

*The Cultural Logic of Miracles\**

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*Abstract:* Miracles are not a residual category of science, nor are they the result of ignorance. For millions of people, miracles continue to play an important role in modern life. This article explores the resilience of miracles by considering two key factors: 1) the relationship between the institutions of religion and science, and 2) the power of miracles to mobilize dedicated constituents. The article argues that taken together, these two factors turn miracles into social facts. In the final part of the article, modern sainthood is used as an example to illustrate how the Catholic Church negotiated its relationship with science at the dawn of modernity and how miracles continue to have the power to mobilize people.

*Keyword:* Miracles, Science, Catholic Church, Institutions.

Cross references: [all provisional suggestions, KvR]10403 Collective identity and expressive forms; 10416 Symbolic Boundaries; 10436 Embodiment and Culture or 10442 “ Culture and Cognition” ; 10444 Networks and Publics; 10455 Culture and the Institutional Logics ;

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Although many people might assume that a miracle is merely a residual category of event, destined to be marginalized by such processes of modernity as secularization and scientific progress, for millions of people miracles remain a key element of modern life. Miracles continue to occur abundantly around the world despite advancements in scientific understanding and a decrease in church attendance. Durkheim famously defined a social fact as a "way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an influence, or an external constraint" (1982, 26); social facts are the "things" that social scientists study. The resilience of supernatural events is important for sociologists and social scientists more broadly because it highlights a core characteristic of miracles: whatever else they may be, they are undeniably social facts.

How did miracles survive the challenges of modernity and manage to become a social fact? One key to this question is the struggle between religious institutions, like Christian churches, and the scientific community over control of the category of miracles and the authority to sanction (or debunk) miraculous claims. Another key is an understanding of the capacity of miracles to mobilize people in a common cause. Indeed, this mobilizing power is the difference between a miracle and a personal fantasy.

Before examining in greater detail how these two factors combine to make miracles a social fact, I offer a definition of miracle as *any event that defies common expectations and for which a readily available mental frame exists that denies or eliminates the role of randomness as a cause for the event*. A social world without miracles has always been possible, now as five hundred years ago. It is a rational world ruled by stochastic processes where random events occur as a matter of routine. The fact that many people do not see the world in this way tells us a lot about our modern societies and, perhaps, about our collective expectations and fears as human beings.

After discussing how the scientific community, religious institutions, and activists all contribute in turning miracles into social facts (Sections 1), I will examine in greater detail the exemplary case of modern Catholic saints. In particular, I will reconstruct the historical transformation of sainthood at the hands of the Catholic Church during the seventeenth century and how such transformation made miracles compatible with modernity (Section 3). Because of the Church's overt attempts to use rules to regulate the production of miracles modern sainthood is an ideal typical case for studying miracles as social facts in other Christian religions too.

## **1. The relationship between science and religion and the creation of new knowledge**

In the Christian religions, most miracles are health-related, thereby making the relationship between religion institutions and medical scientists the focus point of my analysis. A metaphor known as Zeno's Paradox could help illustrate this relationship. The Greek hero Achilles is racing against a turtle. Achilles is ten times faster than the turtle, so he gives the turtle a head start of ten spatial units. Will Achilles ever reach the turtle? If the distance the two have to run is infinite, the answer is no, because the turtle will always be ten units ahead of Achilles, no matter how infinitesimal the units are. If we subscribe to the view that modernity has transformed death from a fundamental aspect of human's life (regulated by rituals and traditions) into an undesirable and "hidden" outcome of science and medicine, then religious institutions and medical scientists

become similar to the turtle and Achilles respectively, running the infinite distance of modern life. Miracles will always occur in the space of what is unpredictable.<sup>1</sup>

If Zeno's Paradox provides a key for understanding why the supernatural remains part of modernity it does not explain "how" such a process developed in time—the institutions and actors involved in the production of miracles and the historical circumstances that created the modern field of religion. In this chapter I argue that the current relationship between modern religion institutions and science (medicine in particular) can be recast as one of control over a boundary: the boundary that separates the possible from the impossible. Modern science failed to displace miracles because Christian churches defended this boundary, claiming authority on the impossible side of the division. While before the modern period, religion dictated what was to be considered "officially" a miracle (an event that imitated the life or actions of Jesus, for instance see Vauchez 2000; Boesch-Gajano 1999), strong enforcement of the possible / impossible division became the cornerstone on which miracles could continue to occur in the modern period, without any need to define the content of the impossible. Indeed the priest (or pastor) and the scientist are commonly perceived as representatives of opposite and distant worlds. One world, that of science, is predicated on openness, experiments, and results; the other world, that of religion, is predicated on mysteries and dogmas.

