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John of St. Thomas (Poinsot) on the Role of Miracles and Wonders in Preaching the Gospel

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Abstract

This article considers the claim that miraculous healings are essential to present-day evangelization. I contrast this perspective with that of the Baroque scholastic theologian John Poinsot. Like his contemporaries, Poinsot is concerned with offering a robust defense of the Christian faith but is rather circumspect with respect to the role that the miraculous should play. I argue that Poinsot's reasons are not only valid, but the positive framework he develops for defending the articles of the faith helps contemporary evangelists successfully navigate the pitfalls of postmodernity.

Keywords: apologetics; Baroque scholasticism; evangelization; John Poinsot; miraculous healings

1. Introduction

Among certain Christian evangelists today, including those operating within the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, there is a growing emphasis being placed on the performance of 'signs and wonders' as essential to the preaching of the Gospel. This is especially the case with respect to miraculous, physical healings. According to Matthias Thelen, a Catholic proponent of the integration of healing with evangelization, 'healing is not only one of the signs that will accompany those who believe in the gospel, but also a sign that the Lord Jesus is present with his disciples as they proclaim the gospel'.¹ This is true, he thinks, not only for the apostolic age, but also for present-day evangelistic efforts. Mary Healy, Thelen's mentor, not surprisingly shares her disciple's perspective. In her preface to Thelen's work, Healy writes that 'The prevalence of healings and miracles in evangelization today is a return to normal'.²

¹Matthias Thelen, *Biblical Foundations for the Role of Healing in Evangelization* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), p. 33. If healing is a sign of one who believes, as he suggests, then one is led to wonder whether implicit in this claim is an inverse statement: remaining in illness is a sign of one who does not believe. Mary Healy seems to think so when she writes, 'Mark does not mean that Christ's power was limited in itself, but that he chose to make his miracles dependent on human faith'. See Mary Healy, *Healing: Bringing the Gift of God's Mercy to the World* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015), p. 51.

²*Ibid.*, p. ix.

Latent in her notion of a ‘return’ is a narrative common among Charismatic Catholics and Pentecostals that attempts to account for the apparent novelty and even peculiarity of their practices. According to this narrative, between the early Church and the present Christian context something happened to disrupt the original praxis and/or doctrine of the apostles. Whether that disruption was something philosophical, political, sociological, or otherwise is determined on the basis of the proclivities particular to the individual committed to the narrative. Whatever the reason for this disruption, in order to return to an authentic form of Christian belief and worship, we are often told that it is essential to adopt a more primitive, apostolic form of Christian practice. Healy herself protests against ‘long-held and unquestioned assumptions’ that the disruptive interlude has left in its wake, namely, that ‘miraculous healings are generally confined to the age of the apostles and the lives of a few great saints, that ordinary people should not expect God to do extraordinary things through them, and that the new evangelization can be carried out effectively without demonstrations of God’s power’.³ For his part, Thelen holds that these ‘unquestioned assumptions’ actually handicap evangelization in light of our postmodern context, for ‘an evangelization that seeks primarily to persuade intellectually postmodern culture about the truth of Christianity will face significant setbacks and have little success’.⁴

In what follows I question this narrative as well as the inferences that are drawn from it. I show that those who appropriate it operate with a certain set of unquestioned assumptions themselves that unwittingly risks undermining their own evangelistic efforts. I say this with an eye to the role that miraculous healings play in present-day evangelization. At issue here is a twofold question: (1) what is the nature of the miraculous – in particular healing – and (2) what role should it play with respect to advancing or defending Christian doctrine? Since Healy speaks of ‘long-held assumptions’ this twofold question is one that must be located within a historico-theological context, namely, that of the afore-mentioned ‘disruptive interlude’. In order to assess the validity of this narrative I have chosen to turn to the Baroque period and in particular to one of the great Dominican Thomists of the flourishing Iberian scholasticism, John of St. Thomas (Poinsot) (1589–1644). My choice of Poinsot might *prima facie* seem like a nonstarter for those presently concerned with evangelization. Nevertheless, I believe there is merit to this approach for the following reasons.

First, as a Baroque scholastic, Poinsot treats theological questions not only with the greatest degree of analytical scrutiny but also in constant conversation with the preceding theological tradition taking careful consideration of its authorities (i.e., biblical, patristic, and theological). There is constant effort made to resolve any apparent conflicts within those authorities so that a coherent and systematic presentation of Catholic belief can be offered.

Second, Poinsot was one of many scholastics responsible for what José Pereira calls a ‘super-system’.⁵ A super-system involves the integration of a fully systematic

³Thelen, *Biblical Foundations*, pp. ix–x. Healy examines some reasons for this narrative herself. See Healy, *Healing*, pp. 38, 46–47.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 77. Healy similarly thinks that evangelization through healing and the ‘power of the Spirit’ is needed to confront the ‘tsunami of secularization’. See Healy, *Healing*, pp. 10–11.

