

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

Miracles

Elizabeth Ficocelli

Hi. I'm Elizabeth Ficocelli. I'm a Catholic author, speaker, and radio host, and I'll be talking to you today about the subject of miracles. Let's start with a prayer.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lord, this Lent as we work towards You in our spiritual growth, help us to see the miraculous aspect of You and our faith. Help us appreciate the many times that You have tried to reach out to Your people through things that are hard to explain for humankind, but tangible ways that You were showing Your love and protection for us. Open our hearts and minds to the subject of miraculous events in history and in our own days and, most particularly, in our day-to-day lives. And we ask this in Jesus' name. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This presentation is called "Bleeding hands, weeping stone." It's based on the same book of mine *Bleeding Hands, Weeping Stone: True Stories of Divine Wonders, Miracles, and Messages*, and a full-length presentation on the same subject. But today I'm kind of giving you some highlights to talk about the subject of the miraculous. And what motivated me to write the book is that people would come to me at my book table after speaking events and say "Please write something for my high school students, or for my college students, because they no longer go to church, they're bored with the faith." And I remember that, as I entered the Catholic church as a young adult myself at the age of 23, the first subject I studied were the miracles, because I just thought they were very, very fascinating, and I thought to myself "Well, maybe this could be the topic that I can reach young people with."

And I thought in particular because when you think about the entertainment that young people, and not even young people, but all of us, tend to be drawn to, some of the big blockbuster movies, are all about things that really are supernatural when you think about it. Superhuman powers, and magic, and dragons, and science fiction and, you know, outer space. All these things that are just beyond normal, natural living. So I know there's an appeal for that. And when I talk to young audiences about the subject of the supernatural, I am quick to remind them that, you know, all of those things we see in the movies are computer-generated, right,

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

they're not real. But there is something that's very real when we talk about supernatural, and that's our Catholic faith. It's very supernatural, and we have evidence all through the Bible.

We have stories of burning bushes that could speak, and ravens bringing a prophet dinner in the desert. We have stories of people walking around a big city and the walls crumbling when they shout and blow their trumpets. And we have stories of, you know, of an angel coming to a young, unwed woman telling her she was going to be the Mother of God. And a miraculous star in the sky that leads people from far away countries to the town of Bethlehem. And we see Jesus and His apostles performing countless miracles, like raising people from the dead, and multiplying food, and healing the sick, and so forth. So we know that the Bible continues, you know, to show us that we have a very supernatural God and a supernatural faith, but it doesn't end in the pages of scripture. Miracles continue to happen right up to our day and time.

And I like to, when I talk about miracles, break them down into what I think are the 6 major categories of God's miracles. And those categories are: Eucharistic miracles, stigmata, incorrupt bodies, amazing abilities of saints, apparitions, and weeping icons or artwork. And before we kind of get into the subject of miracles, there's just a couple of things I like to point out to my audiences. First of all, you're not required to believe in anything we're going to be talking about today. Miracles fall under a category called "private revelation". What we are required to believe in is public revelation, and that's the teaching of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, that's what's in sacred scripture. It's already given to us everything we need to get to heaven.

Miracles fall under a category of helping us in our faith maybe when we're doubting, when we need that extra strength, just to really experience God's awe and wonder, and I think that's why He gives us the miracles. They can really help our faith, but we're not required to believe it. We also want to make sure we let Holy Mother Church be the judge of whether a miracle is authentic or not, and the reason I say that is because the evil one can be a great imitator of these kinds of events, so we want to make sure that we are following what are authentic in the eyes of the church. And finally, all events should lead us to Jesus. If they're not leading us to Jesus, then we don't want anything to do with them.

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

So we'll start with the first category of Eucharistic miracles. Well, of course, the greatest Eucharistic miracle happens every time we go to mass! On every Catholic altar around the world when the bread, I'm sorry, the bread and the wine are transformed right in front of us into the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ. But we can't see that miracle with our eyes, can we? Not at least the eyes of our body. But we have to look at that with the eyes of faith. But there have been times throughout history, and even until current times, where God has willed that these miracles would happen in a physical, visible way, so we could see that these bread and wine species turn into, right before us, human flesh and human blood.

