

MARTYRDOM AND OTHER REVOLUTIONARY MIRACLES

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MARY MacKILLLOP'S prospective sainthood has brought miracles into public discussion. Reports of contemporary local miracles make interesting human stories. But they also provoke the ire of those who see them as mumbo jumbo and further evidence of the irrational character of religious faith.

The points and counterpoints in this debate are predictable. But another angle may be found in an apparent oddity in the processes of saint making.

Martyrs do not require miracles to qualify for inclusion in the public worship of the Catholic Church. They need only evidence that they died for their Christian faith. But other candidates for sainthood do need miracles, as well as evidence that they have lived lives consistent with deep faith. Miracles are broadly understood as events that are associated with prayer and are not susceptible of a natural explanation.

This intriguing difference between martyrs and other saints illuminates the place of miracles in the Catholic tradition. In it the martyr's death is equivalent to miracles worked through the saint. Both point to a rent in a world that is declared to be self-enclosed.

The Roman world of the first Christian martyrs was politically enclosed. The sacred and the political were joined in the worship of the Emperor. The Roman imaginative world was one in which the public welfare depended on the tight union between the empire and religion.

Christianity, like Judaism, challenged this with its faith in a God whose claims and favour could not be locked into Imperial institutions. The central story of Jesus Christ was

of a death at the hands of the Imperial authorities and a Resurrection that made his scattered followers the kernel of God's people. They represented the new way of living that God had opened through Christ's death and rising.

To the Roman authorities this faith located Christians as a set of outsiders who gave communal allegiance to a God beyond the Empire and so tore the tent that housed the sacred.

This view led the Roman authorities to persecute Christians, offering them the choice of recanting their allegiance to Christ or face torture and death designed to destroy their dignity and their humanity. Christians saw the death of martyrs as a demonstration of the power of their God who gave martyrs strength to endure being hacked to bits. They saw it as a vindication of the Church in its belief in a God whose claims and ways of acting lay beyond the control of the State. The martyrs by their death symbolised that rent in an apparently sealed world.

The miracles associated with faith and prayer also tear open a world that is seen as self-enclosed and whose possibilities are narrowly defined. In daily experience the world is enclosed by the forces of fate, like plague, famine and the contingencies of sickness and health. These tend to restrict our hope and sense of what is possible. Our world can also be limited by imaginative frameworks that limit reality to what we can perceive, and restrict our hopes to the ways in which we can make the visible world work for us.

Miracles open a gap in the canopy that we build over our world. They point to a more mysterious reality and to incalculable possibilities that arise from the recognition of a God

on whom the world depends. The lives of saints, miracles and all, point to that deeper reality of a God who transcends the world and analysis of it. Miracles associated with faith are symbols of God's presence and power within the world.

Seen from this perspective both miracles and the deaths of martyrs are symbols. They point to something beyond themselves. The twin qualities of miracles are that they are human events that are out of the ordinary and that they occur within the context of faith. For Christians who accept that faith they disclose a God who is intimately active in the world. Miracles do not demand that others believe in their God, although they do invite them to reflect whether their imagination of the world may be too circumscribed.

If miracles are seen as symbols, the questions about whether they really exceed the powers of nature will appear tired. Their veri-



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fication demands simply that healings should be beyond our present power to analyse or to replicate. It does not demand that scientific reflection will never be able to explain or replicate them.

Central to the miracle is the context of faith within which the extraordinary healing is situated. Without that they are no more than an unusual event. But even unusual events lead us to ask questions.

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2473 Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death. The martyr bears witness to Christ who died and rose, to whom he [sic] is united by charity. He bears witness to the truth of the faith and of Christian doctrine. He endures death through an act of fortitude. 'Let me become the food of the beasts, through whom it will be given me to reach God.'

2474 The Church has painstakingly collected the records of those who persevered to the end in witnessing to their faith. These are the acts of the Martyrs. They form the archives of truth written in letters of blood:

Neither the pleasures of the world nor the kingdoms of this age will be of any use to me. It is better for me to die [in order to unite myself] to Christ Jesus than to reign over the ends of the earth. I seek him who died for us; I desire him who rose for us. My birth is approaching. (St Ignatius of Antioch)

I bless you for having judged me worthy from this day and this hour to be counted among your martyrs.... You have kept your promise, God of faithfulness and truth. For this reason and for everything, I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. Through him, who is with you and the Holy Spirit, may glory be given to you, now and in the ages to come. Amen. (St Polycarp)

—From The Catechism of the Catholic Church.