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Two Lourdes Miracles and a Nobel Laureate: What Really Happened?

by

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The author is the winner of the 1987 Templeton Prize. The following is the annual Joseph M. Gambescia lecture given at the conclusion of the 19th World Congress of FLAMC and the 67th Annual Meeting of the Catholic Medical Association, September 13, 1998.

The Nobel laureate is, of course, Alexis Carrel (1873-1944). He received the Nobel Prize in 1912, for his work in vascular anastomosis. Four years ago the joint authors of an article in *Scientific American* credited Carrel with having initiated all major advances in modern surgery, including organ transplants.¹ In the 1920s he was a chief celebrity of New York City. Important visitors vied with one another to be admitted to his labs at Rockefeller University. They wanted to see a piece of tissue from the heart of a chicken embryo which Carrel kept alive from 1922 on in a special solution. It became a journalistic cliché to claim that Dr Carrel was on his way to discovering the secret of immortality.

Carrel had a brush with immortality in another way. This happened when he witnessed at close range a miraculous cure in Lourdes. In fact, he witnessed two such cures. The second took place in 1910, when he saw the sudden restoration of the sight of an 18-month-old boy who was born blind.

By far the more famous of the two cures is, of course, the first. It took place on May 28, 1902. It is known as the Marie Bailly case. Indeed it is so famous that it is not possible to write on Carrel without discussing it, however briefly.

The authors of that article in *Scientific American* devoted the better part of a column to the Marie Bailly case. Unfortunately, almost every statement

there is either false or only half true. It is always worth setting the record straight, but there is more at stake in having this case recounted as it actually happened.

A miraculous cure is much more than a purely medical matter, however interesting. A miraculous cure is far more than a purely medical challenge to the physician in charge. The manner in which Carrel faced up to that challenge is where the true interest of the Marie Bailly case lies.

But first back to that article. We read there that "Carrel was an intensely religious man." He was not. Then we are told that "in 1903 he accepted a priest's invitation to join him on a pilgrimage to Lourdes, anxious to gain first-hand knowledge of the alleged miracles and to check their authenticity through objective assessment." The second part of this statement is half true, the first part is false. The year was not 1903 but 1902. It was not a priest but a fellow doctor, a former classmate of his, who asked Carrel to take his place as the doctor in charge of a train carrying sick people to Lourdes.

Carrel was interested in Lourdes, but not because he wanted to check on the authenticity of miracles. At that time and for many years afterwards, he did not believe in miracles. He merely wanted to see at close range the fast rate of the healing of wounds reported from Lourdes.

In that article we are also told that "On the train he met and examined a girl who was close to death from tuberculous peritonitis, a common affliction of the time, and he suggested that the priest administer the Last Rites." There is no evidence whatsoever that such a suggestion was made by Carrel or that a priest was nearby. As to tuberculous peritonitis, it was not common, but it was certainly lethal at that time. And this was especially true of the kind of tuberculous peritonitis from which Marie Bailly suffered.

And now to the "unscientific" part of the story in *Scientific American* that relates to Lourdes proper: "At Lourdes Carrel went to the pools with the girl and her nurse. She was still alive, but in a coma." The fact is that when the train arrived in Lourdes the girl, Marie Bailly was half-conscious, but by the time she arrived in the hospital in Lourdes proper, she was fully conscious. Then the authors continue: "Submergence into the sacred pool was out of the question. They settled to whispering prayers and sprinkling holy water on her distended abdomen, then covered her with a blanket."

As far as this can be known, there was no sprinkling of holy water. Instead, at the insistence of Marie Bailly, a pitcherful of Lourdes water was poured three times on her abdomen, which was very distended indeed. "Half an hour later," our authors go on, "the girl's pulse began to slow, and she slowly regained consciousness. The portion of the blanket covering her abdomen had flattened. Pulling the blanket back, Carrel saw that her

abdomen was flat and felt that it was soft; the swelling and hard masses of the previous day were gone. A few months later the girl joined a religious order, where she lived to the age of 51."

