

THE CONCEPT OF MIRACLE FROM ST. AUGUSTINE TO MODERN APOLOGETICS

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PHYSICAL miracles as divine interventions in the visible world are as old as the history of God's revelation to man. At the dawn of the Old Testament they were the instruments used by Yahweh to organize the chosen people under Abraham; in the time of Moses and Aaron they were the heavenly aids by which the Jews were liberated from the bonds of Egypt; in the days of Elias and Eliseus they were the signs and wonders which the Lord showed through His prophets to ratify their divine commission. With the opening of the New Covenant, miracles served to announce the coming of the Savior; during His public life on earth Jesus appealed to His works of power in confirmation of His divinity; and before He ascended into heaven He gave to His Church the power to do the same miraculous works which He did, as a pledge of His assistance and a proof of her authority.

During the first three centuries after Christ, Christian apologists and the early Fathers more than once referred to the miracles of the Gospel to establish the rational foundations of the faith. For example, around the year 125 a certain Quadratus presented an Apology to the Emperor Hadrian, in the course of which he said:

But the works of our Savior were always present, for they were genuine: those who were healed and those who rose from the dead—who were seen not only when they were healed and when they were raised but were constantly present; and not only while the Savior was living, but even after He had gone they were alive for a long time, so that some of them survived even to our own day.¹

Some years later, still in the second century, Melito of Sardis invoked the miracles of Christ as an argument for His divinity: "The deeds which Christ performed after His baptism, especially His

¹ This fragment has been preserved by Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, IV, 3 (GCS, Eusebius, II, 302; PG, XX, 308). For the thesis of P. Andriessen that the lost *Apology* of Quadratus is actually the *Epistle to Diognetus*, cf. *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*, XIII (1946), 5-39, 125-49; XIV (1947), 121-56; also the English summary of the argument in *Vigiliae christianae*, I (1947), 129-36.

miracles, conclusively prove to the world that underneath the flesh was hidden the divinity."^{1a}

FIRST THEOLOGICAL DEFINITION OF MIRACLE

It was not, however, until after the great persecutions, when peace was restored to the Church, that anything like a scientific examination was begun into the exact nature and function of miraculous phenomena. St. Augustine, in his controversy with the Manicheans, formulated the first theological definition of *miraculum*.² Shortly after his conversion in 387, he wrote a treatise for his friend, Honoratus, still a Manichean, inviting him to accept the Christian faith. After pointing out the need for revelation, Augustine shows how reasonably the word of God may be embraced when fortified by miracles. He adds: "I call a miracle anything which appears arduous or unusual, beyond the expectation or ability of the one who marvels at it."³

Some years later Augustine wrote his longest work against the Manicheans; it was directed against Faustus, who claimed that Jesus might have died although He had never been born, arguing that, while this would certainly be contrary to nature, it would be no more unnatural than the prodigies which Christ worked by healing the lame and blind and restoring life to the dead. Augustine replied to this sophism by distinguishing two ways in which the expression, "contrary to nature," may be taken. If it is understood to mean "contrary to the divinely established and universal order of things," then clearly God can no more act in this way than He can act against Himself.

^{1a} *Fragmentum 7* (PG, V, 1221).

² In crediting St. Augustine with formulating the first definition, it should be remembered that scattered through his writings the term *miraculum* has at least five different meanings; angelic prodigy, diabolical *mirum*, magical legerdemain, a phenomenon attributed to pagan deities, and in general anything strange or marvelous. As a result, rationalist criticism dismisses his authority on the subject by saying that, for him, "Miracle is simply an extraordinary event" (R. M. Grant, *Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought* [Amsterdam, 1952], p. 217). A more balanced judgment will distinguish between Augustine's use of the term loosely and strictly—although it must be admitted that, even when speaking of miracles in the strict sense, for him "the term miracle does not have the rigidly technical meaning that we find in St. Thomas" (A. Van Hove, *La doctrine du miracle chez s. Thomas* [Paris, 1927], p. 27).

³ *De utilitate credendi*, 16, 34 (PL, XLII, 90). It is to be noted that a mistaken reference to this passage is given in many editions of St. Thomas' *Summa theologica*, I, q. 105, a. 7, where St. Augustine is quoted, i.e., *De trinitate*, III, 5; the Marietti edition, 1950, has the correct reference.

However, he adds: "There is no impropriety in saying that God does something against nature when it is contrary to what we know of nature. For we give the name 'nature' to the usual and known course of nature; and whatever God does contrary to this, we call 'prodigies' or 'miracles.'"⁴

Certain critics see in these definitions a denial of God's supernatural intervention. Augustine, they say, was a naturalist for whom "the only difference between miracle and non-miracle is that miracle, being unusual, is assigned to a different mode of causation from that of ordinary events. [But] both classes of events are natural."⁵ This strange accusation comes from misunderstanding what Augustine says elsewhere in trying to explain the miraculous. He suggests that besides their natural constituents creatures also possess certain seminal elements (*seminales rationes*) which God can stimulate into operation, contrary to the creature's ordinary mode of activity. In Scholastic terminology this might be called the "obediential potency" present in all creation, which by His absolute power God can reduce to act and thus perform a miracle. To accuse Augustine of denying the supernaturality of miracles because he calls these seminal elements "natural" is to confuse two entirely different concepts: "natural" as applied to "the ordinary course of nature," and "natural" as applied to "something in nature which only a direct intervention of God can actuate."

ST. THOMAS' CONCEPT OF MIRACLE

The Augustinian concept of miracle remained standard in the Church until the time of St. Thomas Aquinas. The latter adopted Augustine's terminology, with added clarification, and then made several formulations of his own that have since become classic in speculative theology. St. Thomas' most extensive treatment of the subject is in *De potentia* in ten articles, repeated with minor changes in the *Summa theologica*. The following is a summary of his doctrine, drawn from these two sources:⁶

⁴ *Contra Faustum*, XXVI, 3 (*PL*, XLII, 481).

⁵ R. M. Grant, *op. cit.*, pp. 218-19. Augustine, says Grant, "explains miracle as due to the *semina seminum* implanted in the world at creation. These 'seeds' ultimately produce the miracle in nature. It is thus unusual but not strictly supernatural" (*ibid.*).

⁶ According to Van Hove, besides St. Augustine, the writers whose concept of miracle immediately influenced St. Thomas were: Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173), for whom

1) That which is arduous is called a miracle not because of the greatness of the thing produced, but in comparison with the faculty of nature. Consequently every effect is reckoned to be difficult—and therefore miraculous—no matter how insignificant the effect, if the latter surpasses the powers of nature.⁷

2) A miracle is described as something unusual because it is contrary to the usual course of nature, even were it to be repeated every day.⁸

3) A miracle may surpass the powers of nature in three ways: (a) *Substantially*, as when two bodies are together in one place, or the sun is made to turn back, or when the human body is glorified. Such miracles are absolutely above the capacity of nature, and represent the highest degree.⁹ (b) *Subjectively*, when the miracle consists not in the substance of what is produced but in the subject in which it occurs; for example, the resuscitation of the dead and restoring sight to the blind. Nature can indeed produce life, but not in a corpse; and it can give sight, but not to the blind.¹⁰ (c) *Qualitatively*, when a miracle exceeds the mode or manner in which nature produces a given effect. Thus, for example, when a person is suddenly cured of a long-standing disease, without medication and without a period of convalescence which is usual in such cases.¹¹

4) Finally, when a miracle is said to be beyond the expectation of the one who beholds it, the hope in question is the hope of nature and not of grace, as, for instance, our hope in the future resurrection of the body.¹²

“Miraculum est opus creatoris manifestativum divinae virtutis” (quoted in *De potentia*, q. 6, a. 2); William of Auxerre (d. 1231), who does not define miracle but describes it by distinguishing miracles, which are “supra naturam,” and natural events, which are “secundum naturam” (*Summa aurea*, I, 12); William of Auvergne (d. 1249), who gives a clear definition: “Miraculum appellamus virtutes Dei admirandas operationis insolitas cursuque naturae contrarias” (*De fide*, 3); and Alexander of Hales (d. 1245), who adopted Augustine’s definition but gave it a unique interpretation which directly influenced Aquinas. The Augustinian term, “arduum,” he explains, “dicitur supra potestatem naturae.” That he means complete transcendence of nature is evident from the way he distinguishes miracles from anything natural: “Miracula autem ab alio principio fiunt quam sit natura, scilicet a superiori, id est, prima natura” (*Summa theologica*, II, q. 42, a. 3).

