



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin MARY

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“**B**Y His revelation, the invisible God, from the fullness of His love, addresses men as His friends, and moves among them, in order to invite and receive them into His own company,” teaches the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. “The adequate response to this invitation is faith. By faith, man completely submits his intellect and will to God... What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason : we believe because of the authority of God Himself Who reveals them, Who can neither deceive nor be deceived. So that the submission of our faith might nevertheless be in accordance with reason, God willed that external proofs of His Revelation should be joined to the internal helps of the Holy Spirit” (CCC, 142-143, 156).

First and foremost, the person speaking in the name of God must have credentials. *Men of Israel, hear these words*, Saint Peter declared on the day of Pentecost. *JESUS of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs ... you crucified and killed. But God raised Him up* (Acts 2 :22-24). “This testimony,” explains John Paul II, “contains a synthesis of the entire messianic work of JESUS of Nazareth... The *wonders and signs* testify that He Who performed them was truly the Son of God” (General Audience [GA], November 11, 1987). Saint John the Evangelist likewise declares, *Now JESUS did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book ; but these are written that you may believe that JESUS is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name* (Jn 20 :30-31).

In addition, the faithful themselves, over the course of the centuries, would perform “miraculous signs” in JESUS’ Name. The divine Master promised His apostles : *Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me ; or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me will also do the works that I do ; and greater works than these* (Jn 14 :11-12). “The essential goal of these signs,” clarified John Paul II, “is to show the world man’s destiny and vocation to the Kingdom of Heaven,” (GA, January 13, 1988). However, some people “who would like to limit God’s power or confine it to the natural order of things, as if to force God to abide by His laws” (GA, December 9, 1987), respond to these “signs and miracles” with an anti-supernatural prejudice. As a result, many people today deny the existence or even the possibility of miracles, following in the footsteps of famous authors whose influence is still strong today.

No wooden legs!

In 1874, Emile Zola visited the sanctuary of Lourdes. Standing before the numerous votive offerings in the grotto, he declared, in a mocking tone, “I see many canes and crutches, but I don’t see a single wooden leg.” He meant that never, at Lourdes or anywhere else, has anyone seen a missing or amputated limb grow back. Similarly, Jean-Martin Charcot, a famous neurologist of his time (1825-1893), wrote, “In consulting the catalog of cures in Lourdes claimed to be ‘miraculous,’ no one has ever observed that faith has made an amputated limb grow back.” The goal of these defiant declarations is to destroy, in the name of reason and a critical spirit, belief in the existence of the supernatural world. Ernest Renan declared plainly : “We refute the supernatural... To this day, a miracle has never taken place that could be observed by witnesses worthy of credence, and recorded with certainty” (Preface to the *Life of JESUS*).

Miracles and the supernatural world are actually linked. Refusing to admit the latter, rationalists deny the possibility of the former, and as a result, classify the Gospel narratives as fables that, nonetheless, “are as worthy of faith as those in other historical works, and even more” (John Paul II, GA, December 9, 1987). The miracles in the Gospels are events that really took place and that were actually performed by Christ. Those who reported them witnessed to them to the point of shedding their blood. We have manuscripts of the Gospels much older and more numerous than those of the secular writings of antiquity considered historical.

What then is a miracle ? It is a perceptible event that takes place outside or beyond the mode of activity of created nature, thereby demonstrating the intervention of a power greater than nature. Miracles have been observed :

“The history of the Church and, in particular, the process conducted for causes of canonization... are documentation that, even when submitted to the most harsh consideration by historical criticism and medical science, confirm the existence of the *power from on high* (Lk 24 :49) that both works within and supersedes the order of nature” (John Paul II, *GA*, January 13, 1988).

Renan refuted

The miracle that we are going to relate happened well before Renan’s time. It is not a dream, or a fable, but a fact, established with all its circumstances through irrefutable historical evidence. This event categorically refutes Renan’s claim... By a strange anomaly, it remained almost unknown outside of Spain for close to three centuries. The beneficiary, Miguel Juan Pellicer, is fully known thanks to a great deal of information preserved in the archives of the parish in Calanda (in the province of Aragon, in the north of Spain), which a courageous person protected from the pillage and destruction during the civil war in 1936.

