

**Wonders and Signs:  
Insights from Catholic Research into Wonders**

**Jos Sterk<sup>1</sup>**

Introductory comment: According to a Roman Catholic vision,<sup>2</sup> determining the miraculous nature of a healing belongs to ecclesiastical authority, because the involvement of God can only be accepted through faith.

It is worth the trouble to revisit the issue Onno van Schayck discussed in this journal last year. The issue was whether or not it was legitimate for Van Schayck, as professor of preventive medicine at the University of Maastricht, to have declared in an interview by the Evangelische Omroep, a Dutch evangelical TV station, to have explicitly confessed his faith in miracles. In connection with his observation of a spontaneous lengthening of a short leg after a prayer, he said, “There have been moments during which I have seen God directly involved, very nearby.” Because of the commotion this declaration caused, he resigned his directorate at the Care and Public Health Research Institute at the university.

Is a scientific researcher like Van Schayck allowed to make such a declaration? In this article I want to answer that question from the perspective of the miracle research at Lourdes, France, and the authoritative declaration of sainthood in the Catholic Church. Secondly, I wish to make a few observations about the place and significance of wonders in these official miracle declarations.

**Faith and Science in Lourdes and Sainthood Declarations**

Sources for the existence of miraculous healing are legion. On the internet the subject “healing miracles” has been hit at least 30,000 times. Just within

---

<sup>1</sup>Trans. Jan H. Boer. *Sophie*, 2/2014, pp. 14-17. Original title: “Wonder en teken: Inzichten vanuit het wonderonderzoek bij de Catholica.” The reader is put on notice that occasionally I as translator take issue with or challenge Sterk in footnotes. This article is based on a stark dualism between faith and reason, a perspective not shared by the Reformational philosophy underlying this website.

<sup>2</sup>Trans: Note the indefinite instead of the definite article. It seems to indicate a plurality of Catholic visions on the subject.

Christianity the literature on the subject is very extensive, even just in Dutch.<sup>3</sup> What are we to make of this voluminous literature? For example, what of the reliability of all these stories?

When I designate four different Christian traditions, I come across the following important publications. Among the Pentecostals, I find that of Osborn (1955) and Zijlstra (1997); among the Charismatic renewal, MacNutt (1978) and Tardif (1990); among the Evangelicals, Wimber (1987) and Heynis (1995); and among Catholics Schamoni (1976) and Lapple (1995). Except for Schamoni's and Lapple's, the stories and reports of healing miracles of persons in these books are indeed remarkable, but still mostly vague descriptions of the miraculous course of the healings. In almost all cases described, we lack clear witness declarations, reports of medical research, the course and duration of the sickness and its healing. Most healings among Charismatics are spiritual with only three researched in Lourdes over the course of time (Chiron 2000, 196). Of course, the wonder character of such healing stories ought not a priori be denied, but what if a basic, scientific documentation is lacking? The authors themselves are convinced of the miraculous nature of the healing, but this by itself does not have to convince outsiders.

Schamoni and Lapple describe various healing miracles from the twentieth century of which the supernatural nature of the healing is determined according to specific procedures with clear criteria. With Schamoni it is about intercession of a declared saint who received a miraculous healing that is mentioned in the documents associated with the declaration of sainthood. With Lapple it is about the miraculous healings that have taken place at Lourdes. The procedures for determining a miracle associated with a sainthood declaration and with Lourdes are very precise and protracted.<sup>4</sup> In order to determine whether a healing is or is not a miracle, it is normal to distinguish two levels:<sup>5</sup>

1. A *scientific* level, where the medicals subject the healing to a specialist research. How far does this healing deviate from what normally can be expected from this particular sickness?

---

<sup>3</sup>Willem Ouweneel published a book in the Dutch language, *Geneest de zieken! Over de bijbelse leer van ziekte en bevrijding*. Vaassen: Uitgeverij Medema, 2003. For the commotion he caused, read the numerous Dutch reviews at <http://vergadering.nu/boekouweneelgeneest2.htm>. K. J. Kraan similarly graced us with a lively book *Opdat u genezing ontvangt: Handboek voor de dienst der genezing*. For reviews go to <https://www.digibron.nl/search/detail/9fb026d36cde95a128ccee64f91dd337/gebed-en-genezing>.

<sup>4</sup>Lauvrijs 1995, pp. 78-99; Lapple 1995, pp. 27-30.

<sup>5</sup>Theillier 2000, p. iv.

2. A *spiritual* level, where theologians judge the value of a healing in the light of faith. Does the healing include a sign that points to divine intervention?