⁷ Cf. *Sum. theol.*, I, q. 105, a. 7, ad 2m.

⁹ Cf. *Sum. theol.*, I, q. 105, a. 8.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*

⁸ Cf. *De pot.*, q. 6, a. 2, ad 2m.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, a. 7, ad 2m.

Among the various definitions of miracle given by St. Thomas, the two most often quoted in subsequent literature are expansions on the doctrine of St. Augustine. The first is based on an analysis of the term *mirari*, the Vulgate equivalent for *thaumazein*, which is used to describe the effect of wonder produced by the miracles of Christ:

The most hidden cause and the furthest removed from our senses is God, who works most secretly in all things. Wherefore those effects are properly called miracles which are produced by God's power alone, on things which have a natural tendency to the opposite effect or to a contrary mode of operation.¹³

The second definition is introduced by the words of the Psalmist: "Praise the Lord, Who alone doth great wonders":

A miracle is something which happens beyond the order of nature. However, it is not enough for the essence of a miracle that something occur beyond the order of a particular nature. Otherwise when a man throws a stone he would be performing a miracle, since his action is beyond the natural capacity of a stone. Consequently, when something is called a miracle, it means an occurrence beyond the order of all created nature. No one but God can do this; because whatever an angel or any other creature does by its own power is still within the order of created nature and therefore not a miracle.¹⁴

Immediately the question arises: How is St. Thomas to be understood when he says that only God can work a miracle? Does he exclude the possibility of miracles wrought by preternatural powers? As will be seen presently, a correct understanding of this point is essential for properly evaluating the Scholastic concept of miracle. St. Thomas treats the problem under the heading, "The Power of the Angels over Bodily Creatures." The objection was raised that not only God but also the angels, certainly the demons, can work miracles, as evidenced from the pages of Scripture where false prophets and wizards are said to have worked wonders. He answers:

Miracles strictly so called are those which occur beyond the order of all created nature. However, since we do not know all the forces of created nature, when something happens beyond the order of created nature known to us, through

¹³ *De pot.*, q. 6, a. 2.

¹⁴ *Sum. theol.*, I, q. 110, a. 4. The standard Catholic exegesis of Ps. 135:3-4 is that it refers summarily to all the marvelous works of God, in creation and in the miracles which He worked. Thus vv. 4-9 describe "Jahve in seiner Schöpferallmacht," and vv. 10-15 "beim Auszug aus Ägypten" (H. Herkenne, *Das Buch der Psalmen* [Bonn, 1936], p. 425).

created forces unknown to us, the occurrence is a miracle for us. Consequently when the demons do something by their natural power, these are called miracles not in the strict sense, but miracles relative to us.¹⁶

In other words, St. Thomas recognizes only one type of miracle in the strict sense of the term: where the effect simply transcends the forces of all created nature, human and angelic. Extraordinary events which appear wonderful to us because the effect transcends the powers of man, are only relative miracles, i.e., relative to our ignorance of supra-mundane, preternatural powers, like those of the angels and demons.

POPE BENEDICT XIV ON MIRACULOUS PHENOMENA

The next stage in the evolution of the concept of miracle was made by Pope Benedict XIV in the eighteenth century. Regarded as "the founder of the modern science of juridical history,"¹⁶ his monumental work on miracles remains to this day the standard reference at the Roman Curia in the processes of beatification and canonization. Although first written while still Cardinal Lambertini, it was later on formally confirmed by him as Pope in two Apostolic Letters, dated 1743 and 1748.¹⁷ The volume on miracles represents one portion of a larger work, *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione*. Covering thirty-three chapters plus an appendix, and running to five hundred pages in octavo, *De miraculis* is the best authoritative treatment of the subject in Catholic theology.¹⁸

Early in the treatise, *De miraculis*, Benedict XIV analyzes the concept and substantially adopts the definition of miracle given by St. Thomas, as an event produced by God beyond the order of created nature. However, there is one notable qualification. St. Thomas re-

¹⁶ *Sum. theol.*, I, q. 110, a. 4, ad 2m. This text gives us perhaps the best evidence that St. Thomas did not consider relative miracles genuinely miraculous, because he refers them to any created power unknown to us, even demoniac, as in the present passage.

¹⁶ *Enciclopedia cattolica*, II, 1283.

¹⁷ There are two Apostolic Letters by which Benedict XIV sanctioned the edited publication and approved the content of his own cardinalatial writings, among which is the treatise, *De miraculis*. The Letters in question are: *Concepta de Nostris*, June 15, 1748; and *Cum archiepiscopalem Bononiensem ecclesiam*, July 20, 1743. They are quoted *in toto* in that order in the introduction to *Opera omnia* (Venice, 1767), I, xii, xix-xx.

¹⁸ With respect to Benedict's treatise on beatification and canonization it has been said: "Quest' opera, basata su larghi studi e l'esperienza acquistata nell' Ufficio di Promotore della Fede (1708-1728) è rimasta insuperata e classica per la Curia Romana" (*Enciclopedia cattolica*, II, 1285).

quires for a true miracle that the effect transcend the forces of all creation, admitting that where preternatural forces produce an effect by their own power the result is only relatively and improperly called miraculous. Benedict, on the other hand, does not hesitate to call these latter, preternatural effects genuine miracles, although of a lower order:

In order to constitute a miracle, is it necessary that something exceed the powers and faculty both of invisible and incorporeal, and of visible and corporeal nature? Which is the same as asking whether something can be called miraculous if it surpasses only the forces of visible and corporeal nature and is arduous, unusual and marvelous, even though it does not exceed the powers of invisible and incorporeal nature, i.e., of an angel. According to the doctrine of St. Thomas, the answer seems to be negative. For he teaches that a miracle occurs when something happens beyond the order of all created nature. . . . However, the same holy doctor teaches that we do not know all the power of created nature, and thus there is such a thing as a *miraculum quoad nos*, when something is done by a created power unknown to us, beyond the order of created nature which we know. . . . But we, for the sake of clarity, prefer to say that major miracles exceed the forces of the whole created nature; and minor miracles exceed the power of corporeal and visible nature only.¹⁹

Although Benedict speaks only of clarifying St. Thomas' concept, actually he goes to great length to defend the opinion that angelic intervention is sufficient to constitute a true miracle. He was led to this position by the problems which arose in the causes of beatification and canonization during his thirty years' service on various Roman congregations. While codifying the rules for recognizing miracles in a canonical process, he was faced with the question: "Is it permissible, in a trial of beatification or canonization, to admit miracles which surpass only the forces of visible and corporeal nature, but not the native power of an invisible and spiritual nature, as of a good angel?"²⁰ He answered as follows:

