

SAINTS AND MIRACLES

The Miraculous in Causes of Beatification & Canonization

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TO DESCRIBE the whole question of miracles in causes of beatification and canonization as one which nowadays occasions uneasiness, doubt and perplexity, and indeed as a target for criticism, particularly among the uninformed, would be merely platitudinous. On the other hand, to treat the whole issue with serious intent, and against its detailed historical background, so as to bring to it a logical and theological evaluation – this would be another matter entirely. In fact, to undertake such a task would not only provide the information essential for a better understanding of the problems involved; it would, we believe, offer a solid contribution to the present historical and theological debate which might well have positive repercussions on Church legislation in this field.

Miracles in the current legislation

Before we approach the problem as we have set it out above, it will be useful to recall the canonical legislation which still obtains at the moment: and this in such a way that even those without professional competence in church law, who find themselves defeated by the complexities of the canons in question,¹ may easily grasp the various legal requirements which differ according to the nature of the particular Cause.

1. For the beatification of non-martyrs, the minimum requirement is two miracles.
2. For the beatification of martyrs, where the cause and the fact of the martyrdom are clearly established, these themselves can be considered as adequate 'divine signs' – a technical expression differing from that of 'miracle' in the strict sense; and if such divine signs are nowhere in evidence, it is up to the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints to decide whether, in such a case, to seek a dispensation from the Holy Father.

¹ See the Code of Canon Law (CIC), Canons 2116, 2117, 2138.

3. For the canonization of both martyrs and non-martyrs, the minimum requirement is two miracles; and these must have occurred after the beatification of the person.
4. In certain cases of 'formal' beatification and canonization, the requirement is more than two. In fact, in some cases, three, and sometimes four, are required. The criterion for increasing the number is the kind of testimony available in the informative and apostolic processes respectively.
5. For the formal canonization of one who was beatified equipollently,² however, the requirement is increased to three miracles. The reason for this is the presumption that the research undertaken for such a beatification does not provide the same guarantee of certainty as in the processes which precede a formal beatification.
6. Though the Code of Canon Law is very exacting in the matter of miracles required for formal beatification and canonization, the situation is, surprisingly, different for the equipollent cases. It rather spreads itself in dealing with equipollent beatification;³ yet it does not demand any miracle in this case. Nor does it say anything of equipollent canonization. As is well known, a 'schema' was prepared to deal with this matter, but was later withdrawn. Its purpose seems to have been not to abolish this kind of canonization, but, in all probability, to give greater discretion and freedom of action to the Holy Father. Certainly, every pope in recent times has celebrated equipollent canonizations without insisting on the requirement of a single miracle.

It is not surprising, then, if such legislation gives rise to an increasing bafflement today: and this not only for the layman, but even for the specialists in the field. We refer to the dogmatic and spiritual theologians, to whose competence it belongs to analyse the nature and function of the miraculous as a divine sign, having as its purpose to corroborate revealed doctrine, or the supereminent holiness of a particular servant of God. Further there are not a few historians who do not hesitate to stigmatize the current legislation as anachronistic and badly in need of radical reform. It is their view that it fails to take sufficiently into account the development of history as a science over the last two centuries; and that canon law here comes close to neglecting seriously the value of historical research: an undeniable fact when we read that the number of required miracles is to be raised to three, if eye-witnesses who were

² On 'equipollent', as opposed to 'formal', beatification or canonization cf *infra*, p 296, n 5.

³ CIC, part II, book IV, title xxv, canons 2125-35: 'On the process of beatification of servants of God by way of cult or the exceptional case'.

available in the informative process are no longer so in the apostolic process; whilst the number is stepped up to four when the evidence available in both processes comes from second-hand witnesses or from written documents.⁴ Those medical consultants and specialists who offer their professional services in cases of allegedly miraculous cures are equally baffled, when, under the most exacting and rigorous of examinations a favourable verdict is reached, they are told that similar evidence of a further cure or cures is required.