## Research

Before an official announcement is made about the miraculous character of a healing, which in the case of a declaration of sainthood is done by the Pope, while a Lourdes healing is announced by the bishop of the diocese of the member, both required that a thorough scientific, medical research be conducted with respect to the origin, the nature, the course and the duration of the sickness and the healing. This is absolutely necessary in order to eliminate every natural cause of the healing, as well as any phantom healing or superstition. For the medical part of the research the seven criteria that were established in 1734 by Prospero Lambertin (1675-1758), who became Pope Benedictus XIV, still hold. It declares that a healing is medically unexplainable when it is *subita* (sudden), *perfecta* (full, complete), *duratura* (permanent) and *non redeat* (free from recurrence).

In addition to these criteria for the healing itself there are still the following that are now and then adjusted to the requirements of modern medical insights:

1. The sickness must be intense and impossible to heal or with great difficulty.
2. The sickness must not already be in the process of healing.
3. No medicine may have been used or, if it has, then it must not have had any effect.
4. The sickness must be organic, i.e., not functional or psychological, in nature.

## Applying the Criteria

The application of these criteria that were established during the period Biblical criticism was also under development, is subject to unremitting discussion. Why do only healings of organic nature qualify? What is the difference in the qualifications of the medical doctor and the theologian, i.e., bishop? How is a miracle to be distinguished and what does it signify? The medical colleges like the *Comite Medical International de Lourdes (CMIL)*,<sup>6</sup> that judge miracles include expressly non-Christian medicals. Critique is constantly responded to. The procedures are very strict. Since the appearances of Mary in 1858, according to

---

<sup>6</sup><http://nl.lourdes-france.org/verdiepen/genezingen-en-wonderen/het-internationaal-medisch-comite>

statistics of the year 2,000, approximately 2,500,000 patients have visited Lourdes, of whom some 30,000 are said to have been healed. Of these, 6,700 have been taken into research, of whom 2,000 have been accepted as *medicalement inexplicable* and of these, 66 have finally been declared official Lourdes miracles. The last official miracle dates June 20, 2013. Even the most thorough skeptics are admitting it: “It cannot be denied: Lourdes heals.”

When a healing in Lourdes is marked as medically inexplicable by medical and other specialists, that does not necessarily mean that a miracle has actually taken place. The qualification to declare a miracle does not belong to the medics, for the intervention of God in an unusual healing cannot be demonstrated scientifically. For one thing, a miracle is not repeatable, which is an absolute requirement for scientific research. Those medics who do make such declarations, which did happen during the initial period of Lourdes healing, go beyond their qualifications. Qualification belongs to an ecclesiastical authority, since divine intervention can be determined only out of a responsible faith.<sup>7</sup>

### **Conclusion of Van Schayck**

When we contrast professor Van Schayck’s statements about miracles with the light of the described procedures for miracle research in the Roman Catholic Church, then his statements are indeed very controversial. At the very least, they are confusing, for he mixes his scientific statement that Xrays had undoubtedly shown the healing of the leg with his faith pronouncement about divine intervention in the healing. The modern scientific research conducted among Catholics with their extremely strict procedures and their many phases for determining miracles in Lourdes and for sainthood declarations does not prove whether an event is a miracle. The research aims exclusively at finding a solid, natural explanation for the wonderful event. If that cannot be found, because not a single natural cause could be located, then and only then can the spiritual leaders, represented by the bishop, designate the miraculous character of the event as credible. No one, whether the medics involved in the case, the theologians or the bishop can prove a miracle. The members of CMIL remind us time and again that they are not in the miracle business, but that this is the proper domain of the bishop of the person healed. It is the Church that acknowledges the miraculous.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Trans: are scientists or other lay people not capable of “responsible faith?”

<sup>8</sup>See website of CMIL.

In itself, Van Schayck is quite conscious of this distinction, for he says that when it comes to the miraculous, he has “difficulty talking about it;” “one has to be careful with this;” “one must test whether it fits” and more such cautious expressions. You should *experience* such a special medical happening as that of Van Schayck, see it with your own eyes, then an immense challenge faces your attitude to research as a scientist!

A similar event overcame the French surgeon, atheist and Nobel prize winner, Alexis Carel, during a pilgrimage to Lourdes in 1902, when he saw with his own eyes the external signs of peritonitis of the tuberculosis victim Marie Bailly disappear. Alexis was perplexed and wrote about it in his 1949 publication *Le voyage de Lourdes*, that out of embarrassment for his scholarly colleagues was published four years posthumously. As scientist one can or may never say that a special healing is a miracle, for the latter is a religious concept. A scientist *can* say that such an event is “medically inexplicable.” As a believer one can speak of miracles, but not as scientist, for from the perspective of science, a miracle is an absurdity.<sup>9</sup>

### **Place and significance of a Miracle**

Except for martyrs, for sainthood declarations the occurrence of a miracle is a prerequisite. That is to say, determining that a miraculous healing has taken place after the invocation on the part of the person to be declared a saint and on his or her intercession with God. Since only God can do miracles, a miracle functions as a confirmation of the sainthood of the person. The dossier containing the decree or determination of a miracle by witnesses and by statements is called “*positio super miraculo*.”