On the one hand, it would seem that in such a grave matter only those miracles would be admitted which exceed the powers and faculty of all created nature. On the other hand, it is very difficult to know and distinguish whether a phenomenon proposed for examination in a canonical process transcends the capacity of the invisible and incorporeal nature of a good angel. Note that I say, "of a good angel." As regards the fallen angels, there are many signs by which true miracles

¹⁹ *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione*, IV: *De miraculis*, 1, nn. 14, 17 (*Opera omnia* [Venice, 1767], IV, 5-6).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

can be distinguished from false ones: the good effects of a phenomenon, its utility, mode of performance, purpose, character of the performer and circumstances. All of which can clearly show the limitations in the natural powers of a malevolent spirit. For just as it belongs to divine providence to preside over this world to prevent the abuse of God's power with consequent inversion in the natural order of the universe . . . even so, and with more justice, will He not permit the native forces in His creatures [the fallen angels] to be misused in order to confirm by signs and miracles the error of a false religion or the lie of fictitious sanctity.²¹

Benedict's doctrine, therefore, is that the special intervention of preternatural benevolent powers in the visible world is truly miraculous. In order to prove this thesis he appeals to two arguments: one drawn from the practice of the Church, which he terms a *posteriori*, and the other based on an analysis of the angelic nature, which he calls a *a priori*. The historical proof is given first as the more important:

We see that most of the phenomena related in Sacred Scripture do not exceed the power and faculty of a good angel. And yet they are regarded [by the Church] as miraculous.

Moreover, in the causes of beatification and canonization, miracles are constantly admitted . . . which do not surpass the natural forces of an angel. This is true not only in cases of beatification and canonization where the Roman Pontiff passed judgment independently of a council, but even in canonizations pronounced by him in a general council [of the Church].²²

The proof *a priori* has two parts. Benedict first points out that, since the good angels are confirmed in grace, if they testify to a person's sanctity by working some prodigy through the latter's intercession, this testimony is incontestable. Moreover, if we examine what an angel is, by comparison with man, we shall find that:

The angelic nature is more noble and sublime and of a higher order than the human; nor is it occupied with the service, protection, and care of human beings, who are beneath the angels in dignity and grade, except under the command of God. Now, although it is true that the good angels render many services to men, yet there is an order divinely established in rendering this service, which may not and cannot be changed or interfered with unless God, who decreed the order, disposes otherwise.

Hence it follows that when this order is changed by extraordinary angelic

²¹ *Ibid.* Here Benedict has introduced a distinction which was at best only implied in St. Thomas, i.e., that among the *miracula quoad nos*, only those performed by benevolent spirits are genuinely miraculous.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

operations, the change would not have taken place if God had not relaxed the laws and order which He previously decreed should regularly obtain between angelic spirits and men.

Since these angelic operations are very difficult, extraordinary, and beyond the ordinary laws of divine providence; since they proceed from God as their principal cause, and from the angels as His ministering spirits, only one conclusion can be drawn: although in themselves and *in abstracto*, so to speak, they do not surpass the powers and faculty naturally possessed by an angel, yet *in concreto* they must be admitted in processes of beatification and canonization.²³

Besides reviewing a number of canonical processes in which this doctrine was vindicated, Benedict also cites the authority of recognized theologians. The outstanding is Francis Suarez, quoted from his *De angelis*: "Sensible effects which appear to men to be miraculous can and should be considered true miracles, provided at least the following condition is fulfilled: that they exceed all the native power of visible and bodily natural causes."²⁴

Relying on the authority of Sacred Scripture, which regularly attributes miraculous phenomena to the power of God, Benedict XIV simply declares that "God alone is the principal efficient cause of miracles."²⁵ Or, in the words of St. Augustine, whom he quotes:

We cannot but believe that all miracles, whether wrought by the angels or by other means, so long as they are done in such wise as to commend the worship and religion of the one God in whom alone is blessedness of life, are wrought by those who love us in holiness and truth, or through their means, God Himself working in them. For we cannot listen to those who maintain that the invisible God works no visible miracles; for even they [the Platonists] believe that He made the world, which surely they will not deny is visible.²⁶

Evidently God can directly intervene in nature and immediately produce a miraculous effect with no cooperation from His creatures except the passive submission of the subject to have God perform a

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *De angelis*, IV, 39, 10.

²⁵ *De miraculis*, p. 6.

²⁶ *De civitate Dei*, X, 12 (*PL*, XLI, 291). In the same context Augustine gives the reason why God works additional miracles in the world, when the creation of the world is already His greatest miracle. "Whatever marvel happens in this world, it is certainly less marvelous than this whole world itself. . . . But, as the Creator Himself is hidden and incomprehensible to man, so also is the manner of creation. . . . Therefore God, who made the visible heaven and earth, does not disdain to work visible miracles in heaven or earth, that He may thereby awaken the soul which is immersed in things visible to worship Him, the Invisible" (*ibid.*).

miracle upon it. But historically the miracles which God performs are normally done through the ministry of rational creatures, angelic or human, and the latter while still mortal or after death.

How does God produce miracles through the cooperation of the angels? Benedict XIV adopts St. Thomas' doctrine in this matter, but with a significant addition of his own. According to St. Thomas, the angels may cooperate in the production of miracles in two ways: (a) As moral cause, by their prayer and sanctity, impetrating of God the performance of a miracle. (b) As partial physical, instrumental cause, by preparing the material before God works a miracle; or by cooperating with Him in adding to the accidental perfection of a miraculous effect.²⁷ Both of these contributions, it is admitted, are made preternaturally, i.e., by the angels using their native powers, which exceed the natural capacity of men.

However, consistent with his previous extension of St. Thomas' definition, Benedict also extends the function of the angels in performing miracles. Since he considers transcendence of visible, corporeal nature sufficient for a true (minor) miracle, and given that the angels can make this transcendence by their natural powers—whenever they do so, under God's command, they are producing a miracle. Technically, the totality of physical essence in the miracle comes from the angels' native powers, while the command to exercise this power to produce a specific miraculous effect comes from God. The angels are still instruments in the hands of God, only now what He is using to His own determined end is not only to have them prepare the material or add an accidental perfection, but to produce the whole miraculous phenomenon, not only dispositively but also formally, and not only accidentally but also substantially.²⁸

²⁷ Cf. *De pot.*, q. 6, a. 2. Although St. Thomas distinguishes three ways in which the angels may contribute to a miraculous effect, these modes can be reduced to two, according to two types of causation, moral and physical. Moreover, when he speaks of the angels co-acting with God as instrumental causes of "the perfection of a miracle," Thomas understands this as a kind of *donum gratiae gratis datae* which is not granted permanently or habitually (cf. *ibid.*).

²⁸ When it is said that angels produce miracles formally and substantially, this is always to be understood in a subordinate sense, and only with reference to the physical *esse* of the phenomenon. The principal cause even of minor miracles is God alone, who first commands and then uses the physical entity of an angelic prodigy for a miraculous purpose predetermined by Him.

Benedict here introduces an important caution, occasioned by the false doctrine of Malebranche, who held that at least in the Old Testament the angels were not executors of the divine will, but rather God was the executor of the angelic will in working miracles. Malebranche contended that, since God had given the custody of mankind to the angels, whatever miracle they performed could only be attributed to this general providential will of God, sanctioning whatever the angels themselves wished to do. There was no particular divine will determining this or that specific miraculous phenomenon.

