



# Miracles do happen

The Catholic Church teaches that miracles do happen, and that they are a necessary part of the process of making someone a saint.

But what exactly is a miracle? Why does the church regard them as so important, and why are they required for canonisation?

*By Triona Doherty*

**O**n May 1 this year, the first Saturday after Easter, Catholics from all over the world will gather in Rome to celebrate the beatification of Pope John Paul II. Coming just six years after his death, the ceremony will move the late pope one step closer to sainthood and give him the title 'blessed.'

One of the crucial steps on the road to sainthood is the recognition of miracles. While the call 'Santo subito!' – 'a saint immediately!' – echoed through St Peter's Square from the crowds gathered at John Paul II's funeral on 8 April 2005, a miracle still needed to be confirmed before he could be beatified.

His successor Pope Benedict XVI waived the five-year period usually required after death, essentially putting John Paul on the fast track to sainthood; however, he insisted on a thorough investigation process.

The confirming miracle accepted by the church was the case of a 49-year-old French nun who was cured of Parkinson's disease. The church body that

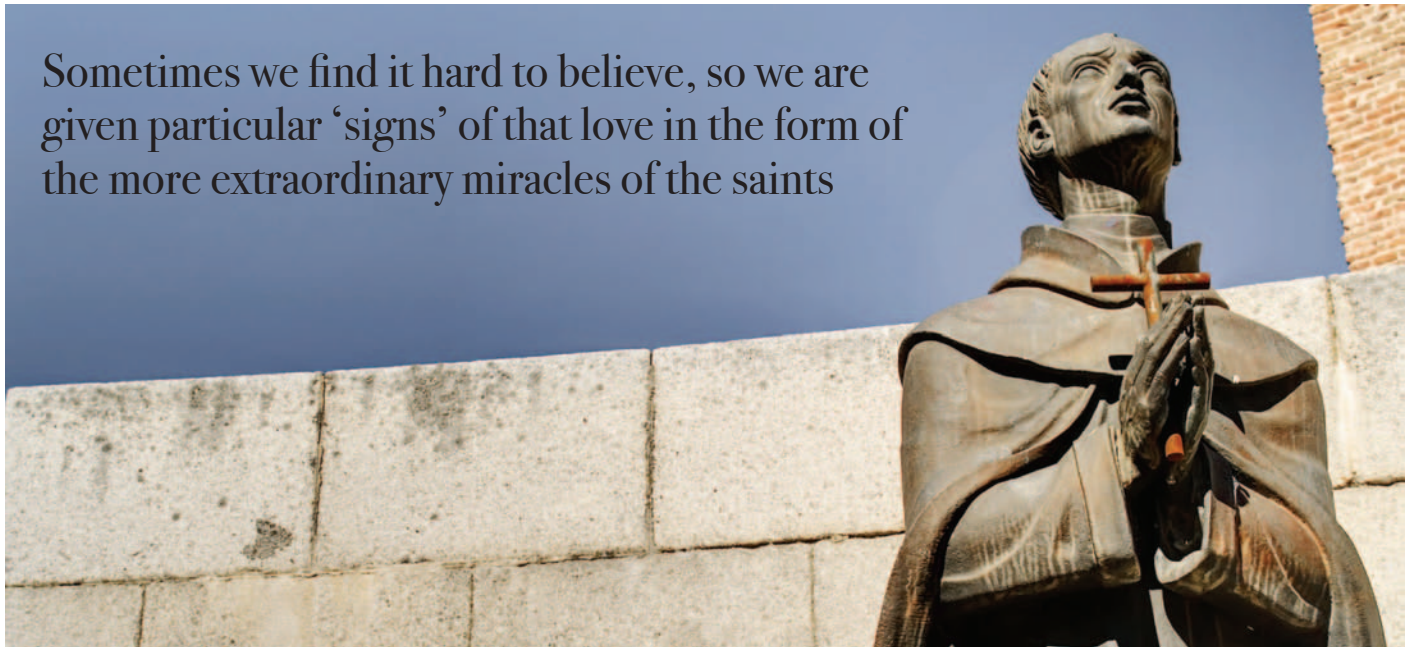
examines such cases, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, concluded that the late pope had interceded to cure Sister Simon-Pierre Normand, who had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, from which the pope himself had also suffered.

Her illness is reported to have inexplicably disappeared two months after his death, after she and her fellow sisters prayed to him for intercession. Sr Simon-Pierre explained that she knew she was healed when she was able to hold a pen and write John Paul II's name on a piece of paper, and later was able to get out of bed with her body suddenly no longer painful.

With this miracle already accepted by the church and his beatification taking place next month, Pope John Paul II's canonisation as a saint will follow if another miracle is confirmed.

But what exactly is a miracle? Why does the Catholic Church regard them as so important, and why are they necessary before a person can be declared a saint?

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#### WHAT IS A MIRACLE?

“It’s a miracle!” These magic words can be exclaimed for anything from a friend showing up on time to a family member getting the all-clear from an illness; from an out-of-the-ordinary or joyous event to the more literal use of the word to describe something which cannot be explained by logic or science. However, the Catholic Church has a specific definition for what constitutes a miracle.

