

Peter May revisits biblical characteristics of healing miracles

Cardinal Newman's MIRACLE

key points

Starting with the much publicised beatification of Cardinal Newman during the recent British visit of Pope Benedict XVI, the author reviews the medical evidence for the claim that Jack Sullivan had experienced miraculous healing after praying to the late Cardinal.

He compares this evidence with the biblical criteria, upon which the Catholic Church has based its criteria since 1795, and having commended Catholic openness in making material available in a *Positio*, concludes that the Jack Sullivan case falls far short of being a miracle.

In a brief 'apologetic' consideration of biblical accounts of Christ's healings, he emphasises that the resurrection is a miracle that is open to critical investigation today.

The making of a Saint?

In September 2010, at a much publicised ceremony during the British visit of Pope Benedict XVI, the late Cardinal Newman was beatified. There are two stages in the making of a Catholic saint, beatification and canonisation, and each stage requires evidence of a miracle resulting from prayers being made to the individual in question.

A television film about Newman was seen by an American man called Jack Sullivan, who at 61 years was training for the Catholic diaconate. The film urged people, who had prayed to Newman and believed their prayers to have been answered, to inform the Catholic authorities.

Mr Sullivan had severe back pain. An MRI scan confirmed that there was pressure on the root of his femoral nerve.¹ So in the summer of 2000, after seeing the TV film, Sullivan prayed to Newman and apparently had immediate and lasting relief of his pain. Now all that is impressive enough, except for the fact that ten months later, the pain returned. This temporary relief of pain can be explained medically, in that investigations had demonstrated a slipped lumbar disc to be the cause, rather than degenerative bone disease.² Most slipped discs shrivel up with time.

When the pain returned, Sullivan was re-examined, confirming the earlier diagnosis. He was consequently seen by a neurosurgeon, who performed a laminectomy on 9 August 2001.

This common operation carries a good success rate and pain relief is dramatic as soon as the pressure on the nerve is released. Most patients are usually encouraged to walk within 24 hours of the operation, and most leave hospital within five days.

However, Mr Sullivan suffered a complication during the operation, in that there was a large tear of his dural sac.³ To suture it required a more extensive removal of bone than had initially been indicated.⁴ As a result, he was restricted to bed rest for four days post-operatively to allow the tear to heal.⁵ On day 5, Mr Sullivan had both pain and anxiety when a physiotherapist tried to mobilise him. On the 6th day however, he put his feet on the ground and he prayed again to Newman. He says that he immediately had a warm feeling in his body and felt 'a surge of strength and confidence that I could finally walk'.⁶ He then began to walk and found that his pain had vanished. Later that day he was allowed home. Since his original episode of pain had recurred, causing him to have surgery, it is this second relief of pain after a successful, albeit complicated, operation, which the Catholic hierarchy are calling a miracle, justifying the 'beatification' of Newman.

What is 'miracle'?

'Miracle' is a word we are all liable to use rather casually to speak of entirely natural events, such as childbirth. When Christian people speak of healing

miracles, we tend to imply that we are talking about Christ-like gospel miracles. We do not just mean that their prayers were answered in the natural course of events.

Cardinal Lambertini, who went on to become Pope Benedict 14th, has been the Catholic Church's guiding authority on this subject. In 1795 his study of the Gospels enabled him to publish five defining characteristics of Christ's healing miracles:⁷

1. They were complete cures
2. They included frankly incurable diseases
3. They happened instantaneously
4. There was no other treatment involved
5. They were not self-limiting conditions

Examples showing all five characteristics are found in all four Gospels. They include a man who was born blind (John 9:1ff), a woman who had a fixed curvature of her spine for 18 years (Luke 13:10ff), a paralysed man who was able to take up his bed and walk (Mark 2:1-12), a deaf-mute (Mark 7:32-37), a man with a shrivelled hand (Matthew 12:9-13) and the raising of Lazarus, who had been dead for four days (John 11:1-44; 12:1, 2, 9-11).

