a Cripple: 14:8-10
 Prison Doors Opened by Earthquake; Paul, Silas Escape (16:25, 26
 Paul Restores Eutychus to Life (20:9-12)
 Paul Heals the Father of Publius (28:7-9)

2.3 MORE RECENT MIRACLES

We can categorize miracles wrought after the times of the New and Old Testament as follows: Marian apparitions, Eucharistic miracles, uncorrupted bodies, healing miracles.

Marian apparitions

There have been nine apparitions approved by the Church. (See below, for the procedures used by the Church to approve miracles.) I'll list four of these; for the complete list and an expanded description of each apparition see [this link](#).

Our Lady of Guadalupe. 1531, Mexico—Mary appeared four times to St. Juan Diego, asking that a church be built and for the conversion of the Aztecs.



Statue of St. Juan Diego, wearing the miraculous serape with the image of roses and the Virgin Mary from Wikimedia [Commons](#)

Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, 1830, Paris—Mary appeared to St. Catherine Laboure and asked that a medal, commemorating the Immaculate Conception be made.

Our Lady of Lourdes, 1858, France—Mary appeared to St. Bernadette Soubirous (14) 18 times at a grotto, which has since been the site of miraculous cures (see below). Mary described herself as “The Immaculate Conception”, a term which had been set as dogma four years earlier, and with which Bernadette would not have been familiar.

Our Lady of Fatima, 1917, Portugal. Mary appeared to three children six times. She called herself “Our Lady of the Rosary,” asked that the rosary be prayed daily for the conversion of sinners and the consecration of Russia to her Immaculate Heart. She left messages (prophecies), that are in the custody of Vatican authorities.

Besides the nine approved apparitions, there is the apparition of Mary at Medjugorje, Bosnia, where Mary is reported to have appeared to six children. This apparition [has not been approved by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith](#), though the faithful are still allowed to make pilgrimages to the site.

Eucharistic Miracles

Eucharistic miracles occur when the host, previously consecrated, either issues blood or is transformed into human tissue.

One of the oldest (Eighth Century A.D.) occurred at [Lanciano](#) Italy. The host was transformed into cardiac tissue, and subjected in 1970-71 and 1981 to histological analyses. The results showed that the tissue had blood type AB, the same as that found for residues in the Shroud of Turin. Remarkably, the tissue remained uncorrupted for the 1100 years after the miracle occurred.

Another remarkable Eucharistic miracle occurred in Buenos Aires during the 1990s, when Pope Francis was Archbishop. A consecrated host was dropped, recovered and put into water, whence it turned into cardiac tissue, presumed to be of the left ventricle of the left ventricle of a heart very much under stress, according to pathological studies. For a more detailed account, refer to, [Eucharistic Miracles of the World](#), and the pdf sections [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

The most recent in [Legnicka, Poland](#) occurred in 2013 when a host was dropped and then found to bleed. Examination by pathologists confirmed that it was most likely cardiac tissue.

These results are hotly contested by atheists who claim that they are either the result of fraud or that the internet reports of their occurrence are made up. Given the reluctance of Church officials to certify miracles which might be revealed as fraudulent or natural (see the section on Healing Miracles below), it seems unlikely that this objection is valid. Whether all internet reports are totally accurate is another question.

Healing Miracles

Miraculous cures are observed at shrines, for example, Lourdes, and from the intercession of saints. The protocol for certifying such miracles as genuine will be discussed below. It's instructive to consider a recent example, the medical miracles taken to support the canonization of Pope St. John Paul II. Three months after his death a French nun suffering from Parkinson's disease (the same affliction that Pope St. John Paul II suffered from) prayed to him and woke up one morning in perfect health, even though she had been unable to move her legs before. The second cure, after his beatification, was that of a Costa Rican woman who had been told by her doctors that her brain aneurysm gave her only a month to live.

Miracles of Incorruptible Bodies of Saints

There are many saints (see a list [here](#)) whose bodies apparently do not decompose after death. Among the most notable of these is St. Bernadette, the Saint of the Marian Apparition at Lourdes. Although her body appeared essentially not to have decomposed after exhumation in 1909, 1919 and 1925, there was some damage, and the face and hands were given a ["wax mask"](#) . Not all incorruptible bodies have been altered, however, so the phenomenon is real.