Nevertheless, several social scientists have shown how categories evolve over time and boundaries become porous. Hannan and Freeman, for instance, considered several social processes, such as personnel turnover and technical errors, that usually lead to the blending of opposite categories (1989). Rao, Monin, and Durand considered a successful case of such blending in the realm of French gastronomy (2005). Indeed one could interpret certain aspects of positivism during the eighteenth century—the intuitions that led Auguste Comte to invent the word "sociology," for example, or Saint Simon's vision of a technocratic society (2009)—as a blending between science and religion. Had such a blending been successful, my argument suggests, miracles would have disappeared from the landscape of religious life. Why did the boundary of the possible / impossible remain salient during modernity?

One reason that this boundary did not become porous at the end of the nineteenth century was that religious institutions throughout the Christian world continued to train their own personnel quite separately from the state-controlled training of scientists and other professionals. Maintaining control over the training of the clergy was (and is!) important because it produced a specific knowledge about the realm of the impossible that justified the existence of a rigid boundary. In his historical analysis of the relationship between mental illness and civilization, Michel Foucault argued that once the mentally ill started to be moved into institutions, they fell under the scrutiny of a power that began distinguishing between different types of psychological malady—alcoholism, depression, etc. Different types of mental illness became the objects of analysis of a new discipline, psychology (Foucault 2001). Similarly, different types of impossible events came under the scrutiny of the clergy, which transformed some of them into miracles. As with the case of psychology, power—in this case, the power of religious institutions

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, we don't have to accept that life is potentially completely predictable. If we adopt the idea that unpredictable events and fundamental uncertainty are inevitable aspects of modernity (as they were for people living in antiquity, for instance), then miracles become a residual and superstitious category of events.

expressed through the training of their personnel—generated knowledge—in this case, a knowledge of the impossible.

No other church extended this process of knowledge creation further than the Catholic Church. In the aftermath of the Protestant Schism, Rome embarked on a deep re-organization of its centennial structure and created a specific commission to investigate miracles performed by candidates for sainthood and by objects such as statues, icons, and paintings. While the latter part of this article will provide more historical details about this fascinating and not widely known period of Church history, it is worth pointing out that Rome's strategy as ultimate arbiter of the impossible did more than defend a boundary line. In effect, the Catholic Church achieved control over the boundary. This is illustrated by the simple fact that Catholics throughout the world consider true miracles not just those events that defy scientific expectations but also those that have received approval from the Pope. That is, for Catholics, not every impossible event is *ipso facto* a miracle.

In light of all of this, the relationship between modern religion institutions and science is not one of progressive domination of the latter over the former. This simplistic perspective, perhaps better captured with Francis Bacon's sentence that "knowledge is power," ignores that science and religion are two separate and autonomous systems of beliefs, practices, values, and rules—and that power, too, is capable of creating knowledge. Only by restoring the complexity of the social world in which scientists and priests live together is it possible to start understanding the resilience of miracles.

## **2. The mobilizing power of miracles**

In the modern world, most supernatural events take place privately between a single worshipper and her deity. This type of miracle is private in the sense that it does not involve others beyond the individual and, potentially, her immediate family. Private miracles do not have mobilizing power and are a matter of personal beliefs, i.e., they are not social facts. A subset of miracles are, however, public, in the sense that they occur at pilgrimage destinations or are used for establishing someone's sanctity by the Catholic Church. Still other times, miracles are public because they occur in public spaces in front of several people. Many social scientists tend to think that public miracles are the result of crowd behavior or are spontaneous eruptions of faith and are, in this sense, comparable to private miracles. This way of thinking about miracles has led social scientists to in large part ignore them as objects of study. However, in reality, public miracles more closely resemble mobilizing events of contemporary social movements, and are worth studying as organized expressions of religious activism.

Indeed, behind each public miracle—be that a healing performed by a powerful relic of a soon-to-be saint or the crying of a religious icon in front of hundreds of worshippers—there is always a group of activists that first catalyzed the conditions for the occurrence of the miracle and then organized the local support generated by the miracle so that more miracles could occur. This group of activists could be made of early acolytes of a recently deceased candidate for canonization, or it might comprise the clergy of a potential pilgrimage destination. Regardless, activists benefit directly from the occurrence of the miracle and stand to further benefit from the occurrence of more supernatural events.

