Did an incident that reportedly occurred in Turin, Italy, in 1453 (unrelated to the famous “shroud” later enshrined there) offer unimpeachable evidence of the supernatural? How else can one explain the wonderful story of “The Miracle of Turin” and other Eucharistic miracle claims?

Introduction

According to her book *Eucharistic Miracles*, Joan Carroll Cruz (1987, xi) states, “The greatest treasure in the Catholic Church is, without question, the Holy Eucharist—in which Jesus Christ humbly assumes the appearance of bread.” In Catholicism, the Eucharist is the sacrament in which the bread and wine consumed at Communion in remembrance of Jesus’ Last Supper are, by the miracle of “Transubstantiation,” changed into the actual body and blood of Christ, whence they are known as the Blessed Sacrament (Stravinskas 2002, 139, 302, 734). In other words, Catholics take literally Jesus’ statement regarding the bread: “Take, eat: this is my body,” and regarding the wine, “Drink ye all of it: for this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matt. 26: 26–28).

In contrast, Protestants understand the story (given in various other versions: Mark 14: 22–25; Luke 22: 19, 20; John 6: 48–58; and 1 Cor. 11: 23–26) as symbolic of Jesus’ dying for mankind. Indeed, it is an evolved form of the Jewish Passover ritual (Dummelow 1951, 710). Religious writers Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan (2006, 192–194) consider the story, together with the entire Easter narrative, as a parable (a simple story with a moral, whether factually true or not).

Eucharistic Miracles

Nevertheless, Transubstantiation is a dogma of Catholicism and, from at least the eighth century, numerous “Eucharistic miracles” that seem to verify its reality have been reported. In addition to a few dozen accounts in Cruz (1987), many more are related in *Legends of the Blessed Sacrament* (Shapcote 1877), and no fewer than 142 are featured in a Vatican international traveling exhibition titled the “Eucharistic Miracles of the World,” which I was able to view in Lackawanna, New York, on September 20, 2007. (The exhibition consists of display panels, otherwise available on a Web site [Eucharist 2007].)

Some Eucharistic miracle tales (Cruz 1987, 187–188, 191–192, 208–209) seem to be little more than derivations of biblical stories. For example, the account of a boy having eaten communion bread which keeps him from harm inside a fiery...
furnace evokes the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel (3: 10–30); the Holy Sacrament’s curing of a demoniac recalls Jesus’ similar feat in Mark (5: 1–16); and the multiplication of a few consecrated wafers—or Hosts—into enough to serve almost 600 people obviously recalls Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the multitude of 5,000 with only “five loaves, and two fishes” (Matthew 14:15–21). (Interestingly, the multiplying Hosts was accomplished by St. John Bosco, 1815–1888, who, in his youth, had been a magician [Cruz 1987, 208].)

Many of the Eucharistic miracle stories have a suspiciously similar plot, which suggests derivation. For example, at least three stories—from Lanciano, Italy, eighth century; Regensburg, Germany, 1257; and Bolsena, Italy, 1263—concern a priest who had doubts about the reality of transubstantiation. When he spoke the words of Consecration, the Host was suddenly transformed into flesh and/or the wine became visible blood (Cruz 1987, 3–7; 59–62).

As another example, several tales—from Alatri, Italy, 1228; Santarem, Portugal, early thirteenth century; and Offida, Italy, 1280—feature a woman who kept the Host in her mouth so she could make off with it and, as instructed by some occultist, transform it into a love potion. Subsequently, the Host was turned into flesh (Cruz 1987, 30–37; 70–83), and in one instance it also issued a mysterious light (Cruz 1987, 38–46).

At least two anti-Semitic tales—one from Paris, France, 1290; and one from Brussels, Belgium, 1370—involves a Jew or Jews illicitly acquiring a consecrated wafer and stabbing it with a knife, whereupon blood spurted forth in triumph over their mocking disbelief (Cruz 1987, 63–65; 112–122). In the latter tale there are even conflicting accounts of the Jews’ fate: one says they were burned at the stake, the other that they were banished from the area. Such variants—as folklorists call them—are a “defining characteristic of folklore,” since oral transmission naturally produces differing versions of the same tale (Brunvand 1978, 7).

**Turin ‘Miracle’**

The story of “the miracle of Turin” begins just before the middle of the year 1453 at a church in Exilles (then in the French Dauphiné), according to a parchment which I personally examined at the Turin city archives (Valle n.d.). Reportedly, some men (two soldiers, in popular legend [Cruz 1987, 145]) had come from a war between the French Savoys and the Piedmontese, pillaged a church, and then loaded a sackful of plunder—including a silver reliquary with a sacred Host—upon a mule. They made their way via Susa, Avigliana, and Rivoli to Turin, but after the beast passed through the city gate, it halted in front of the church of San Silvestro and fell to the ground. Out of the pack tumbled the Host—“the true body of Christ”—and it miraculously ascended into the air, shining “like the sun.” The bishop, Ludovico Romagno, was summoned along with the clergy, whereupon they discovered the reliquary on the ground and “the body of the Lord in the air with great Radiant splendor.” The bishop knelt and brought out a chalice into which the Host descended, thence being transported to “the doorway of the Cathedral.”

The parchment, signed only by a ducal official, nevertheless lists the names of several witnesses and notes that “after completion of the new cathedral” the Host is to rest therein and to be the subject of an annual octave (an eight-day event) in commemoration of the “miracle” (Valle n.d.).

