

Review of the doctoral thesis of Rev. Fr. Casmir Ikechukwu Anozie entitled
CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC THEOLOGY OF MIRACLE,
Lublin 2018, pp. 223
written in the Institute of Fundamental Theology
of the Faculty of Theology of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
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In the past, miracle played an important role in the proclamation and the deepening of the faith. It was in miracle that theology, and especially apologetics, saw a fundamental argument for the divine nature of Christ's mission and for the very divinity of Jesus of Nazareth. As it had been through the ages, it remains a controversial issue in contemporary theology. The complexity, evolvement and ways in which the concept of miracle was understood over the centuries constituted the subject matter of comprehensive studies by Professor Fr. Marian Rusecki, the founder of the Institute of Fundamental Theology at the Catholic University of Lublin. Research on the contemporary Catholic theology of miracle undertaken by Fr. Casmir Ikechukwu Anozie is a welcome initiative, all the more so since, on the one hand, the issue fuels many a hot debate and is the subject of many a misconception in the public sphere (a fact evidenced by the sheer number of websites dedicated to paranormal phenomena and 'miraculous' healings), and on the other hand it remains a key theological issue, whose relevance the PhD student duly points out in the *Introduction*:

"Christ was against people seeking a miraculous sign as a condition necessary to believe in God. Theologians must clarify the meaning and purpose of miraculous occurrences, and correctly channel people's spiritual desire. The research hopes to contribute toward making this call a reality. It is a serious challenge for the Church and her theologians to guide and present authentic understanding of the concept 'miracles' in the contemporary period. Indeed, it is not an attempt to suppress the manifestation of the supernatural by the Church hierarchies and her theologians instead they guard against confusion and abuse by some unscrupulous people" (p. 14).

Fr. Anozie's dissertation falls within the framework of research on the theology and credibility of miracle in the field of fundamental theology. The PhD student demonstrates comprehensive understanding of key aspects that form the basis of the work: the precepts of the contemporary concept of miracle, developments in its definition and the means of its recognition. Considering the complexity of the topic, with its denominational idiosyncrasies, Fr. Anozie's brave decision to carry out research in this field is commendable. The very amount of effort invested in researching this difficult and multi-layered problem merits recognition, especially in light of few theological monographs devoted

to such aspects of miracle as possibility, credibility and recognition (with notable exceptions in Polish theology authored by M. Rusecki and R. Paciorkowski, or A. Świeżański in the field of philosophy).

1. Evaluation of the structure and assumptions of the work

The structure of the dissertation is clear and logical, and hence does not give rise to any objections. The author not only includes opinions on the contemporary Catholic theology of miracle, but also attempts to formulate the main concept around the aspects of credibility, recognition and function of miracle. The amount of work the PhD student was required to do in order to conduct analysis of many different statements made by theologians on the issue of miracle, and its connection to the question of credibility in fundamental theology, should not be overlooked.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter one presents the theological understanding of miracles. Chapter two focuses on the post-biblical miracles and their classifications. In chapter three, the author discusses warrants for the possibility and credibility of miracles in the midst of so many criticisms levelled against them. Finally, chapter four concentrates on the recognition of miracles and their functions.

The other indispensable elements make up the whole of the structural framework of the thesis. They are *Abbreviations*, *Introduction*, *Conclusion* and *Bibliography* respectively.

Abbreviations (pp. 7–8). This element could have been reduced to items that are not included in the containing the most common abbreviations used in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (see: <https://www.catholicdoors.com/catechis/abbrev.html>) and the *Oxford English Dictionary (ODE)* (see: <https://public.oed.com/how-to-use-the-oed/abbreviations/>).

