

RECOGNITION OF MIRACLES: ITS PROCESS IN ROME AND LOURDES Part I: Process in Lourdes

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Miracles are a sign of God's presence in the world and his mighty deeds, and veneration of the saints is part and parcel of the Church's history. From its beginning, the Church has publicly honored its martyrs and, in the course of time, its confessors. However, the veneration of these holy people differs from the glory, honour and praise rendered to God and the Blessed Virgin Mary. In beatifying and canonizing them, the Church considers miracles that God performs through their intercession, as a prerequisite. This process occurs in Rome. Similarly, following the apparition of Mother Mary in Lourdes a separate process has arisen there, an ecclesiastically-recognized place of pilgrimage where many miracles have occurred through the intercession of Our Lady. With this article, divided into two parts, the author will present and compare this process with that followed by Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome. Second part will appear in the next issue of *Iustitia*.

1. Introduction

As the Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary is the only person who cooperated with the Heavenly Father as closely as Christ in fulfilling the divine plan of salvation. By accepting the divine offer to be the Mother of God, she participated in salvation history by closely following the Son of God up to the foot of the cross. Consequently, she has a unique intercessory power before God through Jesus. This power

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is evident in Scripture, as Jesus performed the first miracle¹ through her intercession (Jn 2:1-11). In this sense, the miracles that take place at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes are of a different and special category from those dealt with by the Congregation of the Causes of the Saints (CCS).

The Catholic Church recognizes three forms or grades of veneration which are distinguished by its object. God alone is worthy of the supreme form of cult called *latria*. The second type, *iperdulia*, is proper to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Lesser than *latria*, it is nevertheless superior to the cult given to the saints, known as *dulia*.² The CCS, which treats only miracles worked through the intercession of persons in the third category, has nothing to do with those miracles happening at Lourdes. For the latter's ascertainment and official recognition, there is a separate, recognized juridical organ responsible not to the CCS³ but to the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF).

Because of my experience, though short in this field, I have sometimes been asked to comment on the miracles happening at Lourdes through the intercession of the Bl. V. Mary. This article, which deals mainly with those miracles and the process of their recognition, is a response to those requests. I will first present some historical facts regarding the Sanctuary, its approval as a place of ecclesiastical cult and the reasons for it. Then, I will treat both the Medical Commissions intermittently established to study and examine the miracles, and the process of their

¹See for its meaning, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged, With Seven Language Dictionary*, Vol. II, *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.* (Chicago, Philippines: G & C Merriam Co., 1976), p. 1441; cf. D. P. Simpson, *Cassell's Latin Dictionary* (Latin - English English - Latin Dictionary, 5th edition, 1968, 8th impression, 1984), p. 374. Cf. Cherian Thunduparampil, *The Role of Miracle in the Process of Canonization*, (Dharmaram Canonical Studies, 2) Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, (2003): "The word 'miracle' comes from the Latin term "*mirari*" meaning "to wonder," "to be astonished at," "to admire, to look on with admiration." The adjective "*mirus, a, um*" means *wonderful, astonishing, extraordinary*. A Miracle is, thus, an extraordinary event which is beyond human capability or endeavour and which creates in us a sense of astonishment and is taken to manifest the supernatural power of God fulfilling His purposes."

²Indelicato Salvatore, *Dizionario canonico concordatario*, Tipografia Guerra e Belli, Roma (1953), 111.

³For details on miracles and its recognition process in the canonization of saints, see, Cherian Thunduparampil, *The Role of Miracle*, chapter one.

official recognition. I will conclude with some comparison of the different processes for the recognition of miracles operative at the Vatican and Lourdes.

1. The Sanctuary of Lourdes: Some Historical Facts

The story of Lourdes begins on February 11, 1858.⁴ Between then and July 16, 1858, the Blessed Virgin Mary visited Bernadette Soubirous, a poor and illiterate girl of fourteen, eighteen times at the Grotto of Massabielle ("ancient rock") along the Gave River. On February 25, 1858, acting on the instruction of the Blessed Virgin, Bernadette discovered with her own hands the spring which continues even today to heal innumerable persons afflicted with various diseases and other problems.

Although critics have objected that some chemical in the water at Lourdes procures the cures, it has been proven that "chemically the water at the spring does not differ from that of the public fountain of Lourdes; it is common "drinking water" (*acqua potabile*)."⁵ Also in and around the baths near the fountain many miracles take place. "The water [baths] in the present pool in the Grotto is normally changed only once a day. Many sick people take bath in this spring [water] every day, very often people with contagious diseases; but no one is ever reported to have acquired some new diseases or at least a worsening of the health condition, instead many are healed miraculously."⁶

⁴See, http://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/statements/lourdes_commission.html. NDL Editions/Sanctuaires Notre-Dame de Lourdes, "Création du Bureau Médical," *Expliquez-moi... Les Miracles* (2011) 19. In the same year itself investigation began with the formation of a commission for it. For the text with which Bertrand Sévère Laurence, bishop of Tarbes instituted the commission, see below under the subtitle 2.1 "Episcopal commission," p. 120.

⁵*Enciclopedia Cattolica*, 1950 ed., s.v. "Lourdes" by Clement M. Henze.

⁶*Enciclopedia Cattolica*, 1950 ed., s.v. "Lourdes" by Clement M. Henze: "Nelle attuali piscine l'acqua viene ordinariamente rinnovata una sola volta al giorno, ed in essa vengono immersi tanti infermi, spesso affetti di malattia contagiose; ma nessuno vi ha mai contratto una nuova malattia o un peggioramento, anzi molti sono guariti."

1.1. Approval of Lourdes as a Place of Public and Ecclesiastical Cult

Through the miraculous healings that take place there, the spring in the Grotto is a source of spiritual as well as physical relief to the infinite pilgrims who visit the spot with supplications to the Lord through the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes. Soon after the apparitions in 1858, pilgrimages to the spot and extraordinary healings occurring there began to multiply. Consequently, it took hardly four years to approve the apparitions and the public cult of 'Our Lady of the Grotto of Lourdes,' or simply 'Our Lady of Lourdes.' In 1861, Church authority obtained from the civil ministry of cult permission to construct an edifice for the public cult at the grotto. Through the January 18, 1862 decree of Bishop Bertrand Sévère Laurence of Tarbes, the Church officially approved Lourdes as a place of pilgrimage based on the three criteria of "reliability of the seer, spiritual fruits and cures of the body."⁷ In 1876, Pope Pius IX, through his representative Card. Guibert, the archbishop of Paris, consecrated a new basilica at Lourdes. The liturgical feast (11 February) of the apparition of Our Lady of Lourdes, approved by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 and originally limited to the ecclesiastical province of Auch, was later extended to the whole Latin Church by Pope Pius X in 1907. Under the guidance of Msgr. Théas, a great basilica and a vast underground Church were consecrated at this site of pilgrimage in 1901 and 1958, respectively.⁸

