

The Miracles of Saint Medard 9 Dec 2019

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On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1727, an elderly widow named Louise-Madeleine Reigney (or Beigney, there is some doubt about the spelling) went to church in a working class neighborhood of Paris, the faubourg Saint Marceau. She was attending the funeral of deacon François de Pâris who had acquired during his life a reputation for piety and saintliness among all his parishioners. She was an illiterate woolworker who had suffered from a paralyzed arm for twenty years. The doctors had continually told her there was no cure for her. She went to the Saint Médard church, knelt down at the bier, and kissed the feet of the deacon. When she rose, her arm was no longer paralyzed. Her prayer had been heard, and she claimed that she had been cured through the intercession of deacon François de Pâris. A miracle had taken place! Word of this miraculous event spread quickly through the parish and then like wildfire through the neighborhood and then the entire city. A miracle!

Miracles are not the kind of phenomenon we associate the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason. No, the eighteenth-century is the time of cartesian reason, rational discourse, and logical behavior. No place here we might think for the supernatural, the irrational, the supra-natural. And yet for five years, from May

1727 to January 29, 1732, Paris was abuzz with the strange and inexplicable events that were occurring in the tiny church of Saint Médard.

To understand fully what was taking place as well as the political and theological ramifications of these miracles, we have to step back in time. In 1653, Rome condemned as heretical the teachings of a Dutch bishop named Cornelius Jansen, especially his espousal of predestination. The immediate consequences were insignificant. His followers, naturally called Jansenists, continued as before to believe in Jansen's teachings but remained quiet and law-abiding. Grim, austere, and stubborn, they were considered the Calvinists of Catholicism. Since they practiced all the ordinary religious rituals (mass and the sacraments), they differed from regular Catholics only in their unspoken beliefs. Everyone knew they existed, but no one really knew who they were.

In the years from 1690 until his death in 1715, Louis XIV's kingdom was suffering through severe financial hardships caused by the continual wars he waged, usually with little or no ultimate benefit. The age-old political strategy is that if foreign affairs go badly, turn to domestic issues ... and vice versa. Focusing on religion, Louis became irritated by the invisible presence of Jansenists who could possibly

become politically subversive. He wanted only one religion in his nation as proof of his personal religious zeal. Consequently, he pressed the Pope to condemn Jansenism. Clement XI finally issued the desired papal bull Unigenitus on 8 September 1713. It commanded all Jansen's followers to acknowledge that he was a heretic and to swear their full allegiance to main stream Catholicism. Ordinary parish priests were required to sign a document that stated they renounced Jansenism. If they did not, they could be barred from their priestly duties and expelled from their churches. A large proportion of the lower clergy were Jansenists. Those priests refused to sign and their Jansenist parishioners supported them vigorously. From a quiet acceptance of the status quo, the Jansenists now exploded in forceful opposition and refused to accept the condemnation articulated in Unigenitus.

Immediately a huge pamphlet war broke out. Jansenists defended their namesake and/or denied that he ever held what Rome considered heretical views. The back-and-forth, as acrimonious as it was, was nothing but a dialogue of the deaf. Neither side accepted what the other side said, and continued to advance its own ideas. This war of words was a skein of tedious theological arguments that passed over the heads of everyone except the authors themselves.

We return now to May 1, 1727, the day deacon Pâris died. He was a Jansenist and beloved by his parishioners. He was famed for his humility. He inflicted tortures like flagellation on his own body out of piety. He gave up the fortune he had inherited to aid the poor. He slept without blankets in winter to mortify the flesh. He walked barefoot through the city year round. Even before his death, the entire Saint Marceau community considered him a saint. Now, upon his death the cry "Saint Pâris" echoed through the streets. He was acclaimed and canonized by the faithful. Two days later, at the deacon's burial, Mme Reigny was cured. Saint Médard had produced in less than a week both a saint and a miracle.

As news of this miracle spread far and wide, people flocked to Saint Médard. The church and its cemetery were open to all from dawn to dusk, seven days a week. People came and went so the crowds were always huge although various individuals spent different amounts of time there. Some came to be cured. Some came to watch. Others came because of the extraordinary excitement that the crowds and the possibility of seeing a miracle elicited. And not just locals. As the news spread, pious individuals suffering from all sorts of ailments flocked to the church in the rue Mouffetard. Paralyzed limbs, blindness, internal diseases, deformities, palsies. Some came alone, others were accompanied or

even carried by friends. Almost immediately, and for five years, the church was surrounded by a sea of humanity anxiously awaiting the next stupendous event, hoping for a miracle. And miracles there were.

