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The miracle that made the Founder of Opus Dei a saint

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"Cancerous development of chronic radiation dermatitis, third stage,

irreversible and with a terminal prognosis."

The Medical Consultants of the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of the Saints have concluded proceedings to evaluate whether a cure, attributed to the intercession of Blessed Josemaria Escriva, could be declared "scientifically inexplicable." After many consultations with the patient, careful diagnostic tests, interrogation of dozens of witnesses and examination of all the documentation, the doctors of the Consultation committee have unanimously concluded that the cure indeed was scientifically inexplicable.

In other words, the Medical Consultants, none of whom were members of Opus Dei, determined that there had never been a documented case of a cure of radiodermatitis. (Radiodermatitis is a

skin disease caused by exposure to X-rays; it leads to cancerous growths that ultimately metastasize.)

In the case the committee examined, the patient's condition had been progressing for almost thirty years and had reached the most advanced stage. The patient had been rendered disabled and was resigned to an imminent death.

Nevertheless, in the autumn of 1992, an inexplicable process of healing began. The patient's cancerous ulcers disappeared to the point that he was able to return to work. A recovery like his was unprecedented in the annals of medicine. As a result, the scientists declared it "inexplicable," a term that theologians translate in their own language as "miraculous."

This declaration means that the founder of Opus Dei, Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer, will be entered in the canon of saints for having

obtained from God a miraculous cure.

The recovered patient is a Spanish orthopedic surgeon named Manuel Nevado Rey. Nevado, 69, suffered a malady common in surgeons, who until recently had to work with X-ray machines that were quite dangerous.

Not long after he began his professional work, Manuel Nevado noticed the first symptoms of a chronic radiodermatitis. The condition, as his dermatological colleagues confirmed, was inexorable, irreversible and incurable.

In November of 1992, Nevado's ulcer-plagued hands forced him to give up surgery. He decided to dedicate the short time he had left to caring for a few beloved grapevines on his property. He was seeking information at the Ministry of Agriculture in Madrid for a problem

related to his grapevines, when an official noticed his ulcers. The official offered him a prayer card of Msgr. Escriva, who had been proclaimed blessed a few months earlier, and suggested that he pray to him.

Dr. Nevado had had no contact with Opus Dei and had hardly heard of the founder, so he put the prayer card in his wallet and thought no more of it. Shortly afterwards, he traveled to Vienna. While visiting some churches there, he noticed in the pews many prayer cards similar to the one that had been given to him in Madrid.

Impressed by such devotion to a Spaniard in a German-speaking country, Nevado began to recite the prayer of intercession written on the prayer card. Almost immediately his symptoms began to disappear. This surprised and perplexed first the patient and then the specialists

treating him. As the doctors of the Vatican consulting committee noted, the only thing left of Dr. Nevado's ulcers are some scars, and he is able to use his hands again to the extent that he is now performing operations in his hospital in the Spanish province of Badajoz.

In the ten years that have passed since the Beatification of Msgr. Escriva, the office of postulation has received thousands of reports about "favours" and "graces" attributed to his intercession. From this impressive body of evidence, they selected around twenty cases of cures that appeared inexplicable at first glance and, therefore, miraculous. There is a case from shortly after the beatification, for example, of a child cured instantaneously from an inoperable obstruction of a kidney artery.

In the end, the office decided to concentrate attention on the case of Dr. Nevado. This is clearly because radiation dermatitis is still incurable and fatal (in the later stages, as in this case, the metastasis of tumors ends up invading the whole body), and because this case involved no possibility of "cure by suggestion." There is no case in which this disease has regressed; it always advances slowly but inexorably to the end. Besides, the patient, a doctor, could make his own judgment about his situation and had consulted with many colleagues who were later called to Rome as witnesses. The file was, therefore, both extensive and scientifically impeccable.

But it seems also that a spiritual motive was influential in the choice of this case. The heart of the message of Opus Dei is sanctification through ordinary work, whatever that work might be (whether manual labor or

banking), according to the principle that work should be carried out with the greatest human perfection possible. And this miracle had as its subject a worker like so many others, a good orthopedic surgeon from the countryside.

From the beginning this doctor realized the consequences practicing his profession could bring. Nevertheless, he voluntarily accepted that risk and continued to work for the benefit of his patients, day after day using the X-ray apparatus that helped to cure them but was poisoning him.

A miracle of God, certainly; but in this story there is also good will, an "ordinary sanctity in work" of the person who received the miracle. He was not even a person who knew about the spirituality of Opus Dei; he was just a simple Sunday Mass-going Catholic.

The choice might also have been influenced by the character of this miracle, certainly scientifically indisputable but basically not very "spectacular." Monsignor Escriva ("our father" as the faithful of Opus Dei call him) did not like the exhibitionism of the "miraculous." He was convinced that the real miracle is a life of work, not just endured, but embraced directly for love of God, with effort and with joy.

The cure for which he will ascend definitively to the altars has no mark of the spectacular or dramatic. It is a "quiet" miracle: the hands of a worker are cured and he is able to return to his work. A mystery, really, within the framework of the everyday silence Msgr. Escriva so loved.

It is a style distinct from that of Padre Pio, who "fortune" (though this word has no meaning from a Christian

perspective) wanted to have united with him in the proclamation of the miracles that will take both of them to their altars. It is not that the Friar of San Giovanni Rotondo sought prominence; on the contrary. But events happened around him, in the midst of crowds, journalists and curiosity seekers, as it were, in the limelight.

During the same period of years, they lived remarkably different lives, which the Church is now uniting in holiness. In the final analysis, it is a striking proof of the infinite variety of charisms that exist together in what continues to be, in spite of everything, the greatest religious community in the world.

Vittorio Messori // Corriere della Sera (Milán)

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