1.2. The Reasons for the Authentication of the Public Cult

What led to the raising of Lourdes as a place of public cult? Four reasons induced the ecclesiastical authority to officially elevate this place of apparition to the status of a pilgrim centre with public and ecclesiastical cult.

i) It is better here to recall here that in case of a person presumed to have died with the odour of sanctity or died as a martyr, the faithful visit his/her tomb, pray his/her intercession and God performs signs and miracles through his/her intercession. As mentioned above, many extraordinary healings began to take place immediately after the

⁷*Enciclopedia Cattolica*, 1950 ed., s.v. "Lourdes" by Clement M. Henze: Bishop Bertrand Sévère Laurence of Tarbes raised Lourdes, the place of apparition to a centre of public cult through the pastoral letter of 18 January 1862, just four years after the apparition. See, <https://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cures-and-miracles/medical-bureau-sanctuary>.

⁸See, NDL Editions, *Expliquez-moi... Les Miracles* (2011) 58.

apparitions at Lourdes. After sixteen such 'unusual' healings were thoroughly, accurately examined by medical practitioners and approved by them as inexplicable, the diocesan bishop moved to officially recognize Lourdes as a pilgrim centre. ii) Besides physical miracles, spiritual renewal, conversions, and notable revitalization of religious practices resulted from this place. iii) The evidently visible changes and the ecstasy of the little Bernadette during the visions. She was transformed and her features manifested an uncustomary expression. iv) Although the testimony comes from a single witness only - as she alone had the visions - and that too from an illiterate child of fourteen years old, these facts do not weaken its credibility and the fact does not become less true, rather in fact it is most precise, true and always coherent, and above all it comes from an innocent girl, incapable of lying.⁹

These reasons based on the apparition and the related extraordinary events surrounding the grotto inspired the Church to pronounce it as a centre of Marian cult. The flow of the faithful to Lourdes, spiritual revitalization, conversions and other good effects as well as the uncountable number of miracles that occur there even after almost hundred and sixty years justify the decision of the ecclesiastical authority.

3. Criticisms against Extraordinary Healing at Lourdes

The myriad pilgrimages to the Sanctuary of Lourdes and the many miracles that happen there due to the faithful's prayers should not blind us to the criticisms raised against the extraordinary or supernatural character of such cures. Often these objections come from rationalists and atheists. One of the main criticisms was that the miracles at Lourdes result from some physical-chemical mechanism in the baths. In actuality, "chemically the water of the spring does not differ from that of the public fountain of Lourdes; it is the common

⁹*Enciclopedia Cattolica*, 1950 ed., s.v. "Lourdes" by Clement M. Henze: "Sedici di tali prodigiose guarigioni, accuratamente esaminate, offrirono al vescovo diocesano Bertrando Severo Laurence di Tarbes (dal 1912 la denominazione della diocesi e "Tarbes e Lourdes") una delle ragioni per poter approvare le apparizioni ed il culto pubblico di "N. Signora della Grotta di L."

'drinking water' (*acqua potabile*)"¹⁰ Moreover, despite the number of people with contagious diseases who bathe in the water, no new infections nor any worsening of health have ever been reported by pilgrims. Rather, many are healed. So far no analysis, laboratory examination, or other test has produced any result in favour of the critics.

Pierre Janet, a professor of psychology, refutes any testimony of the witness of a healing. The rationalist in him reduces the healing to 'good faith.'¹¹ In line with Janet, Charcot also propagates the theory of 'faith healing,' in which the psychological condition of the patient heals him. Because of this meaning, some non-believers use the expression 'faith healing' but in a negative way. Some attribute the healing to the semi-demiurgic power of man. Others say that the gospel miracles have only a symbolic value. Still others would argue that miracles are the result of the personal or collective suggestions.¹²

The Society of Parapsychology of New York entrusted Dr. Donald Wells¹³ with the task of critically studying the dossier of the Medical Bureau Lourdes. According to him, only one healing was inexplicable: that of Lydia Brosse from tuberculosis more than 25 years ago. Because the healing happened almost instantaneously, West reported that it could not be the product of any personal or collective suggestions. Against the healings at Lourdes, however, West makes the following objections: the desire for the miracle, which animates the Medical Bureau in their research; the great number of women healed; the rarity of the healings (this should not constitute an argument); the absence of the control.'¹⁴ However, these are the reactions of persons closed to the supernatural reality of miracles. The miracles and other good effects that incessantly take place at the Sanctuary continue to disprove these and other criticisms levelled against these supernatural or extraordinary happenings.

¹⁰*Enciclopedia Cattolica*, s.v. "Lourdes"; Cf. Alphonse Olivieri, "Obiezione e critiche sollevate contro il carattere extra-naturale delle guarigioni di Lourdes," *Sacra Doctrina* 5 (1960) 151.

¹¹Faith here is not to be understood in the theological sense rather it is the psychological feeling of patients which is referred to here.

¹²Alphonse Olivieri, "Obiezione e critiche..." 150 ff.

¹³He is the author of the book, *Eleven Lourdes Miracles: A Critical Analysis of "Miracle Cures" at Lourdes Shrine, Based on Medical Investigation of Selected case Histories* (Helix Press, 1957).

¹⁴Cf. Alphonse Olivieri, "Obiezione e critiche..." 154.

The following testimony of Prof. François Thiebaut, Professor of Clinique Neurologique - Strasbourg, describes the weapon of such critics of miracles:

When a physician, rich with past experience, sees healing taking place in front of his eyes, of which type he knows no precedence, the spontaneous cure of which type the medical literature does not report, he has the right to believe that it is a supernatural healing. I have seen at Lourdes in the past years such healings. In matters related to healing the evaluation of a competent physician is valid and susceptible of creating the conviction, but not the certainty. Therefore there is always room for doubt, even if it is minimum. It is such a doubt that is exploited by the exaggerated sceptics or by persons of bad faith, be they physicians or no... The story is not new... (cf. Lk.16: 31).¹⁵

Alphonse Olivieri, the president of the Medical Bureau of Lourdes, in the following words, expresses what should be the attitude of a physician confronted with an extraordinary, miraculous healing:

Miracle is the powerful moment of the divine intervention in the world and not being able to conceive it outside the doctrine, it could be defined as the "word of God". In the presence of a fact supposed to be miraculous it might require that the catholic physician, in an attitude of respect, maintain his reservations and make appeal to the methodical doubts; for the rest there should not lack respect for the divine sign, must study it with all the guarantee that the human intellect illuminated and guided by the scientific discoveries could offer.¹⁶

Because of such criticisms, the Church must adequately investigate alleged cases of healings.

