

Wayne Glausser

Of Saints, Miracles, and Embarrassment in an American Plague Year

If the idea of saints in America has always seemed a little fishy—our Puritan birthright, probably, along with a certain pragmatism embedded in the national character—you'd think a rotten year like this one would be a great time for saints to shine: nothing like a plague to bring out the novenas! But it hasn't turned out that way. In fact, the subject has become something of an embarrassment.

Consider the following cases of saints or near-saints in America, from all three rungs of the canonization ladder.

Venerable: Fulton J. Sheen

In 2012, Pope Benedict declared that Sheen, well known in the last century for his use of radio and television to spread the faith, had lived a life of "heroic virtue." The Pope's declaration gave him the status of Venerable, the first stage along the path to canonization.

The first embarrassment surrounding Sheen's path to sainthood involved his mortal remains. The diocese of New York City had tucked them beneath an altar in St. Patrick's Cathedral, but his relatives wanted them back home in Peoria. After years of litigation, a court finally ruled in favor of the family. The family's motives were something less than heartwarming: they meant to use the future saint's relics to boost Peoria's economy.

Pope Francis no doubt held his nose at all of this, but in July of 2019, he certified a miracle for Sheen. Like almost all miracles submitted for sainthood cases, this was a healing—a baby apparently stillborn in 2010 who revived after the mother prayed to Sheen. In the sainthood process, it takes one official miracle to advance someone from Venerable to Blessed. The Vatican scheduled Sheen's beatification for December 21. But shortly before the ceremony was to take place, the Vatican announced an indefinite postponement. The problem had to do with Sheen's service as Bishop of Rochester from 1966 to 1969. Rochester had questions about his role in the assignment of priests during a time when some of its priests were becoming known as sexual abusers. Earlier in 2019, Rochester had become the first diocese to file for bankruptcy protection as it confronted a number of lawsuits from men who claimed they had been abused by priests. Some of these abuse cases dated back to the 1960s. Evidently the church wanted to avoid the spectacle of a beatification becoming entangled with lawsuits over sexual abuse.

The embarrassment of the Sheen case is palpable. The church had certified that he performed a miracle. That means he's in heaven, interceding with God on behalf of a mother and her baby in Illinois. But now they're not so sure he was "heroically virtuous" in the way they first thought. It all seems ass-backwards. If you really believe in the miracle you have confirmed, nothing else should matter: he's in heaven, he's a saint. Now, if you don't trust the miracle, that's a different story—but then the supernatural credential for beatification and canonization becomes vulnerable to skeptical debunking.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

Saint: Junipero Serra

Pope Francis canonized Serra in 2015, over two centuries after his death. In all this time he had just one miracle to his credit: the 1960 healing of a nun in St. Louis, whose lupus cleared up after she prayed to him. When Francis used his papal prerogative to waive the requirement for a second miracle, Serra became the first saint canonized with a mass on American soil.

Serra's case was controversial because many historians sharply criticize his involvement in the mission activities of early California. Some condemn him as an active participant in a system of colonial enslavement and torture; others concede that he was complicit, but believe he did things to ameliorate conditions for the Native Americans he was intent on converting. Hostile reaction quickly followed Serra's elevation to sainthood. Most dramatically, someone decapitated a statue of him in Monterey, California only a week after the canonization mass in Washington, D. C.

The church's embarrassment over Serra increased substantially in 2020. Amid widespread controversies over statues of confederate generals and slave owners, protestors defaced and toppled Serra statues all over California. One of the most newsworthy came in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, where a 30-foot statue was brought down, splashed with red paint, and sprayed with protest messages. The caretakers of the San Gabriel Mission in Southern California took the precaution of removing their statue of Serra from the front entrance, but worse consequences lay ahead. With no statue available as a target, the whole mission became vulnerable: on July 11, a suspicious fire destroyed much of the church.

Even if carried out by non-Catholics, such angry vandalizing directed at a saint brings embarrassment. Catholic ideas of virtue ought to overlap significantly with those held by people outside the faith. A person designated heroically virtuous by Catholics should at least be viewed respectfully by non-Catholics. If, on the other hand, a reasonable case can be made for a saint's moral culpability, then confidence in canonization starts to erode. Even if a nun's lupus did seem to disappear back in 1960 in a way that three doctors could not account for with the medical reasoning available then.