A final point, stressed by those involved in the complexities of establishing the miraculous in the modern scientific context, is the extreme difficulties encountered in gathering the necessary medical documentation and in obtaining the willing collaboration of the various specialists involved in a particular case – all of which is essential, according to the current legislation. Here we have one of the main reasons for the extraordinary delays in causes of beatification and canonization; and the consequence is that the Church is deprived of many opportunities of presenting to the faithful practical examples of the existence of outstanding holiness in conditions which are typical of modern life.

There is scarcely need to dwell on the importance of this last consideration. Suffice it to say that it is shared by many who are convinced that even today the genuine cult of the saints is of immense pastoral value; and that perhaps even more than in the past it is a special means of bringing the faithful face to face with a more genuine christian life. All in all, then, it seems imperative that the legal requirements of the miraculous in causes of beatification and canonization should be examined afresh, in order to bring them into line with modern situations and circumstances. With this in mind, we must begin by taking a brief but accurate look at the legal history of our question.

A brief historical survey of the growth of the cult of Saints, of the Causes of Beatification and Canonization, and the miraculous.

First of all, it is historically certain that the existence of miracles was in no way connected with the cult of the Saints in its beginnings; nor was the miraculous considered as a requirement for this cult.

The honour paid to the early Saints of the Church, that is, to the first martyrs, was due entirely to the fact of their martyrdom,

⁴ Cf CIC 2117.

publicly recognized because witnessed at first hand by the christian community. In this early period there was no question of the specific acknowledgment of the fact of martyrdom by ecclesiastical authority; nor indeed can one speak of canonization in the modern canonical sense of that term. The solemn liturgical cult of the martyrs must be considered as a spontaneous and logical development, stemming essentially from the historical recognition of their martyrdom: that is, their veneration rested on the fact that they had given their lives for Christ, and in this way had become perfectly assimilated to the Lord, united with him by virtue of the sovereign witness of their love for him. It was the continual relationship between the various local churches – the early christian communities which caused the cult of these first martyrs to be spread abroad. Their names began to be recorded in the calendars and martyrologies of other churches, and some of the more famous were added to their diptychs (painted altar-pieces).

These kinds of honour, originally reserved to the martyrs, spread quickly enough to others. The period of the first persecutions had not yet come to an end when another group of deceased Christians began to attract the special veneration of the christian community. These were the 'confessors', or Christians who had been haled before the civil authorities on account of their faith; but who, for one reason or another, did not actually undergo martyrdom, or survived the torture to which they had been subjected. Yet others began to be associated with these 'confessors'. These were men and women who, without having been called upon to give their lives for their faith, were venerated for their sacred teaching, their exemplary christian lives, their charitable and ecclesial activity. Because of these qualities, they were honoured soon after their deaths in a similar way to the martyrs.

This was the period of the development of the 'ascetical life' and of the formation of the first monastic communities, when the lives of many Christians were chronicled by St Athanasius and numerous other writers as paragons of christian virtue approximating to the perfect love initially represented by martyrdom. It is not surprising, then, that the anniversary of the deaths of such men and women came to be celebrated liturgically; or that their tombs assumed the guise of sanctuaries, whose fame spread far and wide as the desired goal of special pilgrimage; that their relics were objects of special veneration, and building churches in their honour became the fashion.

Between the sixth and the tenth centuries, with the developing cult of the martyrs, the cult of other saints spread rapidly: it was enough for people to hear of a penitential life, of the foundation of a monastery with the charitable works which inevitably followed, outstanding care for the poor, and sometimes violent death, the motive for which could not be attributed in any strict sense to hatred of the faith. Above all, a new reason for cult was found in the reputation for working miracles; in fact, the two elements which constituted the *point de départ* for these cults in the high middle ages were precisely the popular recognition of holiness of life and the people's belief in miracles. Normally speaking, the great churches reckoned their founders and first bishops to be true saints; and the same was held of the great abbots. In all these cases, the stories of their achievements were put on record; *legenda* proliferated, in which the critical approach was of little consequence. The calendars and martyrologies of these times were constantly embellished with fresh names. In the churches, altars were multiplied, and the number of feasts rapidly increased.