¹⁵François Thiebaut, "La diagnosi delle guarigioni extranaturali," *Sacra Doctrina* 5 (1960) 141: "... Ed io ho visto a Lourdes in questi ultimi anni tali guarigioni. In materia di guarigione straordinaria la valutazione di un medico competente è valida e suscettibile di creare la convinzione, ma non la certezza: vi è sempre posto per il dubbio, per quanto minimo possa essere; ed è tale dubbio che è sfruttato dagli spiriti esageratamente scettici o da persone in cattiva fede, siano o no dei medici...."

¹⁶Cf. Alphonse Olivieri, "Obiezione e critiche..." 159; See, Association Médicale Internationales de Lourdes, *Fons Vitae*, (2012) 117 - probabilistic paradigm may be better.

2. Medical Commissions

As we saw above, in the spacio-temporal context of Lourdes, that is, in and around the spring at Lourdes, during the candle procession, and the individual blessing of the sick, many healings took place and continue to take place. However, not all have been recognized as true miracles. Only after subjecting the reported 'exceptional' healings to rigorous study and examination by medical experts were the above-mentioned sixteen cures recognized as inexplicable or miraculous. To verify the miraculous healings at Lourdes, several scientific and theological commissions have been instituted over the course of time.

2.1. Episcopal Commission

In the very year the apparition occurred, investigation began to verify and confirm it. Thus, on July 28, 1858 Msgr. Laurence, Bishop of Tarbes, appointed a commission "to confirm and authenticate" the things happening at Lourdes. The document establishing the commission posed some specific questions. It reads as follows:

A commission is established in the diocese of Tarbes in order to enquire whether any cures have been effected by the water of the Grotto of Lourdes, either drunk or applied externally, and if these cures can be explained naturally or must be attributed to a supernatural cause... Whether the visions which the child Bernadette Soubirous professes to have had in the Grotto, are genuine, and if so, whether they can be explained naturally or whether they have a supernatural and divine character... Whether the object seen in the visions has made any requests, or revealed any desire to this child... Whether the child has been told to communicate them - if so, to whom, and what are the requests or desires revealed? ... Whether the spring now flowing in the Grotto existed before the vision which Bernadette Soubirous claims to have seen ... Given at Tarbes at our Episcopal palace under our seal and signature and countersigned by our secretary the 28th July 1858, signed Bertrand Sévère, Bishop of Tarbes.¹⁷

¹⁷NDL Editions, *Expliquez-moi... Les Miracles* (2011) 19. The task was to "constater l'auntenitcité et la nature des faits qui se sont produits, depuis environ six mois, à l'occasion d'une Apparition, vraie ou prétendue, de la Très Sainte Vierge dans une grotte, sise à l'ousest de la ville de Lourdes... Quatre questions sont posées à la commssion. Seule la première concerne les guérisons: 'Rechercher si des guérisons ont été opérées par l'usage de l'eau de

At the beginning, the episcopal commission led by Canon Germain Baradère considered only nominated clerics' opinions regarding the nature of the cure; no medical consultants were involved. The result of the initial enquiry was directly reported to the Bishop of Tarbes. However, one year later, Prof. Henri Vergez of the faculty of Medicine at Montpellier¹⁸ was appointed to medically evaluate the cases so that only genuinely inexplicable cases were considered.

2.2. The Bureau des Constatations Médicales (BCM)

BCM, the current Medical Bureau, was established in 1883 and was headed by Dr. Georges-Fernand Dunot de Saint-Maclou. BCM functioned at the residence of the Garaison Fathers in Lourdes.¹⁹ After Pope Leo XIII gave his "assent to the Bureau's rigorous procedures" in 1886, in 1905 "the Holy See confirmed to the Bishop of Tarbes - in his capacity as Guardian of the Grotto - the right to use the procedures of the *Bureau des Constatations Médicales* to investigate any declared cures."²⁰ The BCM means: i) "an office in the Sanctuary with permanent members, including a practising doctor who receives the declaration and starts a critical examination thereof," and ii) "a meeting for "discussion of a clinical case" where all doctors and healthcare workers present in Lourdes who, regardless of religious affiliation, can participate."²¹ It had the scope of studying the healings where they took place there and establishing their veracity.

la Grotte de Lourdes, soit en boissons, soit en lotions, et si ces guérisons peuvent s'expliquer naturellement, ou si elles doivent être attribuées à une cause surnat-urelle?" See, http://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/statements/lourdes_commission.htm.

¹⁸Cf. NDL Editions, *Expliquez-moi... Les Miracles*, (2011) 58-59.

¹⁹Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age*, Penguin Books, 1999, 18, 323, 325-26. Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lourdes_Medical_Bureau#History. From 2009 onwards, Dr. Alessandro de Franciscis is the president and the office functions on the second floor of a building called *Accueil Jean Paul II* in the shrine compound.

²⁰Cf. <https://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cur-es-and-miracles/medical-bureau-sanctuary>.

²¹Cf. <https://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cur-es-and-miracles/medical-bureau-sanctuary>.

2.2.1. Association Médicale de Notre-Dame de Lourdes (AML)

In 1925, Msgr. François-Xavier Shœpfer, the bishop of Tarbes, and Dr. M. Petitpierre, interim president of the BCM, together instituted an "Association Médicales de Notre-Dame de Lourdes" (AML) - which in no way affected the functioning of the BCM - for the catholic doctors with a view "to strengthen the relations among all these colleagues and thus facilitate the investigation of the ethos of Lourdes." Later, Dr. Auguste Vallet (1927-1947) transformed it into an "Association Médicale Internationale de Lourdes" (AMIL) with a view "to keep in touch all doctors from all continents wishing to maintain a lasting relationship with Lourdes after their visit to the Sanctuary." The AMIL encompasses several other associations related to Lourdes.²²

2.3. Comité Médical International de Lourdes (CMIL)

Msgr. Pierre-Marie Théas, Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes and Dr. François Leuret, the president of the BCM, together established in 1947 a *Lourdes Medical Committee (Comité Médical de Lourdes)* having as its members well-renowned professors and practitioners in various areas of medicine, with 'the function of examining, at second instance, the cures which had been considered as remarkable by the BCM' and to 'certify' them as indeed "unexplained."²³ The same bishop gave it an international dimension in 1954, qualifying it as *Comité Médical International de Lourdes (CMIL)*²⁴ which serves as its official organ of

²²Cf. <https://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cures-and-miracles/medic-al-bureau-sanctuary>. AMIL includes: Inter-national Pharmacists' Association of Notre Dame de Lourdes (APIL - 1935); International Dentists' Association of Notre Dame de Lourdes (ADIL - 1991); International Healthcare Workers Association of Notre Dame de Lourdes (AILACS - 1993); and International Nurses' Association of Notre Dame de Lourdes (AAIL - 2014).