The Pope explains that, while it is true the Scriptures describe the Law as being given through the angels, the Israelites obedient to the Law being rewarded by angels and the contemptuous being punished by them, the army of Sennacharib being slain by the hands of an angel, in all these cases the meaning is that God used the angels as His ministers, bidding them perform such prodigies. Against the theory of Malebranche it is necessary to safeguard the immediate divine volition in angelic phenomena, a volition which is direct and not merely permissive, imperative and not only tolerant in commanding preternatural forces to intervene by their native power in the visible and corporeal world. Otherwise it would be impossible to save the distinction between intervention by malevolent spirits, which are hostile to God and perform prodigies only by His tolerance, and the intervention by beneficent spirits, friendly to God, which perform genuine miracles by His commission and direct approval. In both instances the physical forces of visible nature are clearly transcended, but what makes the transcendence only prodigious in one case is the divine permission, and truly miraculous in the other is the divine command.²⁹

However, not only angels but also men are known to have worked miracles, either during life or after death. And here a more speculative problem suggests itself. In what sense should men be regarded as the agents of miracles? St. Thomas and Benedict concede that men no less than angels can be moral causes of miraculous effects when, by their prayers and the merits of a holy life, they "move" the will of

²⁹ This insistence on the special, immediate, and positive divine volition in real angelic miracles gives the clue to distinguishing them theologically from diabolical prodigies; for if only genuine miracles are thus directly intended by God, and diabolical phenomena are not so intended, then the latter are not truly miraculous.

God to perform a miracle in their favor. But are they also physical causes? Benedict unequivocally says they are. Following Sts. Gregory and Thomas, and Suarez, as well, he shows that God may communicate to men the power to work miracles, according to their capacity and the order of divine wisdom. This communication can be made to a man during life or after death; and either to himself, as a person, or to any act which he performs, e.g., his speech or external gesture; and even to his bodily remains after death. There is one limitation to this communication of thaumaturgic power: "This power is not communicated to a pure creature as an abiding habit, but only as a transient quality and act. I say 'to a pure creature,' since in Christ the Lord the power of working miracles was, as it were, a consequence of the hypostatic union, which itself is constant and perpetual."³⁰

Understood in this sense, therefore, a man may be regarded as the physical cause of miracles, without prejudice to God's supreme dominion over creatures, since, by analogy with the sacraments, these may be considered physical, instrumental causes of grace without injury to the dignity of God as the sole Author of the supernatural life.³¹

Benedict devotes a whole chapter to the subject of apparent miracles worked by the devil and his agents. In this he recognized a problem which had already tried the Jews in the Old Testament, and was the main accusation of His enemies against the miracles of Christ, that He worked them not by divine power but through Beelzebub, the prince of devils.

Given a broad definition of miraculous phenomena, the way seems to be open for admitting that not only God and the angels but also the demons can work real miracles:

We have already said that there may be genuine miracles which surpass only the forces of visible and bodily nature; also that all power of operation *ad extra* . . . which is natural to the angels, remains intact in the demons. Therefore it would

³⁰ *De miraculis*, p. 10.

³¹ When Benedict declares, as a probable opinion, that human beings can be physical causes of miraculous effects, he is applying St. Thomas' principle of analogy, namely: "Nec est mirum, si . . . spiritali creatura [homine vel angelo] Deus instrumentaliter utitur ad faciendum mirabiles effectus in natura corporali, cum etiam corporali creatura utatur instrumentaliter ad spirituum justificationem, ut in sacramentis patet" (*De pot.*, q. 6, a. 4). Benedict's addition to this concept lay in his interpreting St. Thomas to mean that sacraments are physical, and not merely moral, instrumental causes of divine grace.

seem that devils can perform real miracles, not of course exceeding the capacity of invisible and spiritual natures, but certainly above the powers of visible and corporeal beings.³²

The problem is resolved first of all by recalling that through divine power the evil spirits are kept from doing many things of which they are naturally capable: "They [the devils] cannot do whatever they wish, but only as much as by the providence of God is permitted to them. For they have their natural power restricted and, as it were, bound by God."³³

But the core of the problem is whether, in spite of this restraint, the devils can still do certain things which exceed the powers of visible nature. The answer is, yes. Putting aside the many cases where natural forces have not really been surpassed, others in which the devil only apparently intervened, and still others where we cannot form a certain judgment: "Yet there are some instances in which, by the will of God, and especially for the destruction of wicked men, the demons produce effects which transcend the powers and faculty of visible and corporeal nature."³⁴

Is this supervention of natural laws to be considered a miracle worked by the devils? Benedict shows that it is not:

If from the foregoing someone inferred that demons by their natural power can work miracles . . . he would be mistaken. For it is one thing to say that God can and on occasion does use the works of demons in performing miracles; it is quite another to say that miracles can be worked by the demons themselves. The reason is that according to our definition and common acceptation he is said to work a miracle who produces an extraordinary effect in confirmation of the doctrine which he teaches, or at whose intercession something marvelous is performed by God so that his sanctity may be recognized among men. And, as Estius correctly observes: "Though it may be admitted that sometimes God works miracles through the demons, this is not to say that the demons themselves perform miracles. For the demons do not teach any truth which they might want to confirm by miracle; nor do they work any miracles by themselves or through others, in order to testify to their sanctity, which they do not have. Either one of these two intentions seems to be necessary to say that someone works a miracle."³⁵

An adequate notion of miracle, therefore, involves two essential elements: (a) transcendence of nature, at least of those forces which

³² *De miraculis*, p. 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

are inherent in the visible world; and (b) a religious purpose, directed to the confirmation of truth or personal sanctity. And since the latter is necessarily absent from the devils' intentions, they cannot be said to work any miracles.

Benedict further distinguishes between two types of angelic phenomena:

If any miracles, whether of a higher or lower order, whether surpassing all created powers or only of visible and corporeal nature, have as their object the divine honor and glory, we may correctly say that such miracles are performed by the good angels, whenever God uses their activity to produce certain effects which transcend the forces of nature. This is because the good spirits, acting conformably to the divine will, seek and intend to promote the praise and glory of God. But we can never say that miracles are worked by the fallen angels, even if God uses them to produce effects which surpass the order of nature . . . which He generally does in order to punish the wicked. For although the glory of God may also be manifest in the chastisement of sinners, and to that extent the devils are His ministers, yet they are reluctant ministers, confirmed in evil, who serve the honor of God unwillingly, without wishing or intending to obey Him.³⁶

It should be understood in what sense Benedict means that the devils can be used by God as His ministers, and how he distinguishes this ministerial function from those diabolical *mira* which are in no sense truly miraculous, and which are only permitted by God. Clearly two entirely different sets of phenomena are here under consideration.

In the first instance, where demons are used by God, their part in the production of a miraculous effect is purely instrumental. In other words, just as the Lord uses benevolent spirits as agents of His mercy, so He may use the demons as instruments of His wrath. In this case a true miracle is performed, not by the demons but by God, the miraculous character being manifest in the confirmation of doctrine or attestation to sanctity accomplished by the prodigy, e.g., when a false prophet is miraculously slain by God *mediante daemone*. Of course, since the devils' intentions are always evil, God can only permit, not positively desire, the malice which they intend. His intention is to accomplish something good, permitting the demons to exercise their powers in order to achieve the end which He has in view.