Another essential element, the *Introduction* (pp. 9–17), has been executed well. In it the PhD student distinguishes two parts: *Historical Background* (pp. 9–12) and *Significance and Methodology* (pp. 12–17). The first comprises an overview of the various ways in which miracle was understood in the Christian theology (from the Bible, through Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the First Vatican Council to the Second Vatican Council). The author, appropriately, focuses more on the concept of miracle as inspired by the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. He lists such Catholic theologians as K. Rahner, R. Latourelle, John Paul II, Walter Kasper, Benedict XVI, J.B. Metz, P. Gwynne, R. Laurentin, L. Monden. Thus the author perceives their views as substantial for the contemporary Catholic theology of miracle. This, however, begs the question about the selection criteria for the German theologians. Notwithstanding their unquestionable contribution to the 20th century theology and the fact that their works are translated into English, are there not more respected authorities in theology of miracle among German theologians (see e.g.: H. J. Pottmeyer, H. Dolch, R. Guardini or B. Weissmahr)? The validity of including in the list Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI is also questionable, all the more so since the author does not mention J. Ratzinger's book *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (1987), nor his article *Wissensachft*,

Glaube, Wunder (published in: L. Reinisch (ed.), *Jenseits der Erkenntnis*, Frankfurt, 1977, pp. 28–44). The PhD student offers an appropriate description of the main currents in the present-day debate on miracle when he states the following:

“In the contemporary period, the emphasis is on the semiological aspect of a miracle without abandoning its psychological element of wonder. [...] Theological inquiry in the contemporary era is interested primarily in the historical aspect of miracle and not in its nature. [...] Moreover, the discourse on the miracle in the contemporary era can only be meaningful when links with the person of Christ and his work” (p. 12).

In the second part of the *Introduction* he clearly specifies the purpose of the dissertation:

“In this research, attention is going to focus on the contemporary Catholic theological understanding of miracle which is based on the meaning and functions of the miracles as a sign from God to humanity” (p. 12–13).

The aim is then consistently pursued and underscored when different aspects of the main issue are discussed in the consecutive chapters. The research’s validity and relevance is presented appropriately: (1) “The study will certainly help people to make an informed judgement about the alleged claims [of] miracles, especially in a situation when the Church has not made any pronouncement yet” (p. 13); (2) “Theologians must clarify the meaning and purpose of miraculous occurrences, and correctly channel people’s spiritual desire. [...] It is a serious challenge for the Church and her theologians to guide and present authentic understanding of the concept ‘miracles’ in the contemporary period. Indeed, it is not an attempt to suppress the manifestation of the supernatural by the Church hierarchies and her theologians rather guide against confusion and abuse by some unscrupulous people” (p. 14).

The latter statement seems to point to particular relevance of the research, especially in view of the controversy surrounding miracles or healings (medical miracles) within the context of the phenomenon known as ‘pentecostalization’ (see pp. 98 and 106).

The doctoral student gives a clear description of the next research steps:

“The structure of the thesis is configured in a way to suit the topic which is an attempt to synthesise and analyse different [authors’] understanding of miracles in the contemporary period. It is not a historical account of theological development about miracles. Each chapter builds on the other leading to a conclusion” (p. 14).

The description adequately conveys the elaborate methodology characteristic of fundamental theology.

In the *Conclusion* (pp. 211–213) the PhD student competently summarises the contents in a skillful synthesis. The intended purpose of the thesis is thus accomplished. The main theses of the dissertation, as developed by means of analyses conducted in the successive chapters, are presented with clarity. Well presented is also “the contemporary Catholic theological understanding of miracles as signs with

some purposes to accomplish in the life of every Christian” (p. 213). Then the author briefly reiterates the theological fundamental aspect of the thesis concerning possibility and recognition of miracle as well as its relevance to the issue of confirming the validity of the divine nature of Christianity. In adequate manner is presented the semiological aspect of miracle and the significance of the religious context in the process of interpreting miracle as sign (p. 212). The author concludes the chapter by pointing out areas that require further research: (1) “there is a need for a theological solution to the ‘traditional Catholic low pace’ approach to investigation, discernment and recognition of private Revelations”; (2) “the positive and negative effects of the improved information and communication technologies on the dissemination of the news of private Revelations needs to be elucidated” (p. 213).