The chief prelate of Paris at the time was the Cardinal de Noailles who was not at all hostile to the reports of miracles coming from Saint Médard. During the 1720s there had been reports of miracles taking place throughout France. They were all one-off events, however, and had no social or religious consequences. In 1728 Noailles appointed a task force to investigate twelve miracles that had taken place at Saint Médard. The experts found four of them credible enough to warrant further analysis. Their report was never published or made public, however. The Prime Minister, the Cardinal Fleury, had it squashed.

When Noailles died in May the following year, he was replaced by Archbishop Ventimille from Marsaille. Ventimille was an extreme authoritarian. He was hostile to what was happening at Saint Médard. For him only the church hierarchy could decide who was a saint and what constituted a miracle. He dismissed the spontaneous, grass-root enthusiasm for deacon Pâris. Saints and miracles were decided from the top down and not from the bottom up. Ventimille began an extensive campaign to discredit all the activities taking place in the church graveyard. By the summer of 1730 he threatened

to punish any priest who had not signed the oath upholding Unigenitus.

Like the church, the government was upset. All authoritarian regimes fear unorganized or uncontrolled crowds. The police were afraid that these throngs crowding into such a small space would turn into an unruly mob. They were alarmed by the possibility of spontaneous outbursts, of rowdy conduct, and of agitated crowds being swept up by some violent emotion. Starting right from the first miracle, the chief of police René Hérault posted uniformed officers in strategic locations near the church. As the archbishop became more and more anxious, Hérault's crowd- and traffic-control became active surveillance. He sent undercover policemen to infiltrate the crowd and watch for suspicious activity. They kept tabs on the rif-raff and the hucksters drawn by the crowds. The rue Mouffetard reverberated with a carnivalesque atmosphere that augmented the religious enthusiasm. Street vendors were selling bits of Pâris' hair and clothing as relics. They also hawked prayers and incantations that were sure to produce miracles. And of course, minor criminals like pickpockets roamed around. The police presence was discreet but nonetheless pervasive.

From May through spring 1730, 24 alleged miracles took place. The following year, as this thaumaturgic display continued to fascinate Paris and as

Ventimille's hostility grew, an additional 70 claims were made.

The most famous and the best documented miracle was Anne Lefranc's. In November 1730 she visited Pâris' tomb and prayed there. She had suffered from blindness in one eye and partial paralysis. Doctors had declared her conditions incurable. A few days after praying at the tomb, her symptoms disappeared. A miraculous cure!

Five months later (March 1731) a panel consisting of twelve doctors, several lawyers, and a few priests examined her case. Ventimille appointed the taskforce only reluctantly and expected a negative decision. However, the experts concluded that the miracle was genuine and they published their results. Evidence to support their conclusion included 22 notarized certificates from more than 100 witnesses.

Inspired by this official affirmation, Jansenist authors intensified the war of words that had begun with Unigenitus. Nicolas Petitpied published anonymously his Dissertation sur les miracles. It was a detailed account of Lefranc's case. In it he vigorously defended miracles that "had taken place on the tomb of M. de Pâris at Saint Médard Church" as the rest of his title states. He claimed that these miracles were "a direct expression of the divine will, a visible sign of God's presence and His special favor." (Kreiser, p 122) The theological battle lines between Ventimille's

unyielding orthodoxy and the Jansenists' radical challenge were clearly drawn. According to Petitpied, because they were direct divine interventions into human affairs, miracles proved that God was on the Jansenists' side. Thus, they were justified in opposing the regular Church which they claimed had fallen into apostasy.

Lefranc's was the most famous, the most documented, and the most influential example of these supernatural effects, of these miracles. Anne Lefranc made Saint Médard a national cause célèbre.