This is not to suggest that the religious motivations of activists are of secondary importance. Rather, it serves as a reminder that the mobilization of a community via miracles also produces worldly advantages for some people. Pilgrimage is one example. A steady stream of pilgrims generates revenue that can be channeled either to a local church or a religious order. But while the economics of a miracle can be a boon for activists, they do not merely reap the reward. The activists' efforts to organize the miracle are actually essential for the miracle to exist as a social fact, and for a subtle reason—the participation of activists makes public miracles compatible with a cultural and social environment dominated by skepticism toward supernatural events.

Religious activists catalyze the occurrence of miracles through the use of ritual. In the case of public miracles performed by a Catholic saint, for instance, they occur via the intercession of a relic that it is usually in the control of the activists. The ritual performs the function of expelling chance from the equation and ensuring that everything that happens as a result of it is the result of God's will. The ritual creates a frame that makes an unpredictable event predictable, and therefore reproducible. By showing that the event obeys God's laws, the ritual creates a legitimate suspension of natural laws (or of medical knowledge) so that, for example, the places where these types of miracles occur are *de facto* places for supernatural activity on Earth.

Using rituals in order to make miracles align with modernity represents an extension of Max Weber's thesis on the rationalization of religion (1922). The mobilizing power of miracles shows that, in fact, the rationalization of religious beliefs did not mean only the exclusion of magic from religion, i.e., Puritanism. The path travelled in Northern Europe to make Christian religious beliefs compatible with modernity was just one possible solution to the tensions created by scientific progress and medicine. Another solution was to leave some magic into the religious core of Christianity. What this chapter argues is that the rationalization of religion is better seen as a historical and institutional process that involves activists legitimizing and structuring what can be considered genuinely supernatural, i.e., a miracle that occurred as the effect of a ritual (the cause), according to their own interests and ideology.

### **3. An extended example: Modern sainthood**

Miracles are part and parcel of the modern world and are a key aspect of Catholicism. Sainthood would not be *necessary* without miracles, that is, without the widespread belief in miraculous events and the cultural understanding that such events are the work of holy individuals after their death (*post mortem*), because they sit in Paradise and are thus able to intercede for us with God. The story of modern sainthood shows to the maximum extent how the Church constructed a specific knowledge of the impossible in contrast to the discoveries of science, and how religious supporters of future candidates for sainthood used (public) miracles to mobilize local communities in support of the canonization of their leaders. The institutional process that made it possible for modern saints to continue performing (public) miracles thus serves as an illustration of how social facts are created. In what follows, I will provide some historical detail of the re-organization of the Catholic Church in the aftermath of the Protestant Schism. My

attention will focus first on sainthood during the medieval period and then on the special commission that Rome created with the intention of reforming it.

### 3.1 Sainthood before the Protestant Schism

In the Middle Ages the ascetic, healing saints, as typified by Saint Francis of Assisi, were prevalent in Italy and had a long history going back to the late Roman Empire (Brown 1981), while the noble kinship saints, such as Saint Louis, were dominant in France and were a more recent version of sainthood (Vauchez 2000; Vauchez 1989). For the most part, the popes canonized candidates that conformed to the Italian model of sainthood.

Models of sainthood did not vary only by region (Duby 1980). Because the popes did not have complete control over matters of sainthood until the seventeenth century, Boesch-Gajano and Modica suggest distinguishing types of sanctity based on the authorities that certified them. *High* sainthood in this model coincides with official sainthood, one that received the approval of the pontiffs (2000). *Low* sainthood, on the other hand, refers to sanctity achieved through popular acclaim and certified by local authorities. The case of a dog worshipped as a saint in the village of Villars-les-Dombles in the Ain region of Southern France is a notorious example of this latter type of sanctity. The dog, Guinefort, was (incorrectly, it turned out) accused of having killed a baby and was thrown in a well and killed. After discovering the dog's innocence, the population of the village began to worship the dog, who from that point on (and up to the eighteenth century) was known as Saint Guinefort. Vauchez explains: "In the contrast to ... harsh punishment and its patent injustice, popular piety was born. This popular emotion is the same which, transposed on the religious sphere, generated devotion. By virtue of a process that we can treat as a 'law of popular affectivity,' popular piety generates religious piety" (1989, 101).