For our purposes it is of particular importance to look closely at the more or less uniform steps which began to be taken during this era; they constitute the manner in which a new cult came to be authorized. The point of departure was, as it always had been, the public recognition of holiness – the *vox populi* – which had its origin around the tomb of the servant of God immediately after death, where the deceased person's intercession before God was invoked, and miraculous results of those prayers were proclaimed. Next, the local bishop would be approached, and in his presence, often on the occasion of a diocesan or provincial synod, a 'life' of the deceased was read, which would lay special stress on accounts of miracles attributed to the deceased's intercession. Such an event was, as it were, the skeletal outline of the future processes. These proceedings would result in the approval of the cult; and the body of the servant of God would be exhumed and given a more solemn burial – the 'elevation'. This was often followed by the 'translation', when the body would be placed above or under the altar in a church which would be given the name of the saint whose remains were laid to rest there. And all this was associated with the introduction of a liturgical feast in the person's honour.

The principal elements, then, of this procedure, which began to take shape during the merovingian era, and achieved a certain consistency during the carolingian epoch, were as follows: the

presentation to the bishop or to the diocesan or provincial synod of a 'life' composed for the occasion, with particular emphasis on the miracles attributed to the saint in question; and approval or official consent given to the cult, which began with the elevation or translation of the saint's remains.

From the historical point of view, it is of crucial importance to bear in mind that this procedure, with its intense and all-embracing stress on the miraculous, had its beginnings and main development during merovingian and carolingian times: that is, the period during which one of the more typical aspects of spirituality was the insistence on the extraordinary divine intervention in human history. It was a time also when history was in no way governed by critical or scientific standards; whilst the quality of medical research was not only crude: it could scarcely be said to have existed at all.

For five or six centuries – the sixth to the twelfth – episcopal canonization, as described above, was the norm, and indeed the only form which obtained in the Western Church. Alongside it, papal canonization had a very slow start; and it took lengthy and laborious work in the fields of theology and canon law, before it finally ousted the normal procedure of medieval times. The change from episcopal to papal canonization appears so casual in its beginnings as to be scarcely perceptible. Certainly it was not taken as an act of the supreme magisterium, one that affected the Church as a whole. At the same time, it is clear that a canonization celebrated by the pope enjoyed a greater authority; so that gradually, in succeeding centuries, requests for papal authorization of cult became more and more common. The procedure, however, remained the same as that which obtained in episcopal canonization; and in the majority of cases, the pope did no more than give his approval. Apart from this, the local procedure with regard to the customary solemn elevation and inauguration of cult went on as before. The papal travels during the eleventh and twelfth centuries provided occasions for the pope to preside over such elevations in person. Papal canonization in these ways gradually and almost imperceptibly achieved greater consistency and canonical import. The procedure took on a more inflexible form, until it finally became the only legitimate and acceptable method of canonization.

Here we can distinguish three periods in the development of papal canonization: first, the procedure prior to the time when the Decretal *Audivimus* of Pope Alexander III (1170) was added to the Decretals of Gregory IX (1234); secondly, the centuries which led

up to the decision of Sixtus V to entrust to the Sacred Congregation of Rites the task of preparing papal canonizations (1588); and finally the period during which papal canonization was governed by the work of this Congregation. It was during this third period that, on the basis of study and experience, legislation in the strict sense was conceived and formulated along with the establishment of methods of procedure. This fresh legislation and jurisprudence are in fact responsible for the regulations which still today control in large measure all matters pertaining to canonization. It took shape during the pontificates of Urban VIII (1623-44), Alexander VII (1655-67) and Benedict XIV (1740-58). The legislation of the Code of Canon Law, summarized at the beginning of this article, is the substantial legacy of these three popes.

A critical evaluation of the historical data

First of all, when we look at the public and liturgical honours paid to the Saints in the earliest times, we must conclude that cult was not linked in any way whatsoever to miracles, or to the reputation for miracle-working attributed to those persons officially venerated as saints.

Secondly, and very significantly, it was during the growth of rudimentary canonical procedure relating to the approval of public and liturgical cult of a servant of God that we find the first emphasis on the miraculous. This took place during the merovingian and carolingian times, when everyone, clerics as well as the ordinary faithful, were notoriously avid for miracle-stories, and very credulous.