In the second instance, where the demons perform certain prodigies which simulate true miracles, God is not using them as His ministers.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

He allows them, even as He allows sin, ultimately for His glory, but proximately not intending to work a miracle *mediante daemone*. In this case there is no question of a miracle, even though the visible forces of nature may be transcended. The reason is because here God is not using a preternatural power to confirm a certain doctrine or testify to someone's sanctity. On the further question, why God should permit the devils to work these *mira* and thus lead people astray, Benedict answers that such permission is not contrary to the order of divine providence, because it is an effect of divine justice in vengeance upon unbelievers and of divine mercy, in allowing the faith and constancy of the saints to become more manifest; moreover, with the aid of divine grace, the temptation to deception by the devil is not beyond the power of human resistance.³⁷

MODERN THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT OF MIRACLE

The Transcendence of Natural Laws

The element of transcendence of nature in miraculous phenomena was recognized by the earliest apologists in the Church. However, this recognition was sometimes so implicit that even St. Augustine has been accused of denying such transcendence altogether.³⁸ Not until the twelfth century, under the influence of Aristotelian metaphysics, did theologians begin to emphasize the fact that in every miracle the laws of nature were somehow superseded by the exercise of divine power. In the thirteenth century St. Thomas formulated his definition of miracle, in which the essential and almost exclusive note was the transcendence of all created forces by the intervention of God's omnipotence. When Benedict XIV, in the eighteenth century, modified St. Thomas' concept of this transcendence, his motive was a practical

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 16. For reasons of clarity Benedict distinguishes the two types of diabolical agency, ministerial function in true miracles and permissive operation in demonic *mira*, by referring the former to the *daemones* and the latter to *antichristus*. While the devil is operating in both cases, still *qua* demon he is reluctantly carrying out the express command of God, but *qua* Antichrist, by divine permission, he is opposing and contradicting this command, by trying to seduce men from their allegiance to Christ.

³⁸ This is a familiar theme among rationalist critics, who argue that, if even the speculative Augustine did not conceive of miracles as transcending physical laws, then this concept must be a medieval innovation. Sabatier, for example, says that the Augustinian definition of miracle is "any phenomenon which astonishes us because of our ignorance" (*Esquisse d'une philosophie de la religion* [9th ed.; n.d.], p. 75).

one, namely, the need for passing judgment on the miraculous favors reported in canonical processes.

An analogous situation in modern times has influenced Catholic theologians to make the same modification as Benedict XIV. Where his problem was dogmatic and canonical, theirs was primarily apologetical. He did not see how, in practice, the bulk of extraordinary phenomena reported in the lives of holy persons could be considered miraculous unless the necessary surpassing of nature were reduced to the transcendence of "visible and corporeal powers." In like manner, modern theologians found it hard to answer some of the difficulties raised by the science of comparative religions unless not only strict but also relative miracles were admitted to be apologetically valid.

The objections from comparative religion have been active for upwards of a century and are still vigorous. A recent spokesman for the opposition put the matter succinctly:

The belief in miracles has accompanied most positive religions. It has been one of the features commonly criticised by philosophy and philosophical religions.

In all primitive religions there is a strong tendency to identify the divine with unusual and striking occurrences.

When great gods arose, they were conceived as producing more than ordinarily striking and unusual events. . . . Miracles become special deeds, whose divine nature is assured by their highly unusual and sensational nature.

This conception of miracle pervaded the ancient world and is exemplified in both the Old and New Testaments. Such a conception is not specially Christian, for it is found among all early civilizations. It was as familiar to the Greek as to the Jew. It was taken for granted by the age, as was the belief in divinities. To most people, a god who did not perform miracles would have been considered worthless.³⁹

Comparative religionists were familiar with the ready answer which apologists gave to this objection: "The so-called miracles of paganism are either historically unproved, or, if proved to have occurred, are the work of the devil". Sober history, including Sacred Scripture, shows that prodigies have been worked in pagan religions which clearly transcend the visible forces of nature. So, at least for

³⁹ Homer H. Dubs, "Miracles—A Contemporary Attitude," *Hibbert Journal*, XLVIII (1950), 159. Dubs is professor of Chinese at the University of Oxford. His attack on miracles provoked a reply from Arnold Lunn, "Miracles—The Scientific Approach," *ibid.*, pp. 240–46. Lunn, in turn, was answered by Patrick Nowell-Smith, of Trinity College, Oxford, "Miracles—The Philosophical Approach," *ibid.*, pp. 354–60.

these events, the conclusion must be that they are the work of the evil spirit. But then arises a difficulty. If the only true miracle is one which surpasses all the forces of nature, how explain the teratological similarity, i.e., identical extraordinariness, between what are traditionally called miracles and what apologists dismiss as diabolical prodigies? According to the adversaries, logic forces us to one of two conclusions: Either both phenomena, pagan and Judaeo-Christian, are miraculous, which Christian theology will not allow; or neither are miraculous, which again is not allowed by Christian apologetics, but which rationalist critics are ready to admit.

To meet this and similar difficulties Catholic apologists have followed the lead of Benedict XIV in extending the notion of miracle to cover not only the *miracula stricta* of St. Thomas, but also the *miracula relativa* which he also allows, though only restrictively considers miraculous. Provided the forces of human and terrestrial powers are surpassed, there is matter enough for a true miracle. Given this concession, the objection from comparative religion is theologically resolved as follows.⁴⁰

It may be granted that at least some of the phenomena commonly regarded as miraculous in Judaism and Christianity are externally duplicated by the ethnic religions of pagan China, India, Greece, and Rome. Technically, therefore, the teratological (wonder-producing) aspect in each type of phenomena may be the same.

However, a miracle is not defined by the subjective effect of wonder which it produces on those who behold it. The basis of definition is something objective, in which the first duty is to locate the producing agent or efficient cause. Is this agent always God Himself, operating directly in the plenitude of His almighty power? Not necessarily. He may produce a true miracle even when He uses forces subordinate to Himself, as long as the powers in question are preternatural, in the sense of higher than terrestrial or merely human.

Given this fact, theologians proceeded to explain the similarity in external form between certain miracles in Christianity and the pseudo-miracles of paganism. According to sound theology the fallen spirits

⁴⁰ Consistent with the principles of Benedict XIV, the only type of diabolical phenomena under consideration here is what is technically called a *mirum*, in which two elements are verified: real transcendence of visible and corporeal nature, but not commanded by God or directed by Him to the confirmation of doctrine or personal sanctity.

have retained their native powers; only the exercise is now restricted by God. Consequently, whenever they interfere in physical nature, as may happen in pagan prodigies, the general effect need not differ from that produced by benevolent spirits.

Theologically, therefore, there is no problem in explaining why certain phenomena should be regarded as miraculous and others, equally marvelous, should not; as long as we say that in neither case were all the forces of creation transcended. It is enough that in the first case God works indirectly, through the agency of benevolent spirits operating at His bidding, and in the second that He allows a diabolical *mirum*, through malevolent spirits acting by His permission.

Obviously the problem is not yet settled apologetically, since it is one thing to explain on dogmatic grounds how externally similar phenomena are intrinsically different by reason of different operating agencies, and something else to distinguish in practice between an angelic miracle and a demoniac *prodigium*. But this latter discrimination is a familiar process, summarized by Benedict XIV, for recognizing a good spirit or an evil one: character, purpose, method, circumstances, and moral effects. If all these are evidently good, the agency behind the phenomenon is also good; if obviously evil, the agent is also evil. However, to be borne in mind and emphasized is that, until the dogmatic ground is first cleared, as above, the apologetic norms cannot be legitimately applied. Unless, that is, we first establish theologically that a genuine miracle and not merely an apparent one can be worked by God through preternatural powers, we have no right to apply the rules for the "discernment of spirits" in prodigious phenomena. But once admitted that true, although minor, miracles can be duplicated teratologically by evil preternatural powers, then and only then may we distinguish the former from the latter on the traditional basis of contrary moral qualities.