²³NDL Editions, *Expliquez-moi... Les Miracles* (2011) 58, 70. It had the "fonction d'examiner, en deuxième instance, les guérisons qui auront paru remarquables au Bureau médical des constatations." Cf. <https://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cures-and-miracles/medical-bureau-sanctuary>, accessed in 2016.

²⁴Cf. Alphonse Olivieri, "Obiezioni e critiche..." *Sacra Dotrina*, 5 (1960) 148-149; cf. F. Thiebaute, "La diagnosi delle guarigioni extranaturali," *Sacra Dotrina*, 5 (1960) 142; *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, 1950 ed., s.v. "Lourdes" by Clement M. Henze; cf. NDL Editions, *Expliquez-moi... Les Miracles*, (2011) 58. See also, <https://fr.lourdes-france.org/approfondir/guerisons-et-miracles/composition-comite-medical-international-lourdes>; cf. <https://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cures-and-miracles/medical-bureau-sanctuary>.

publication the quarterly that the AMIL started publishing in 1928.²⁵ The CMIL is a "superior consultative body of about 20 permanent members, made of hospital [university] doctors, whose task is to carefully examine sufficiently investigated cases prior to prompting a medical and psychiatric expertise."²⁶ The Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes jointly head the committee with one of its members as nominated by the Bishop. The president of the BCM functions as the secretary to this committee.

Msgr. Théas stipulated in 1949 that the task of the doctors is to respond to three questions: i) whether there was a true serious sickness; ii) whether the cure from it is true and iii) whether there is a natural explanation for the cure. He affirmed that the Church considers the work of the doctors a great service and that they should be without reproach before their conscience. They are independent in their domain as experts of the particular issue in question and can examine with proper method and rigour. They should not, however, intervene in the theological question related to the cure which does not belong to them but to the Church.²⁷

²⁵Medical Office and International Medical Committee of Lourdes, *A Medical-Spiritual Report on the Cure of Mr. Jean-Pierre Bély*, (Sanctaires de Notre-Dame de Lourdes, January 2003) 35. It has a quarterly Bulletin which is published in 5 languages. It "treats of cures in a practical manner, including medicals and spiritual observations and a theoretical approach, which addresses the relation between science and faith based on an anthropological approach of the patient whereby all three dimensions are taken into consideration (body, mind and spirit)." For details on CMIL, see, <http://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cures-and-miracles/the-international-medical-committee>; cf. <https://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cures-and-miracles/medical-bureau-sanctuary>, accessed, 2016.

²⁶Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report...*, 36. Today it consists of thirty members as is presented in, <https://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cures-and-miracles/medical-bureau-sanctuary>, access -ed in 2016.

²⁷NDL Editions, *Expliquez-moi... Les Miracles*, (2011) 59-61 reproduce what Msgr. Théas wrote in 1949 (Bulletin, n. 79, January 1, 1949): "-Dans tel cas donné, y avait-il vraiment maladie?; - Y a-t-il une guérison véritable?; -De cette guérison, y a-t-il une explication naturelle?" He also stated how the Church views their service: "L'Eglise veut que vous fassiez un travail sérieux. Elle vous demande d'être sans reproche devant votre conscience et de mériter, par votre compétence et la rigueur de vos méthodes, les éloges des savants. ... Messieurs, dans votre domaine, l'Eglise vous reconnaît et vous laisse entière indépendance. Elle vous demande, par ailleurs, de ne pas

Msgr. Théas wished to transform the BCM from a group of general physicians to a gathering of special experts. Further, in order to avoid the influence of the atmosphere of Lourdes on the group's judgment, its meeting place was transferred to Paris.²⁸ Bp. Claude Dagens says: "A medical committee has neither the competence, nor the authority to pass judgment on the miraculous aspect of such an event. After appropriately discussing the case, it merely may relay the facts..."²⁹

This creation of several committees or commissions with the scope of studying the miracles reveals with how much interest and what care, attention and rigour does the Church deal with miracles of Lourdes.

2.4. Diocesan Canonical Commission

As it is the magisterium who is competent to declare an alleged exceptional cure a miracle, the bishop of the diocese where a patient is domiciled constitutes a *Diocesan Canonical Commission* to theologially and pastorally discuss the cure before giving the final verdict.

3. The Constitutive Elements to Be Verified in the Recognition of 'Exceptional' Cures

As one of the most important pilgrim centres in the world, Lourdes continues to attract thousands and thousands of faithful. Many of them return after their visit with much physical and spiritual relief, including 'inexplicable' cures. At the same time, the centre was or is no less an object of criticism too. The Church, therefore, very prudently takes utmost care and caution in judging every 'exceptional' cure employing all the possible and available means, academic as well as technological. As our argument is related to such a centre of religious cult and the 'exceptional' or 'unusual' cures happening there, the recognition of such cures calls for the verification of two important elements or aspects before they are officially declared as authentic miracles: the scientific and theological. While medical professionals study the former, the magisterium of the Church has the competence

intervenir, en tant que médecins, dans des questions d'ordre théologique: il ne vous appartient pas, par exemple, de conclure vous-mêmes au miracle. Ceci regarde l'Eglise."

²⁸NDL Editions, *Expliquez-moi... Les Miracles*, (2011) 59.

²⁹Claude Dagens, "Occurrence and Recognition of a Cure," Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report...*, (2003) 8.

for the latter, i.e., the hierarchy at Lourdes and that of the diocese of the cured person's habitual domicile.³⁰

Msgr. Zygmunt Zimowski, President of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, in the *First Lourdes International Scientific Seminar*, dealing with "What does it mean to be 'cured' today"? (June 8, 2012 at Lourdes) spoke about science and faith thus: "Normally, the term science indicates that form of knowledge concerning reality, or things, or situation, or phenomena that are understandable in a sufficiently precise and complete manner thanks to the use of reason and the investigation tools developed by man through the ages. Usually, science means the realm of precision, of verifiability, of understandability."³¹ St. John Paul II, in the preamble to his encyclical *Fides et ratio* (September 14, 1998), stated that reason and faith "are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth." Ten years later, Pope Benedict in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate* n. 74 (June 29, 2009) further stated: "Only together will they save man. Entranced by an exclusive reliance on technology, reason without faith is doomed to flounder in an illusion of its own omnipotence. Faith without reason risks being cut off from everyday life."³²

3.1. Scientific Aspect: Competence of the Medical Practitioners

We have seen above that even though already in 1858, the year of Apparition, investigation began, it was a team of clerics nominated by the bishop who did the job and no medical practitioners were part of the recognition process. Without much delay, however, from 1859 onwards, somehow medical experts were also part of the process (see, under the subtitle, 2.1. Episcopal Commission, p. 120).