Actually Marie Bailly died at the age of 58. There is no evidence that Carrel performed the diagnosis as described right then and there. During all that half hour Marie Bailly was fully conscious. Our authors continue: "Carrel was perplexed. The scientist in him refused to accept the possibility of a miracle, but an empirical and pragmatic conclusion also eluded him." Carrel was certainly perplexed. But it was totally false to claim that "Therefore he chose merely to describe the event to the Lyons medical community without trying to draw any conclusions that would explain it."

Actually, Carrel very much hoped that nobody in that community would learn about his having gone to Lourdes. He knew that the mere rumor of it would jeopardize his career in the Medical Faculty of the University of Lyons, where at that time he was assistant professor of anatomy.

What happened was that the sudden cure of Marie Bailly became widely known in Lyons, together with the fact that Carrel was present at her cure. A newspaper published an article, implying that Carrel refused to believe in the miracle. Carrel then was forced to publish a reply which pleased nobody. He blasted the believers for taking too readily something unusual for a miracle. He also took to task those, and they were largely the members of the medical community, who refused to look at facts whenever they appeared to be miraculous.

Carrel's Career Progression

Half a year later Carrel had to leave the Medical School. He first went to Paris, from there to Montreal, from there to the University of Chicago, and from there, via a lecture at Johns Hopkins, to the Rockefeller Institute. The Marie Bailly case became big news in France only from 1913 on, after Carrel, with the halo of the Nobel Prize around his head, returned to France for a visit.

Before taking a look at the case itself, a few words may be in order about Carrel. He came from a devout Catholic family and was educated by the Jesuits. By the time he entered the University, he no longer practiced his religion. He was a second-year medical student when the French President, Sadi Carnot, was assassinated by an anarchist in Lyons in 1894. The knife of the anarchist cut a thick artery. The President lingered on for two days and then died. At that time the suturing of a large blood vessel was still a hit-and-miss affair.

Carrel the young medical student decided to solve the problem. Six years later, already an MD and an assistant in the anatomy department, Carrel read a paper on May 12, 1902, before the Medical Society of Lyons. The paper made medical history as Carrel knew it would. Clearly, he was in that state of euphoria in which one is apt to throw caution to the wind. Two weeks later he found himself on the train that carried Marie Bailly to Lourdes.

What happened from that moment on during the next five or so days was written up by Carrel shortly afterwards, but the MS was published only in 1948, four years after his death in November 1944. In two more years, in 1950, it came out also in an English translation as *The Voyage to Lourdes*.

Partly because Charles Lindbergh wrote the introduction to it, the book failed to reveal its true significance. One reason was that Lindbergh, a sort of agnostic, skirted the issue of the miraculous and the supernatural. Another reason was that Carrel had written a novelistic account, rather than a medical document. Still he had been factual enough.

The most important factual details can be gathered only from the Archives of the Lourdes Medical Bureau. Those details form the backbone of the introduction I wrote to a new edition of *The Voyage to Lourdes*, published in 1994.²

Marie Bailly was born in 1878. Both her father, an optician, and her mother died of tuberculosis. Of her five siblings only one was free of that disease. She was twenty when she first showed symptoms of pulmonary tuberculosis. A year later she was diagnosed with tuberculous meningitis, from which she suddenly recovered when she used Lourdes water. In two more years, in 1901, she came down with tubercular peritonitis. Soon she could not retain food. In March 1902 doctors in Lyons refused to operate on her for fear that she would die on the operating table.

On May 25, 1902, she begged her friends to smuggle her onto a train that carried sick people to Lourdes. She had to be smuggled because, as a rule, such trains were forbidden to carry dying people. The train left Lyons at noon. At two o'clock next morning she was found dying. Carrel was called. He gave her morphine by the light of a kerosene lamp and stayed with her. Three hours later he diagnosed her case as tuberculous peritonitis and said half aloud that she would not arrive in Lourdes alive. The immediate diagnosis at that time largely depended on the procedure known as palpation.

In Lourdes Marie Bailly was examined by several doctors. On May 27 she insisted on being carried to the Grotto, although the doctors were afraid that she would die on the way there. Carrel himself took such a grim view of her condition that he vowed to become a monk if she reached the Grotto alive, a mere quarter of a mile from the hospital.