Nevertheless, official sainthood did require the support of people, what the Church called the *Fama Sanctitatis*, in addition to papal approval of a candidate's sanctity. In the Middle Ages, the support a saint could attract was based largely on his miracles; hence, miracles were a vital instrument for gathering the popular support necessary for canonization. Organizing this support through the use of rituals was not that fundamental, however. Summarizing the field of sainthood before the Protestant Schism we can say that while *low* saints had popular support, *high* saints had prestige.

During the reformation, Protestants attacked the Church's indulgence to popular devotion of the kind that produced the dog Saint Guinefort. At the same time, the great rate of scientific discoveries popularized via the printing press contributed to produce a shift in climate, whereby supernatural events began to be greeted with increasing skepticism. Thus, at the dawn of modernity, the Church was faced with the dual challenge of promoting its own version of sainthood while attracting popular support. To a certain degree, the two goals had the potential to undermine one another: allowing popular devotion was important in ensuring popular support, but allowing too great a variety of popular devotion would seem to prove skeptics right because it could potentially turn any popular mystery into a holy act. The establishment of a central commission to investigate claims to sainthood was part of the Church's effort to reshape the relationship between popularly perceived sainthood and its own official version.

But *how* did the new commission effect this reshaping? It took considerable organizational skill to steer the environment from one in which putative saints faced lax scrutiny and were proclaimed locally to one in which Rome asserted close control over sainthood, all the while maintaining popular support. The Church risked alienating its followers in a period when the legitimacy of its dogma was much in question and when religious wars challenged the political authority of Rome.

### 3.2 The special commission for investigating miracles and saints

Pope Sixtus V created the *Congregatio Sacrorum Rituum*, or Congregation of Sacred Rites, with the January 22, 1588 encyclical *Immensa Aeterni Dei*. The *Congregatio* was originally charged with organizing and moderating the Latin liturgy of the Church as well as investigating whether individuals who died with reputations of extreme holiness were indeed saints. The latter function quickly took precedence, so that the work of the *Congregatio* resembled more and more that of a tribunal that “tried” candidates for sainthood after their deaths (Papa 2001).

The establishment of the *Congregatio* was the culmination of a long process that began on February 9, 993, at the Church of Saint John in Rome, when the pope officially sanctioned the worship of the bishop of Augsburg, Saint Udalric. This was Rome’s first documented canonization. Interestingly, the *bolla*, i.e., the Pontiff’s communication, issued for the occasion described the twenty miracles that Udalric had performed. Similar canonization bulls listing miracles continue to be issued to this day (Papa 1988).

Despite this early example, the Roman Curia and the papacy had very little control over granting the title of saint. Throughout the Middle Ages, Catholic Europe was divided in its devotion to a myriad of local saints. This state of affairs persisted even though, in order to prevent abuse of the title and to institute some consistency, Pope Alexander III officially took the power of canonization out of the hands of local bishops in 1170 with the decree *Audivimus, de Reliquiis et Veneratione Sanctorum*. But the decree was not enforced, partly because of the difficulty of controlling a territory as vast as Europe and partly because it made little organizational sense to risk alienating popular support. The practice of worshiping local saints continued.

However, in the new social landscape of the Counter-Reformation, the saints and their miracles were a matter of particular importance, and a subject about which Protestants and Catholics fought fiercely (Thomas 1971). In this environment, Rome had a direct interest—for the sake of its own credibility—in assuring the quality of the people worshipped as saints. As Rome began to insist more strongly on the importance of its approval, local religious activists found an interest in securing Rome’s recognition of their candidate, in order to enhance their local reputation. The two demands, one from the top and the other from the bottom, met in the procedures of the *Congregatio*, which transformed sainthood into a standardized legal procedure (Gotor 2000; Gotor 2004).

The canonized sainthood that the *Congregatio* instituted was based on a series of trials in which witnesses were called to testify on the miracles and virtues of the candidate. Each trial was divided into sections, and witnesses were called for each. The sections were: (1) the early life of the candidate; (2) the sanctity of the candidate in a broad sense; (3) the virtue of faith; (4) the virtue of hope; (5) the virtue of charity toward God; (6) the virtue of charity toward spiritual life; (7) the virtue of charity toward

temporal life; (8) the virtue of prudence; (9) the virtue of justice; (10) the virtue of patience (only for French candidates); (11) the virtue of strength; (12) the virtue of the religious life, if the candidate belonged to a religious order; (13) the supernatural gifts of the candidate; (14) the *Fama Sanctitatis*, or saintly reputation of the candidate; (15) the death of the candidate; (17) the candidate's fame after death; and (18) the miracles.

