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The Rationalization of Miracles

During the Counter-Reformation in southern Europe, Catholic Church officials developed rules to legitimize miracles performed by candidates to sainthood. *The Rationalization of Miracles* uncovers a tacit understanding between central religious officials and local religious activists. Each group had a vested interest in declaring miracles: Catholic Church leaders sought legitimacy in the wake of the crisis of faith created by the Protestant Schism, and religious acolytes needed Church approval to secure a flow of resources to their movements. The Church's new procedure of deeming miracles "true" when there were witnesses of different statuses and the acts occurred in the presence of a candidate's acolyte served the needs of both parties. And by developing rules and procedures for evaluating miracles, the Church rationalized the magic at the root of the miracles, thereby propelling the institution out of a period of institutional, political, and social uncertainty and forming the basis of modern sainthood.

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A Giada ed Elsie, perchè la magia sia sempre una parte delle vostre vite.

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Terms: Latin and Other Foreign Languages

Bolla (Latin): Papal bull issued proclaiming the beatification or canonization of a candidate to sainthood.

Caelestis Hierusalem cives (Latin): Decree reforming the procedures for canonization, issued by Urban VIII in 1634.

Caput mundi (Latin; "head of the world"): Latin expression to indicate Rome.

Coda mundi (Latin; the "tail of the world"): The expression that the poet and play writer Piero l'Aretino used to mock the Catholic Church and Rome.

Credo (Latin): Apostles' Creed.

Dies Natalis (Latin; "the day of birth"): In the Church's terminology, this indicates the day the candidate passed away and transitioned to Paradise.

Fama sanctitatis (Latin "fame of sanctity"): One of the official requirements for reaching canonization.

Per Viam Cultum (Latin): The procedures through which established religious cults were judged by the Congregatio.

Per Viam Non Cultum (Latin): In contrast to the procedural path previously described, this path was reserved for recently deceased candidates who did not have an established religious cult.

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Processus Super Cultum Non Adhibito (Latin): A type of trialto to verify that the candidate to sainthood had not been worshipped during the fifty years following his death. It became the first trial in the canonization proceedings after the reforms of 1642.

Risorgimento (Italian; "The Resurgence"): Refers to a period of Italian history that began with the Council of Vienna (1815) and culminated with the proclamation of Rome as the capital of the nascent Italian Kingdom in 1871.

Siglo de Oro (Spanish; "Golden Century"): Refers to a period of Spanish history that goes from the Reconquista (1492) to the Treaty of the Pyrenees (1659). It marked the military, political, and cultural ascendance of Spain over Europe.

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Preface

This book would not exist without the encouragement, support, and help of many people. I started thinking about a project for my dissertation during the summer of 2003 while visiting my family in Florence. My advisor, Peter Bearman, was spending his sabbatical year in Genoa, and so I took the opportunity to visit him. I spent a day with Peter talking about a paper we were writing together and about potential future projects. On my way back to Florence, Peter gave me a ride to the train station on his Vespa. Few know it, but the unfortunate truth is that Peter is a terrible Vespa driver. He had no idea how to handle the unruly Italian traffic, and after a car passed us on the right side because we were proceeding too slowly in the middle of a lane, I was certain we were going to get hurt. Indifferent to the peril around us, Peter kept talking about projects, and I kept nervously agreeing. We made it to the station safely, but I worried about Peter driving back. I comforted myself with the thought that he would simply perform the same trick as before, of tackling potential problems directly and without much hesitation. For getting me safely to the station that night and for teaching me more than how to be a sociologist, thank you Peter.

In the days following the memorable Vespa ride I kept thinking about the only sentence that I had been able to understand from Peter. He said (or I understood): "Did you know that ancient Rome had more than one million inhabitants?" What was he talking about? In the three hours it took me to get back to Florence I thought about several possible answers. Finally, I settled on the following – Peter was suggesting that if I wanted to go back to Italy to write my dissertation I should focus on Rome, possibly ancient Rome. So I did.

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I quickly discovered, however, that doing historical sociological work on ancient Rome would require a deep knowledge of several ancient languages and the ability to travel to archives scattered throughout the Mediterranean basin. Although tempted, I opted to maintain the focus on the Eternal City but to study a more contemporary period and one closer to my interests in formal rules and organizations. In my search for potential topics, I stumbled on a directory that listed in great detail all of the holdings of the archives in the Vatican. This became the basis for building my project about the special commission that, since the end of the sixteenth century, has investigated the miracles and the deeds of candidates to sainthood. The immense archive of the commission resides in large part in the Vatican.

Columbia University awarded me a scholarship to go back to Rome, and so my family and I packed everything and left New York in August 2004. The three years that followed would represent a period of great joy, intellectual growth, and personal challenge for me. My second daughter was born in Rome; the archives of the Vatican, and in particular the Apostolic Library, proved to be truly incredible places for conducting research; and my mother's mental health significantly deteriorated. All of these ups and downs would have been simply too much to handle if it weren't for my wife, Amy, who stood patiently by my side. Simply said, without her the project behind this book would have never been completed. To her, my eternal gratitude and deep love.