Not all Catholic theologians, however, were ready to accept the modification introduced by Benedict XIV on the necessary transcendence in true miracles. The Vatican Council had described miracles as "divine effects . . . which clearly show forth the omnipotence of God".⁴¹ At least on this authority, some held that only an event which surpasses the forces of all creation, human and angelic, should be

⁴¹ *DB*, 1790.

considered miraculous. Thus Vacant, in his commentary on the Vatican Council:

The Council does not admit a wider concept of miracle, as introduced by certain modern apologists, who extend the term miraculous also to effects which transcend the forces of human and sensible creation—and consequently includes the intervention of angels and demons. This notion, which was elaborated to avoid difficulty in distinguishing certain angelic and demoniac effects as divine interventions, does not solve the problem. In fact, it introduces further complications to give the term “miracle” this novel meaning; confusing “miraculous” with the “marvelous,” whether angelic or diabolical.⁴²

This attitude, expressed in 1895 and repeated by various writers,⁴³ has been steadily changing, until now the opposite opinion is relatively common doctrine among Catholic apologists. With regard to Vacant’s interpretation of the Vatican Council, first to be noted is that Benedict XIV and others who defend *miracula minora* do not, as he suggests, identify angelic prodigies and diabolical marvels as equally miraculous. The bare fact that both happen to transcend the laws of visible nature

⁴² *Etudes théologiques sur les constitutions du Concile du Vatican* (Paris, 1895), II, 41–42. Vacant’s criticism of “certain modern apologists” for this extension of the concept of miracle arose from his unquestioned assumption that the Council was adopting St. Thomas’ definition of a miracle without qualification. Among the apologists whom he criticizes for “introducing” the wider concept are: Le Grand, *Dissertatio de miraculis*, in Migne, *Cursus completus s. scripturae*, XXIII, 1117; Brugère, *De vera religione*, p. 10; La Hogue, *Tractatus de vera religione*.

⁴³ In 1928, for example, *L’Ami du clergé* answered a correspondent who asked how it is possible to reconcile St. Thomas’ definition of a miracle with the great difficulty, in practice, of proving that a certain phenomenon transcended all created powers, including angelic. The editor quoted Vacant favorably, and after several pages of discussion concluded that, in the last analysis, the proof of a miracle is subject “to the general laws of human psychology and the special laws of religious psychology” (Dec. 13, 1928, pp. 881–85). More recently, Garrigou-Lagrange cites the authority of Vacant that “Secundum Concilium [Vaticanum], miraculum est factum divinum luculenter Dei omnipotentiam commonstrans. Ergo miraculum proprie dictum, iuxta Ecclesiam, debet esse supra vires totius naturae creatae et creabilis, etiam supra vires angelorum” (*De revelatione* [Rome, 1945], II, 33). However, even he admits that “improprie et lato sensu dicuntur miracula quaedam facta quae non superant vires angelorum, et quae, consideratis circumstantiis, tribuuntur bonis angelis aut Deo” (*ibid.*, p. 41). Only when he comes to illustrate these *miracula improprie dicta*, he quite neutralizes their miraculous property by stating that two examples of such *miracula lato sensu* are “quod aliquis sanctus ambulat super aquas” and “propterea aliquis ut Simon Magus potest virtute daemonis elevari in aera” (*ibid.*). As seen in the previous section, and for the reasons there given, Benedict XIV and modern apologists who consider angelic prodigies true (minor) miracles, expressly deny that demoniac phenomena should be classified as miraculous.

has never been claimed as a title to the common term "miraculous." As explained by Benedict, the end or purpose which God intends is what finally determines whether the transcendence is miraculous or not; apart from this purpose, we can only speak of the matter out of which miracles are made by God, not of the finished and formal miracles as such.

In the Lenten Conferences which Pinard de la Boullaye gave at Notre Dame in 1931, he took public issue with the stand of Vacant and his minority school on the subject of transcendence in miraculous phenomena:

In the first place, we cannot say that the Council does not admit a wider concept of miracle merely because it does not use it. . . . Moreover, it is inexact to call this concept a "modern" innovation. A detailed examination, which we cannot recount here, allows us to affirm that *all the schools of Catholic thought* for the first twelve centuries had no other notion than this. The proof of this is evident: the early apologists did not yet have a common philosophy which might allow them to fix their concept [in this way]. . . . Furthermore, recent studies have shown that the limitation of the term "miracle" to prodigies of the first order, was introduced by St. Thomas Aquinas.

In the abstract and conceptual order, there is an obvious advantage in isolating miracles from all analogous phenomena. But in the concrete order and in practice, to define miracles as exclusively God's work is to invite additional difficulties, which the ancient apologists wished to avoid, and to lose intellectual contact with the persons whom the apologists wished to convince.

To define two types of miracle . . . does not lead to a confusion of diabolical and angelic marvels. The former are called "prestidigitation" or false miracles, the latter true miracles. There is a clear objective difference between the two kinds of phenomena, which may be recognized at least by their contrary moral character.⁴⁴

With the rarest exception,⁴⁵ present-day theologians accept the wider definition as revised by Benedict XIV, in which the only tran-

⁴⁴ H. Pinard de la Boullaye, *Jésus Messie: Le thaumaturge et le prophète* (Paris, 1931), pp. 79-80. The "recent studies" to which Pinard de la Boullaye refers are those of Van Hove, who showed on historical evidence the following facts: (1) Medieval Scholastics, like Alexander of Hales and Albert the Great, "are much more definite and categorical than their predecessors in what concerns the concept of transcendence in miracle. They had no scruple in interpreting the Augustinian definition in an entirely new sense" (*op. cit.*, pp. 50-51). (2) St. Thomas crystallized this prevalent medieval thought; so that, "if the credit for changing the sense of the Augustinian definition [of miracle] belongs to the Scholastics who preceded the Angelic Doctor, it should also be recognized that he

scendence necessary and sufficient to constitute a miraculous phenomenon is to have the "visible and corporeal forces of nature" surpassed by an extramundane power operating under obedience to God.

This extension of the concept of miracle is clearly illustrated in a recent papal document, in which Jeanne de Valois, Queen of France, was decreed the honors of sainthood. In the Decretal Letters of Canonization Pope Pius XII declares: "We did not proceed to the solemn consecration of Jeanne until, as the Church prescribes, a number of miracles were proved to have been worked through Jeanne's intercession."⁴⁶ Then follows a detailed description of the first miracle accepted in the canonical process: a certain Jeanne Mazelhier, suffering from an infection of the cornea, practically blind, was suddenly cured after invoking the saintly queen. On which the Pope concludes: "Medical witnesses testified that this cure could not have been performed by *merely human powers*."⁴⁷ In the second miracle, also a case of blindness, induced by glaucoma, Jeanne Chaynes suddenly had her sight restored while praying to her namesake. And again the same conclusion: "In this instance also, medical experts chosen by the Sacred Congregation of Rites to examine the case declared that, under the conditions related, the cure had *transcended human powers*."⁴⁸

Miracles as Divine Signs

More serious than the objection from comparative religion, modern criticism rejects miracles on the score that they cannot be recognized. For example, Renan insists: "It is not in the name of this or that philosophy, but in the name of universal experience, that we banish miracle from history. We do not say: 'Miracles are impossible.' We say: 'Up to this time a miracle has never been proved.'"⁴⁹ The

went even beyond them: he modified the very terms of the definition, allowing it to express more than he wished the definition to say, notably, that a miracle is essentially an effect produced immediately by God, without the active concurrence of secondary causes" (*ibid.*, p. 53).

⁴⁶ The present writer has verified that the following authors expressly or equivalently accept, with necessary distinctions, the two types of miracles, major and minor, recognized by Benedict XIV: Baiert, Bainvel, Cotter, Dieckmann, Dhanis, Dorsch, Falcon, Felder, Frank, Hontheim, Jungmann, Langan, Lercher, E. Muller, Ottiger, P. Parente, Pesch, Pinard, Pohle, Tromp, and Van Noort.