⁵José Pereira, *Suárez: Between Scholasticism and Modernity* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2007), pp. 58–65.

theology – available since the time of Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa theologiae* – with a systematized philosophy that became available beginning with the works of thinkers such as Diego Mas (1553–1608), Chrysostomus Javellus (1470–1538), and Francisco Suárez (1548–1617). In the task of forging the synthesis proper to a super-system, important questions had to be answered with respect to how theological data could be integrated with philosophical reasoning such that the probity of theological doctrine could be secured. In composing his *Cursus theologicus*, Poinsoot offers a propaedeutic to his theological work. That propaedeutic consists in defending the articles of faith against nonbelievers: pagans, Jews, and non-Catholic Christians. In his defense of the faith against pagans, Poinsoot has occasion to address systematically and at length the role of the miraculous and presents an account that is quite different from what some current authors—such as Healy—suggest. It is simply not true that the matters with which contemporary evangelists are concerned were left ‘unquestioned’ or remained merely a set of ‘assumptions’ within the interval between the apostolic age and ours.

Third, while the pagans Poinsoot had in mind were undoubtedly those of antiquity (i.e., Greek philosophers), he was also forced to contend with the realities that the discovery of the New World and the exploration of the far East presented. The encounter of indigenous peoples raised not only new theoretical questions about human nature but also what rights Christian missionaries had in preaching the Gospel in lands that enjoyed their own proper and inviolable jurisdiction.⁶ The engagement with those who had never heard the Gospel at all or who had only passing familiarity or perhaps a caricatured understanding of Christian doctrine characterizes – to a remarkable degree – the current landscape with which Christian evangelists must presently contend.⁷ There is thus a homologous set of circumstances that make Poinsoot’s reflections on the role of the miraculous in evangelization worth considering, especially in light of the great success that the Portuguese and Spanish had in their missionary efforts.⁸

Fourth, Poinsoot was one of the keenest minds that Baroque scholasticism produced and made a tremendous impact upon philosophers and theologians well into the twenty-first century such as Jacques Maritain and John Deely.⁹ His thoughts on the miraculous should therefore be of interest for their own sake.

2. Theological science

Poinsoot was born in 1589 to a noble family in Lisbon. He began his studies at the renowned University of Coimbra before moving to Louvain with his family, where he completed the studies necessary to join the priesthood as a member of the Dominican

⁶Here, the *re-lectiones* of Francisco de Vitoria are particularly important, especially his *De indis* (1537–1538).

⁷Healy suggests that ‘today we find ourselves in a cultural situation that is in some respects more like that faced by the early Christians than it has been at any time since’. See Healy, *Healing*, p. 14. I do not doubt the parity between the present-day and the apostolic age in many respects. It is historically naive, however, to suggest that our current age is ‘more like’ the apostolic age than ‘at any time since’.

⁸Here, I do not intend to downplay the abuses that were carried out alongside many of those missionary efforts. What cannot be doubted, however, is that, historically, the seeds of the Gospel were planted and eventually took firm root in the New World. Whether that remains the case today is a different matter.

⁹For Maritain see his *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. by G. Phelan (London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd., 1959), chs. 3 and 4; for John Deely, see his ‘A Morning and Evening Star: Editor’s Introduction’, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 68 (1994), 259–78.

order. For years he taught philosophy and theology at the University of Alcalá before eventually becoming the confessor and counselor to Philip IV in 1643. Poinsoot died in Fraga, Spain in 1644. Among the Dominican's most important works are a sprawling pair of texts: the *Cursus philosophicus* and the *Cursus theologicus*. The latter work, though it roughly parallels the structure and organization of Thomas Aquinas's own *Summa theologiae*, is not just a mere commentary, but develops the field of theological speculation considerably beyond what Thomas himself had accomplished in the thirteenth century.

Aquinas's own novelty in composing the *Summa theologiae* consisted in his establishing *sacra doctrina* along the lines of an Aristotelian science.¹⁰ In the *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle laid out the rudimentary features of what he takes science to be. A science considers the universal features of natures and, through a demonstration either from cause to effect or vice versa, attempts to determine what attributes and properties must follow necessarily from something's essence or nature. The demonstrative character of science is such that it begins with principles and arrives at conclusions.¹¹ This takes place syllogistically such that one is able to infer a conclusion from an antecedent pair of premises.

In the opening question of his *Summa theologiae*, Thomas points out that theology argues from principles to conclusions in the sense just described, and so it too is a veritable science.¹² The question for him is what are theology's first principles and how are they known? Some scientific principles, such as the principle of noncontradiction, are known through the natural light of human reason. Other sciences, however, proceed from principles known by the light of a higher science in the way that music, for example, makes use of principles taken from mathematics. In the case of sacred theology, the first principles are just God's own self-knowledge communicated through revelation. For Thomas and Poinsoot, these are the articles of faith.¹³

In contrast to Aquinas, Poinsoot begins his *Cursus theologicus* not with a discussion of the scientific character of sacred theology, but with a disputation devoted to the certitude of theology's first principles. He does this because, as he sees it, 'with respect to unbelievers and of those who lack faith, it is worthwhile to defend those principles themselves at the very beginning and threshold of theology, to explain their certitude'.¹⁴ The 'unbelievers' Poinsoot identifies are pagans, heretics, and Jews.¹⁵ For our purposes, it will be sufficient to consider how Poinsoot proposes to show the certitude

¹⁰This stands in contrast to Peter the Lombard's *Sentences*, which was the standard theological textbook, as it were, of the time. As its name suggests, the *Sentences* are just a (haphazard) compilation of authoritative sources regarding Christian doctrine. In the second scholasticism that flourished in the Iberian Peninsula, Thomas's *Summa theologiae* eventually replaced the *Sentences* as the chief theological text.

