NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Beatification Q&A #2: What's the deal with miracles?

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 26, 2011 NCR Today

ROME -- In one way or another, miracles have always been part of the sainthood process.

Well before the Catholic church had a formal system of canonization, grassroots devotions to saints were usually premised both on someone?s reputation for personal holiness and their wonder-working power. By the 16th century, a candidate for sainthood who wasn?t a martyr had to have a ?reputation for sanctity and miracles? in order to be beatified, and at least two more miracles had to be documented before canonization. John Paul dropped the number to one miracle for beatification and one more for canonization, but the requirement remains.

The logic is straight-forward: When the church declares someone a saint, it means she or he is already in Heaven. A miracle, worked in response to a request made in prayer, is seen as confirmation that the person is indeed in Heaven and capable of interceding with God. (That?s why the miracles have to come after the candidate?s death. Although Roman lore is full of anecdotes about prodigious deeds associated with John Paul II during his lifetime, none of that satisfied the posthumous requirement.)

tThink of the miracle, in other words, as God?s seal of approval on the candidate.

tIn theory, the miracle could be any act of divine intervention. For instance, when the Croatian nun Marija Petkovi? was beatified in 2003, her miracle concerned a lieutenant on a Peruvian submarine sunk by a Japanese fishing trawler in 1988. According to a church investigation, the lieutenant prayed for Petkovi??s help and was granted superhuman strength that allowed him to open a hatch against several thousands of pounds of water pressure, saving the lives of 22 crewmen.

tIn most cases, however, the miracles studied for purposes of beatification and canonization involve healings from illness. Those healings are examined by consulters to the Vatican?s Congregation for the Causes of Saints, both a panel of medical experts and a panel of theologians.

According to the traditional criteria, for a healing to be certified as miraculous, it must be:

- Immediate
- Complete
- Permanent
- Scientifically inexplicable

John Paul II always had a sense of theatre, and thus it?s only fitting that the miracle which sealed his beatification has a poetic arc. It involves the healing of a 49-year-old French nun named Marie Simon-Pierre Normand, who belongs to an order called the *Institut des Petites Soeurs des Maternités Catholiques* (?Institute of the Little Sisters of Catholic Motherhood?).

tThe poetry is that Normand suffered from Parkinson?s disease, the same ailment that afflicted John Paul himself. In fact, Normand has said that when she was in the grip of the disease, she found it painful to watch John Paul on television, because she saw a glimpse of her own future ? progressive loss of control over her body and a life confined to a wheelchair.

According to accounts given by Normand, she had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of Parkinson?s disease in 2001, which meant that instead of gradually getting worse over many years, she deteriorated rapidly. When Benedict XVI announced the opening of a beatification cause for John Paul II on May 13, 2005, members of Normand?s community in both France and Africa began praying to the late pope for her recovery.

By that time, Normand said, she intended to resign from her position in charge of a large staff at a maternity hospital, and she even despaired of her ability to make a trip to Lourdes to pray for a cure.

As Normand told the story in a 2010 interview with the Italian state TV network RAI, on the night of June 2, 2005, she told her superior of her intention to resign, who suggested that she pray anew to John Paul II. Normand said the superior suggested that she write the pope?s name on a piece of paper, which by that stage she normally couldn?t do because of tremors in her hands. The superior insisted, suggesting that the left-handed Normand use her right hand, and she complied. That night, she said, she was able to sleep well, despite the fact that the pain of the disease usually kept her awake.

The next morning, she said, she awoke feeling much greater movement in her body, and went directly to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. She said she prayed the ?luminous mysteries? of the rosary (a new devotion introduced by John Paul II in 2002). Afterwards, she said, she went to the regular morning Mass with the other sisters, where she became convinced she was cured. Four days later she had a regularly scheduled appointment with her neurologist, who, she said, was amazed by the complete disappearance of her symptoms.

In March 2010, media reports briefly implied that Normand had fallen ill again and that at least one physician had questioned the original diagnosis of Parkinson?s disease, suggesting it may have been some other nervous disorder which can go into spontaneous remission. Those rumors were swiftly denied by the French bishops? conference, however, and the Vatican obviously resolved any doubts to its satisfaction.

tOne advantage of beatifications and canonizations which come quickly is that most of the people who loomed large in the candidate?s life are still around. That?s certainly true with John Paul II, including his *miracolata*, an Italian word literally meaning ?miracled one,? and referring to the person who experienced the candidate?s miracle. In true 21st century fashion, interviews with Normand are even available on YouTube.

Sr. Marie Simon-Pierre will be very much in evidence in Rome this week, among other things offering her testimony during a vigil ceremony Saturday evening in the Circus Maximus. She?ll be joined by two of John Paul II?s closest aides: Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz of Krakow, Poland, his longtime private secretary; and Spanish layman Joaquin Navarro-Valls, John Paul?s spokesperson.

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