Blessed: James Miller

James Miller does *not* have a miracle, but he was beatified in December 2019 because the church officially designated him a martyr. In the saint-making process, martyrdom counts the same as a first miracle. Miller, who grew up in Wisconsin, joined the Christian Brothers and taught both in Minnesota and in Central America—first in Nicaragua, then in Guatemala. He was murdered in 1982 while teaching at a school for indigenous Guatemalans. The apparent motive had to do with the Christian Brothers' efforts to protect their students from conscription into a dirty civil war.

From everything I have read about him, Brother James Miller sounds like a great guy—and a real hero. He could have stayed in Minnesota teaching high school in a job he liked that was obviously much safer for him; but he asked to be sent back to Central America, where he felt his service was more urgently needed. When three masked gunmen shot him in the back in Guatemala, he was on a ladder repairing some damage to a

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

school wall. He had just returned from accompanying students on a picnic. The Christian Brothers have produced a touching icon of him: dressed in overalls, he holds a lamb in his arms, with this caption to the side: "Apostle to the Suffering Poor of Central America."

The contrast between the icon of James Miller and the vandalized statues of Junipero Serra could not be more striking. And yet Serra is forever enrolled as a saint, and Miller needs a miracle. What if that miracle never comes?



At the root of this embarrassing situation is the church's attachment to the miracle requirement. Pope Francis harbors a curious attachment to old-fashioned elements of devotion along with his more publicized progressive gestures—and he *loves* miracles. He recently prayed for a COVID-19 miracle at a church with a fabled crucifix from plague times. Francis has so far resisted the idea of eliminating them from the saint-making process. He certainly knew that in 1983 the church gave serious consideration to dropping the miracle requirement. A member of his Jesuit order, Father Peter Gumpel, led the argument for change. For Gumpel and others inclined to eliminate miracles, advances in medical science had made it much more difficult to "prove" that a miraculous healing had occurred; and there were doubts about conclusions reached by some of the medical panels appointed by the Vatican to investigate claims of miraculous events.

Two separate panels must evaluate each miracle claim. One has a theological focus: did the healed person pray to and only to the saint candidate before the healing took place? The other panel deals with the medical issues. The case must satisfy three conditions for a miracle: the healing must be sudden, permanent, and have no scientific explanation. For the medical panel, the Vatican appoints five doctors, who go through all available evidence—scans, labs, medical reports, and so on—before they make a decision. Interestingly, only three of the five doctors must vote "miracle" for a case to pass muster. You'd think it would take a unanimous vote. Or would that make it too difficult to have *any* case clear the final hurdle of "no scientific explanation?"

Perhaps another pope will take a more modern approach. There's a nice passage from Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics" that helps to elucidate what seems to be a philosophical snag built into the church's current canonization process. "It is absurd to say, 'Science has proved that there are no miracles,'" Wittgenstein tells his Cambridge audience. To illustrate, he offers the following thought experiment. Suppose someone among you "suddenly grew a lion's head and began to roar"—a wondrous, inexplicable event. "Now, whenever we should have recovered from our surprise, what I would suggest would be to fetch a doctor and have the case scientifically investigated and if it were not for hurting him, I would have him vivisected. And where would the miracle have got to?" He goes on to draw the conclusion, *not* that science has eliminated miracles, but that scientific facts and miracles are products of very different intentional acts of human consciousness: "For it is clear that the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle."

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

Wittgenstein's remark helps to clarify the church's difficulties with the process of vetting miracles. The Vatican tries to prove the existence of miracles by using scientific methods—CT scans, MRIs, blood tests, and all manner of medical reasoning. For Wittgenstein, this is a muddled enterprise, wrongheaded at its philosophical core. You can believe in miracles, but not if you also want to subject them to the strictures of scientific reasoning. More dedicated secularists than Wittgenstein simply wish to dispense with the idea of miracles altogether. They like to point to the problem of "God of the gaps." In earlier centuries, miracles were fairly easy to "prove" because there were so many gaps in our knowledge of nature; over time, those gaps filled in with science. Eventually, it may be next to impossible to find even three of five doctors to vote yes for a miracle. If the church wants to keep speaking about miracles, they may need to redefine what a miracle means.



I have waited until now to confess that this essay has been secretly inspired by personal connections to these three American saints and near-saints.

The story of Brother James Miller stirred memories of my first really good teacher—probably the only one I ever took as a model for my own teaching. When I first saw photos of Brother James, I thought he looked like Brother Raphael, my old teacher, also a Christian Brother. Brother Raphael taught me religion and then geometry in my first two years of high school. As I reflect on it now, part of his appeal was that he combined two essential features of my parents: my father's STEM intelligence (Brother Raphael would soon leave high school teaching to get a Ph.D. in mathematics at the University of Toronto), and my mother's soulful commitment to faith.