¹¹Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 1.6–10.

¹²Thomas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 2.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Poinsoot, *Cursus theologicus* [hereafter CT], opera et studio monachorum quorundam Solesmensium O.S.B. editus (Paris, 1931), *ordo disputandi in hac quaestione*, (p. 306): '... respectu infidelium et eorum qui a fide deficiunt, operae pretium est ipsa principia in initio ipso et limine theologiae defendere, eorumque certitudine explicare...'. In what follows, all references will be to this particular edition of Poinsoot's work. Pagination will be supplied parenthetically.

¹⁵Ibid., disp. 1, n. 1.

of the articles of faith to pagans since they share no common conceptual framework whatsoever with the Christian. Accordingly, such unbelievers pose the greatest difficulty for evangelistic success.

3. Defense of the *Articuli fidei*

Following Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas maintains that no science argues in proof of its first principles, for this would lead to the infinite regress of demonstrations.¹⁶ This is no less true of sacred theology. Thomas insists, however, that the theologian can answer objections to the faith in a dispute with an unbeliever if only the unbeliever would make some claim.¹⁷ Poinsoot agrees with his confrere but cautions that ‘one must by no means presume that he will be able to convince them [i.e., unbelievers] by reason and discourse, and demonstrate those things that are of the faith’.¹⁸ This statement seems to coincide with Thelen’s above-mentioned claim that an evangelization that seeks to ‘persuade intellectually’ will have ‘little success’.¹⁹ Healy would also seem to agree when she states, ‘Reason can provide a support for faith, but it cannot produce faith itself’.²⁰ Yet, the explanation Poinsoot offers for human understanding’s limited capacity to discourse about matters of faith is notably different from what Thelen or Healy suggests. In alluding to our postmodern situation when he makes his claim about limited success, Thelen surrenders – at the very least implicitly – reason’s ability to argue persuasively not just about the faith but with respect to any determinate perspective at all. One should not hope for argumentative success, Thelen intimates, precisely because our situation is postmodern. Regarded as ‘incredulity to metanarratives’,²¹ postmodernism maintains that our present age consists in a proliferation of language games, narratives, and incommensurate religious perspectives all of which make the notion of a single, unchanging truth completely incredible.²² One who would claim otherwise would even seem to be guilty of metaphysical violence and conceptual idolatry.²³ Consequently, the thought seems to be that, in light of our postmodern context, if the Gospel is to be presented with any credibility at all, it will have to be through some means other than through rational discourse. For Thelen, Healy, and those who share the same point of view, that ‘other means’ would seem to be miraculous healings as a manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Though Poinsoot thinks reason cannot convince the unbeliever of the faith’s truth, he is not thereby calling into question the efficacy of rationality itself. Just as much as Thomas Aquinas and others committed to a broadly Aristotelian epistemology, Poinsoot

¹⁶Thomas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 8; cf. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 1.3.72b5-15.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Poinsoot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 2 (p. 308): ‘... nullatenus praesumere debere, quod ratione et discursu poterit eos convincere, et demonstrare ea quae fidei sunt’.

¹⁹Cf. n. 4 supra.

²⁰Healy, *Healing*, p. 32.

²¹Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

²²Cf. Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. by Luca D’Isanto (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 5, 7, 15; James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 17.

²³Vattimo, *After Christianity*, ch. 9; Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), ch. 2.

is convicted of the efficacy of (human) rational discourse and its demonstrative powers. The point for him is not that reason is impotent in vindicating truth claims that are universal and/or objective, but that 'since the things of the faith are so high that they exceed all created human understanding, they cannot be comprehended or demonstrated'.²⁴ Indeed, if one were to attempt to supply proofs for the faith, those proofs could only ever be weak and nonconclusive. One thereby risks subjecting the faith to ridicule and mockery if an unbeliever should be led to think that a non-compelling reason is meant to serve as justification for the faith.²⁵

If not through (scientific) demonstration, how should one go about 'defending' the principles of the faith to which Poinsoot commits himself in the opening disputation of his work? The Dominican indicates two ways. First, he says, 'through an extraordinary and superior way, namely, through the miraculous'.²⁶ Second, there is the 'ordinary way' (*ordinaria via*) which defends the faith through 'the way of persuasion and of disputation' (*per viam persuasionis et disputationis*).²⁷