Miguel Juan Pellicer received Baptism on March 25, 1617. He was the second of eight children of poor farmers who led a virtuous life. The only instruction the child received was catechism. This basic religious formation planted in him a simple and solid Catholic faith, based on regular reception of the sacraments and an ardent and filial devotion to the Virgin MARY, venerated in Zaragoza under the title of “Nuestra Señora del Pilar” (Our Lady of the Pillar), the Patroness of Spain. Around the age of nineteen or twenty, Miguel took a job as a farm worker for a maternal uncle, in the province of Valencia. At the end of July 1637, as he was leading two mules hauling a cart filled with wheat to the farm, he fell from the harness. One of the wheels of the cart passed over his leg, below the knee, fracturing his tibia.

His uncle Jaime immediately transported the wounded man to the neighboring small city of Valencia, about sixty kilometers away, where they arrived on August 3rd. Miguel stayed there five days, during which he received various treatments but to no effect. He then returned to Zaragoza, arriving in the first days of October 1637. Weak and feverish, he was admitted to the Real Hospital de Gracia, where he was examined by Juan de Estanga, a professor at the University of Zaragoza, the head of the surgical department, and by two master surgeons, Diego Millaruelo and Miguel Beltran. These medical practitioners, having observed advanced gangrene in his leg, concluded that amputation was the only way to save the patient’s life. When they provided testimony before the judges, these doctors would describe the leg as “very phlegmonous and gangrenous,” to the point of appearing “black.” Around mid-October, Estanga and Millaruelo performed the

operation, cutting the right leg “four fingers below the knee.” Although they had made the patient drowsy with alcoholic and drugged drinks, as was the practice at the time, Miguel suffered excruciating pain: “In his torment,” the witnesses would later say, “the young man called upon the Virgin of the Pillar, unceasingly and with great fervor.” A surgery student by the name of Juan Lorenzo García, was given responsibility for recovering the amputated leg and burying it in a dignified fashion in a part of the hospital cemetery reserved for this practice. At this time of faith, respect for the body destined for resurrection dictated that even anatomical remains be treated with piety. García would later testify that he had buried the piece of leg horizontally, “in a hole as deep as a span,” that is twenty-one centimeters (approximately 8 inches), according to the Aragonian measure.

The Virgin’s power

After a hospital stay of several months, even before his wound was completely healed, Miguel went to the sanctuary of “the Pillar,” about a kilometer away, and thanked the Virgin “for having saved his life, so that he might continue to serve Her and show Her his devotion.” He then begged Her to obtain for him “the ability to live from his work.” In the spring of 1638, the hospital administration provided him with a wooden leg and a crutch. The young man had no other way to survive than to make himself *pordiosero*, that is a beggar authorized by the chapter of canons at the sanctuary of “the Pillar.” Zaragoza at that time numbered twenty-five thousand inhabitants, most of whom went to “greet the Virgin” every day. The suffering face of this young cripple drew the attention of these countless visitors, whose charity he solicited. Miguel attended Holy Mass every day in the sanctuary; at the end of each Mass, he would smear his stump with oil from the lamps that burned constantly before the statue of Our Lady of the Pillar. It did no good for Professor Estanga to explain to him that rubbing the wound with oil would make his wound heal more slowly. Miguel continued his gesture of devotion—this act of faith in the Virgin’s power took precedence, for him, over rules of good health.

At the beginning of 1640, Miguel returned to the place of his birth. He arrived in Calanda in March, mounted on a small donkey. His journey of about 120 kilometers had exhausted him, but his parents’ affectionate welcome restored his strength. Miguel was about to turn 23. Unable to help his family by his work, he went back to begging for alms. Many people testified that they had seen the young amputee in the villages surrounding Calanda, mounted on a little donkey, his cut off leg conspicuous, to call upon the inhabitants’ charity. On March 29, 1640, the region celebrated the 1600th anniversary of the Virgin MARY’s “coming in

the mortal flesh” to the banks of the Ebro, according to the belief of the people of the area. This is the origin of the Spaniards’ ancient veneration of the Virgin of the Pillar. Around the same time, a book called *The Augustinus* by Bishop Cornelius Jansen was published in Louvain, Flanders, at that time part of the Spanish empire. The author’s notorious and eponymous doctrine, Jansenism, rejects Marian devotion, popular piety, pilgrimages, processions, and popular interest in miracles as unworthy of pure faith...

