

Miracles

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called, a man who was blind in one eye came to one of his healing services "not expecting anything," but fell to the floor with his eye feeling hot declaring he could see; after Father Swizdor blessed him and hands were laid on him.

Father Swizdor, 80, cited his own healing as a miracle. He has been on kidney dialysis four times a day in his home for about two years, and developed restless legs syndrome. "It's like an itch inside your bones and you can't scratch," he said. Every night was a "night of torture," he said, and often he was lucky to get two or three hours of sleep.

In February he was giving a series of healing missions in Sharon, Pa. On tired and shaky legs, he turned in to sleep. Then he woke up and "I saw a beautiful face looking down at me. It was a woman with large dark eyes." She disappeared after a few minutes.

"I assume it was the Blessed Mother, I can't say. No words were said," he said. But what he does know is that he's been without the syndrome ever since.

"To me, it's a miracle," he said.

Another diocesan Catholic, John Leary Jr. of Holy Name of Jesus Parish, Greece, a best-selling Catholic author of apocalyptic books, said he sees a lot of miracles.

One of his prayer groups prayed over an Indiana woman at Our Lady of Lourdes Church, Brighton, about two years ago, he recalled. The woman was suffering from emphysema and was dependent on an oxygen tank. That very night, he said, she "felt different" and by morning she was off the oxygen, which she hasn't needed since.

A "smaller" miracle occurred when a woman was praying for verification that he was authentic, he said. The woman, at her home in South Bend, Ind., noticed one of the hankies she was ironing had his name sewn into the corner of it. She later gave him the hankie, and wrote a letter recalling, "I had to sit down, my heart was racing so fast."

But, he said, "To me, the spiritual miracles are the best, where people have gone back to confession after 20 to 30 years."

Leary, 55, also speaks of his own "spiritual miracle of conversion." That occurred in April 1993 in Medjugorje, when he received an "inner understanding" that he was to do everything for God. He increased his daily rosary recitations, continued daily Mass, and began spending an hour before the Blessed Sacrament every day.

In addition, he began receiving what he describes as visions and locutions, which he relates in talks and his books.

Father Swizdor agrees with Leary that the spirituality of miracles is primary.

"The important thing is not the healing, but is the coming to faith," the priest said. Of one "who is ordinary day-to-day and suddenly his faith becomes vibrant, I would consider that a miracle, a miracle of grace."

He was careful to add a qualification: "You don't call it (anything) a miracle till the church authorities call it as such. But we among ourselves call things miracles."

Sign of God

Jesuit Father Ladislav Orsy, professor emeritus at Catholic University of America and a full professor of the philosophy of law at Georgetown University, said, "The attitude of the church is this: The meaning of a miracle is to be a religious sign. And therefore the primary importance of any event that is claimed to be a miracle is its religious significance. ... Catholics and virtually all Christians believe God can interfere in the physical process of the universe."

Beyond one miracle, he said, there is no teaching that one must believe in miracles.

"For Catholics, there is one miracle which is absolute, and all believe in it, and that is the resurrection of Christ," he explained.

The church is cautious when it comes to miracles, he said.

"When somebody is cured, they will not say, 'There it is, it is a miracle' — the church will never say that," he said. "The church will say, 'For this cure we cannot find any natural explanation.'"

This cautious approach is not popularly known, he added.

Even Mother Angelica of EWTN, who claimed healing of leg and back pain this year, does not use the term miracle, according to a spokeswoman.

The network nun, injured in an accident,

had worn a leg brace for 40 years, and more lately, other braces. After a visitor prayed for her, she was able to walk without them. She attributed her healing to the rosary, saying, "The rosary is powerful."

While the church won't mandate belief in miracles, Father Orsy said, it can see the benefit of pilgrimages to certain places of prayer such as Lourdes and Fatima, where bishops have approved Marian apparitions as "worthy of belief."

By 1959, according to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 5,000 cures at Lourdes had been reported, with "58 declared miraculously by the Church."

"If someone says, 'I'm not going to make a pilgrimage to Lourdes,' the church would say that's within your right," Father Orsy said. "If someone would say, 'I'm going to make a pilgrimage and I believe in the apparitions,' the church would say that's within your right, and if it helps you, go."

Even in issuing judgment on alleged miracles for a saint canonization, Father Orsy said, the church nuances its wording. The Latin statement usually translated as attesting to "a confirmed miracle" in English actually begins something like, "there is not a natural explanation for this event and it occurred in a religious context, therefore it is a sign for sanctity of this person."

Father Richard McBrien stated in his 1981 book *Catholicism*, "Few theological questions are treated so unsatisfactorily as the question of miracles."

In summarizing his comments about them, he wrote, "Miracles are manifestations of the power of God and as such are consistent with divine Providence. They were central to Jesus' ministry. They enter into the formation of our own faith. Beyond that, many questions remain open."

In the 1990 *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, C. Benton Kline, professor emeritus and former president of Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, stated that "A miracle is an event that one finds oneself led to interpret by reference to God's action rather than in terms merely of finite acts or causes. God's healing power, for example, is exercised through the agency of the healing arts and sciences regularly and expectedly; but God's power may also be unexpectedly made evident."

Kline has had open heart bypass surgery

twice. "I say perfectly openly. God was at work and it was a sign of grace I recovered," he said. "It's a miracle in that sense."

"We tend to think miracles are only inexplicable, but that's scientists' test for miracles," he said. Contemporary theology, he wrote, recognizes it as wrong to say that God is at work only in the extraordinary or unpredictable, in what insurance policies and courts of law call "acts of God."

"Signs" and "wonders" are the correct translation for many biblical terms that more often get translated as miracles, according to theologians.

Signs and Wonders was the title of a study of miracles by Father Louis Monden, SJ. At Cardinal Leon-Joseph Suenens' urging, the book was translated from Flemish to other languages, including English, in 1966.

Father Monden and others noted a more rationalist approach in the 19th century overshadowed belief in miracles until the 20th, when it was realized that science doesn't have all the answers. He wrote that the "best thinkers" then returned to tradition rooted in the Scripture and the church fathers that miracles are a divine sign.

The church requires its members to believe in the possibility of the miraculous, he wrote, but it leaves each mind free to judge the worth of any particular miracle.

Even Christ, known for his miracles, suggested that "we ought not think too highly of the miraculous," Father Monden noted. His miracles were linked with his very mission, pointing the way to salvation.

St. Augustine taught that miracles were not set aside for the power they displayed but because their unusual nature makes them better signs, according to Father Monden. He quoted St. Augustine as commenting, "... scarcely anyone notices how wondrous is God's power in the development of a grain of wheat."

"For this reason, mindful of his mercy, he decided in his good time, to work wonders surpassing the ordinary course of natural events, so that man, grown too accustomed to the wonders that daily surround him, might be struck by happenings not more grand but more unusual."

"Actually, the government of the universe is a greater deed and a more extraordinary one than is the act of feeding five thousand men with five loaves."

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