To unpack these criteria further, there is no suggestion that the blind man could only partly see or that the paralysed man staggered off home leaning on the shoulder of a friend, who had to carry his bed! These diseases were incurable then and remain so today. The healings were immediate in that they occurred there and then in full view of the watching crowd. That Jesus touched the deaf-mute cannot be said to have been physically therapeutic in natural terms. None would have got better on their own and neither would any of them need a physician's certificate to confirm that they had been healed. That was entirely obvious to everyone present.

It is important to note that none of these conditions were psychosomatic. These were frankly physical diseases and the examples I have listed above certainly would not have resolved with placebos.

Jack Sullivan's pain was relieved immediately but this was fully expected to resolve as a result of the operation. It is difficult to exclude a psychological effect, given what we know about placebo responses. What we do know is that he had definitive surgery for the cause of his pain, and the operation notes gave every indication of a good result.⁸

Evaluating Gospel accounts

Of course, sceptics doubt that the Gospel events actually happened. However, testimony to such healing miracles is given in all four Gospels, while the Jewish historian Josephus also described Jesus as 'a doer of wonderful works'. Historian Hugo Staudinger has written 'It is from a historical point of view impossible, that these miracle stories as a whole are the result of a free-roaming imagination. One must continually call to mind that the oral fixation of the reports already began shortly after

the actual happenings and that the final written fixation of the first Gospels was brought to a conclusion at a time when the greater part of the witnesses were still living.'⁹

It seems to me that we cannot investigate these healings today and must therefore take a general view of them on other grounds. Our conclusions about Christ will be pivotal to our view of his reported deeds. That view will take into account his teaching, character, claims and resurrection (a miracle that is open to critical investigation today). The Christian will argue that there is plenty of evidence there to support the view that God confronts us in Christ. And as Jesus said, 'If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the Kingdom of God has come to you' (Luke 11:20).

Evaluating contemporary claims

It is not difficult in Britain to investigate miracle claims. The *Access to Medical Records Act 1990* allows all patients to obtain copies of their medical records or specialist letters upon request. So if a patient claims to have been healed of blindness, for instance, we can establish whether they had been formally registered blind and whether they were completely or partially blind. We can also compare the visual acuity scores before and after any claimed healing. The only caveats are that their doctors may request an administration fee and they retain the right to decline to give reports, if they feel that it is not in the patient's best interests to see these details.

It seems to me that anyone claiming to have experienced a healing miracle should do the decent thing and obtain medical verification. If that is true for individuals making claims, it is also true for any potential publisher to see such reports before telling the world about it.

A new Vatican openness?

Dr Jacalyn Duffin, a Canadian haematologist, was given access to the Vatican secret archives to research her 2009 book on the Vatican miracles. She wrote that she was not allowed to see any of the Vatican records since 1939.¹⁰ 'Positios' of the saints are kept secret in Vatican archives for the next six papacies – a period of approximately 70 years.

My details of the Newman miracle story however come from the official Vatican document called a *Positio*, a copy of which I have been able to purchase! This came as a complete surprise to me. If this represents a new openness by the Catholic authorities, it is very much to be welcomed. It is quite clear to me that the so-called miraculous healing of Jack Sullivan falls far short of the biblical criteria, and indeed the Catholic Church's own criteria, for what constitutes a miracle.

Peter May is a retired GP in Southampton with a long term interest in the evidence for miraculous healing



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references

- 1 Positio Super Miro, Ioannis Henrici Newman. p172,173 & 186. Roma 2008
- 2 Ibid p182, 186
- 3 Ibid p191, 199
- 4 Ibid p199, 209
- 5 Ibid p218
- 6 Ibid p220
- 7 Reported in: Dowling St J. Lourdes cures and their medical assessment. JRSM 1984; 634-638
- 8 Positio p198, 199
- 9 Staudinger H. The Trustworthiness of the Gospels. Handsel Press, 1981
- 10 Duffin J, Medical Miracles - Doctors, Saints and Healing in the Modern World. OUP 2009; p7, 191