With respect to the first way, Poinsoot points to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians where the Apostle states, 'My speech and my preaching is not in the persuasive words of human wisdom, but in showing the spirit and power' (1 Cor. 2:4). Healy and Thelen cite this very passage in order to show that Paul contrasts the power Paul mentions with human wisdom.²⁸ The two are distinct and thus, given reason's (postmodern) impotence, they hold that the miraculous should be the normative means of evangelization. Poinsoot, in contrast, holds that preaching the Gospel in such a fashion 'is not to be used commonly and ordinarily unless one senses a special movement of the Holy Spirit'.²⁹ Why counsel against the extraordinary when so many contemporary evangelists eagerly pursue it? He warns that it exposes the faith to danger if one 'presumptuously' (*temerarie*) presumes to produce a miracle in support of the faith but fails to produce it.³⁰ Centuries later, *Lumen gentium* would also urge against 'presumption' with respect to extraordinary phenomena:

Extraordinary gifts are not to be sought after, nor are the fruits of apostolic labor to be presumptuously [*temere*] expected from their use; but judgment as to their genuinity and proper use belongs to those who are appointed leaders in the Church, to whose special competence it belongs, not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to that which is good.³¹

Further still, Poinsoot explains that miracles were frequent in the early Church since it 'was [just] planted in the world' (*plantabatur in mundo*). At that time, it was not

²⁴Poinsoot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 2 (p. 308): '... cum res fidei sint ita excelsae quod omnem intellectum creatum supernant, non possunt humana ratione, quae valde infirma est, comprehendi et demonstrari ...'.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., n. 3 (p. 308): '... per modum extraordinarium et superiorem videlicet per miracula...'

²⁷Ibid., n. 4.

²⁸Thelen, *Biblical Foundations for the Role of Healing in Evangelization*, 54; Healy, *Healing*, p. 32.

²⁹Poinsoot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 3 (p. 308): '... sed hoc utendum non est communiter et ordinarie, nisi aliquis senserit specialem motionem Spiritus Sancti'.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹*Lumen gentium*, n. 12.

presumptuous to seek the miraculous from God 'repeatedly' (*crebra*), but a necessity. This is evident from Acts 4:29–30: 'Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus'. While reliance upon the miraculous in the early Church might have been appropriate at that time and undoubtedly had a strong evangelistic impact,³² now that the Church has been 'rooted and founded in the faith' (*radicata et fundata est in fide*) one should no longer seek after new miracles nor seek after them daily in order to believe.³³ This stands in stark contrast to what so many contemporary Charismatic and Pentecostal evangelists profess.

Poinsot further cautions that one who insists upon pursuing the miraculous runs the risk of failing to consider what Christ himself warned against in Matthew 12:39: 'A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah'. It is interesting, then, to contrast this passage with Christ's response to John the Baptist's disciples in Luke 7:18–23. There, Christ points to the numerous miraculous healings he has produced. Certainly, these miracles manifest Christ's messianic nature, but it is far from evident that they are intended to be normative in contemporary Christian practice. Indeed, it is entirely possible that it is precisely on account of the faithlessness of the 'adulterous generation' that Christ would have condescended to such signs. As Poinsot sees it, the miracles of the past, whereby the Church was established – including those that Christ performed Himself – should be sufficient for us today without the need for new signs and wonders. Again, Poinsot does not call into question the power that Christ's miraculous healings have in convincing one of their evangelical truth. Here, F.F. Bruce notes that Christ's miracles served as the 'strongest evidence' for first and second-century Christians about the truth of the Gospel.³⁴ By raising Christ from the dead, God made clear that Christ was truly the Messiah and that 'God had kept His promise'.³⁵ Yet, if the resurrection of Christ – a miracle without compare – is not sufficient for our belief, then to what exactly does our faith pertain if we are convicted by some inferior wonder?

Such being the case, if not by adverting principally to the miraculous as a means of evangelization, what tactic should one employ? Poinsot suggests that the less glamorous 'ordinary way of persuasion and disputation' should be utilized in making manifest the 'excellence' and superiority of Christian doctrine over all others. That excellence can be shown in three ways: namely, (1) 'through the way of negation' (*per viam negationis*) whereby objections to the faith are overcome; (2) through positive arguments whereby what can naturally be known about God is demonstrated so

³²See Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2011), vol. 1, p. 262.

³³Poinsot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 3. Poinsot is not unique in making this claim about the establishment of the Church. Similar thinking can be found in Augustine and John Chrysostom. See, e.g., Augustine, *In Evangelium Joannis Tractatus*, tr. 32; John Chrysostom, *De sancta Pentecoste*, Homilia I.

³⁴F. F. Bruce, *The Apostolic Defense of the Gospel* (London: Intervarsity Fellowship, 1959), pp. 11–12.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 12. Bruce is well aware of the challenges that evangelization poses in the twenty-first century. He summons the evangelist to 'remove obstacles which lie in the way of people's accepting the truth', to 'expose erroneous ideas', and to 'confront men' with the 'command to repent'. *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 42. He does not, however, claim that the expectation of miraculous healings is a feature – let alone a necessary one – of evangelization.

that therefrom a manuduction can be made with respect to matters that are specifically unique to the faith; and (3) by supplying similitudes and examples ‘whereby the things of the faith are made perceptible, although not demonstrable’ (*quibus res fidei fiant perceptibiles, licet non demonstrabiles*).³⁶ What is noteworthy is that in the second way – that is, offering positive reasons – the miraculous is appealed to once again in order to establish the credibility of the faith. It will be worthwhile, then, to consider Poinsoot’s thoughts about that matter.