Thirdly, it must be noted that the emphasis during this period, as as in the following centuries, was not in fact on miracles as such, but on the reputation for miracle-working. One cannot therefore speak of a serious attempt in these times to establish scientifically as miracles the events loosely designated as miraculous.

Lastly, during the third evolutionary period of papal canonization, during which the essential structures of the canonical procedure were established, there was undoubtedly in every case a serious attempt to discover whether or not the facts presented as miraculous actually happened, and also their preternatural character. It was during this time that the miracle was clearly taken to be a supernatural corroboration of the sanctity of the candidate for canonization: that is, that the Church humbly waited on God to confirm its judgments about the heroicity of the virtue or the fact

of martyrdom of the particular person.

A fully adequate assessment concerning the quality of this legislation, and in particular the suitability of its application in modern times, would require a much fuller and highly technical treatment. At the same time, one cannot ignore the high standards set us by the positive sciences today, especially in the field of medicine. Though one would not wish to pass judgment on the preternatural quality of phenomena accepted as miraculous in the past – and the present writer wishes to make it clear that he does believe in miracles – it does seem necessary to emphasize that in several instances the material offered as proof of the miraculous would in our day be judged insufficient by the medical experts.

To say this in no way implies criticism of the ecclesiastical methods employed in times gone by. What is more to the point, and indeed indispensable in any serious discussion of these matters, is this: whether, in the present situation, granted the extraordinary progress made by the medical sciences in their methods of research and verification, there is still a case for insisting on a multiplication of miraculous phenomena. Again, this is not to say that in other times and circumstances such insistence was unreasonable; it was an indication of elementary prudence. In other words, it is surely the case that the legislators of the past would not have insisted on this multiplication of evidence of the miraculous, if in their times the positive sciences, and that of medicine in particular, could have presented the same guarantees as they can do today.

Theological reflections

1. Theologically speaking, it must first be emphasized that the existence of Saints among the people of God, and the devotion which calls for their canonization, has to be seen as essentially coming from God. It is his work; it is he who raises up saints in his Church, and who, after their death, desires that they continue to play an important spiritual and pastoral role for the sake of the whole Mystical Body. From these suppositions the theologians conclude that the hierarchy can never renounce its task of promoting the cult of the saints and of constantly seeking to offer new saints for the edification of the faithful. No matter what the change of circumstances and behaviour in our world, there have always existed men and women who have led exemplary christian lives.

This work of the hierarchy receives the divine assistance. God himself awakens in the hearts of the faithful deep and spontaneous

feelings of admiration and devotion, and leads them to seek the intercession of the Servant of God with affectionate trust. Here is found the authentic reputation for holiness; every canonization finds its real roots in what the theologians recognize, and rightly so, as a 'divine sign': *digitus Dei est hic* ('God's hands are at work here').

It is hardly necessary to insist that the foundations and divine origins of this reputation for holiness demand a most diligent and precise verification; and it is equally evident that for these purposes all the means which modern science and learning puts at our disposal must be used. Today, much more than in the past, scientific research concerning martyrdom or heroic virtue can in certain cases reach definitive conclusions which must be accepted as morally and scientifically certain. Hence there seems to be no reason to modify in any way the traditional practice whereby the Holy Father issues the decree on the authenticity of the martyrdom or heroic virtue antecedent to any investigation into alleged miracles attributed to the intercession of the servant of God. In this connection, we should remember that these Decrees are the official acts of the supreme *magisterium*; and their importance must not be watered down. In fact, as far as the actual procedure is concerned, they bring to a close the investigations concerning martyrdom or heroicity of virtue, and should be considered as the definitive confirmation of their authenticity.

Whether or not miracles are necessary or useful in Causes of Beatification and Canonization is therefore independent of the facts concerning the martyrdom or the heroic virtue of the servant of God. Certainly they have no other function than to resolve any doubt whether it is God's will that this martyr, or that person who manifested heroic virtue, should be beatified or canonized.