⁴⁶ AAS, XLIII (1951), 247.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 247-48.

⁴⁹ *Life of Jesus* (New York, 1927), p. 59.

main argument of the critics is a reflection of the progress which science has made in discovering a host of physical laws which two centuries ago were not even dreamed to exist. Dean Inge, following Renan, puts the case simply:

No one says dogmatically that miracles are impossible; that is more than anyone can know. But whereas in the dark ages it was considered the most natural explanation of a strange occurrence to assume that it was a miracle, we now expect to find either that it was not a miracle or that it did not happen. We do not call telegraphs, telephones and broadcasting miraculous, though they would have seemed so two hundred years ago; they are not miraculous, because their mechanism is understood. If something inexplicable happens, we assume that there is a natural explanation, and sooner or later we find it.⁶⁰

The problem here was not unlike the previous one on the degree of transcendence. Only now the question was not to distinguish between two sets of similar phenomena, one angelic and the other diabolical, but within the whole range of extraordinary events to distinguish a true miracle from a purely natural occurrence, no matter how unusual. Where the transcendence of nature was so complete that only an atheist would deny God's intervention, say in resuscitations from the dead, the only task was to show that the event actually took place. Once assured of the historical evidence of a dead man returning to life, there could be no doubt that a miracle took place and that no natural forces, known or unknown, could explain the phenomenon. But where the transcendence was not so complete, as generally is true, how eliminate the chances that some unknown natural law and not a heavenly directed agency produced the effect? To meet this difficulty apologists have returned to the full concept of miracle as a divine sign, so frequently stressed in Scripture and used by the Fathers, but obscured during the Middle Ages when the apologetic aspect of miracles had less occasion to be emphasized.

As long as miracles are defined only in terms of transcendence, we have indeed a norm to distinguish miraculous phenomena from extraordinary natural events. But the norm is mostly negative, eliminating the presence of a natural agency. Whereas if we add the concept of miracle as a divine sign, we have at hand an index to determine the miraculous not only negatively, by the exclusion of nature, but positively, by giving evidence of the purposeful presence of God.

⁶⁰ *Labels and Libels* (New York, 1929), p. 70.

A recent writer sees in this failure to include the sign function of miracle in its full definition, a contributing factor to the modern attacks not only on the recognition but on the very possibility of miraculous phenomena:

If a miracle really has the structure of a divine sign given to it by God, this function should not be omitted from its definition. Most of the objections against the possibility of miracles arise from the fact that the objectors wrongly conceive the whole essence of a miracle to consist in its quality of prodigious transcendence. Viewed in this way, a miracle seems to be some kind of arbitrary exception and unacceptable deordination. (Medieval) Scholastics gave a handle to this sort of objection; so that the definition of miracle which they propose, needs to be complemented by the express mention of its semeiological aspect, which the Scholastics themselves certainly admit, on the basis of Scripture and Sacred Tradition.⁵¹

Already in the eighteenth century Benedict XIV had insisted that the religious purpose of miracles should be included in their adequate definition. He was led to this conviction by the function which they show in the history of revelation and the life of the Church. Whenever a miraculous event occurs, it invariably serves a higher purpose than merely to astonish the witnesses. This higher purpose is a religious one, namely, to indicate an extraordinary intervention of God, by a special manifestation of His power, wisdom, justice, or goodness, in order to confirm the teaching or sanctity of the person through whom the prodigy is worked.

If we examine the events in Scripture and tradition which are commonly called miraculous, we find that they regularly manifest their religious function as heavenly signs, and that in three distinct ways.

1) The first reaction of those who witnessed the miraculous events in the New Testament was to recognize the special intervention of God. This spontaneous effect is variously described in the sacred writings. For example, when Peter saw the first miraculous draught of fish, he fell down at the feet of Jesus, saying: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."⁵² Even the pagans of Lystra, on seeing the man crippled from birth suddenly cured by St. Paul, ". . . lifted up their

⁵¹ E. Dhanis, *Tractatio de miraculo*, p. 8; these are lecture notes for students in the graduate course, *De miraculo*, Gregorian University, Rome, 1950-51.

⁵² Luke 5:8.

voice in the Lycaonian language: 'The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men.'"⁵³

Why should miraculous phenomena spontaneously be recognized as signs of God's intervention? The reason is, first of all, because they are, *ex hypothesi*, extraordinary and naturally unexpected events. But, more specifically, they always occur under circumstances which indicate that God is here, speaking in a special way to men, in answer to their invocation of His aid. Historically these religious *adjuncta* which identify miracles as "divine responses" are of two kinds: the circumstances preceding the phenomena are such as somehow petition for an answer from God, and the miracles themselves possess qualities which are clearly proportional to this petition. We shall analyze these in some detail.

The circumstances or *adjuncta* which precede miraculous phenomena exhibit a petitional quality that is unmistakable. Most often, except in the miracles of Christ, an explicit prayer is addressed to God, asking for a certain prodigy. Thus Peter, before curing the cripple at the gate called Beautiful, prayed: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, arise and walk."⁵⁴ At other times a person's holiness is so evident and his union with God so constant as to be in themselves a kind of living prayer which invites the outpouring of God's miraculous power. The public life of Jesus Christ is a perfect example of this type of petition.

A close correspondence or relation between the petition for a miracle and its actual fulfillment is perhaps the most striking feature of miraculous phenomena as divine signs. This rule of proportion has two aspects, a negative and positive. Negatively, the prodigy never occurs indifferent to the petition or contrary to what had been requested. Obviously this does not mean that every time a miracle is asked for, it also takes place. But when it does occur, it is worked in a way that does not contradict the preceding petition. Positively, the prodigy always occurs in a way that shows a necessary connection with the antecedent circumstances. For example, a person with a certain degree of faith or holiness asks for the cure of a certain disease, at a particular place and time, through prayers directed to a certain saint. Then the cure is effected, in selective favor of the one making

⁵³ Acts 14:10.

⁵⁴ Acts 3:6.

the petition to this particular saint, at the very time he is praying in a hallowed shrine already famous for its miracles. This result is so proportional in distinctive qualities to the previous petition that an unprejudiced mind instinctively sees the causal relation. The miracles at Lourdes are perennial examples of this kind of proportion.

2) The logical correlative to miracles as signs of God's special intervention is their extraordinary manifestation of His perfections, notably His power and wisdom, justice and mercy. For when we say that a miracle shows forth a special divine intervention, this is generic. Concretely and in practice, the intervention is recognized from the circumstances under which it occurs, as an exceptional manifestation of one or another attribute of God. Thus, when the prophet Daniel, after praying to God, was miraculously enlightened on the meaning of Nabuchodonosor's dream, he said: "Blessed be the name of the Lord from eternity and evermore; for wisdom and fortitude are His."⁵⁶ When Christ, seeing the widow of Naim, "had compassion on her" and raised her only son from the dead, all who witnessed the wonder "began to glorify God, saying, 'God has visited His people'" in this showing of His mercy towards them.⁵⁶ When He healed the paralytic at Capernaum, "the crowds were struck with fear, and glorified God who had given such power to men."⁵⁷ And when Ananias and Saphira were struck dead at the feet of St. Peter, "great fear came upon the whole Church and upon all who heard this," seeing in this speedy punishment an extraordinary sign of God's infinite justice.⁵⁸

3) Further inductive analysis of the miracles in Scripture and tradition shows that, besides their intrinsic function as spontaneous divine signs, they are also conventional or extrinsic signs which God uses in order to witness to the truth of some doctrine He wants accepted, or to testify in favor of some person whose sanctity He wants recognized. Briefly it may be explained that miracles as spontaneous and as conventional signs differ in the same way as a natural sign differs from an arbitrary one. For instance, smoke in itself is a natural sign of the presence of fire, but arbitrarily it may be agreed upon to signify something else, e.g., white smoke to indicate the election of a Pope. With regard to miracles, therefore, of and by themselves they

⁵⁶ Dan. 2:20.