4. The role of miracles in defending the faith

The positive reasons whereby the ‘things of the faith’ (*res fidei*) can be explained to unbelievers are of two kinds: (1) those that pertain to the *praeambula fidei*;³⁷ and (2) those that convince one of the credibility of the faith such as miracles, the fulfillment of prophecies, testimonies, martyrs, and the like. Though Poinsoot notes that miracles, such as healings, can truly manifest the credibility of Christian doctrine, he holds that ‘they are not the formal reason of the faith’ (*non sunt ratio formalis fidei*).³⁸ Accordingly, in the preaching of the Gospel, one must consider miracles not ‘just in any way’ (*quodmodocumque*) for there are some ‘portentous and extraordinary works’ carried out by pagan nonbelievers. These are the ‘false miracles’ (*miracula fallacia*) produced by pseudo-prophets such as those mentioned in Matthew 24:24: ‘For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect’. This also pertains to the Antichrist as 2 Thessalonians 2:9 makes clear: ‘The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders’.

Poinsoot is no cessationist, for he clearly believes in the reality of the miraculous even in present times.³⁹ His view does not intend to gainsay the credibility of the truly miraculous nor does he deny that the early Church abounded with miracles, including healings.⁴⁰ Thus, there need be no opposition between Poinsoot’s account and that of a contemporary author, such as Craig Keener, whose main argument is ‘that eyewitnesses can claim to have seen healings and that some healings may involve supernatural causation’.⁴¹ Nor would Poinsoot call into question the role miracles play in the ‘legitimation’ and fulfillment of Jewish ‘expectation’.⁴² Nevertheless, for his part, Poinsoot is cautious about their use for preaching the Gospel in his time and, presumably, our time. But why? Miracles may well be signs of God’s presence among His people, that the kingdom of God is at hand, that He is who He says He is, namely, the Messiah. Yet, precisely as a *sign*, there is always some ambiguity for a sign not only reveals; it can also conceal. As Paul tells us after all, if the rulers of the world had known, they ‘never would have crucified the Lord of glory’ (1 Cor. 2:8).

³⁶Poinsoot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 5.

³⁷The *praeambula fidei* are just those truths pertaining to the faith that can be shown through natural reason, for example, the existence of God or that only one God exists.

³⁸Poinsoot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 8.

³⁹See *ibid.*, n. 35.

⁴⁰Here, the afore-mentioned work of Craig Keener that defends the credibility of New Testament miracles thus remains entirely valid. See Keener, *Miracles*, 2 vols.

⁴¹Keener, *Miracles*, vol. 1, p. 260.

⁴²*Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 61–64.

Accordingly, Poinsoot remarks that ‘miracles taken without qualification [*nude sumpta*], abstracting from the true or the false, are not the primary proofs of our faith’ for ‘miracles themselves require proof whether they are true or false miracles’.⁴³ Regrettably, among many contemporary evangelists who stress the essential role of miracles, precious few give any consideration to this point in their enthusiasm for amazing wonders.

Obviously, the question here is how to determine the difference between true and false miracles. Poinsoot explains that there are two things to consider: (1) the substance itself of a miracle and (2) the circumstances pertaining to miracles. With respect to the first, we are told that true miracles exceed the entire power of nature. Francisco Suárez, an important Jesuit theologian and near contemporary of Poinsoot, agrees with his Dominican counterpart and explains that the ‘grace of health’ (*gratia sanitatum*), that is, the miraculous restoration of health, does not pertain to the order of grace ‘except in so far as it is done in some way by superseding a natural power: because otherwise it is not the proper work of God’.⁴⁴ The Jesuit further notes, for example, that a physician (*peritus medicus*) could effect health, but surely no one would consider such a matter miraculous.⁴⁵ Operating in this same vein, mention is also made of the possibility of demonic intervention in the production of a pseudo-miracle. For his part, Poinsoot explains, ‘But if sometimes the dead are raised or the blind are made to see by the art of a demon, either he was not truly dead or he was not truly resuscitated; ... if sometimes someone blind is made to see, he was not truly blind’.⁴⁶ What he draws attention to in these latter occurrences is the fundamentally illusory character involved. If a demon seems to restore a dead person to life, that restoration is momentary and only long enough to delude.⁴⁷ Further, the resurrected person would not truly exercise any vital operations that are congruous with actual life as had been the case with Lazarus, whom Christ truly raised from the dead. Rather, the dead person would simply be moved locally like a puppet. Certain apocrypha even report such phenomena as having transpired at the hands of Simon Magus.⁴⁸

What is noteworthy here is that while Poinsoot emphasizes the illusory character of these pseudo-miracles, Suárez grants that ‘a demon can at times confer *true health* so

⁴³Poinsoot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 13 (p. 313): ‘Quare miracula nude sumpta, abstrahendo a veris vel falsis, non sunt primae probationes nostrae fidei: sed ipsa miracula etiam indigent probari utrum sint vera, vel falsa miracula’.