2. When the matter of miracles in Causes is approached in these terms and examined in this light, one can see why the uneasiness and perplexity of the theologians are eminently reasonable. For if it is true that an authentic reputation for holiness is a divine sign, and not merely a natural phenomenon; and if scientific research has clearly and unequivocally demonstrated that the person in question was in fact martyred, or did indeed live a life which can be described as truly heroic in the strict christian sense, then surely it has already been proved that this reputation for holiness is legitimate and genuine – in fact an authentic divine sign. If this is the case, then why seek for further proof by way of another divine sign? Why the necessity of further demands for divine intervention?

Modern catholic theology has no difficulty in admitting the feasibility and also the real existence of divine signs, and this includes miracles in the technical sense of the term: that is, preternatural facts which in accord with scientific findings demonstrably occur outside the ordinary course of nature. At the same time, theology is unwilling, and rightly, to make the easy presumptions and demands so typical of that period of history in which, to a large extent, this insistence on the miraculous in the context of beatification and canonization emerged and grew strong. Small wonder, then, that the modern theologian considers it strange and indeed unreasonable that, following on the magisterial declaration of martyrdom or heroicity of virtue, which is in fact the authentication of the divine sign of true reputation for holiness, demands should be made for another divine sign: in this case, for a miracle in the technical sense, or even for a whole series of them!

3. It cannot be alleged, either, that current practice in the Church constitutes a valid argument from authority for these demands for special divine signs before beatification or canonization can take place. History offers no scope for such an argument. On the contrary, we have the certain knowledge that in the first centuries of the Church's life public cult was accorded to martyrs, granted the certainty that these men and women had given their lives for the Lord. Theologically speaking, there is no valid argument against returning to this ancient practice of the Church. The same arguments hold in the case of non-martyrs, once their heroic practice of christian virtue is officially established.

Historical investigation into the origins and growth of the procedure which demands proof of the existence of special divine signs prior to beatification and canonization shows that such requirements have their explanation in the special conditions of the time. As we have shown, they in no way depend on a systematic and reliable theological conception which could be said to give to current practice, itself neither continuous nor of any great antiquity, the inalienable right of citizenship in the Church. That the requirement of the miraculous has been dispensed with in many cases, itself gives the lie to any unilateral attempt to sustain such an argument.

4. The procedure which the Code calls 'by way of cult or the exceptional case'⁵ is one that has obtained in the Church for

⁵ The distinction between 'formal' and 'equipollent' beatification dates from the time of Pope Urban VIII. By force of his decrees, it was established that where a liturgical

centuries; it belongs to the authentic tradition which is based on solid theological reasoning. This too is a valid argument in favour of the position presented in this article.

5. In short, there does not seem to be any theological defence for the necessity or even the advantage of demanding proof of any other divine sign, apart from the authentic reputation for holiness: which means a widespread and spontaneous movement of admiration, devotion, invocation and love of the servant of God. The legitimacy of the claim for such a reputation will obviously depend on the most rigorous scientific research; and it will receive final confirmation in the Decree of martyrdom or of heroicity of virtue.

6. If, in spite of these arguments, one should persist in demanding proof of existence of other divine signs besides this reputation for holiness, is it necessary that these should be 'miracles' in the strict sense? Again, theologically speaking, it is our view that such a demand is extravagant and without justification. There is in fact no valid theological argument which proves the necessity of miracles, or for insisting that they are opportune. We are not saying at all that God has not worked and does not work true miracles in our times; or that when they occur, they should not be presented and properly investigated. What we are saying is that there are various facts and phenomena outside this restricted category, which could and should be a sufficient argument for the Church.

We need to take into account the phenomenal progress made by medical science in all fields of research; and equally, the rigorous way in which contemporary theology distinguishes the miracle in the strict sense from various kinds of extraordinary graces. When this is done, we have a situation in which the present insistence on miracles is essentially different from what might have existed in the past; and it is this discrepancy which becomes wider in proportion to the progress made in the medical sciences.