In my search for the significance and value of modern miraculous healings I have learned that they must be regarded in connection with evangelical miraculous healing stories. The miraculous healings in the Gospels form the key to interpretation. Earlier in this article I referred to the two levels in the determination process and the official declaration of a miraculous healing. The

---

<sup>9</sup>Trans: That statement needs to be challenged. There are many things or happenings that are beyond science. Are they all absurdities? The Reformational perspective underlying this website insists that even scientists are believers in the sense that they all work with unproven assumptions. See my *Science without Faith Is Dead* on the < Boeriana > page of this website.

medical doctor establishes the extraordinary nature of the healing, while the residing bishop is able to recognize a sign of God in this healing. That this happens very seldom in the case of Lourdes is apparent from the small number of official declarations of miraculous healings: From the last appearance to Bernadette there in 1888 till the time of this writing, there have been a mere 69.

But what are the steps needed to reach such an official declaration? To what extent are the healing stories in the gospels of importance?

### **Factual and Intentional**

In general, the insights of Latourelle give us some direction. According to him, miraculous healing comprises two elements: the factual and the intentional. The first element is observable, a deviation from the normal natural happening. The second is the sign, the compassionate gesture that is given to people in need of healing from a supernatural reality. From the perspective of the first aspect, he calls miracle by the French term “*prodige*,” from the perspective of the second, “*miracle*.” The factual element is researched by the medics according to strict scientific methods; the sign character, by theologians.

How do we recognize the second element? Here the religious context in which the miracle takes place is very important: the miraculous healing must take place in an environment of prayer and spirituality or devotion. Putting it negatively, every aspect of deceit, charlatanry, egotism, phantasy, superstition and the like must be excluded.

The spiritual context is clearly observable in the gospel stories of miraculous healings, as, e.g., in the story of the leper (Matthew 8), the centurion of Capernaum (Matthew 8), the bleeding woman, and the two blind men (Matthew 9). The spiritual setting here is a situation of genuine longing and pleading for healing from a wretched sickness. There is no trace here of an ulterior motive, of hypocrisy, hypnosis, magic and the like. The exceptional nature of the healing is proportional to the genuineness of the longing and call for healing. In these stories the exceptional nature of the healing derives its meaning from a gesture of compassion for the afflicted person, who craves and prays with his entire being for health, a pleading that God answers in Jesus. But when it is a case of hypocrisy or ulterior motive, then Jesus objects and withholds Himself (John 10:25, 32, 37;

Matthew 16:1ff). We do not need to doubt the veracity of Jesus, for His deeds serve as confirmation of His words (Matthew 4:23).

It is precisely because of this aspect, namely the clear connection between the words and deeds of Jesus, that the gospel stories of miraculous healing serve as an effective reference point to recognize and distinguish the sign character of contemporary healing miracles. Here the miracle is regarded as a sign of deliverance that is announced in the Old Testament (Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:5-6) and receives concrete shape in the New Testament in the deeds of Jesus (Matthew 11:5; Luke 7:22).

In a very specific sense the connection between other miracles and miracles in the gospels plays an important role at an official declaration of sainthood or at a Lourdes miracle. Thus, in the sermon of the bishop at the time of establishing the official sixty-sixth Lourdes miracle of Jean-Pierre Bely<sup>10</sup> on February 9, 1999, he referred to the intimate connection of this miracle to the miraculous healings in the Gospels. He said,

“This is a matter of a sort of progressive development that is not invented and that make us think about certain stories in the Gospels, especially the story about the paralytic at Capernaum, whom Jesus first forgave him his sins to the great annoyance of the theologians, before He said to him, “Get up, take your mat and walk” (Mark 2:9). The testimony of Jean-Pierre Bely belongs to the core of the Gospel.

It is from this perspective that the aforementioned Schamoni gave the title *Parallelen zum Neuen Testament* (1971) to the first edition of his book about healing miracles as intercession for the saints in the history of the Roman Catholic Church. He sourced the material of his book from the acts that confirmed the declaration of sainthood under oath, which gives this book special value. The many miracles confirmed by numerous eyewitnesses demonstrate that everything Jesus taught His disciples was promised and predicted (Mark 16:17-18). What Jesus did in terms of miracles, still happens.

---

<sup>10</sup>Bely was a head nurse who was healed of multiple-scleroses during a pilgrimage to Lourdes in 1987.