⁵⁷ Matt. 9:8.

⁵⁶ Luke 7:16.

⁵⁸ Acts 5:11.

are spontaneous signs of God's special intervention in the world and manifestation of His presence. But over and above this He may decree to have the miracle also serve to testify His approval of certain teaching or personal holiness. In this case, at least an implicit covenant is made between God and men, by which they may recognize a prodigy as evidence not only of His intervention, but of His intervention in order to attest to some external fact, outside the miracle itself. What happens is that, when a person asks for a miraculous favor from God, he adds the further request that this should serve as a divine attestation. Then if the phenomenon occurs, the conclusion is that God has not only answered the petition for a prodigy, but also agreed to make the prodigy become a heavenly sign, testifying to the truth of a given doctrine or to the fact of a person's sanctity.

To clear up a possible misunderstanding, it should be noted that serving as a conventional divine sign is something essentially extrinsic to miraculous phenomena. Nevertheless, historically it is so regularly associated with them that, as has been seen, Benedict XIV considers this function indispensable to the definition of a miracle. Thus the miracles of Christ, without exception, are not only *semeia automata*, manifesting extraordinary divine power and wisdom operating in the world, but also *semeia homologa*, testifying divine approval to the heavenly mission of the Son of God among men.

Given the above qualities which characterize miracles as divine signs, they become a ready norm for distinguishing them from non-miraculous phenomena, governed by unknown natural laws. The process of reasoning behind this principle is as follows.

Apologists and agnostics agree that certain extraordinary events occur for which no naturally known cause can be assigned. The problem is to assign a cause; and here two possibilities present themselves. According to the agnostics, the unknown cause is a natural one, i.e., some force or power essentially identical with the known physical forces in the universe, but to date unknown in its mode of operation.⁶⁹ To Christian apologists, the "unknown" cause is a preternatural or supernatural one, i.e., some *dunamis* essentially superior to any mun-

⁶⁹ An example would be the emission of electrons (beta-rays) by the radioactive elements. Always active in the world, its cause was unknown before the discovery of radioactivity in 1896.

dane physical power. Both sides agree that no known natural cause will explain a certain phenomenal effect. But what right does the critic have for saying that the cause, though unknown, is natural? None except his preconception that higher than natural causes do not exist or cannot be recognized.⁶⁰ On the other hand, what right does the apologist have for saying that the "unknown" cause is really known, as something extramundane and divine? He has every right under the laws of human logic.

First, negatively. Whatever other properties are possessed by the physical laws of nature, one at least is universal. Physical laws are areligious. They operate independently of any religious circumstances, and depend entirely on the natural conditions being rightly placed to evoke a definite predictable effect. Having these physical conditions, a natural physical effect invariably takes place. Always and only these conditions are required. There is not the remotest suggestion of needing religious *adjuncta*, say prayer or sanctity in the human agent, to produce a natural effect. Hydrogen and oxygen, for example, will combine to form water when ignited by an electric spark, regardless of the religion or holiness of the operator; in fact, regardless of whether anyone is even present to view the explosive combination.

Second, positively. In complete contrast to the areligious character of natural operations, miraculous phenomena are regularly and remarkably religious in every phase of their occurrence. They are preceded by petitions appealing to God or one of His saints, explicit in prayer or implicit in the sanctity of the one working the prodigy; they are requested to confirm a man's office as spokesman for God, or testify to the holiness of a servant of God. When they occur, the quality of the effect corresponds in detail to the time, place, and circumstances of the petition, indicating that God is addressing Himself to man in response to man's addressing himself to God. If, therefore, it is a

⁶⁰ Thus Adolph Harnack first invokes the general principle: "We are firmly convinced that what happens in space and time is subject to the general laws of motion, and that in this sense, as an interruption of the order of nature, there can be no such things as miracles" (*Das Wesen des Christentums* [Leipzig, 1933], p. 17). Then he applies the method for dismissing the so-called miracles of the Gospels: "Although the order of nature be inviolable, we are not by any means acquainted with all the forces working in it and acting reciprocally with other forces. . . . Miracles, it is true, do not happen; but of the marvelous and the inexplicable there is no lack" (*ibid.*, p. 18).

primary law of the mind to demand a sufficient reason for every effect which occurs, then Christian apologetics is not only permitted but constrained to conclude that no other agency than the preternatural one invoked was the one really responsible for the effect produced.

Christian apologists have come to recognize in the semeiological function of miracles their strongest weapon against infidel criticism. Van Hove in his definitive study of *La doctrine du miracle chez s. Thomas* cites a dozen modern authorities who feel as he does that: "It is not only useless but perfectly unreasonable to appeal to unknown forces in order to explain a phenomenon, when there are positive reasons for admitting the action of a force that is known, although of a transcendent order."⁶¹

When an electric current decomposes water into its elements, hydrogen and oxygen, it never enters the mind of any sane person to doubt that this action, however strange, was produced by the electric current; or to suppose that some day we shall have to explain the phenomenon by a mysterious power, yet undiscovered, which is hidden in the walls of the laboratory or in the region of some distant star. He concludes:

There is no point in inventing arbitrary and undefined theories, when all the circumstances of a miraculous event sufficiently indicate that the phenomenon is the effect of a free and transcendent agent, namely, God Himself. Certainly, if no antecedent circumstance renders a prodigy intelligible, we should abstain from passing judgment and admit that the cause is unknown. But if the finality and semeiology of a phenomenon clearly identify it as belonging to the religious sphere, it is there we must look for its "raison d'être" and not postulate the action of an unknown cause.⁶²

When adversaries appeal to "unknown natural forces" rather than admit miraculous phenomena, they are frequently concealing a basic philosophical error which should be exposed. J. S. Haldane, for example, denies the demonstrability of miracle on the score that all the laws of nature are only convenient hypotheses. "A physical law," he says, "is only a formula in which we summarize our observations."⁶³ Given this concept of nature, it is only to be expected that "Belief in supernatural interference of any kind declined very rapidly as scientific

⁶¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 376.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *The Sciences and Philosophy* (Garden City, N. Y., 1929), p. 117.

investigation proved more and more clearly that such intervention is not found to occur.”⁶⁴ If it occurred, it could never be proved, since what believers call miraculous transcendence are only extensions of a hypothetical “law” which needs to be modified every time an apparent exception, in the form of a “miracle,” takes place.

By insisting, therefore, on an examination of the religious circumstances under which miracles occur as heavenly signs, we may force the adversary to declare the logical consequences of his position. The perfect correlation of prayer and phenomenon cannot be dismissed as pure coincidence without infringing on the principle of causality. For if there is no causal connection between a petition to God and a given phenomenon which never occurs unless the petition is there, what right have we to see efficient causality in any action which always conditions a certain determined event? With causality uncertain, no physical laws can be said to be certainly known, and agnosticism is the order of the day. Consequently, when Haldane declared that the “physical conception of a universe is a mere make-believe,”⁶⁵ and that “the scepticism of Berkeley, and still more thorough scepticism of Hume” have “never been shaken,”⁶⁶ he was only deriving a conclusion to which his principle of absolute indeterminism led him—a conclusion to which he and others like him may be driven by the logic of Christian apologetics.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 294–95.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 259–60.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 258.