Maybe the most famous, or one of the most famous cases of this was back in Lanciano, Italy in the 1700s, and the priest himself was doubting in the great miracle. Although he said those words faithfully at mass, he doubted inside. And yet on one particular day the bread and the wine in his hands, once they were consecrated turned into visible, physical flesh, and visible, physical blood. And it was a great miracle not only for the priest and his congregation to witness such an amazing miracle, but the whole region, and it was venerated for centuries. And, even more miraculous, modern day tests were done on it a few decades ago and confirmed that this really is human flesh and blood. It's pretty outstanding!

But Eucharistic miracles aren't limited to that kind of transformation. The Eucharist has also been known to have amazing abilities, like surviving fires, and floods, and being stolen, and stopping weather patterns, you know, big storms from hitting and destroying villages and that kind of thing. So, a lot of power in the Eucharist. And just to give you an example of something in modern day times: In 2001 in Chirattakonam, India, there was a Eucharistic miracle approved by the church where the Eucharist displayed the face of Jesus Christ on it. It's still visible. A man with long hair and a beard. So these miracles happen right until our present time.

Let's talk about stigmata. One thing I loved when I became Catholic was how much attention the Catholic church gives the wounds of Christ, the Passion of Christ, what He did for us to open the gates of heaven, and to overcome sin and death. And we know He was whipped and scourged, we know He was pierced with nails in His hands and feet. We know He was crowned with thorns, stabbed in the side. He literally lost every ounce of blood for us. Well, through the history of our church, there have been holy men and women who have really venerated the wounds of Christ, and have received, through God's grace, the wounds of Christ

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

themselves. Sometimes invisibly, where they feel the pain, but nothing visible on their body. But other times visible wounds would appear on these people's hands, their feet, their side, their head, and they would feel the crushing pains of the agony.

Some people that are well known for this: For instance, St. Francis of Assisi. Probably one of the first stigmatists we know of. And St. Francis was a very holy priest, and in the last 2 years of his life he had a vision, and he was pierced in that vision with nails through his hands and feet. You could not only see the wounds, but you could see the nails themselves, and they were long, and they pierced through these appendages, and we were bent over – the points were bent over on the backside of them so they were not, you know, able to be pulled out. And he lived like that for 2 years. They had to carry him around because he couldn't even walk. A very outstanding case of stigmata.

And, you know, in more recent times, a man who just died in 1968, you know, in many of our lifetimes was St. Padre Pio, a very famous case of stigmata. He had very large wounds, for instance in his hands that bled for 55 years, and were visible to anyone who encountered him. So, again, another outstanding case of stigmata. There are cases that still are reported today. There's a priest in Croatia who has many of the similar abilities that Padre Pio had, including stigmata. They're watching him. I met a young man at a Marian conference in Chicago who showed me wounds in his hands that looked, from everything I've ever read, actual stigmata. But of course, again, we have to let the church decide on these more recent cases.

So let's talk about incorrupt bodies. As organic creatures – you know, people, humans, plants, animals – when we die, we decompose. Ashes, you know, we start from in the ashes, we finish as, right, from ashes and ashes, dust to dust. But there have been people throughout history – not a lot, but a few cases – where they seem to defy the natural process of decomposition, and that is what we call “incorrupt bodies”. And I'm just going to mention 2, because this is a short presentation today, but one that always fascinated me was St. Charbel Makhlof, who was a Maronite priest. Very holy man, lived kind of like a hermit life, slept on the floor, ate scraps, but was known to be very, very holy, and he was buried in the ground, in a mass grave, no coffin, no preservatives, and a flooded grave at that, which really should have caused him to decompose, you know, more fast, all the more quickly than normal.