What do we mean by scientific aspect in relation to the recognition of miracles? From 1947 onwards the National Medical Committee had the duty of reviewing the dossiers of the Medical Bureau. As science requires precision, verifiability and understandability, the Church considers only physical miracles that could be examined and verified.³³ A medical doctor confronted with an alleged miraculous

³⁰Cf. NDL Editions, *Expliquez-moi... Les Miracles* (2011) 65-71.

³¹Association Médicale Internationale de Lourdes, *Fons Vitae*, Bulletin of the Office of Medical Observations of Lourdes, n. 321 (January 2013) 15.

³²Association Médicale Internationales de Lourdes, *Fons Vitae*, n. 321 (January 2013) 15.

³³Medical Commission, *A Medical-Spiritual Report...*, 36.

cure is employing all available medical knowledge and technology to determine whether a healing is “sudden,” “complete” and “stable,” that is, if the unusual cure is explicable or not according to the present day knowledge of medical science. Thomas Benjamine Dytor, a medical student at University of Birmingham, Member of AMIL, says: “For a cure to be considered as genuine it must be immediate, lasting, not down to any possibility of medical intervention and deemed incurable. Any remission automatically dismisses a case as does the possibility that the disease could have been cured by medicine.”³⁴

For example, after studying and analysing the miraculous healing of Mr. Jean-Pierre Bély³⁵ after his visit to the shrine at Lourdes in 1984, it is held that “from a medical standpoint it is clear that such a development, so unexpected, so sudden, so complete, and so contrary to the normal progression of the disease can only lead to the confirmation that such an event goes beyond the norms of medicine.”³⁶ Therefore, the medical bureau correctly states that “this is precisely what is expected of the Medical Profession – to ascertain that the described events indeed constitute a cure – rapid passage from a state

³⁴Thomas Benjamin Dytor, “Medicine in Lourdes: The experience of an English Medical Student,” *AMIL, Fons Vitae*, n. 321, (January 2013) 18.

³⁵See, Medical Council, *A Medical-Spiritual Report ...*, 5-9; 24-29: Jean-Pierre Bély, a French native, born in 1936, affected by neurological difficulties from 1972, was diagnosed to be suffering from *multiple sclerosis* in 1984, with poor prognosis, still incurable, and was judged “totally disabled and eligible for home nursing help.” Following his visit to Lourdes in 1987, it was reported that, “he felt a sense of great peace and freedom... and noticed an almost instantaneous return to previously lost neurological functions.” On his return from Lourdes, the same doctor who made the previous diagnosis now conducted a neurological examination on him again and found that he was “completely normal” with a “neurological recovery without explanation.” In 1988 Bély, returning to Lourdes, reported the cure to MBL and underwent several rounds of check-ups by many physicians and experts and “all concluded that the evolution of the disease in his case was unexpected and most unusual.” Then the CMIL, having studied and discussed the matter over and over again, at various levels, judged it inexplicable and recommended it, in 1998, to the ecclesiastical authority for the final declaration. Thus, Msgr. Claude Dagens, Bishop of Angoulême, after due process, declared the unusual and exceptional cure of Jean-Pierre Bély a true miracle.

³⁶Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report...*, 30.

of disease to one of consistent health, defying the usual parameters of medicine."³⁷

The physical healings which are "visible and the only kind that can be objectively and fully examined" are subjected to objective verification with the best available medical knowledge and using all the advanced technology for effecting the cure. If medical professionals are challenged with a cure, from a precisely diagnosed physical illness or a serious handicap having hopeless prognosis, either without any treatment or without having completed the medication or without having the time, according to the natural order of things, to have the effect of the medication done, then the medical practitioner might declare such happening as beyond medical explanation as per the available medical knowledge.

At present for the medical practitioners also it is not easy to declare with utmost certainty that a cure is medically inexplicable because of the problem of fixing a correct diagnosis and also the problem of the time factor in the effectiveness of the medication etc. Therefore, for the medical practitioner,

It is essential to go through all the stages of expert opinion entrusted to the IMCL. One must be able to reply to the objections that one hears constantly and which academics and skeptics regularly churned out, remarks such as... *"The diagnosis was incorrect"...* *"What about the placebo effect in medicine"...* *"Cases of a spontaneous and definitive remission have been"...* *"Many illness are emotional in origin. ... The best medical specialists can give no conclusion other than that saying we can find no scientific explanation for this event. An analysis of such a phenomenon is unexplained (and not unexplainable). There is a strong probability that it is authentic. We have no proof of it."*³⁸

After studying such difficulties faced by medical practitioners a researcher states: "the adoption of a probabilistic paradigm instead of a determinist one does not affect the clinician's chances of studying that question; in fact, on the contrary, it changes the value of his

³⁷Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report...*, 31.

³⁸Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report...*, 30-31.

scientific postulates. A more “humble” science could theoretically send into crisis those who seek to use our data as apodictic certainties.”³⁹

In the case of Mr. Bély, there was also a difference of opinion among the experts with regard to a determinist approach regarding the diagnosis. Hence Dr. Confavreux, a senior Neurologist Consultant of the Medical Committee, after collecting the conclusions of many experts stated:

It is highly probable that Mr. Bély suffered from MS in an advanced degree, and that his sudden cure at Lourdes constitutes an unexpected and unexplainable event in the light of current scientific knowledge. I believe it is impossible to further clarify the diagnosis, and that debate in this regard should cease. It is now to the religious authorities to formulate an opinion on the other aspects of this cure.