That Thursday, March 29th, Miguel did his utmost to help his family fill baskets of manure loaded on a little donkey. He filled nine baskets in a row, in spite of the trouble he had standing on his wooden leg. When evening came, he returned home, exhausted, his stump sorer than usual. That night, the Pellicer family was forced, by order of the government, to put up one of the Royal Cavalry’s soldiers who was marching toward the border to push back the French troops. Miguel had to give him his bed, and slept on a mattress on the ground in his parents’ room. He stretched out on it around ten o’clock. Having taken off his wooden leg, he stretched a cloak over himself that was too short to cover his whole body, because he had lent his blanket to the soldier. He then fell asleep...

Two feet and two legs

Between ten-thirty and eleven o’clock, Miguel’s mother entered the room with an oil lamp in her hand. She immediately smelled “a perfume, a sweet smell.” Intrigued, she raised her lamp — two feet were sticking out, “one over the other, crossed” from under the cloak covering her son, who was fast asleep. Stunned, she went to get her husband, who lifted the cloak. No doubt about it, there were indeed two feet, each at the end of a leg! They managed with some difficulty to wake up their son. Gradually becoming aware of what had happened, Miguel was amazed. The first words that came to his lips were to ask his father to “take his hand, and forgive him for the transgressions he had committed against him.” This spontaneous and immediate reaction of humility in this person who was the beneficiary of a miracle, is a very strong sign of the divine origin of this wonder. When asked, in a voice full of emotion, if he had “any idea how this had happened,” the young man replied that he knew nothing about it, but when he had been awakened from his sleep, “he had been in the middle of a dream that he was in the Holy Chapel of Our Lady of the Pillar and that he was rubbing his amputated leg with oil from the lamp, as he had the custom of doing.” He was immediately sure that Our Lady of the Pillar had brought back his cut-off leg and put it into place. The following Monday, his parents each in their turn affirmed before the notary that they “thought and regarded as truth that the Most Holy Virgin of the

Pillar had asked her Son, our Redeemer, and had obtained this miracle from God, because of Miguel’s prayers, or because such were His mysterious ways.” These Christians clearly saw that the Virgin does not “do” miracles, but that, through her supplication, she obtains them from the Most Holy Trinity. As loved and venerated as she is, the Virgin is not like a pagan goddess, but rather an intermediary between us and her Son, in keeping with the maternal role her Son Himself bestowed on her when He told Saint John, *Behold, your mother!* (Jn 19 :27).

When he had gotten over his initial shock, the young man began to move and feel his leg. Upon observation, marks of authenticity were discovered on it. The first of these was the scar left by the cart wheel that had fractured the tibia. There was also the mark of the excision of a large cyst when Miguel was a boy; two deep scratches left by a thorny plant; and the marks of a dog bite on his calf. Miguel and his parents were therefore certain that “the Virgin of the Pillar had obtained from God Our Lord the leg that had been buried more than two years before.” They swore this unhesitatingly and under oath before the judges of Zaragoza. A newspaper of the time, *l’Aviso Histórico*, wrote on June 4, 1640, the day before the opening of the proceedings, that, in spite of searches of the hospital cemetery in Zaragoza, the buried leg had not been found—the hole that had contained it was empty!

Everyone was dumbfounded

From dawn on March 30, Friday of Passion Week, at that time the feast of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows, the incredible news spread throughout the little market village. Don Juseppe Herrero, the parish vicar, arrived at the Pellicer home, followed by the *justicia*, who combined the functions of justice of the peace and person responsible for public order, the mayor and his assistant, the royal notary, and two doctors of Calanda. A procession formed to accompany the young man who had been miraculously cured to the parish church, where the rest of the inhabitants were waiting for him. According to the documents, everyone was dumbfounded to see him again with his right leg, since they had seen him with only one leg up till the night before. The young man went to confession and received Holy Communion during the Mass of thanksgiving celebrated by the vicar.