⁴⁴Suárez, *De gratia*, prolegomenon III, c. 5, n. 15 (ed. Luis Vivès, vol. 7: p. 154): ‘... collatio sanitatis non pertinet ad gratiam, nisi quatenus aliquo modo virtutem naturalem superante fit: quia aliter facta neque est proprium opus Dei ...’.

⁴⁵Curiously, Healing regards natural phenomena as miraculous at times. She states that miracles ‘may include an extraordinary coincidence, such as a chance encounter that leads someone with a rare condition to just the doctor who can help’. Healy, *Healing*, pp. 43–44. I doubt such a description of the miraculous would be persuasive to the skeptic.

⁴⁶Poinsoot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 13 (p. 313): ‘Quod si aliquando arte daemonis videtur fieri suscitatio mortui, aut illuminatio caeci ...’.

⁴⁷I find it curious then that some contemporary evangelists have to develop an apologetic apparatus to address the transient character of some purported healings. See, e.g., <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fV2jvMLthww&t=37s>> [accessed 18 September 2024].

⁴⁸*Acta apostolorum apocrypha* (ed. Lipsius-Bonnet, 1891), Petri cum Simone c. 24–28; t. 1, pp. 72–78.

as to make it appear miraculous'.⁴⁹ The Jesuit concedes that a demon could truly heal a person, for example, truly restore sight to the blind and, while such an event might be a wonder, it is not a true miracle or something from God. It is not truly miraculous since, for Suárez just as much as for Poinsoot, what occurs does not come about from outside the realm of nature entirely but through 'natural causes', that is, through the power and science of demons. Only that which results from a power that transcends nature entirely (even the preternatural) is miraculous. Such are the miracles that Christ performed simply by his 'command and proper power' (*imperio et propria potestate*) rather than through a natural means.⁵⁰

But why should demons produce false miracles or wonders of their own in the first place? Christ himself tells us that a house divided against itself will not stand (Matt 12: 25). Poinsoot answers in terms of the second aspect pertaining to miracles mentioned above, namely, the circumstances pertaining to their ends: 'false miracles are made so that one may seek his own glory, but true ones [are made] so that one flees and seeks true virtue'.⁵¹ Not surprisingly, pride is at the center of the distinction between what is true and what is false. Though Thelen holds that 'there cannot be a real separation between the proclamation and the demonstration of that proclamation',⁵² how many times did Christ, after having healed someone, command that person 'tell no one'?⁵³ Christ, Poinsoot rightly notes, did not perform miracles for his own vanity or glory, but only for the glory of God so that the Father might be glorified.⁵⁴ Indeed, Christ fled all honors of the world and accepted the abject humiliation of crucifixion.⁵⁵ In contrast, those who perform 'false miracles' (*miracula ficta*) – even if unknowingly through demonic intervention – are seduced so that they may ultimately seek their own glory rather than God's. This may well be true among Christians, notes Poinsoot,⁵⁶ for whom vanity might even lead them to believe they are 'among those in the vanguard of the Holy Spirit's new work'.⁵⁷ This is hardly surprising since, as Poinsoot states, 'when demons do wonderful things, they do it out of pride, so that they may be regarded as gods'.⁵⁸

Poinsoot's point behind the present discussion is not to call into doubt the miraculous or the credibility they lend to the Christian faith. Rather, he urges caution precisely because of the ambiguity that wonders entail, which could serve to mislead or ensnare one who does not use adequate discernment or who has a ready penchant for the miraculous. Besides which miracles alone are not meant to serve as the sole confirmation of the faith, since, more importantly, they are further supported by the 'multitude of witnesses, such as the most learned, most wise, and holiest men who

⁴⁹Suárez, *De gratia*, prolegomenon III, c. 5, n. 15 (ed. Luis Vives, vol. 7: p. 154): '... daemon interdum possit *veram santitatem* ita conferre, ut facta miraculose appareat ...' (emphases mine).

⁵⁰Poinsoot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 13.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, n. 14 (p. 313): '... fiunt enim falsa miracula ad quaerendam propriam gloriam, vera autem ad fugiendam, et ad veram virtutem quaerendam'.

⁵²Thelen, *Biblical Foundations for the Role of Healing in Evangelization*, p. 13.

⁵³See, e.g., Luke 5:13-14; Mark 7:36; Matt 9:30; Matt 8:4.

⁵⁴Poinsoot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 13.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, n. 15.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷Thelen, *Biblical Foundations for the Role of Healing in Evangelization*, p. ix.

