

TRUE CHRISTIANITY, SIGNS AND WONDERS¹

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NO Catholic questions the possibility of miracles or doubts that they actually do take place. Christ's mission and His Divine Nature were proved by the many great miracles He performed here on earth. The early Church overcame initial difficulties and persecutions because the Holy Ghost gave her special help that expressed itself visibly in the gifts the Apostles enjoyed and in the large number of the elect among the first generations of Christians. Once the Church was consolidated, these special gifts of the Holy Ghost, as we can well understand, grew less. But they have not ceased. The help of the Holy Ghost and the presence of Christ in His Church are two things that will last until the end of time. The former shows itself by means of supernatural signs, too, with miracles.

By way of example, it is sufficient to call attention to the miracles that are examined during the process of the beatification of the Servants of God or the canonization of the Blessed. Such miracles are rigorously verified both scientifically and theologically. And we might add here that the rigour with which the miraculous cures at Lourdes are examined is common knowledge.

Let no one call us enemies of the supernatural, therefore, if we gird ourselves now for the task of warning the faithful against unchecked statements concerning supernatural happenings that are supposed to have taken place, statements which are fairly widespread at the present time, statements which create the danger of seeing the true miracle discredited.

¹ *Osservatore Romano*, 4th February, 1951. N.C.W.C. News Service translation (mainly).

Our Lord Himself has put us on our guard against 'false Christs and false prophets' who 'will show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect' (Matt. xxiv. 24). Such happenings have occurred from the earliest days of the Church (Acts viii. 9). For this reason the Church has the right and the duty to judge the truth and the nature of the facts or revelations said to have come about by a special intervention of God. And it is the duty of all good sons of the Church to submit to this judgment.

As a mother, the Church has to bear the burden of a mother's onerous and doleful duties, and, like all mothers, she sometimes has the duty not only of taking action, but also of suffering, keeping silent, and waiting. Fifty years ago who would have thought that the Church would now be in the position of having to put its sons, even some of those who are priests, on their guard against so-called miracles, against all those happenings acclaimed as preternatural, which are arousing the interest of the masses here and there in almost every continent and country? Fifty years ago, when the 'scientific' and positivist attitude was rife, people would have laughed at anyone who paid attention to and believed in what were called superstitions of the dark ages. Fifty years ago people reviled the Church because it alone persisted in upholding their existence, their spiritual worth, negative or positive, and their beauty or ugliness. One of the commonest and most solemn of subjects as far as the apologetics of the day was concerned was miracles. Now the Church has to warn its sons through the mouths of its Bishops by repeating the words of the Divine Master (Matt. xxiv. 24) not to allow themselves to be easily led astray by similar happenings and not to believe in them save with eyes wide open and after the authorities have made all the necessary inquiries and given their reports.

For some years past we have witnessed an increase of popular hankering after the wonderful, even when it concerns religion. The faithful repair in vast crowds to places where visions and wonders are supposed to have taken place and,

at the same time, abandon the Church, the Sacraments and preaching and instruction. People who are ignorant of the first words of the Creed set themselves up as ardent apostles of religiousness. Some of them do not hesitate to speak of the Pope, the Bishops and the clergy in terms of severe reprobation and then grow indignant when the latter do not take part, together with the mob, in all the enthusiasms and outbursts of certain popular movements.

Although this is a displeasing situation, it is not one that causes surprise. Man's feelings are natural, even those towards religion. Just as man is a rational animal, so he is a political and a religious animal. By bringing disorder and confusion into the nature of man and all his feelings, original sin has attacked, so to speak, religious feelings also. This is the explanation of the deviations and the errors of so many natural religions, no more and no less than the explanation of so many other distortions in the history of man. But it is a fact that errors of this kind are much more troublesome where religion is concerned. Coming to redeem man from his darkness and shortcomings, revelation and grace have restored him to his right nature especially where religion is concerned. Having healed man's wounded and stricken nature, grace gives it a superabundance of strength to be used in the service and love of God. The Church, the custodian and interpreter of the true religion, was born of the Word and of the blood of Our Lord

To think oneself religious, however that may come about, is not required. What is required is to *be* truly religious. As in the case of other feelings, there can be, and in point of fact there are, also deviations from true religious feeling. Religious sentiment must be guided by reason, nourished by grace, and as is our whole life, controlled by the Church, and even more strictly. There are such things as religious instruction, religious education and religious training. Those who have fought the authority of the Church and religious sentiment in so light-headed a way find themselves to-day faced with imposing outbursts of an instinctive religious feeling entirely deficient in the

light of reason and the consciousness of grace, one that has no check or control.