“To be considered the object of a possible miracle, any cure must be judged by the specialists to have been instantaneous, complete, lasting and inexplicable, according to ordinary medical or scientific research,” explains administrator of the Dublin Diocesan Office for Causes, Fr Ciaran O’Carroll.

The change in the condition of Sr Simon-Pierre Normand met all these criteria; the healing occurred instantly, was without medical explanation, and was long-lasting – she remains well to this day.

It can seem as though miracles should have no place in the modern scientific mindset, where logical explanations are sought for every occurrence. Many wonder whether miracles can be credible in light of constant scientific developments. The very idea of attributing an unexplainable event to a supernatural power seems to contradict the logic of science.

But Fr O’Carroll says a miracle by its very definition is an event that defies the laws of nature.

“A miracle is seen as an event that goes beyond the forces of nature. It is realised by God outside of what is normal in created nature - by the intercession of a servant of God or a blessed person,” he says.

The concept of miracles is hardly a new phenomenon. Our scriptures tell us that since the beginning of time, God has always intervened in human history and acted on behalf

of his people.

“Basically, miracles fit into the category of the signs of God. Already in the Old Testament, we read of the ‘wonderful deeds’ of God on behalf of his people - saving them out of slavery, the parting of the waters, leading them through the desert. Then Jesus also was known for the many ‘signs’ he did - curing people, healing them, calming the storm, etc,” points out Fr Brendan Leahy, Professor of Systematic Theology at St Patrick’s College, Maynooth.

“Sometimes we find it hard to believe, so we are given particular ‘signs’ of that love in the form of the more extraordinary miracles of the saints. But in reality Jesus Christ is always doing great things in our lives. The saints are those who so identified with Jesus while on earth that now from heaven they work with him in continuing to accompany us, helping us to be more faithful to God’s plan for us so that we can say our ‘yes’ to God,” says Fr Leahy.

#### THE MAKING OF SAINTS

The confirmation of a miracle is a very important step in the process of being declared a saint. It is a lengthy process, whose early stages involve an initial investigation within the diocese where the alleged miraculous event took place, before all documents are forwarded to the Vatican’s Congregation for the Causes of Saints. The evidence is reviewed by a number of panels of medical experts and theologians before being approved by the pope.

A miracle must be officially attributed to the intercession of a candidate before they can be beatified and declared ‘blessed.’

“To prove the authenticity of a miraculous event necessitates undergoing a process of meticulous scientific and

theological examination,” says Fr O’Carroll.

“Since 1975, to advance to the stage of beatification requires one approved miracle, and for canonisation another subsequent miracle.”

He believes the requirement of miracles for canonisation is critical “because miracles are a divine confirmation of the holiness of the person prayed to by the petitioner,” as well as “a sign destined to glorify God.”

There are, of course, those who believe the requirement for a miracle before a person can be declared a saint should be abandoned, or at least reconsidered. Some recommend that sainthood should be dependent solely on a study of the life of the candidate.

Others argue that miracles have no place in our advanced modern world, and that unexpected cures are more likely to be the result of a placebo effect or ‘wishful thinking.’ The church itself can be reticent about some cures, such as cures from cancer, as there is a possibility that the disease is merely in remission and could recur.

When the healing experienced by Sr Simon-Peter was being examined, one doctor remarked that to experience such a recovery she could not have had Parkinson’s in the first place. Some medical experts also pointed out that the disease is difficult to diagnose.

As evidence was gathered towards the beatification of Pope John Paul II, thousands of testimonies came from those who were convinced favours had been granted through the late pontiff. While the French miracle officially paved the

way, Pope John Paul’s biographer George Weigel commented recently that “in the larger sense of ‘miracle’, the case for the beatification – and ultimately the canonisation – of John Paul II rests on the witness of his entire life.

“His evangelical Catholicism demonstrated both the beauty of Christianity and its importance for the human future. That demonstration was his greatest ‘miracle’; it was his greatest gift to the church and the world; and it is the reason why the church was right to recognise his heroic virtues in declaring him to be among the blessed,” Weigel says.

#### MIRACULOUS HAPPENINGS

The beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman last September was a high profile affair, taking place as it did during the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Britain. American deacon Jack Sullivan, cured through the intervention of Cardinal Newman, was there to greet the pope.

Jack had just completed his second year of a four-year course to become a deacon when he began to experience crippling back pain. Advised by doctors to quit his studies, he prayed to Cardinal Newman that he might be able to return to finish his studies and reach ordination. When he woke the next morning, the pain had gone, returning only when he had completed the academic year.

He was informed by an orthopaedic surgeon that his back and leg pain was caused by severe stenosis, or compression of the spinal cord and nerves. Following an operation to



Deacon Jack Sullivan speaks to British journalists as Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster looks on. Deacon Sullivan recounted in detail how he was inexplicably cured from a severe spinal disorder after he recited a short prayer to Cardinal John Henry Newman, recently beatified

remove a part of the spinal bone he was left in severe pain and worried that he would not be ready to return to his studies. Again he prayed to Cardinal Newman, and felt “an intense heat and a strong tingling sensation” throughout his body.