However, the leg did not look good at first—it was a purplish-blue color, the toes were bent, the muscles atrophied, and above all, it was shorter than the left leg by several centimeters. It would be three days before the leg took on its normal appearance, with its flexibility and strength. These circumstances, carefully observed and studied during the proceedings, confirm that this was not an illusionist act—they prove that the restored

leg was indeed the same one that had been buried two years and five months before, more than 100 km away... That June, witnesses asserted before the judges in Zaragoza that Miguel could “press his heel on the ground, move his toes, run without difficulty.” Moreover, they stated that since the end of March, the recovered limb had “grown almost three fingers longer,” and that it was currently as long as the other. Only one mark had not disappeared—the scar that formed a red circle in the place where the segment of leg had been rejoined to the other. This was as an indelible sign of the miracle.

“A miracle must therefore be certified by a great number of very sensible persons who have no interest in the matter,” Voltaire affirmed. “And their testimonies must be recorded in good and due form ; indeed, if we require such formalities for actions such as the purchase of a house, a contract of marriage, or a will, how much more necessary are they to verify things which are naturally impossible?” (“Miracle” article from his *Philosophical Dictionary*). But one hundred and twenty years before, precisely such an act had taken place in Calanda. On Monday, April 1, 1640, the fourth day after the miracle, the parish priest and a vicar from Mazaleón, a small market village 50 km away, traveled with the royal notary of the area to verify the truth of the events and draw up an official record of them.

Not one conflicting voice

At the end of that April, the Pellicer family decided to go thank the Virgin of the Pillar. In Zaragoza, the council asked for a trial to be opened, so that all light might be shed on the event. On June 5, two months and a week after the event, the canonical process was officially opened. It was open to the public. More than

one hundred people of all classes took part in it. Despite the rigor of this process, not one conflicting voice was ever heard. On April 27, 1641, the archbishop solemnly rendered his verdict. He declared the restitution of the formerly amputated right leg of Miguel Juan Pellicer, originally from Calanda, “wonderful and miraculous.”

One may apply to every genuine miracle the words Saint Augustine spoke of Christ’s miracles : “The miracles performed by Our Lord JESUS CHRIST are divine works that teach human intelligence to rise above visible things to understand what God is.” Pope John Paul II comments, “We can connect this idea to the reaffirmation of the close link that exists between the ‘miracles and signs’ performed by JESUS and the call to faith. In fact, such miracles prove the existence of the supernatural order, which is an object of faith. They lead those who observe them, and especially those who have personally experienced them, to observe, just as if they had touched it with their finger, that the natural order does not represent all of reality. The universe man lives in is not entirely enclosed within the order of things perceptible to the senses, or even to the intelligence, which is conditioned by perceptible knowledge. The miracle is the ‘sign’ that this order is superseded by the *power from on high*, and that it is also subject to this power. This *power from on high* (cf. Lk 24 :49), that is, God Himself, is above the order of all of nature. It determines this order and, at the same time, through it and above it, this power tells us that man’s destiny is the Kingdom of God. The miracles Christ performed are ‘signs’ of this Kingdom... After the Resurrection, the Ascension, and Pentecost, ‘miracles and signs’ performed by Christ ‘continued’ through the apostles and then through the saints that follow one another from generation to generation” (*GA*, January 13, 1988).

The miracle of Calanda, unimaginable and yet perfectly verified, should strengthen our faith in the existence of an invisible world, that of God and His eternal Kingdom, in which we are called to participate as adoptive children. It is the supreme and eternal reality in relation to which we must consider everything else, as a prudent man orders the means to the end. Above all, miracles reveal to us God’s love and mercy for mankind, especially for those who are suffering or in need, those begging for healing, forgiveness, and mercy. Miracles help root us in an indestructible hope in God’s mercy and inspire us to say often, “JESUS, I trust in You !”

Dom Antoine Nazie *o.s.b.*

P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it.

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