Local Church authorities opened the canonization procedure by collecting evidence on the recently deceased holy person and commissioning the writing of *vitae*, or biographies. This first phase was called the *Processo Ordinario*, because the authority that conducted the investigations was ordinary, or locally based. The evidence gathered in the *Processo Ordinario* was sent to the *Congregatio* in Rome, where it received its first scrutiny, based on the way the trial was conducted—whether all the necessary authorities were present, whether the depositions were sealed and the minutes recorded, etc. Approval in this phase meant that a new trial would be held, this time by the apostolic authorities; therefore the new trial was thus called the *Processo Apostolico*. The judges in this trial were all selected by Rome. If the *Congregatio* reached a positive opinion in the *Processo Apostolico*, it issued the *Lettere Remissoriali*, or permission to gather evidence on specific details (*in partibus*) of the candidate's life and the miracles he performed. Since many candidates were active in more than one parish during their lives, both the ordinary and apostolic trials were held in multiple locations, in effect multiplying the number of required trials (Veraja 1988).

The trials *in partibus*, often called *Remissoriali*, were conducted by the Roman authorities. Until the decrees of the period 1634–1642, the *Congregatio* entrusted a special commission, the *Uditori di Rota*, with the task of organizing most of the work related to these trials. The *Uditori di Rota*, of whom there were three, were the pope's trustworthy advisors. All of them held important positions in the Roman Curia; they were usually cardinals and they were often members of the *Congregatio*. Their predominance in the first decades of the life of the *Congregatio* shows that the pope intended to maintain close supervision over matters of sainthood (Papa 2001). The *relatio*, or summary of the trials, that the *Uditori* wrote for the *Congregatio* and for the pope was the single most important document in a canonization process during this period. This summary of the life of the candidate was divided into two parts: the first addressing the virtues of the candidate, and the second his miracles. The miracles discussed in the *relatio* were a selection of all those collected during the trials.

The process of developing modern sainthood was a precarious one that required balancing conflicting interests. This meant that the *Congregatio* refined and changed its rules many times over the years between its founding and the reforms of the period 1634–1642. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the *Congregatio* instituted one of its first new rules by creating the title of *beato* (blessed). This title had existed informally since late antiquity, indicating a cult that the Roman authorities had approved for the purpose of local worship only. After the *Congregatio's* rule change, the title of blessed became in practice an intermediate step to sainthood. Local authorities carried out the investigations for the title, which allowed them to assert some autonomy from the Roman Curia. Thus, the institution of the title *blessed* mediated between Rome's desire to assume direct control over sainthood and the prerogatives of local communities that had chosen their own saints for centuries (Gotor 2004).

The reforms of 1634–1642 introduced a new figure to the canonization process that drastically reduced the role of the cardinals of the *Congregatio* and completely replaced the *Uditori*. The *Promotore Fidei*—a “devil’s advocate” with respect to the candidate’s position—was charged with the task of dismantling any false claims about the powers and virtues of the candidate. The *Promotore Fidei* was a lawyer entrusted with representing the interests of the Church on matters of sainthood, and he usually represented the Church several times during his career. The use of legal experts on religious matters had been a long-standing tradition in the Church, but the extent of their involvement in canonization procedures was one of *Congregatio*’s many institutional innovations. The first attorney nominated to defend the interests of Rome during a canonization trial was Giovanni Giacomo Nerotti in the case of Raymond de Penafort, a Spanish saint worshipped since the thirteenth century. However, Nerotti’s task remained confined to the traditional role of the Curia’s attorney—that is, establishing that local trials followed proper procedures. Nerotti and his counterpart on de Penafort’s behalf, the Dominican priest Michele Llot, did not address the merits of de Penafort’s purported miracles.

With the expansion of scientific and medical knowledge during the seventeenth century, the *Promotore*’s role also expanded beyond procedural supervision to resemble that of a defense attorney defending the integrity of the Church poking holes in the evidence offered by the prosecutor of the case, i.e. the lawyer for the candidate. This required the creation of a legal-theological framework for handling medical knowledge. With the *Promotore*’s changing role came a new title—*Promotore Fidei*, or protector of the faith. While several documents from the first decades of the seventeenth century mention the new title, the job itself was not officially created until the reforms of 1634–1642. Key to the *Promotore Fidei*’s job was authoring opinions (*animadversiones*) about the candidate’s miracles. These documents, which outlined the *Promotore*’s doubts about the miracles, would circulate among the members of the *Congregatio* and the pope.