Such action results in deplorable acts of disobedience to the ecclesiastical authorities when they intervene to apply the necessary brake. This is what happened in Italy after the so-called visions of Voltago, in France over the Espis and Bouxieres incidents which were allied to those in Hampsur-Sambre (Belgium), in Germany at Heroldsbach, and in the United States of America over the manifestations at Necedah, Wisc. I could go on quoting other examples in other countries both near and far.

The period through which we are passing stands between these two excesses: open, inhuman irreligion or unbounded, blind religiosity. Persecuted by the supporters of the first and compromised by those who uphold the second, the Church does nothing more than repeat its maternal warning. But its words remain unheard amidst denial on the one hand and exaltation on the other.

There is no doubt that the Church does not wish to cast into the shadow the wonders which God works. It merely wants to keep the faithful watchful concerning what comes from God and what does not come from God, and which can come from His and our adversary. The Church is the enemy of the *false* miracle.

A good Catholic knows from his catechism that the true religion rests on the true Faith, on Revelation, which ended with the death of the last Apostle and has been entrusted to the Church, its interpreter and custodian. Nothing else necessary to our salvation can be revealed to us. There is nothing more for which we must look. We have everything, if we wish to make use of it. Even the most accredited visions can furnish us with new motives for fervour but not with new elements of life or doctrine. True religion abides essentially, apart from in the conscience, in the love of God and the consequent love of our neighbour. And, more than in acts of worship and rite, the love of God consists in doing the will of God, obeying His commandments. This is true religion.

A good Catholic knows that in the saints themselves the nature of sanctity consists not in the preternatural gifts of visions, prophecies and wonders, but in the heroic exercise of virtue. That God should in some way authenticate holiness by miracles is one thing, but that holiness consists in performing miracles is another. We must not confound holiness with what can be and is, as a rule, an unmistakable sign of holiness, but not always sufficiently clear so as not to need the necessary supervision of religious authorities.

On this point the teaching of the Church has never been equivocal. The man who turns back to events of dubious interpretation rather than accept the word of God loves the world more than God. Even when the Church authoritatively canonizes a saint, it does not by this act guarantee the preternatural character of all the extraordinary facts connected with his life. Still less does it approve all his personal opinions. By the same token it gives even less guarantee to all that is written, often with unpardonable levity, by biographers with more imagination than judgment.

We repeat that in order to be religious, it is necessary to be so in a proper fashion and as a matter of duty. In order to be good Catholics and devout people we must act with all the attention with which we act when applying ourselves to the most serious things in life. Incredulity is just as harmful to the sincere believer as credulity. True, it is not everyone who can form his own opinion on every point. But what are the Bishops and the Pope for?

It is a strange thing: no untrained person would dare to build a house by himself, tailor his own clothes, make himself a pair of shoes or cure himself of a sickness. Yet when it is a question of religious life, people reject all authority, refuse to place any trust in it, even distrust and disobey it with impunity.

During the past 200 years, especially the last half century, the Catholic priesthood has been so much the object of accusations, insults and defamation both by politicians and writers that one can well understand how it is that the faithful have the greatest difficulty in approaching a priest and

becoming friendly with him. But during the undeniable return to God we are now witnessing, the faithful must overcome their bias and return once more to sharing their feelings, their thoughts and their faith with the priest.

For the last ten years, while the religious authorities have remained hesitant, the people have acted hastily and busied themselves with wonders which, to say the least, have not been verified.

Speaking honestly, we must admit that such events may be expressions of natural religious enthusiasm (religiosity). But they are not Christian events, and they give a dangerous pretext to those who are out to discover at all costs the infiltrations and survivals of paganism and superstition in Christianity, especially Catholicism. Just as wrongdoing may insinuate itself in our daily lives, so may error insinuate itself into this individual Catholic or that, a thing which causes no wonder to those who understand what man is. But just as sin must be recognized as sin if we would free ourselves from it, so too, in the case of error, we must recognize it as such. Just as the Church has the power to forgive sins, so has it also been commanded by God to redeem us from error.

Let Catholics hear the word of God which the Church, and the Church alone, preserves and repeats whole and incorrupt. Let them not run like sheep without a shepherd after other voices seeking to drown the voice of God if in truth they are opposed to the voice of the Church. We have Holy Scripture, we have Tradition, we have the Chief Shepherd and a hundred other shepherds next door to our homes. Why should we offer the spectacle of foolishness or unhealthy exaltation to those who oppose and despise us? 'Christians, be more prudent,' wrote Dante in his day. 'Do not be like feathers that bend to every wind.' The great poet urged the very same reasons that we give to-day: 'You have the Old and the New Testament, and the Shepherd of the Church to guide you.' Dante's conclusion too, is the same as ours: 'This is sufficient for your salvation' (Canto, V. vv. 73-77).

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