He finally concluded stating:

Arguments for rejection of this case rest solely on the fact that neither the exact diagnosis nor the prognosis could be 100% confirmed; however, it remains that his recovery was sudden, complete and has remained stable to date. Medical science cannot shed any further light on this. Bearing this in mind, the Committee agrees that these findings should be forwarded to religious authorities in charge, so that they may make an appropriate adjudication on this case.⁴⁰

As far as the recognition of a miracle is concerned, therefore,

“A medical committee has neither the competence, nor the authority to pass judgment on the miraculous aspect of such an event. After appropriately discussing the case, it merely may relay the facts. Only the Church can declare the designated information as an act from God towards this particular human being, and thus through him, as a sign from Him to all.”⁴¹

³⁹Patrick Lallemand, “Letter to the Editor,” *Fons Vitae*, n. 320 (October 2012) 117. Answering in the affirmative the question “Are there still miracles in Lourdes?” or “Do declarations of cures in Lourdes still have any significance?” she expressed her opinion regarding the probabilistic paradigm on exceptional cures.

⁴⁰Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report ...*, 26. Though in the CMIL meeting majority agreed it as inexplicable, two-thirds majority was not obtained.

⁴¹Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report ...*, 8.

The role of the medical experts is, therefore, confined to the declaration, after multiple investigations and confirmation that the particular 'unusual,' 'exceptional' aspects of the healing are either medically explicable or inexplicable.⁴²

3.2. Theological Aspect: The Magisterium Competent to Judge

Once the scientific aspect is verified through several instances of evaluation and judgment, the concerned ecclesiastical authority has the competence to consider the theological aspects of the case without neglecting the medical commission's scientific report. Since the recognition of miracles belongs to ecclesiastical authority, "only the Church can declare the designated information as an act from God towards this particular human being, and thus through him, as a sign from Him to all."⁴³

The central point to be noted here is that the cure approved as medically inexplicable by medical experts occurs in the religious context of strong faith in God and in the intercessory power of the Saints. With regard to the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, the Church is, particularly, to establish the theological aspect that the above mentioned *sudden, complete and stable* recovery "is a sign;" that it "occurred in relation to the sacramental signs of the Church," and that "the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes played a significant role in it."⁴⁴

In his November 18, 1988 address to the International Medical Committee of Lourdes, then meeting in Rome with the Roman Consulta for the Canonization of Saints, Pope John Paul II mentioned the need to consider the importance of both these elements in the recognition process of a miracle:

For a long time, the participation of doctors according to their own degree of competence has proved precious in judging of miraculous cure. As science progresses we understand better certain facts. However there are numerous cures that constitute a reality which can only find their explanation in faith, and which a priori scientific

⁴²Cf. Alphonse Olivieri, "Obiezione e critiche...," 149.

⁴³Alphonse Olivieri, "Obiezione e critiche...," 149; cf. Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report ...*, 8.

⁴⁴Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report...*, 32.

examination cannot deny, and which therefore it ought to respect, precisely in its own order.⁴⁵

Accordingly, in the same event of an alleged miraculous cure we notice two elements: “the abnormal aspect of the cure and the sign it represents, keeping them both distinct but not apart. Thus leading to a two-fold inquiry, where one approach is specifically medical and carried out by professional medical staff and the other one is pastoral and carried out by the Church.”⁴⁶ The miraculous cures have the effect of a sign and hence the recognition of such a miracle can function as a source of grace to the faithful to turn to God.

3.2.1. Church’s Prerogative to Declare a Presumed Exceptional Cure as Miracle

Since the miracles at Lourdes are based on an apparition and the subsequent public and ecclesiastical cult founded on faith in the Blessed Virgin Mary and her intercessory power, it naturally is the prerogative of the magisterium of the Church to officially recognize, approve and declare them. In the concluding judgments of the medical experts with a basic openness to faith we see a reflection of the same. It is also evident in the official declaration made by the local bishop, for example, in the case of Mr. Jean-Pierre Bély’s miraculous cure.

We can conclude that this sudden and unexpected cure lies outside the usual and natural course of this disease. 1. As acknowledged by the IMC, the Church holds the prerogative in enunciating its own pastoral opinion based on the above-mentioned facts, relying on the testimony of Mr. Bely, and on the advice provided by the canonical Commission which I convened in Angoulême on 4th January 1999. This commission consisted of priests and well-qualified laypersons, notably physicians. In the name of the Church, I therefore publicly recognize the authenticity of the healing that benefited Mr. Jean-Pierre BELY on Friday 9th November 1987.⁴⁷

From the above citation of Bp. Claude Dagens’s declaration we see that though it is the “Church’s prerogative” to recognize a miracle, she exercises this right based on certain other important aspects related to the healings, like the i) “scientific facts” supplied by expert medical team, ii) true “testimony” given by the cured person and iii) the

⁴⁵Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report on...*, 33.

⁴⁶Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report...*, 34.

⁴⁷Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report...*, 28-29.

pastoral conclusion of the "Diocesan Canonical Commission" consisting of experts, priests and laity.

4. The Seven Criteria Established by Cardinal Lambertini⁴⁸

In the process of recognizing a miracle, both the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints and the Medical Office at Lourdes consider crucial the criteria established by Pope Benedict XIV:

- i) The sickness must be grave and, according to the judgment of qualified and competent doctors, its recovery must be extremely difficult or impossible;⁴⁹
- ii) The sickness must not be in the last phase, that is in the last stage of its natural cure or in the crisis which precedes the natural recovery. At the same time, it is not contradictory to the miracle if the cure takes place through some medicine or other means when such means are not available in the place where the miracle took place;⁵⁰
- iii) It is necessary to ensure that such medicines or means which are efficient and sufficient to procure the recovery from such sickness, were not used, and it must be evident that the medicines used were inefficient;⁵¹
- iv) The cure must be instantaneous;⁵²
- v) The cure must be perfect, with no

⁴⁸See, Cherian Thunduparampil, *The Role of Miracle*, 19, f.n. 26: "Prospero Lambertini who later became Pope Benedict XIV, was born in 1675 and died in 1758. He served the Roman Curia in various capacities, especially in the causes of beatification and canonization. In 1701 Clement XI appointed him consistorial advocate for two canonizations and in 1708, Promotor of Faith. In the latter office he had charge of all canonizations until 1727. Seeing the need for a record of such work he wrote *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione, Opera omnia*, Vols. I-VII, Rome 1747: Venice, 1764. It is his most celebrated work. This work consists of four books: ... finally, the first part of the fourth book deals with the miracles while the second part is dedicated to liturgical matters. ... It is his long experience in the canonization process that led him to develop his own concept on the miracle. The treatise *De miraculis* forms part of this work. This was written when he was Cardinal Lambertini. Later he was elected pope and the work was later formally confirmed by himself as Pope Benedict XIV through two apostolic letters in 1743 and 1748: the ap. letters are, *Concepta de Nostris*, June, 15, 1748 and *Cum archiepiscopalem Bononiensem ecclesiam*, July 20, 1743."