In describing his “doubts,” the *Promotore* used the best medical authority accessible to him in order to poke holes in the evidence collected about miracles by the candidate’s attorney, the *Postulatore*. The *Promotore*, that is, operated similarly to the devil’s advocate and it is likely that it is this institutional arrangement that popularized the expression “devil’s advocate”. With time, the expertise the *Promotore* accumulated in the process of debating cases helped the *Congregatio* produce new and more refined knowledge about miracles. For example, it was in this period that the notion took hold that a true miracle required that healing must occur instantly and completely (Antonelli 1962). The *Congregatio* incorporated this idea into an established classification of miracles by degrees that dated to Saint Augustine. This produced a new, more refined list of the characteristics of a true miracle; knowledge of and the ability to judge those characteristics belonged to the Church, not doctors. In this way, the *Congregatio* was able to create a legal framework to control the boundaries of the supernatural and to protect it from the potential further claims of medicine. The new institutional figure of the *Promotore* gave to the process of canonization its lasting form.

#### **4. The mobilizing power of miracles**

Immediately after the candidate's departure for Paradise (the *dies natalis*, in Church terminology), his acolytes were faced with the problem of how to ensure that their leader's message of religious reform could continue. In the absence of the deceased leader's personal charisma the leader's message would only continue to propagate if new activists were brought to the cause of the candidate's sanctity. The involvement of newcomers required that acolytes mobilize a community and this mobilization translated directly into creating the conditions for the occurrence of more miracles. However, since the candidate was not there in the flesh, the acolytes had to be careful to connect the occurrence of the supernatural event to the efforts of the candidate who, sitting close by God in Paradise, was interceding for the sick person. Acolytes had to exercise skill in building, and controlling, the networks that generated miracles on behalf of their candidate (Parigi 2012).

The days immediately after the candidate's death marked a special time in the community where the candidate and his acolytes had been active. It was during this period that the acolytes could potentially capitalize on their skills as activists, because opportunities for miracles multiplied in the days following the *dies natalis*. If the candidate were truly a saint, the general population expected to see *post mortem* miracles, which of course could only occur after the *dies natalis*. The days immediately after the candidate's death were also the time when it was easiest to create relics of the saint, which would be the main vehicle of those *post mortem* miracles. Relics would prove the involvement of the candidate in *post mortem* miracles, and the candidate's acolytes would hope to control them in order build their network and create more miracles.

The public's interest in relics came from the deeply held belief that relics had healing powers. For instance, when friar Rainiero, a candidate for sainthood who lived in central Italy, died on August 23, 1589, his acolyte and fellow friar Egidio da Amelia testified that a mob rushed to the body that lay inside the church and began quite literally to tear him apart—taking his hair and pieces of his clothes and punching holes into his body so that tissues could be soaked in his blood (ASV 3238; 3241; ACS *Storico*, 223). A similar scene happened when friar Pasqual Baylon, another candidate that lived in the same period as Rainiero, died in Villa Real, Spain (ASV 3393). Egidio's testimony exemplifies the fact that public fervor was directed mostly toward pieces of the candidate's body, the most common kind of relics. It would be a grave mistake to think that only the lower strata of society believed in their power. Philip II, the king of Spain from 1556 to 1598, amassed a collection of more than 100 relics in the palace-monastery Escorial (Parigi 2012).

But generally a mob did not tear the body of a candidate to pieces. The acolytes had direct access to relics, and so they were called upon to attend to the sick. Over time, a ritual developed. Upon arriving at the sick person's house, the acolyte would invite everyone present to pray, often instructing them to kneel and pray aloud together. During the prayer, the acolyte asked his candidate for grace for the sick person and at this point usually took out one of the candidate's relics, which he applied to the invalid. The other people present would still be kneeling in prayer. The acolyte would then leave the scene and the other people would notice a sudden improvement in the invalid's condition.