⁵⁸Poinsoot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 14 (p. 313): 'Similiter daemones quando faciunt aliqua mirabilia, propter superbiam id faciunt, ut tamquam dii habeantur'.

came to the faith'.⁵⁹ The shedding of blood of many martyrs throughout the ages in the most gruesome ways also stands as a powerful witness for the credibility of the faith. That many endured persecution with patience alone, without power, weapons, or the favor of men all for the sake of the faith speaks to its credibility. 'For against all this that the faith prevails without any other support, but only by the truth it put forward, is the greatest sign of undoubted certainty'.⁶⁰

Finally, Poinsoot argues that the power of the faith in its 'interior inspiration and change of minds, even without new miracles, which is the greatest of miracles ... has the greatest strength'.⁶¹ He cites Augustine who argued in his *De civitate Dei* that the faith is either credible or it is not.⁶² If it is credible, then what it proposes must be believed. If it is not credible, then how is it that its teachings have been believed by so many men, for so many centuries, in cultivated – not barbarous – lands? Poinsoot remarks: 'Certainly, this is the greatest of miracles that [the doctrine of the faith] is believed without the miraculous; for it is a sure indication of divine inspiration'.⁶³ Likewise he points to Thomas Aquinas, who thinks that the conversion of the world to the Christian faith 'is a most certain indication of the signs of the past'.⁶⁴ Thus the Angelic Doctor does not think it necessary to repeat such signs, even though he has no doubt that God continues to act miraculously through His saints in the present.⁶⁵

5. The miracles of other religions?

As he concludes his opening disputation devoted to the defense of the faith, Poinsoot is faced with an objection to the supporting role he attributes to true miracles. It argues, 'Miracles are not sufficient to prove the certitude of our faith, since sometimes even those who teach other doctrines also perform signs and great wonders'.⁶⁶ The point here is that if true miracles could be used to confirm the credibility of the faith – with all the caveats mentioned above – then the presence of the miraculous with respect to other religions would seem to confirm the truth of those religions as well. But obviously such a claim would be problematic since other religious doctrines are incongruous with Christian belief.⁶⁷ The objection further states that it is insufficient

⁵⁹Ibid., n. 17 (p. 314): '... multitudo testium: sicut doctissimi, et sapientissimi homines et sanctissimi, qui ad hanc fidem accesserunt ...'.

⁶⁰Ibid. (p. 314): 'Nam contra haec omnia fidem praevelere sine alio adminiculo, sed sola sua veritate proposita, maximum signum est indubitatae certitudinis'.

⁶¹Ibid., n. 18 (p. 315): '... interior mentium inspiratio et immutatio, etiam sine novis miraculi, quod inter maxima miracula ... maximum habet robur'.

⁶²See Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, PL vol. 41, cols. 755–60.

⁶³Poinsoot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 18 (p. 315): 'Certe hoc est maximum miraculorum quod sine miraculis credatur; est enim certum indicium inspirationis divinae'.

⁶⁴Thomas, *Summa contra gentiles* I, c. 6 (ed. Leonine, vol. 13: p. 17): '... indicium certissimum est praeteritorum signorum ...'.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., n. 31 (p. 318): '... miracula non sufficienti probare certitudinem nostrae fidei, quia etiam qui alias doctrinas docent aliquando faciunt signa et prodigia magna ...'.

⁶⁷David Hume, one may recall, pointed to the fact that incompatibly diverse religions all boast of their own miracles, which would only serve to cancel each other out. This self-defeating situation, he thinks, would seem to undermine the claim that there actually have been any miracles at all. See his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, sec. 10.

to state that those miracles are false and Christian miracles are true since the miracles of other religions ‘are entirely just as ours’ (*sunt omnino sicut nostra*), for we hear of restoring sight to the blind, which is attributed to the Roman emperor Vespasian, and the raising of the dead, which is a feat attributed to the Antichrist (Rev. 13:3).⁶⁸ There are numerous sources from antiquity that relate miraculous events such as making fire descend from the heavens (rather than ascend in terms of its natural place), or a vestal virgin who carried water in a sieve without its contents falling as a sign of her purity. Poinsoot concedes that in response to this objection it is not sufficient to say that such miracles, though not false in themselves, testify to a false doctrine. The Christian would succumb to a vicious circle: Christianity attempts to prove the credibility of its doctrine because it is accompanied by miracles, which miracles are held to be true because they confirm Christianity.⁶⁹

In his response to this objection Poinsoot begins with the claim that the miracles of pseudo-prophets or of the Antichrist are simply false and mendacious. Again, he does not deny that they produce wonders, but he attributes those wonders to deceptive demonic power. The Dominican offers three reasons why he thinks such wonders are mendacious. First, being produced by illusion and deception, they lack the nature of a true miracle; second, they do not transcend the entire order of nature even if they are truly ‘wonders’ (*mira*); third, they lack the proper end of a miracle ‘since they were made according to some seduction of iniquity’.⁷⁰ Important, then, in overcoming this objection is the ability to discern true from false miracles, which he has already discussed. Poinsoot reminds his reader that the truly miraculous is that which exceeds every natural power. Citing Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, Poinsoot remarks that since oftentimes miracles occur in a hidden fashion, only those that are truly perceptible by the senses help confirm the faith. Thus, among the greatest miracles that Christ performed was raising the dead and restoring sight to those who were blind from birth.⁷¹