⁴⁹Benedict XIV, *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione* 4 Vols., IV, VIII, 3, (Bononiae, 1725) p. 88.

⁵⁰Benedict XIV, *De servorum Dei*, IV, VIII, 6-7, p. 90

⁵¹Benedict XIV, *De servorum Dei*, IV, VIII, 8, pp. 90-91.

⁵²Benedict XIV, *De servorum Dei*, IV, VIII, 12, p. 93.

remaining signs of sickness in the person except perhaps some harmless scars. However, those other scars which are signs of certain sicknesses that had already been cured but formed part of the illness considered miraculously cured, impede the declaration of a miracle;⁵³ vi) The healing must not be preceded by any medical crisis which would mean that at the moment of invocation of the Servant of God, the healing process practically started already;⁵⁴ and vii) Finally, the cure must be stable and long lasting.⁵⁵

These criteria were and are considered by the CCS, in the verification process and judgment of the miraculous nature of an extraordinary healing.

5. The Process of Recognition Followed by the Medical Bureau of Lourdes

The Medical Bureau was instituted to ascertain the miraculous or the supernatural nature of the healings that occur at Lourdes. From 1892 to 1917, Dr. Boissarie presided over the medical board. With the assistance of some physicians, he examined the diagnoses of all the diseases from which healings took place at the Grotto in that period. During the discussion of each case, there was also present some ecclesiastic appointed by the bishop of the diocese. Thus, there was a medical-ecclesiastical examination or discussion of each healing. In 1910, Pope Pius X intervened to make the examination of the healings more rigorous and consistent with the norms established by Benedict XIV, according to which seven criteria (see above) must be verified in order to prove the miraculous nature of a healing.

Statistics presented in 2013 show that “since the very first miracle, that of Catherine Latapie, which took place during the Apparitions, on the

⁵³Benedict XIV, *De servorum Dei*, IV, VIII, 26-28, pp. 97-102; cf. Ambrose Eszer, “I Miracoli e altri segni divini: Considerazioni dommatico-storiche con speciale riferimento alle cause dei santi,” in *Studi in onore del Card. Pietro Palazzini* (Pisa: Giardini Editori e Stampatori, 1987) 149.

⁵⁴Benedict XIV, *De servorum Dei*, IV, VIII, 26, p. 102 (29, p. 103). According to Galeno one cure could naturally take place in three modes: through *decubito*, through *crisis* and through *simple remission* - *Ibid.*, p. 103; cf. Andreas Resch, *Miracoli dei beati 1983-1990* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999) 9.

⁵⁵Benedict XIV, *De servorum Dei*, IV, VIII, 31, p. 103. Cf. NDL Editions, “Labertini et ses critères,” *Expliquez-moi... Les Miracles* (2011) 72-73; cf. Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report...*, 35-36.

1st of March 1858, 6784 cures had been recorded at the Medical Office. Only 66 have been proclaimed as miraculous by the Church."⁵⁶ Three more cases were officially declared later. Thus, today there are a total of 69 cures declared unexplained.⁵⁷ These statistics illustrate how the medical commission and ecclesiastical authority rigidly scrutinize every case, subjecting it to various instances of medical analysis and theological review.

5.1. Different Stages in Process of Recognition

Even if a miraculous healing presented to the Medical Bureau of Lourdes is found worthy of merit and attention, no judgment and no declaration will be made immediately. There are various stages in the process of arriving at the declaration, which have been sometimes described as: i) from the "Declared" Cure to the "Unexpected" Cure; ii) from the "Unexpected Cure" to the "Confirmed Cure;" and finally iii) from the "confirmed" to the "Unexpected Character."⁵⁸

A reported alleged 'exceptional,' 'unusual' or 'remarkable' cure is subjected, at various stages and instances, to profound scientific study, analysis, consultation and voting of the Medical Bureau and the International Medical Committee of Lourdes, respectively. After these steps are taken to confirm its veracity, it is passed to the Magisterium for the final authentic declaration as a miracle. Here below I will highlight the important procedures that this complex recognition process entails.⁵⁹

⁵⁶Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report...*, 36.

⁵⁷These 69 cases result out of a total of around 7000 registered cases. For the confirmation of the 69th miracle, that of Danila Castelli, according to Dr. Alessandro Fancisis, the president of the Medical Bureau, more than 100 doctors met 5 times between 1989 and 2010. "On June 20th 2013 Monsignor Giovanni Giudici, Bishop of Pavia, the diocese where Danila Castelli lives, has declared the «prodigious-miraculous» character and the value of «sign» of this cure." For details see, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/lourdes-officially-records-69th-miracle/> - accessed in 2016.

⁵⁸See, <http://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cures-and-miracles/recognition-of-a-miracle>, accessed in 2016.

⁵⁹For the process described here, see, NDL Editions, "Les Miracles aujourd'hui: La procédure," *Expliquez-moi... Les Miracles* (2011) 65-71; cf. <http://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cures-and-miracles/recognition-of-a-miracle>, accessed in 2016; cf. Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report on the Cure of Mr. Jean Pierre Bély*, 2003.

a. Medical Bureau: 1) The process towards recognition of an alleged cure begins with the cured person's voluntary, spontaneous declaration, to the medical office of confirmation, of his cure which he attributes to God through the intercession of our Lady of Lourdes; 2) the Medical Bureau, having registered the patient's declaration, makes a preliminary evaluation to verify mainly two things: i) if the cure concerns a) an illness or b) a serious handicap; ii) and to determine if the cure is effective.⁶⁰

The medical officer assigned to the case collects as much information as possible from the cured person. This primary evaluation helps to understand the cured person, the illness from which he was cured, and the current state of his health etc. It also helps a) to assess the personality of the cured person, so that any "trickery, acting, illusion, a possible hysterical or delirious pathology" can be ruled out; b) to evaluate the circumstances of the illness so that he can judge if it is clearly "beyond the normal medical provisions of the illness in question," and can verify "if it happened according to extraordinary, unforeseen, striking or remarkable conditions." At this stage he also can consult, if the case requires it, the doctor who accompanies the pilgrim group to which the cured person belongs and also the "patient's personal general practitioner." Thus every case will be studied first by the Medical Bureau to which all the doctors at Lourdes have access. Then, provided that there emerged a positive result, after due process, the report/file will be forwarded to the National Medical Commission for superior evaluation.