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

And they saw lights at his gravesite after they buried him, and some time passed. When they exhumed the body they were very surprised to see he was perfectly incorrupt and not decayed in that water. They dried the body, redressed it, put it in a new casket in the wall of the monetary, and liquid began to trickle out from the floor of the monetary wall. And it was discovered that his casket was filling with several inches of this thick liquid. And the thick liquid would end up having miraculous healing abilities to those that would come in contact with it, and it filled up several times. And it's just a very unusual case of incorrupt body that kept on giving after this person had passed away.

And maybe one of the most spectacular cases of incorruption is St. Bernadette Soubirous. She was that 14-year-old who saw the visions of the Blessed Mother in Massabielle, France. And she died, and when they exhumed her 30 years later, she was incorrupt down to her fingernails and her eyelashes. She is just a beautiful case of incorruption, again in someone who lived in the 1800s. So, this is just something that, you know, continues, and we can expect that, as other people are canonized, and we begin exhuming the bodies of people, that there very well could be other incorruptibles we just haven't discovered yet.

So let's talk about some amazing abilities of the saints and the holy ones. There have been some extraordinary cases of people like St. Ignatius of Loyola, or St. Phillip Neri, who had the gift of luminosity. And luminosity means to glow, like these people glow with a light, it looks like a light is emanating from them. There have been other saints like St. Therese of Avila and St. Joseph of Cupertino who have been known to levitate when they're in a state of prayer, or at the mass, in ecstasy. St. Joseph of Cupertino could literally fly across the church building. It was pretty incredible. There was other cases of bilocation with certain individuals, especially Padre Pio. St. Padre Pio was known to be in 2 places at once, and that's a very hard miracle to understand. How do people bi-locate and be in 2 places at once?

There have been saints that have had the gift of tongues, and that means they can either speak the mysterious language of the angels, or understand someone who is speaking in the language of the angels, or they can understand foreign languages that they're never spoken before. And there's a famous story St. Anthony of Padua, one of the greatest preachers of all times, and he had the famous story of preaching

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

to the crowds, and they weren't listening, so he turned to the sea and he preached to the fish, and they listened, and they received his blessing and went back to the sea, and all of these people converted on the spot. And it's interesting that St. Anthony of Padua, while his body did corrupt, that his tongue and his voice box, his larynx, that area that forms speech in the human body is incorrupt and preserved reliquary over in Italy. And, you know, there's people more in our recent times that have demonstrated amazing, unexplainable gifts like prophecy, and healing, and other gifts. I can think of 2: St. Andre Bessette from Canada, and Venerable Solanus Casey from Detroit, Michigan. People, you know, in our own day and time.

Okay, so let's talk about apparitions. And apparitions are heavenly visitors who are sent to earth to give an important message. We see this through the Bible, right. Sarah and Abraham received a heavenly vision, or visitor, who said "You're going to conceive a child in your own age." Mary received a heavenly visitor announcing that she was going to become the Mother of God. The shepherds in the field of Bethlehem received angels and, you know, heavenly visitors to proclaim that this King had been born in Bethlehem. And Joseph received a heavenly vision or visitor in his sleep to tell him that it was time to pack up his wife and child and flee to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod.

So we know that these apparitions, these visions have happened throughout the course of the Bible, but also throughout the course of history. And it's often the Blessed Mother, which is interesting. She's the one who is sent quite often to give us these messages, and these warnings and consolations. I think about in the 1500s, when she came as our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego, and she famously performs those 2 miracles, of course through the grace of God, producing flowers in the dead of winter, that he can present to his Bishop as proof that this is real. But even more astounding, her image is imprinted on the inside of his cloak, or his tilma, and this converts some 8 or 9 million Aztec Indians on the spot very rapidly, and that tilma is known for miracles that continue to our own day.

Then there's another very famous apparition I think of and that's, again, our Lady of Fatima, Portugal. She comes at a time when the world is just with... World War I is just breaking out, and there's devastation, and she comes as a Lady of peace, and she warns us, you know, that if we don't put God back at the center, if we don't pick up that rosary, if we don't fast and pray and bring our lives back into peace and what God is asking of us, we're going to be in trouble. And all of the

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

prophecies that she related to those 3 children, those 3 visionaries have come true exactly as she predicted. Very powerful apparition for the 1900s.