In the years since we moved back to New York and then to California, many people have commented on pieces of the manuscript. Dan Lainer-Vos gave me precious suggestions on how to handle theoretical aspects of my argument connected with Max Weber's theory of rationalization; Mark Granovetter helped me with framing the argument in the organizational literature; Harrison White was a constant source of inspiration and encouragement; Roberto Rusconi guided me through a dense historical literature on modern sainthood; and John-Paul Ferguson helped me to bring the historical details in line with the analytical argument of the book. Kathy Gilsinian read multiple drafts of what was then my dissertation. The editorial comments of Esther Cervantes were extremely illuminating and always on point. My colleagues at Stanford, Tomás Jiménez, Monica McDermott, and Rebecca Sandefur, read an earlier draft of the manuscript and provided great comments. I also would like to thank my editor at Cambridge, Robert Dreesen, for believing in this project. Other people, too many to mention, also contributed indirectly to the

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manuscript by engaging in conversations with me about a most unusual topic for scholars of organizations – the production of miracles. To all of them goes my gratitude. This book was completed while I was in residence at the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at Stanford University. I would like to thank Karen Cook and Chris Thomsen for creating an environment conducive to research.

This book is dedicated to my two daughters. Their lives, like those of many young girls, are full of magical things. At the moment, therefore, they have no use for a book about the importance of magic. My hope is that once they are older they will find this book useful for understanding the importance of maintaining some magic in their lives.

Palo Alto, August 19, 2011

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What Is This Book About?

It may not be obvious, but miracles are an integral part of modern life. Believers usually refer to miracles when describing events that defy scientific explanation. In the most popular sense, a miracle is a statement about the boundaries of science – and of medicine in particular, given that the majority of miracles, at least in the Christian world, are healings. Beyond this broad meaning, a miracle also has a more specific meaning for Catholics – it is one of the proofs required to achieve sainthood. This book focuses on this latter meaning and contends that if the modern Christian world still has people with supernatural powers capable of performing miracles, it is because of the reforms to sainthood that the Catholic Church introduced during the seventeenth century. These reforms fixed the characteristics of miracles and, consequently, of the people capable of performing them – the candidates to sainthood.

Despite the centuries that separate us from the religious world of the seventeenth century, some of the enduring characteristics of a miracle that were established back then can be detected in the story of a miraculous event that occurred in Ferndale, Washington, a town forty miles south of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, in the winter months of 2006.[1]

During the last minute of a basketball game, a young boy, Jake Finkbonner, was pushed from the back and hit the basketball hoop with his lips. This seemingly innocuous injury opened up a chain of events that would bring Jake to the brink of death. The next morning Jake woke with his face completely swollen and was rushed to the hospital by his parents, Donny and Elsa. There, the doctors diagnosed that Jake had contracted

[1] A report on the event was aired on National Public Radio on April 22, 2011.

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the flesh-eating bacteria called strep-A. Like something in a horror movie, the bacteria had begun eating Jake's face – and it was spreading fast. As Dr. Richard Hopper later reported to National Public Radio, "It's almost as if you could watch it moving in front of your eyes. The redness and the swelling – we would mark it, and within the hour it would have spread another half-inch." Because of the speed with which the disease spread, the doctors could not stop it. They told Donny and Elsa that their son would probably die.

A priest, Reverend Tim Sauer, was called to give the boy the last rites. Noticing that the boy was half Lummi Indian, Sauer also invited his parishioners at St. Joseph's Catholic Church to pray for the intercession of Kateri Tekakwitha, a Mohawk who converted to Catholicism three hundred fifty years ago. Kateri also had scars on her face, caused in her case by smallpox. John Paul II beatified her in 1980. Since then she has been on the list of candidates for sainthood; to reach that achievement, she would need to perform another miracle.

Soon, many other people in the community began praying for Jake and, in a true display of the positive effects of living in a connected world, people in Denver, London, and Israel also began to pray for him. In the midst of all of this, a representative of the Society of Blessed Kateri visited Jake at the hospital and gave Elsa a pendant with the Blessed Kateri's image on it. Elsa placed it on Jake's pillow. Elsa would later recall that it was at that time that the disease stopped progressing. The next morning, as his doctors prepared Jake for surgery, they were startled by the discovery. It was a miracle, in the popular sense of the word. The boy was saved. The officials of the Vatican are currently investigating whether the inexplicable sequence of events can be considered a true miracle according to the Catholic Church.

The doctors' impotence in the face of an unstoppable disease makes its retreat a miracle in the broad sense that Catholics share with other Christians. A miracle is something that science cannot explain. What gives the event the potential to be a Catholic miracle is the belief that it occurred through the intercession of the Blessed Kateri because of her position in Heaven close to God. A miracle is the proof of someone's sanctity, as ultimately established by the pope.

To begin unpacking how this latter and narrower meaning of a miracle came to be, we need to focus on a small detail in the preceding narrative – the pendant and the person who brought it to the scene. Not only did the miracle that saved Jake occur only after an object with the image

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of Kateri was placed on him, but it is also important that the person who provided the image was a representative of Kateri's Blessed Society. As I will show in the book, representatives of the candidate are the crucial actors in modern sainthood. The rules that govern their behavior today developed during the seventeenth century through a tense cooperation between the central officials of the Church, represented by a special commission created to investigate candidates for sainthood and their deeds, and local religious activists – such as the representative of Kateri in the story of Jake's miracle – grouped around a given candidate.

This book is not at all concerned with establishing whether miracles are true or false. Instead, the aim of my analysis is to understand the social and cultural process that created the institutional field of modern sainthood. This process has been studied mainly by historians of the Church, scholars of religion, and people interested in early modernity. My analysis takes an unusual perspective in that it brings an organizational approach to this historical material. The story told in this book is therefore one of organizational adaptation and the transformation of an organizational environment, rather than one of history or religion. I use historical details about religious beliefs during the seventeenth century to build an analytical framework that is firmly part of organizational theory.

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