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What Use Are Miracles?

Commentary for the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap

ROME, OCT. 12, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- While Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, 10 lepers met him at the entrance to a village. Staying at a distance they call out to him, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" Jesus has pity on them and says to them: "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

Along the way the 10 lepers discover themselves to be miraculously cured. The first reading also tells of a miraculous healing of a leper: that of Naaman the Syrian by the prophet Elisha. The liturgy's intention is clearly to invite us to reflect on the meaning of miracles and in particular of miracles that bring about the cure of a sickness.

Let us say that prerogative to do miracles is one of the most attested in Jesus' life. Perhaps the most dominant idea that the people had of Jesus during his life, more dominant than that of a prophet, was that of a miracle worker. Jesus himself presents this fact as proof of the Messianic authenticity of his mission: "The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised" (cf. Matthew 11:5). Miracles cannot be eliminated from Jesus' life without destroying the plot of the whole Gospel.

Together with accounts of the miracles, Scripture offers us criteria for judging their authenticity and purpose. In the Bible, miracles are never ends in themselves; much less are they supposed to elevate the person who does them and show off his extraordinary powers, as is almost always the case with healers and wonder workers who advertise themselves. Miracles are rather an incentive for and a reward of faith. It is a sign and it must serve to draw attention to what it signifies. This is why Jesus is saddened when, after having multiplied the loaves of bread, he sees that they did not understand what this was a sign of (cf. Mark 6:51).

In the Gospel itself, miracles are ambiguous. Sometimes they are regarded positively and sometimes negatively -- positively, when they are welcomed with gratitude and joy, when they awaken faith in Christ and hope in a future world without sickness and death; negatively, when they are asked for or demanded for faith. "What sign do you do that we might believe in you?" (John 6:30). This ambiguity continues in a different form in today's world. On the one hand, there are those who seek out miracles at all costs; it is always a hunt for the extraordinary, and people stop at their immediate utility. On the other hand, there are those who deny miracles altogether; indeed they look upon miracles with a certain irritation, as if it were a manifestation of degenerate religiosity, without recognizing that in doing so they are pretending to teach God himself what is true religiosity and what isn't.

Some recent debates that have arisen around the Padre Pio phenomenon have shown how much confusion is still around today about miracles. It is not true, for example, that the Church considers every unexplainable event a miracle (we know that even the medical world is full of this!). It considers as miracles only those unexplainable facts that, because of the circumstances in which they take place (which are rigorously ascertained), have the character of a divine sign, that is, they give confirmation to someone or an answer to a

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prayer. If a woman, who is without pupils from birth begins to see at a certain point while still being without pupils, this can be cataloged as an unexplainable fact. But if this happens while she is confessing to Padre Pio, as did in fact happen, then it is no longer possible to speak simply of an unexplainable fact.

Our atheist friends with their critical attitude in regard to miracles make a contribution to faith itself because they make us attentive to easy falsifications in this area. But they too must guard against an uncritical attitude. It is just as mistaken always to believe whatever is claimed as a miracle as it is always to refuse to believe without looking at the evidence. It is possible to be credulous but it is also possible to be ... incredulous, which is not very different.

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Father Raniero Cantalamessa is the Pontifical Household preacher. The readings for this Sunday are 2 Kings 5:14-17; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; and Luke 17:11-19.

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