“I felt an indescribable sense of joy and peace, and was totally transfixed by what I believed to be God’s presence. When I became aware of what was happening around me I was standing upright and I exclaimed to the nurse that I felt no more pain,” he said in a recent interview.

While there were sceptics, Jack’s doctor testified that the recovery was remarkable, and Jack himself was so convinced the healing was the result of prayer that he put his story in writing to set in motion the process that culminated in Cardinal Newman’s beatification. He describes himself as “just a recipient of a tremendous divine favour.”

#### IRISH MIRACLES

In Ireland we have our own stories of miracles and several potential candidates for sainthood, including founder of the Legion of Mary Frank Duff, icon of the temperance movement Matt Talbot, founder of the Presentation sisters Nano Nagle, and founder of the Sisters of Mercy, Catherine McAuley. Each cause has a postulator whose role is to investigate the life of the saint and to forward any claims of miracles to the diocese.

Vice postulator for the cause of Matt Talbot, Fr Brian Lawless, explains that the process is long and often fraught with difficulties.

“The cause for the beatification of Matt Talbot began almost immediately after this death in 1925, and he was declared venerable in 1975.

“At the moment there are two or three possible miracles of a physical nature attributed to Matt Talbot but they are in the very early stages. On the other hand, there are many people who have attributed their recovery from alcoholism or drug addiction to Matt Talbot. If these ‘moral miracles’ were accepted by the church I’m sure he would have been canonised years ago,” Fr Lawless says.

## Doctors may be able to attribute 99 percent to science, but there is still one percent miracle, and that is the wonder part of it

While it takes a rigorous investigation process to establish a miracle officially, personal stories of healings and graces received through the intercession of particular saints or candidates for sainthood are plentiful.

Cork native John O’Donoghue claims he was cured of cancer through the intercession of Nano Nagle, who herself hailed from County Cork and whose beatification the Presentation Sisters continue to actively pursue.

Saint Gerard Majella



Diagnosed with lung and liver cancer in 2002, John had undergone several courses of chemotherapy and radiotherapy before a friend recommended praying to Nano Nagle.

“He told me she’d look after me. I was taught by the Presentation Sisters, so I knew who she was,” explains John, a retired bus driver in his 60s.

Soon afterwards a number of events conspired to bring Nano Nagle to his attention. He visited her grave in Cork, where some visiting nuns gave him a prayer leaflet and a relic of Nano. He also noticed a picture of her in his local parish church, and later a priest who visited him in hospital to give him a blessing told him that Nano was looking after him.

After two years of chemotherapy and radiotherapy, in 2003 John was told the cancer was gone.

“The doctor couldn’t understand why it wasn’t there...

The man above calls all the shots, and I have great devotion to Nano Nagle,” says John, who has put his story in writing for examination.

“I’ve had a fascinating journey and my life was turned upside down. Cancer was a great learning curve, and I’m glad I lived to tell the tale. When we are baptised it is our job to go out and spread the word. I only tell my story if someone can get some hope from it,” he adds.

#### MIRACLE OF LIFE

Of course, not every event regarded as a personal miracle is as dramatic as an inexplicable cure from a serious illness. Many

who have lost a loved one regard it as a miracle that they were able to survive the loss and get on with their lives. They find strength they did not know they had. We often hear the birth of a child referred to as the 'miracle of life.'

A novena to the Italian Redemptorist saint Gerard Majella is held every year in St Joseph's Redemptorist church in Dundalk, which is the Irish centre of devotion to this patron saint of motherhood and parenthood. Expectant mothers and those who have worries or concerns about fertility often call upon St Gerard.

During his long involvement with the novena, Fr Michael Cusack, C.Ss.R has journeyed with many couples and families.

"I meet many people who have deep faith in the intercession of St Gerard Majella. Every year people tell me of their miracles. They are not necessarily those decided by the church, but are miracles for the people themselves. There are young couples who have prayed for the grace to conceive or for a healthy child and have had their prayers answered."

Fr Cusack believes the 'miracle' element sometimes lies in the smallest percentage of life's events that can't be accounted for by logic or science.

"Doctors may be able to attribute 99 percent to science, but there is still one percent miracle, and that is the wonder part of it. I have journeyed with people and many say they couldn't cope with what life threw at them if it wasn't for God and their faith.

They see God in the midst of happenings. Looking back, they say it was God who carried them through.

"Miracles do happen and I have been privileged to witness the fruits of those miracles and the joy that they bring. When you come face to face with a couple who have struggled for years with fertility problems and now stand before you holding their newborn to be blessed by the relic of St Gerard, you begin to believe in miracles."

Fr Cusack tells the story of a couple who had received the news that the baby they were expecting would not live more than a few hours after its birth.

"The prospect of the family having to welcome a new baby and say goodbye almost in the same breath was overwhelming."

He asked the congregation at the novena to pray for the family, and in January 2003 Patrick Gerard was born and astounded everyone by putting up a fight for life. He lived to return to the shrine in October that year to be blessed by the relic of St Gerard, but passed away a short time later.

"While deeply saddened by their loss, the family had received an answer to their prayer. They were given time to say goodbye," says Fr Cusack. ■

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