The rest is medical history. It is found in Dossier 54 of the Archives of the Medical Bureau of Lourdes. The Dossier contains the immediate depositions by three doctors, including Carrel, and Marie Bailly's own account, which she wrote in November and gave to Carrel, who then duly forwarded it to the Medical Bureau in Lourdes.

The highlights of Marie Bailly's own account are as follows: On arriving at the baths adjoining the Grotto, she was not allowed to be immersed. She asked that some water from the baths be poured on her abdomen. It caused her searing pain all over her body. Still she asked for the same again. This time she felt much less pain. When the water was poured on her abdomen the third time, it gave her a very pleasant sensation.

Meanwhile Carrel stood behind her, with a notepad in his hands. He marked the time, the pulse, the facial expression and other clinical details as he witnessed under his very eyes the following: The enormously distended and very hard abdomen began to flatten and within 30 minutes it had completely disappeared. No discharge whatsoever was observed from the body.

She was first carried to the Basilica, then to the Medical Bureau, where she was again examined by several doctors, among them Carrel. In the evening she sat up in her bed and had a dinner without vomiting. Early next morning she got up on her own and was already dressed when Carrel saw her again.

The Aftermath

Carrel could not help registering that she was cured. What will you do with your life now?—Carrel asked her. I will join the Sisters of Charity to spend my life caring for the sick,—was the answer. The next day she boarded the train on her own, and after a 24-hour trip on hard benches, she arrived refreshed in Lyons. There she took the streetcar and went to the family home, where she had to prove that she was Marie Bailly indeed, who only five days earlier had left Lyons in a critical condition.

Carrel continued to take a great interest in her. He asked a psychiatrist to test her every two weeks, which was done for four months. She was regularly tested for traces of tuberculosis. In late November she was declared to be in good health both physically and mentally. In December she entered the novitiate in Paris. Without ever having a relapse she lived the arduous life of a Sister of Charity until 1937, when she died at the age of 58.

This is not the place to recite the depositions from that famous Dossier 54. They are given in full in the introduction to my re-edition of *The Voyage*

to Lourdes. But all that material gives only half of the answer to the question: What really happened?

The other half is not so much about medicine as about faith, Catholic faith. An integral part of that faith is the view that there is a Church that teaches in the name of Jesus Christ and therefore has to teach infallibly.

Part of that infallible teaching is that there were, there are, and there forever will be miracles. This is so because the Church is the enduring presence of a supernatural reality, the reality of God's revelation to mankind. That revelation is God's sharing his very life with man and therefore it has to be a most vital matter. Miracles are the most tangible signs of that divine supernatural vitality.

Therein lay the rub for Carrel. If anyone did, he knew that what happened to Marie Bailly far exceeded all that medicine could dream of. Yet he could not bring himself to believe that anything more than merely natural forces had been at work in Marie Bailly's sudden recovery. He kept going back to Lourdes so that he might see more sudden cures, more very fast healing of wounds. He hoped that this way he would gain a glimpse of a purely natural force that works miraculous healing and does so through the power of prayer, which he took for a purely natural psychic force.

The proof of this is in his famous book, *Man the Unknown*, which first appeared in French in 1934 and then in English, and then in thirty other languages. There he speaks in precisely this vein of various Lourdes miracles.

By then thirty-two years had gone by since he had stood behind the stretcher of Marie Bailly. In all those years he had met priests again and again. He met theologians, or rather some theologians sought him out, hoping that Carrel would give them a "scientific" endorsement of miracles.

None of this brought him any closer to the faith of his childhood. Then Marie Bailly died in 1937. Undoubtedly she went straight to heaven as one of God's many unknown saints. As such she had a new job, which is to pull spiritual strings on behalf of others.

The next year, Carrel ran into a priest, the Rector of the Major Seminary in Rennes, with whom he quickly developed a rapport. The Rector told him to see a Trappist monk whose first name also happened to be Alexis. His full name was Alexis Presse. Among other important people, Charles de Gaulle was a great admirer of Father Alexis.

Father Alexis had by then spent a decade restoring and reopening ruined abbeys all over France. In 1939 he started working on a ruined abbey in Bouquen, that was only an hour's drive from the Carrel's summer residence in Brittany. As he was driving there with his wife, Carrel kept grumbling: Meeting with priests does one more harm than good.