The working classes were enthralled by the happenings at Saint Médard. They provided excitement, novelty, and a pleasing change from their laborious lives. Others were much more dismissive, as all those tracts written to defend or debunk the miracles proves. There was also a comic side to the resistance against miracles. Some intellectuals could not abide the basic irrationality involved. They produced a number of satiric and comic plays that mocked the events at Saint Médard. The Jesuit playwright Guillaume-Hyacinthe Rougeant wrote several, with titles like The Bankruptcy of the Miracle Merchants and The French Quakers or Tremblers. They were quite successful. (Kreiser, 176, note)

As impressive as the miracles were, they were not necessarily the highlight of the events taking place in



the church cemetery. The crowds milling about could not always see miracles as they happened. More impressive were the spectacular convulsions that started in late 1731. They took place frequently, almost on a daily rhythm, and were easily witnessed by the bystanders.

Many of those who came to the church to pray exhibited frightening physical behaviors. They collapsed on the ground, went into fits. They rolled over and over, they twisted their bodies into unconceivable shapes. When they lay down on the tomb, their bodies began to shake, their limbs trembled, they lashed back and forth. Their bodies were contorted, their faces racked with pain. Some would howl or speak gibberish. They would foam at the mouth. When their crisis ended, they stood up and walked away as if nothing had happened. Such spectacular incidents only increased the tumultuous excitement. The crowds grew in size. All Paris heard about these "convulsionnaires," as they were called. While no one could explain such convulsions, they were witnessed by hundreds at a time, and cumulatively by thousands. These eye-witnesses could not be gainsaid or dismissed out of hand.

The first of the convulsionnaires was Aimée Pivert who suffered from a nervous disorder, probably epilepsy. Seeking a cure, she went to the church graveyard daily from 12 July through 3 August 1731. From the very first day she suffered convulsions. Her

limbs twisted in grotesque shapes, she shuddered, her body was racked by spasms. These gesticulations were so violent that some on-lookers thought she was possessed by the devil. Finally, after enduring those gyrations every day, she was cured on August 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Catherine Bigot was a deaf mute. A few days after Aimée Pivot she experienced the same convulsions: contortions, twisting limbs, rolling over and over. She experienced a partial recovery of her hearing and speech.

While most of the crowds at the church were working class, a few aristocrats did deign to show up. These VIPs brought back to the court positive accounts of their experience. The Count de Clermont was one such noble visitor. Marie-Thérèse de Bourbon, the Princesse de Conti, belonged to one of the most prestigious families in France. She was not cured of her blindness but a number of estampes document her presence at the church yard. The publicity produced by such august personages helped to keep the happenings at Saint Médard in the public mind.

One specific criticism of these convulsions is interesting to note. About 70% of those experiencing convulsions were women. Some prudes accused them of lewdness and obscenity. In the course of these convulsions, the women's garments were often undone. They became loose and disheveled. When skirts were

raised, bare legs would become visible and even other portions of the female anatomy. In an epoch when women were expected to be modest and retiring, female convulsionnaires could be seen as provocative and undignified. Additionally, their convulsions could be characterized as hysterical, as products of female weakness. Then, as today but perhaps more so, sexuality in women was denied or considered immoral. Calling them hysterical was a cheap shot aimed to denigrate their experience and their human nature.

One episode that deserves mention is an effort to debunk the miracles. On August 4, 1731, Gabrielle Gautier Dulorme, a convinced skeptic, went to Saint Médard intending to refute the miracles. She was in good health but pretended to have a limp in order to move through the line for the grave more quickly. However, after lying down on the deacon's tomb, she was struck with paralysis. It was perhaps a miracle, but in reverse. She repented and issued a public confession renouncing her previous skepticism.

Here is one account of a convulsionnaire by an unsympathetic eyeness. E.J.F. Barbier kept an extensive journal of daily life in Paris from 1708 to 1762. He usually refers to "pretended or so-called miracles" and describes the participants as "fanatics." Nonetheless he describes this scene:

With these [convulsionnaires] lying on the ground, three or four others would stand on their chest or place their foot on their throat to show that the [convulsionnaires] could not be harmed. Afterwards, the latter were as calm as before. (Journal, p 141)

The most impressive of the convulsionnaires was the abbé Bescherand de La Motte who traveled to Saint Médard from Montpellier.

He suffered from severe atrophy of his left side. His convulsions were recorded in some detail. He experienced sudden and violent convulsions, his face twisted in grimaces, he screamed in pain, he foamed at the mouth. Most impressively, he levitated a few feet off the ground and into the air. Several men were unable to push him down and prevent the levitation. He was not cured, but he did return to Saint Médard twice a day from August 31, 1731 through the winter. He was accompanied in his daily routine by five other "regulars" who also experienced convulsions.