By now it should be obvious that to do away with the requirement of miracles in the modern sense, or at least to reduce such demands and limit them to a request for 'extraordinary graces', is in no sense contrary to what we can take to be the authoritative tradition of the Church: one which certainly conforms to effective practice in past ages. Those who have experience in the field of

cult was already in existence, it was possible, under certain juridical conditions, to obtain from the Holy See a recognition which was the equivalent of formal beatification: hence the epithet 'equipollent'. The Code deals with the procedure to be followed in such cases in canons 2125-35.

'Causes' know only too well how great is the volume of cases of cures where it cannot be proved with absolute certainty that one is dealing with the miraculous. Yet in so many of them, doctors will speak of uncommon cures, wholly unexpected recoveries, cures which take place much more rapidly than one would have believed, and so on. And yet, when it is a question of verifying such cures, which fail to qualify as miraculous in the full sense, and when at the same time the prayers of the servant of God were fervently invoked, cannot one legitimately speak of 'extraordinary graces', and hence of authentic divine signs? And where such cures proliferate in the context of seeking the intercession of the servant of God, is not all this quite sufficient for discerning God's will?

And what of other phenomena in the world of God's creation, which are outside the area of medical cures? Certainly Benedict XIV was for using these signs to their full advantage. However, it is so difficult to prove their strictly miraculous character that they tend to be seriously neglected. Let us quote an historical example. A village was directly threatened by a forest-fire; the woods surrounding it were already burning furiously. And suddenly, after prayers to a servant of God, the fire was inexplicably and unexpectedly extinguished, so that the village escaped the devastation. Could not such a happening be reckoned as a divine sign? It is true that in such a situation it would be practically impossible to offer scientific proof that here one was dealing with an authentic miracle. And yet, if one took all the circumstances into account – the sudden cessation of the peril following immediately upon the prayers to the servant of God – there ought to be no particular difficulty in judging such a phenomenon in all its circumstances as an extraordinary grace. And if events such as these tended to become frequent occurrences, could we not reach a moral certainty that we were in the context of divine signs? In such cases it would appear reasonable to proceed to the beatification or canonization of the servant of God whose intercession had been sought, granted that martyrdom or heroicity of virtue had already been established.

We can and ought to have a like attitude with regard to special graces which have moral and spiritual significance. In fact, it should be said that, other things being equal, these events have a greater value than those which happen in the physical or cosmic order. Such divine signs have never received the attention due to them, since the time when demands were made for the verification of miracles in the strict sense: that is, phenomena which can be

proved only by the supposed or genuine methods of the positive sciences. Nonetheless, it is our belief that evidence of remarkable conversions and similar spiritual happenings, in the context of prayers to the servant of God, can provide a foundation which is really sufficient to establish the presence of extraordinary graces; they can furnish us with a valid argument that in this way God is making manifest his holy will concerning the beatification or canonization of the particular person.

From time to time we come across a reputation for holiness which has an exceptional and lasting quality. Take the case of a servant of God who died more than thirty years ago, and is buried in the heart of a great city in central Europe. Day after day, between six and ten thousand people visit his tomb to seek his intercession before God in silent prayer. This is in no way the outcome of propaganda: no public rallies are organized, no corporate prayer-sessions. Is not such a phenomenon an evident sign of the presence of the supernatural, a valid argument for the claim that God wishes the beatification and canonization of this servant of God?

It is possible, then, to distinguish out those movements which are divinely inspired from all others; and thus to discover in the phenomenon of a reputation for holiness that element which constitutes a special divine sign. When this happens in the context of martyrdom or heroic virtue which has already been proven, it offers a guarantee of God's will in causes of beatification and canonization.

Conclusion

Briefly, we do not believe that it is necessary or advantageous to demand a special divine sign apart from the reputation for holiness of a servant of God.

If one wishes to persist in demanding such a special sign, we maintain that it is unnecessary to claim that such a sign be a miracle in the strict sense.

For these purposes the divine signs which are now technically called 'extraordinary graces' should suffice; and they should be given due weight, whether they happen in the physical, cosmic, moral or spiritual order.

A truly extraordinary reputation for holiness should also be sufficient proof of the divine intervention for the beatification or canonization of a servant of God whose martyrdom or heroic virtue has already been proven.