If the doctor-in-charge decides to advance with the enquiry, then he collects from the cured person all the documents pertaining to the illness prior to the cure. The cured person is, then, asked to present himself to the medical bureau in the subsequent year/s for the medical examination so that the permanence of the cure (a prerequisite) could be ensured by the doctors' commission present at Lourdes. (*It might take several years to collect all the documents and to study them.*) Thus, once the dossier on the illness is ready, all the doctors of the medical bureau present in Lourdes, irrespective of the differences of their personal convictions or religious affiliation, are invited to gather in the presence of the cured person and discuss the case in detail, its diagnosis, prognosis and the known developments of the sickness. This effort

⁶⁰*Effective* means "a complete recovery from an "established pathological state to a full state of health." cf. Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report...*, 35.

aims at confirming the cure as the name of the office itself suggests, *Bureau des Constatations Médicales*. The nature of the cure, as appears from such evaluation, will be marked as "no follow-up" or "pending" or will be registered as "unexpected cure" to be studied further.⁶¹ The file will then be transferred to the IMCL.

Out of the many miraculous healings presented to the MBL in 1948, only 28 were judged worthy of reexamination. From the fifteen cases subjected to such second examination in 1949, six were eliminated and only nine were promoted to the National Medical Commission for further examination and judgment⁶² before being sent to the Diocesan Canonical Commission for the final judgment.

b) The CMIL, according to the practice, will nominate one of its members to study the case still more profoundly. He collects all the literature published so far regarding the particular case in question, and requests an assessment of the case from any number of other experts in the field. A comparative study of the pre- and post-cure documents, including CT scan, x-rays, biopsies etc. also is part of it. This study verifies clear progress from a precisely diagnosed physical illness to completely restored health before the file is forwarded to the medical commission for common discussion and judgment. Finally, if the CMIL judges it worth proceeding, the file will be marked as "thoroughly discussed and confirmed" so that it could be forwarded to the next stage. Otherwise, it is marked "no-follow-up."

4. Prior to its judgment, however, the CMIL also has to ensure that the seven criteria established by Pope Benedict XIV (see above) for verifying a miraculous cure are present in this particular case. Having done so, the CMIL can 'certify' that the mode of cure from the particular illness of the person in question is of "exceptional character," that is, unusual, beyond explanation or unexplained according to the present-day knowledge of medical science. Such an approval requires two-thirds majority of the CMIL.

5) Once the CMIL has finished its enquiry and confirms the cure as inexplicable, the bishop of the cured person will be informed because it is he who is competent to declare it a miracle officially. The bishop,

⁶¹Cf. <http://en.lourdes-france.org/deepen/cures-and-miracles/recognition-of-a-miracle>, accessed in 2016.

⁶²Cf. *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, s.v. "Lourdes"; François Thiebaut, "La diagnosi delle guarigioni extra naturali," 142.

after the several rounds of consultation with other bishops and experts as the case may require, and finally with the *Diocesan Canonical Commission* constituted by him, declares it a miracle.⁶³

6. A Few Cases

I conclude the first part of this article by presenting one or two examples of miraculous cures that God worked through the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes. In one case, a blind and paralysed child of four years was healed. After following the above-mentioned process, Msgr. Carlo de Provenchères, the archbishop of Aix-en Provence, rendered his judgment on May 31, 1949 as follows: "We judge and declare that the cure of Francis Paschal that took place at Lourdes on 31 August 1938 is miraculous, and must be attributed to a special manifestation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God."⁶⁴ He ordered that the decree had to be read in all the Churches and chapels of the diocese and that they had to thank the Virgin Mary by singing the *Magnificat*. Another example of miraculous healing, that of Jeanne Fretel, took place in 1948. In 1950, Prof. Leuret, then the president of CMIL, pronounced the result of the verbal process in which 28 physicians participated. Referring to the nature of the cure, he declared: "There is no medical explanation for this cure. This healing escapes the laws of nature."⁶⁵ In the following year, the Archbishop of Rennes, Card. Clemente Roques, officially declared Jeanne Fretel miraculously cured.

Conclusion

Though the miracles that take place through the intercession of saints and the Blessed Virgin Mary of Lourdes may have similarities, the medical and theological authorities that consider these miracles for verification differ in both cases. While the medical experts appointed by the CCS examine the cases presented to the same congregation, various medical committees appointed by the ecclesiastical authorities,

⁶³NDL Editions, *Expliquez-moi... Les Miracles*, 56: "Pour la reconnaissance du miracle, c'est l'évêque du lieu où habite la personne qui doit se prononcer;" cf. Medical Office, *A Medical-Spiritual Report...*, 36.

⁶⁴Cf. *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, s.v. "Lourdes"; François Thiebaut, "La diagnosi delle guarigioni extranaturali," 160-168.

⁶⁵F. Leuret-H. Bon, *Les Guérisseurs et à leur clients*, (1950) 216: "Il n'y pas d'explication médicale de cette guérison. Cette guérison échappe aux lois naturelles"; cf. *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, s.v. "Lourdes"

i.e., by the respective diocesan bishops, study the miracles of Lourdes. Whereas the Cardinal Prefect and the theologians consider the theological aspects of the miracles presented to the Congregation of the Causes of the Saints,⁶⁶ it is the diocesan ecclesiastical authority that looks into the theological aspects of the miracles of Lourdes and approves them. In short, the CCS is not involved in the recognition process of the miracles at Lourdes. However, the medical committees and the ecclesiastical authority of Lourdes are subject to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

It is true that, at least as far as the apparitions are concerned, the whole story of 'Our Lady of Lourdes' has no other basis than the solitary testimony of an illiterate fourteen-year-old girl. However, their veracity continues to be substantiated and confirmed by the countless pilgrimages, prayers, supplications, masses, processions, and miracles at Lourdes, as well as attestations of these miracles by medical experts. These facts confirm the coherent and innocent testimony of Bernadette as true.

Though several objections and criticisms have been levelled against the inexplicable, super natural events at Lourdes, none of them is sound enough to reject the facts. The water in the pool as well as that of the spring has been proved to be ordinary water. The attributions of healing to 'faith-healing' or 'personal or collective suggestions' have no value when very young children are healed. What suggestions or 'faith-healing' can influence them? Therefore, the events that take place at Lourdes induce a believer to see the 'hand of God' still operating in the world of today. We know that no one who is sincere to his own profession will betray it.

If numerous medical doctors, therefore, together in various committees and as a result of detailed scientific examinations, rigorous study and discussions declare certain cures inexplicable according to the present knowledge of medical science, their declarations must be taken seriously. The cures science cannot explain, we must attribute to God. In the case of miracles at Lourdes, God performs them through the intercession of Mary, his Mother. A person with at least a slight openness to faith and belief in the supernatural cannot deny the facts.

(To be continued)

⁶⁶Cherian Thunduparampil, *The Role of Miracle*, 375-385.