Immediately or within the span of a few days, the sick person would be perfectly healed, having become a “saved”.<sup>2</sup>

Successfully organizing public fervor into a community mobilization therefore meant maintaining strict control over the candidate's relics. Acolytes organized their control of the relics through the creation of the ritual healing. The ritual helped construct a predictable mental frame—based on popular beliefs about how nature and society worked—around (unpredictable) illnesses and thereby “produced” healings. As an expression of a strict set of guidelines, a ritual reduced uncertainty by removing chance from the equation and instead offered evidence that all forces obeyed God’s laws. A healing was a patterned process in time in which the behavior of each actor involved was symbolic (Turner 1967). Acolytes catalyzed *post mortem* miracles through their role as performers of a ritual, at whose center stood the candidate or a piece of his body.

Successful acolytes were those who knitted a community together using miracles. This was not a simple task and required considerable organizational skills. The proto-social movement that acolytes organized would then become the main force supporting the canonization efforts. Why would acolytes want to secure the *Congregatio*’s approval? The simple answer is that they faced competition from other religious activists, and such competition created havoc in many local communities. For instance, a priest in a small village near Milan was exasperated by all the attention attracted by a crying image of the Virgin Mary in a nearby parish. During the trial held by the Church authority on the case, he told the judges explicitly that his constituency was diverting prayers and money to the other parish, creating problems for him and his church (Sangalli 1993). Competition was particularly fierce where supernatural results were perceived to be produced by a candidate’s relics. For example, the internal organs of Filippo Neri, (a candidate to sainthood that lived in the sixteenth century) were secretly taken from Rome and brought to Naples, where they ended up in the hands of a noblewoman (*Il primo processo*). Similarly, the head of Bernardino of Santa Lucia, another candidate to sainthood that lived in the same period, was stolen from the Franciscan Church in Agrigento, Italy, where the whole body lay exposed (ASV 2209). A list of such anecdotal examples could go on at length.

Yet, for the candidates and their supporters receiving Rome’s seal of approval, local competition dissipated. A saint performs miracles as a matter of fact and, therefore, candidates that became saints attracted donations, and often pilgrims, for the local church that housed the body of a saint or some of his relics. Furthermore, Rome’s approval could mean the creation of a new religious order, with offices and often a complex bureaucracy, at the disposal of the candidate’s supporters. For local activists, the path to canonization was also the path to progressively reducing local competition. This convergence of interests between the goal of the *Congregatio* to create a more modern version of sainthood and the goal of local activists to reduce competition transformed *post mortem* miracles into social facts within the communities that harbored them.

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<sup>2</sup> This describes most *post mortem* healings. It is not, however, what Church doctrine required of genuine miracles. As previously mentioned, the Church mandated an instantaneous healing that in reality seldom occurred.

## Conclusion

In the previous section, I used the historical case of how the Catholic Church was able to transform sainthood to illustrate a key characteristic of miracles in the modern world, that of being social facts. If the case of the Catholic Church is thus useful for explaining the resilience of miracles to the challenges posed by scientific progress and medicine, it is also interesting in its own right as an example of how an institutional field can be renewed from the center and without conflict (Schneiberg and Lounsbury 2008). Following Pierre Bourdieu, I see a field as a constellation of objective relationships that structure the interactions between given historical actors (2012). The rules of modern sainthood that I documented above, brought to existence a new actor vis-à-vis the Church and the local authorities—the acolytes, i.e., organized group of believers mobilizing local communities in support of their (defunct) leader.

Fervent believers have always existed in the Christian religion, at least since the arrival of Saint Paul to the shore of Rome, but the organization of their fervor into something more similar to a social movement began with the new rules that the *Congregatio* developed in the aftermath of the Protestant Schism. Acolytes, that is, acquired a new structural role—and with that a system of relationships—that made them an essential part of the field of modern sainthood. A field perspective therefore can help explaining not just the endless proliferation of religious orders within Catholicism but also a key reason for why no other major schisms has occurred within the Church since the sixteenth century: the Church created a position for activists within its religious field capable of incorporating the interests of local actors. The legitimacy of modern sainthood has its roots in the matching between subjective beliefs and objective structure (Bourdieu 1971).

The new rules that the Church developed allowed for the expressions of different interests and generated a mutually beneficial exchange between central officials, local authorities and the acolytes. While this exchange emerged through lots of happenstance and conflict (Parigi 2012), it is interesting to note that it represents a case of institutional renovation from the core of a field. My analysis of modern sainthood highlights a unique path toward institutional change that occurred not only endogenously (Rao, Monin, and Durand 2003) but also from the impulse of the central actor operating in the field, i.e., the Church. Change occurred because the procedures that the Church created were able to integrate the interests of all different actors operating in the field.

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