I emailed Brother Raphael as I was starting to ruminate on this topic. Now Professor Emeritus at St. Mary's College in California, he had reached out to me a while ago to see how I was doing. (He had read of my cancer diagnosis in my recent book.) I told him I was thinking about Brother James Miller and miracles and such and would be glad to hear his thoughts. As I anticipated, his answer came with a mathematician's preferred economy of expression. "You raise an interesting question," he began, then simply: "Am kinda convinced that 'miracles' of healing occur. Real skeptics have been impressed at Lourdes, e. g." He believes, but he hedges. He's only "kinda" convinced, he uses scare quotes around "miracles," and he shifts responsibility for belief in Lourdes miracles to other people. Still, he takes the side of miracles, which surprised me—and upset the symmetry of my essay. Brother James has no miracle; and I expected Brother Raphael, his alter-ego for my purposes, to disavow or at least to entertain substantial doubts about miracles. It would have made a good way to end this essay. It's what I had planned. But I guess I had oversimplified him: he's as much my mother as my father.

And speaking of my mother and father, Fulton J. Sheen was the priest my mother counted on to convert my father to the Catholic faith after their marriage in 1947. In order to marry my mother, my unbelieving father had to sign a twofold agreement: 1) that all children would be raised Catholic,

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

and 2) that he would begin the process of educating himself in the faith and converting. In my mother's mind, Sheen was key to her husband's religious education. The Catholic radio star was known for his intellectual acuity and his ability to converse with secular philosophers and scientists. My father was supposed to listen each week to *The Catholic Hour*, Sheen's long-running show in which he discussed matters of theology, doctrine, and public affairs. My father listened for a few weeks, and went to the catechism classes prescribed for him.

Then he quit listening. And stopped going to class. When my mother hesitantly asked him about it one evening, he said he was sorry, but "those people believe in ridiculous things." The subject never came up again.

When I was 14, I quit going to church with my mother and the other kids, and joined my father's dismissal of her faith. She never asked why or tried to change my mind.

More about Sheen. One of my best friends was traumatized by the sexual abuse of a Jesuit priest at his Rochester high school—the diocese, that is to say, where only a few years earlier Bishop Sheen had supervised clerical appointments. My friend wrote about the abuse in *Esquire* decades later, but writing the article did not heal him in the way he might have hoped. He has suffered grave psychological damage from what happened back then. I'll probably never know whether Sheen had any knowledge of the priest who ended up abusing my friend, or played any role in retaining that man in a position where he could do such evil. But if Sheen did indeed play some role, the church should forget about his one supposed miracle and drop the subject of canonization. I should add that Brother Raphael volunteered another succinct opinion in his email to me: "Never did like Sheen." My mother had a very hard time accepting the news of priestly misconduct as it was coming out during the last years of her life, and she died long before the questions from Rochester about Sheen. She would have been dismayed if one of her heroes had played a role in what happened to my friend. But no such disappointments ever shook her faith; and she once suggested to me (against orthodox Catholic belief) that everyone ends up in heaven.

For my official launching as a Catholic, my mother had me baptized at one of Junipero Serra's favorite missions, the one in San Gabriel. This was only about a half hour drive from our home parish. Every few months we would visit the mission to appreciate the historic charm. There were plaques about Father Serra and the Indians and so on that I was supposed to read, but if I ever did, I have forgotten them. All I remember clearly from our visits is feeding the pigeons. My mother would buy each of us a little packet of seeds. It was on my very last visit, with my family and a college girlfriend, that I knew to despise the treatment of Native Americans and to look for signs of trouble in the supposedly charming holiness.

I admit to feeling a nostalgic pang when I learned of the fire that gutted the mission. About the pigeons, partly, but mainly about my mother, and imagining her holding me up for a baptismal sprinkling all those years ago. And suddenly a new ending for this essay has risen up to surprise me—unbidden, as if coming from elsewhere. Not a miracle—not in the old-fashioned sense, anyway—although it's definitely an embarrassment

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

for my secular soul. I want to tell my mother I'm sorry about our baptism in the old mission: it didn't seem to take, like Sheen's Catholic lessons for Dad: and just for a moment now, in these difficult times for me personally and for the world, I find myself kinda wishing it had.