Unfortunately, there are problems with the document, although it is certainly consistent with a parchment of the fifteenth or early sixteenth century. Significantly, it is undated and merely indicates it is not original, including the apparent lack of a true original—all of which inspires skepticism—the copies themselves nevertheless indicate there was, at least at some point, a narrative and a list of names of alleged eyewitnesses to some occurrence. But what was it?

**An Explanation**

The texts suggest that it may well have been some celestial event, the supposed Host being described as “in the air with great Radiant splendor” and “shining like the sun” (see figure 1). The accounts say the event occurred “at hour 20” (Valle n.d.; *Il Miracolo* 1997, 55), but the printed text has an editorial insertion clarifying that it was “between the hours 16 and 17”—i.e., between four and five o’clock in the afternoon (*Il Miracolo* 1997, 55). Therefore the duration was apparently less than one hour. On the other hand, the event obviously lasted long enough for residents to fetch the Bishop and clergy, so it was too long for, say, a meteor.

That it was described as “shining like the sun” suggests to me it could have been a phenomenon known as a “mock sun” (or “sun dog”), that is, a parhelion. Parhelia can appear as very bright patches in the sky and are among the various ice-crystal refraction effects that include halos, arcs, solar pillars, and other atmospheric phenomena (Greenler 1999, 23–64).
I posed the question of the mystery occurrence to Major James McGaha (USAF, retired), who is not only an experienced pilot and noted UFO expert but also director of the Grasslands Observatory in Tucson, Arizona. He conducted a computer search of the sky for the place, date, and time of the occurrence. He found nothing of an astronomical nature that might have caused such an effect. (For example, there was no conjunction of planets, and the moon—a new moon—would have been invisible [McGaha 2008].)

He agreed with my suggestion that a parhelion-type phenomenon could be consistent with the “miracle of Turin.” That is especially likely in light of the celestial object being reported as “over the surrounding houses” and “shining, as a second sun” (“Eucharistic” 2007)—an apt description if the phenomenon were indeed a mock sun. A parhelion could well last for the duration reported and would be most likely to appear when the sun was relatively low in the sky, observed McGaha (2008).

He considered one other possibility given that there was a question of the date. If the event did occur on June 6 but three years later, in 1456, the celestial object could convincingly be identified as Halley’s Comet.

In any event, what might have happened is that the witnessing of a genuine, sensational occurrence was seen as miraculous—a “sign”—by superstitious folk and clergy, the latter interpreting it as the radiant body of Christ in the sky. This could have prompted the Bishop to hold aloft not only a chalice but also a Host, and as the phenomenon soon ceased to be visible, the belief was that the celestial light was absorbed by the wafer. According to this scenario, it was this “miraculous” Host that was displayed. (It was thus kept until 1584 when the Holy see ordered it consumed so as “not to oblige God to maintain an eternal miracle by keeping the Host always perfect and pure” (qtd. in Cruz 1987, 147).

This celestial incident, witnessed by various persons, might then have been grafted by the process of folklore onto a somewhat similar tale, like one set in Paris in 1274 (Cruz 1987, 63). Or it could have been conflated—in the manner of the Roswell UFO crash myth (McAndrew 1997)—and enhanced by faulty perceptions and memories, together with the impulse to create a pious legend.

Such religious legends are often called belief tales because they are intentionally grafted to “give credence to folk beliefs” (Brunvand 1978, 106–108). Indeed, Cruz (1987, 145) states revealingly that “At the time of the miracle of Turin, the faith of the people had grown feeble, and it is thought God wanted to give a sign to arouse them from their apathy.” The miracle, she states, “effected the desired change.”

Arguing in favor of this hypothesis, I think, is the allegorical nature of the Turin narrative—a dramatic tale in its own right, and an even more profoundly Christian one if seen as allegory of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Consider, for example that similar to Jesus’ emerging from exile (Matthew 2:13–15), in the Turin-miracle narrative the Corpus Domini (“Body of Christ”) is placed on a mule and led from Exilles into Turin (which is to become known as “the city of the Holy sacrament” [Il Miracolo 1997, 32]). Jesus’ Last Supper (Matthew 26:17–30) is evoked by the wafer of communion bread, which has been spilled.

This (tradition says) happened between two robbers, like Jesus’ crucifixion, which occurred between two thieves (Matthew 27:38). And just as Jesus bodily arose from his tomb (Matthew 28:1–7) and was “carried up into heaven” (Mark 24:51), the “Body of Christ” emerged from its reliquary (a container for holy remains) and ascended into the sky, radiant like the sun, as Jesus came to be (says John 9:5) “the light of the world.” The subsequent descent of the Holy Host into the chalice obviously symbolizes the gift of the Eucharist to Christianity—a theme common to all of the Eucharistic “miracle” tales.

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Notes

1. For an updated discussion of the Shroud of Turin see Nickell 2007, 122–179.
2. Another version of Luke is in Codex Bezae (Price 2003, 298).
3. In the first instance the man is not stated to be a Jew, but it is implied by his being a “non-Christian” and stereotypically, a “pawn-broker,” and is further indicated by the similar tale specifically involving Jews assembled in a synagogue.
4. Examination with a 10x Bausch & Lomb illuminated coddington magnifier reveals that the parchment’s text was penned with a quill in an ink that has the appearance of an age-browned (oxidized) iron-gallotannate variety and is in an italic hand known as cancellariae—i.e., “chancery” script—because it was widely disseminated by scribes of the Papal Chancery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Whalley 1984, 22, 41, 181; Nickell 2003, 123, 131, 140).

References


Valle, Thomaso. N.d. Parchment account of 1453 “miracle” of Turin in the Historical Archives of the City of Turin (part of archive catalog no. 936, in loose papers collection); personally examined October 14, 2004.