Despite providing a means of discerning the difference between true and false miracles, Poinsoot once again downplays the necessity of miracles. He assures his readers that there is no lack of true miracles in the Church that are done ‘everyday’ (*quotidie*) through the intercession of saints in heaven or by the servants of God on earth. Nevertheless, simply speaking ‘new miracles are not needed for the conversion of unbelievers, since the faith is not merely planted in the world, but planted and propagated: whence ancient miracles suffice’.⁷²

6. Conclusion

The point of the present work is not to call into question the reality of miracles, especially miraculous healings, nor to dispute the power that they may have to convict one of the truth of Christian doctrine. Yet, as Poinsoot holds – and even much more recently

⁶⁸Poinsoot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 31.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, n. 32 (p. 319): ‘... quia fiunt propter aliquam seductionem iniquitatis’.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²*Ibid.*, n. 53 (p. 320): ‘... sed simpliciter non requiruntur nova miracula pro conversione infidelium, quia modo non plantatur fides in mundo, sed plantata propagatur: unde sufficienti miracula antiqua ...’.

Joseph Ratzinger – true miracles and healings are a subordinate matter. Subordinate to what though? His answer is human reason.

Just as exorcism drives out the fear of demons and commits the world—which comes from God’s *reason*—to our human *reason*, so too, healing by God’s power is both a summons to faith in God and a summons to use the powers of reason in the service of healing.⁷³

Both Healy and Thelen completely overlook Ratzinger’s summons to reason,⁷⁴ which is unfortunate in light of the fact that, as Ratzinger has also rightly called attention to, one of the chief problems of our time is the ‘dictatorship of relativism’. It is not clear how attempting to advance the Gospel through signs and wonders overcomes that very problem. What was true of antiquity – namely, practitioners of magic and wonders—is no less true today.⁷⁵ Certain syncretic religions, such as the various forms of Vodou and Santería, have their own healing practices. The same can be said for practitioners of curanderismo and shamanism.⁷⁶ In fact, some contemporary anthropologists, such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, have even argued – through an obvious postmodern lens – for the vindication of Amazonian and Amerindian perspectives in shucking off the homogenizing conceptual frameworks of the West and Christianity.⁷⁷ Without any way to adjudicate between and among these various phenomena prevalent throughout the spectrum of cultures and paradigms, one is simply left in the unruly circus of the *mirabilia* without any reason for choosing one over the other. But to offer a means of evaluation, which is precisely what Poinsett does, is to move beyond the domain of signs and wonders themselves into the rational. The rational scrutiny and investigation of truth claims is precisely the domain where scholastic theologians undoubtedly excelled.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, I do not intend to suggest that the healings that occur in non-Christian religions are instances of true miracles. Rather, my point is that those sects propose their signs, wonders, and healings as true, which, in the pluralistic landscape of postmodernity, together with other religious phenomena, cannot simply be discounted out of hand. Indeed, that precisely is the challenge of postmodernity. Today, the ‘hegemony’ of a single overarching (Christian) conceptual

⁷³Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. by A. Walker (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2007), pp. 176–77 (emphases mine). Evidently Healy disagrees with the position Ratzinger takes when she says, ‘Many people tend to think of healings as secondary to Jesus’ real purpose, to save souls. But the Gospels tell us otherwise’. Quote at Healy, *Healing*, p. 17. Nevertheless, she cites him as supporting her claim though she leaves out his statement that healing is a ‘subordinate’ matter and the role of reason. See Healy, *Healing*, p. 20.

⁷⁴Thelen’s selective quotation of the salient passage excises Ratzinger’s appeal to human reason. See Thelen, *Biblical Foundations*, p. 26.

⁷⁵Here, again, the work of Keener is valuable assessing the various sorts of miraculous phenomena that populated the ancient world beyond Judeo-Christianity. See his, *Miracles*, esp. vol. 1.

⁷⁶For helpful discussion of these belief systems and their practices, see *Mesoamerican Healers*, ed. by Brad Huber and Alan Sandstrom (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001); see also a classic by Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁷⁷Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. by Peter Skafish (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Publishing, 2014).

framework has been abandoned – in the name of decolonization – in favor of a plurality of (indigenous) narratives. Christianity would thus seem to have been relegated to the (marginalized) status of being just one narrative among many. Yet, no Christian evangelist would – or should – be willing to concede that claim, for Christ Himself makes clear that He is the truth (John 14:6). How is that truth to be defended – through wonders such as miraculous healings? Possibly, but that seems simply to complicate matters since, as Poinsoot argues, such wonders themselves still require evidence for whether or not they are true.⁷⁸ What would supply such evidence is not just one more sign or wonder, but rational scrutiny to which even the articles of the faith are able to withstand which, for Poinsoot, is the chief reason for their credibility.

⁷⁸Poinsoot, *CT*, disp. 1, q. 1, a. 1, n. 13.