The convulsions produced such an impact and pushed emotions to the point that the government decided it had to intervene. Ventimille had been pressing the Prime Minister for months to take decisive action. Late in 1731 the Cardinal Fleury agreed that Saint Médard was a menace. It threatened public order and morality as well as the Catholic faith (Kreiser, 208). However,

he did not want to use ecclesiastical power to shut it down. He preferred to employ civic force.

In early January 1732 René Hérault, the chief of the Parisian police, arrested a man named Gontier because he was a convulsionnaire. Harshly interrogated for several days, Gontier confessed to fraud. Once released, however, he withdrew his confession and said it had been extorted. He made a dramatic and highly publicized recantation. Immediately afterwards, he disappeared.

Embarrassed but undeterred, Hérault arrested five more convulsionnaires a few days later. They were Jean Fiet, Claude François Tiersault, Pierre Lahir, Marie Tassiaux, and Antoine Maupoint. These were the five "regulars" who had accompanied Bescherand on his twice daily visits to Saint Médard. They were incarcerated secretly in the Bastille. Along with two other suspects they were aggressively interrogated over several days. Under intense pressure they cracked and admitted they had faked their convulsions. They were held in prison for several more months after their confession so as not to repeat the Gontier fiasco.

With this "proof" in hand, Hénault now claimed that everything that happened at Saint Médard was a fraud. These coerced confessions gave him the evidence he needed to lock down the church and the cemetery. On

January 27, King Louis XV issued a proclamation that ordered the closing of Saint Médard. Two days later Hérault sent several hundred troops to the area. They surrounded the church and the cemetery, locked the gates, and remained to enforce the lock-out. Many of the troops were on horseback. A contingent of spies dressed like ordinary folk infiltrated the crowds. Hérault also had placards posted throughout the area announcing that the church and its cemetery were no longer open.

The following day an anonymous placard appeared on the iron gates. It was a comic epigram usually attributed to the humorous poet Piron. It read:

De par le roi defense à Dieu

De faire miracles en ce lieu

My translation:

The Kings commands that God shall not  
Perform miracles in this spot.

Once the gates were locked and the police stationed around the church, the crowds disappeared. Bescherand, the most famous convulsionnaire, was arrested on February 23, as an extra measure of security against further manifestations.

By the last day in January 1732 the miracles and the convulsions had stopped. However, the fervor of this cult did not cease altogether. From the public space it moved indoors. The convulsionnaires moved underground and continued to meet in secret in the private houses of more affluent Jansenists. They repeated the same practices as before but now there was no large audience, no public crowd, no open-air spectacle to feed their religious enthusiasm. The evidence is sketchy but some practices were quite violent as documented in a few estampes. According to Barbier, in March 1733, a "bon bourgeois" and a merchant in the Rue Saint Honoré, an upscale address, along with 10 or 12 others, was arrested and sent to the Bastille (Barbier, p 141) because he had received and entertained a group of convulsionnaires and spectators in his home

On May 1, 1733, the sixth anniversary of deacon Pâris' death and more than a year after the cemetery was closed, a group of 300 people and 50 carriages gathered in front of Saint Médard to remember him. The church was brightly lit by hundreds of candles. (Barbier, 141). We have no more information about this strange cortege, its purpose, or its participants.

The Saint-Médard phenomenon is a curious one. The cause célèbre ran out of gas after five years of intense excitement and overwhelming publicity. It attracted unprecedented public attention and overflow crowds for that entire period. Nonetheless, it disappeared in a flash. Its much-feared potential for political subversion never manifested itself. Quietly and suddenly it just ceased to exist. The theological controversy about Jansen the heretic, the verity of miracles, the authority of the hierarchy over the laity, faded into the background like all the pamphlets, tracts, and polemics it inspired. We can justifiably ask ourselves how to explain or even understand this episode of irrationality right in the heart of an age soaked in logic, strict reasoning, and abstract thinking. Empiricism is a favorite term applied to the scientific efforts of the Enlightenment. Experiments and the close observation of facts are one of the high points of Enlightenment thinking and its critical legacy to the "hard" or bench sciences of today.

But, come to think of it, are not well studied miracles and widely observed convulsions empirical facts too?



## Biblio

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