And in more modern times than that, in the 1980s we have Rwanda, Africa. This has been an approved apparition, where our Lady, again, appears to some Catholic school children and warns them, because there is this tribal tension that's growing in the area of Rwanda, a very poor area of Central Africa. And she warns them if they don't get along, that disaster is going to strike, and the children were shown very horrific visions of what was going to happen. Well, 10 years later, the people did not heed those messages, and there was the very famous and terrible Rwandan genocide, where a million Tutsis were butchered at the hands of the Hutus. Very, very tragic. And I think Rwanda was the microcosm of the world. If we don't turn back to God and ask for His intervention, we are going to end up like the people in Rwanda.

And finally, let's talk about weeping icons and artwork. As Catholics, we have a lot of artwork, don't we? We have it in our churches; we have it in our homes. We love statues, and stained glass images, and, you know, we love to surround ourselves with these images of Jesus, Mary, the saints, angels. But sometimes, some of this artwork has been known to do kind of odd and unusual things, and that is weep tears of water, oil, or sometimes even blood, and this is what I want to talk about now. And there are many cases that have happened in really recent times. One comes to mind from the 1950s from Syracuse, Italy, where a young newly wed couple received a bust of a Madonna on the black background, and it was mounted in their home, and this bust began to cry several times. The whole village witnessed it, and the Bishop approved that miracle. Again, 1953, not that long ago.

And even more recently in 1973, another Bishop-approved event was Akita, Japan, where Sister Agnes Sasagawa witnessed this miracle that then everyone could see, this statue, this 3-foot wooden statue of our Lady weeping tears, mostly of water, but sometimes oil, and sometimes even blood. And that, again, was approved. And when we think about tears of blood, we have to take these messages seriously. Like, these are dire times for us, and we need to heed those messages and turn back to God.

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

When I'm talking about miracles, and talking to young audiences especially, I like to have them go through this little exercise where I ask them to close their eyes and use their imagination. And I ask them to visualize the most beautiful cathedral they've ever seen. Just, you know, the carved spires reaching towards the heaven. You know, carved angels looking down at them as they approach. Maybe the bells are ringing, a beautiful day, and they're standing in front of this massive, massive tribute to God. And they walk up these big steps, and there's these big mahogany doors, they push their way into it, and they say "And now you enter the lobby of this magnificent cathedral", and the sunlight is shining through the stained glass windows, and there's flowers, and incense is burning, and there's quiet music, and there's statues, and it's just the most beautiful place you've ever been. You think you've gone to heaven, and you want to stay there forever, and you're lingering.

And I say "If you then turned back around, walked out those doors and walk back out onto the street, while that was a pleasant experience, you forgot to do something. You forgot to go through the next set of doors into the main sanctuary. The heart of the church, which was built for the main reason, and that, is to encounter Jesus in the sacraments and in the liturgy. The real miracle of our Catholic faith." And so I tell them that, "I want you to think about miracles, the subject of the supernatural, kind of like the lobby of a great cathedral. It is a very amazing place that will draw you in off the street for sure, and you want to linger in there forever, but it's an invitation, a doorway to enter more deeply into your Catholic faith. To encounter, as I said, where the real miracle is, and that is Jesus coming to us day-to-day through His word, through His mighty sacrament especially, the Eucharist.

So I hope this presentation kind of helped you a little bit in the subject of miracles. It's just a fascinating topic to talk about and to read about. I, again, invite you to read my book *Bleeding Hands, Weeping Stone: True Stories of Divine Wonders, Miracles, and Messages*. Let's end with a prayer.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And Lord, we thank You for the gift of Your miracles. These grand miracles that are just with us for centuries, that have converted so many hearts. But we thank You also for the miracles that we see every day around us. The miracles of nature, the miracles of our human body, the miracles of birth, the miracles of love, and knowing that You, as the creator of all of this, are behind these miracles. Help us never lose sight of the fact that You are a miraculous God. We ask this in the name of Jesus, in the

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Have a miraculous Lent. Thanks for listening. God bless.