They arrived. Out of the ruins came a monk, Father Alexis. He looked at Carrel, who began to feel something strange running through him. Four years later, in November 1944, Carrel was dying in Paris. Word was sent to Father Alexis in Brittany. He jumped on an American military train carrying bananas to the troops still fighting the Germans well beyond Paris. He arrived just in time. Carrel died with the sacraments.

In heaven Carrel could have a good conversation about the nature of the string which Marie Bailly was pulling for him, and about the nature of the force that wrought miraculous healing. The force had nothing to do with even the most advanced forms of string theories of particle physics. It was the force of the supernatural.

This is the gist of what really happened to a Nobel laureate who had the good fortune, the extraordinary good fortune, to witness not only one but two Lourdes miracles.

Church Certification of the Miraculous

Incidentally, neither of those miraculous healings was recognized by the Church. The second, the miraculous healing of the 18-month old baby boy, was probably never put forward for Church approval, a long and arduous process. The other, the Marie Bailly case, was repeatedly discussed at various levels by the Medical Bureau in Lourdes and finally in Paris at its highest or International Committee. The year was 1964. A decision was made against the miraculous nature of the cure. The reason?

Before I give the reason, let me recall what happened to me three years ago when I gave a talk on Carrel at Rockefeller University. After my talk, there followed a question-answer period. As usual some questions were not to the subject. These can be dealt with easily, with some presence of mind. But I gasped for words when a doctor—most of the audience were medical people—got up and shot at me the objection: Marie Bailly could have been pregnant.

I am still rolling over. I would not have fallen speechless had it been objected that the case was pseudosciosis, or psychologically induced mimicry of pregnant condition. But even that is an outlandish assumption. Could so many doctors have misdiagnosed the case? Were all those doctors wrong as they felt through palpation that heavy mucous in the abdomen? For Marie Bailly's peritonitis produced not liquid but heavy mucous. Palpation can easily establish the presence of that heavy stuff, especially when present in large quantities. Again, where did all that heavy mucous go in 30 minutes? Finally, Marie Bailly passed all the psychological tests with flying colors.

She was found to be a person with most sound judgment, a person who was not easily impressionable.

But it seems that because those earlier doctors had not considered the possibility of pseudosciosis, the International Committee decided against recommending Marie Bailly's cure for ecclesiastical approval.

One's first reaction to this may be that it is self-defeating to be so careful in excluding the possibility of an error. But this is the kind of caution which the Church has always demanded from doctors as they are consulted in evaluating cures that appear miraculous.

There is a story, a true story, that takes us back almost three hundred years, to Rome. A young English aristocrat arrives there and establishes contact with someone high in the Vatican. He wants to know what really happens when miracles are being approved by the Church in support of beatifications and canonizations. He is convinced that Rome carelessly admits any sudden cure as a miracle. In response, his contact in the Vatican gives him a thick dossier about a miraculous cure recently submitted to the Sacred Congregation of Rites.

The aristocrat goes home, studies the dossier and a few days later hands it back with the words: This most certainly was a miracle. The Vatican man, still Monsignore Prospero Lambertini and not yet Pope Benedict XIV, replies with a dry smile: the case has already been rejected.³

Catholic doctors can be sure of two things: One is that the Church will always be most careful about certifying miracles. She has to certify them because every process of beatification and canonization depends, among other things, for its favorable outcome on the Church's approval of at least one miraculous healing obtained through the intercession of the person to be beatified or canonized. That approval puts therefore the very infallibility of the Church on the line. The Church will not be overawed just because the doctor, who states that medical science cannot explain the healing, happens to be a Nobel-laureate. The Church will show extreme carefulness, because in doing so it simply cares for that supernatural vitality of hers of which miracles are the most palpable signs. One, however, needs not only a physical but also a spiritual sort of palpation, to detect those miracles.

References

1. V.E. Friedenwald, Jr. And C. Crossen, "Vascular Anastomosis," *Scientific*

American, Science and Medicine, Volume 1, Number 4, September/October 1994, pp. 68-77.

2. Royal Oak, MI: Real View Books, 1994.

3. The circumstantial evidence that Lambertini was in fact that Vatican official, is given in the chapter on miracles in my forthcoming book, *Means to Message: A Treatise on Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1999).