The Sarcophagus and Body of St. Bernadette Soubirous
from [Wikimedia Commons](#)

SECTION 3: How the Church Judges Miracles

3.1 GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Catholic Church has to be very cautious in endorsing miracles. Should a Church approved miracle turn out to be due to natural, rather than supernatural causes, or-worse yet-to be the product of fakery, Mother Church will wind up with egg on her face. The supposed miracle will be cited by nonbelievers as additional evidence against the truth of the Church's theological

and moral stance.

A general protocol for approval of “Private Revelations” is given by the Sacred Congregation for Propagation of the Doctrine of the Faith (SCPDF). The first stage is approval by the bishop of the local diocese; he may seek the aid of a committee of experts. Further approval is given by the SCPDF, either using a permanent commission, as in the case of healing miracles required for canonization, or an ad hoc commission.

These agencies can return three verdicts on whether the event is truly miraculous, not to be explained by natural laws: yes, no, can’t decide (translating from the Latin). Whatever this judgment, and the final judgment of the SCPDF, might be, it should be emphasized that other than those miracles which are part of Doctrine or Dogma (e.g. the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary), the faithful are not required to believe in miracles, although they are encouraged to do so.

3.2 APPROVAL FOR MARIAN APPARITIONS

“There must be moral certainty, or at least great probability, that something miraculous has occurred, something that cannot be explained by natural causes, or by deliberate fakery. The person or persons who claim to have had the private revelation must be mentally sound, honest, sincere, of upright conduct, and obedient to ecclesiastical authority.

The content of the revelation or message must be theologically acceptable, morally sound and free of error.

The apparition must yield positive and continuing spiritual assets: for example, prayer, conversion, increase of charity.”

—*From the [SCPDF general protocol](#).*

3.3 APPROVAL FOR EUCHARISTIC AND MEDICAL MIRACLES

The evaluation process for Eucharistic and medical miracles is extremely rigorous. (See, for

example, [the procedure followed at the Shrine of Lourdes](#)). For medical cures, the criteria established in 1734 by Cardinal Lambertini are applied, with [some modifications](#).

The disease be severe, incurable, or difficult to treat (*vel impossibilis, vel curatu difficilis*);

The disease not be in its final stage;

No curative treatment had been given;

The cure be instantaneous (*quod sanatio sit subita et instantanea*);

The cure be complete (*ut sanatio sit perfecta*) and without relapse (*ut recidiva, sublato morbo, non contigat*).

The “instantaneous” and no “final stage” (no terminally ill) requirements have been rescinded in practice.

For Eucharistic miracles, pathologists and cell biologists are called to examine tissue or exudate from the transformed host. Good examples are given by the procedures used to examine the Lanciano and Legnicke miracles, cited above.

SECTION 4: Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles?

“The divine art of miracle is not an art of suspending the pattern into which events conform but of feeding new events into that pattern.”

–C.S. Lewis, [Miracles](#)

Very briefly, the answer to that question is YES! Let me explain in detail.

First, it should be evident from the material above that the Church applies rigorous and scrupulous standards in evaluating miracles. Mother Church does not want to be embarrassed when fraud or natural causes are proven to be the cause of what are supposed to be miraculous events.

Second, if I were to answer no, I would have to assume that science explains everything, that

“Naturalism” (or materialism or scientism) is the only explanation for all things and processes; in other words, I would accept that the so called laws of nature are just that, prescriptive, rather than descriptive attempts to give a mathematical picture of some aspects of our world. I would have to assume there is no “veiled reality” in quantum mechanics, and that a physicist who told me “I understand quantum mechanics” is neither a liar nor a fool. Third, if I believe that God is omnipotent and omniscient, I also would have to wonder why God could not, as C.S. Lewis proposed, feed new events into nature to create what seems to us to be a miracle.

The so-called laws of nature, to repeat, are descriptive not prescriptive. God can't make $2 + 2 = 5$, but he can curve space, so that the sum of the interior angles of a triangle do not add up to 180 degrees. In other words, God can do the logically possible, but difficult, for whatever ends He wishes. He can't (and wouldn't) do the logically impossible.

Accordingly, my faith in miracles does not contradict my belief that science is a wonderful tool to understand the world, to help us appreciate the beauty described in Psalm 19A (KJV):

*“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.
Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.
There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.*

Indeed, to take this a step further, to realize that the [“unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics”](#) in science is itself a sort of miracle, a miracle that is almost marvelous beyond belief. It is, however, a miracle that speaks to us of the infinite power of the Word that established this universe and us in it, and of the Savior who will lead us to a greater role.