Bibliography (pp. 214–223) is divided into two parts: *The Church and Papal Documents* and *General Works*. Most of the items listed in part one treat the issue of miracle rather spuriously, and the frequency with which the author himself refers to them throughout the thesis attests to the fact. The work which should not have been omitted in this part is the *Theological Commentary on the Third Secret of Fatima* written by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the then Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. The author has not included a third bibliographical category of additional sources, which seems all the more unfortunate as monographs on miracle are by no means lacking as far as the contemporary subject literature in English is concerned (see e.g.: Keith Ward, “Believing in Miracles,” *Zygon*, 37 (2002), pp. 741–750; J. Polkinghorne, “The credibility of the miraculous,” *Zygon*, 37 (2002), no. 3, pp. 751–758; Jacalyn Duffin, *Medical Miracles: Doctors, Saints and Healing*, New York 2009; Joshua D. Reichard, “Of Miracles and Metaphysics: A Pentecostal-Charismatic and Process-Relational Dialogue,” *Zygon*, 48 (2013), no. 2, pp. 274–293; Steven Horst, “Miracles and Two Accounts of Scientific Laws,” *Zygon*, 49 (2014), no. 2, pp. 323–347, and also several articles published in Catholic theological journals *The Furrow*, *New Blackfriars*, *The Hythrop Journal* or *Logos*). Inclusion of additional sources would have not only enriched the bibliography section itself, but would have also contributed to the deepening of the existing interpretations.

In summary, the above reservations notwithstanding, I assess positively the methodological premises of the thesis and the metatheoretical observations on the issue of miracle recognition and credibility. In presenting the contemporary Catholic theology of miracle, and taking into account an explicit theological fundamental perspective, the PhD student sufficiently fulfilled the undertaken task.

2. Evaluation of the substantive value of the work

Analysis of theological texts, conducted in light of the main issue, forms the core of the dissertation.

In chapter one, *Theological Understanding of Miracle* (pp. 18–65), the author discusses three issues in succession: (1) the biblical notions of miracles; (2) the general concept of miracle and its meaning for the contemporary theologians; and, (3) miracle as a sign-event. Firstly, he discusses and analyses at length the biblical notions of miracles in both the Old and the New Testament as a means

and signs of Divine Revelation, and correctly establishes that a miracle in the Holy Scriptures is a sign and a means of Divine Revelation through which God manifests his Divine plans to humanity. Illustrated well is the relation between the miracle and Divine Revelation as well as the meaning and importance of miracles performed by Jesus (pp. 28–36), and of various terms describing miracle (p. 39). The student then skillfully shifts the focus of the discourse from the biblical notions to the general theological concept of miracle, and demonstrates the meaning of the Second Vatican Council's teaching – with a particular highlight of the Dogmatic Constitution *On the Divine Revelation* (see: DV, no. 10) – for the understanding of miracles in the contemporary Catholic theology. He analyses the different contemporary theological definitions of miracle (proposed by such theologians as: J.B. Metz, G. Tanzella-Nitii, R. McInerney, R. Latourelle, K. Rahner, A. Dulles, W. Kasper and G. O'Collins) which underscore the semiological dimension of miracles. Finally, as the third issue he presents different meanings of miracles as Divine signs. It is an interesting thread of considerations, based on the theological reflexion of R. Latourelle and W. Kasper, that lead the PhD student to conclude “that a miracle is a symbolic sign. As a symbolic sign, it is evocative and multivalent acting in different directions at the same time. Hence, miracles manifest signs of God's power, love, faith, Divine mission, the glory of Christ, and the coming kingdom of God” (p. 65). Presenting miracle as “symbolic sign” is a clear indication of certain continuity between the biblical miracles and the post-biblical miracles in the history of the Church.

Chapter two, *Post-Biblical Miracles and Their Classification* (pp. 66–113), deals with the meaning of the post-biblical miracles and their attendant consequences, and classifications. Firstly, the author makes general characteristics of post-biblical miracles which are otherwise known as private Revelations. At the beginning he clearly says, with accordance to the teaching of the *Catechism of Catholic Church*: “We are not expecting any new Revelation during the time of the Church. However, God still communicates with individual people for their well-being in different forms today” (p. 67, see also p. 69). On the one hand, it is a Divine Revelation no doubt, but it has nothing to add to the already complete public Revelation. On the other hand, post-biblical miracles are not a priori excluded, but require proper verification and recognition. At that point in the thesis an apologetic thread becomes evident: the author accurately presents the meaning of the post-biblical miracles and their attendant consequences for the proclamation of the Christian faith in the present day. Typology of post-biblical miracles (pp. 76–111) is particularly important for this type of research, and the one proposed by the author is fairly original and includes events which in neither Polish nor German theology are directly linked with miracle (e.g.: apparitions, miraculous images, stigmata or locution). It should be noted that the proposed typology incorporates the fact-material element – in the form of references to specific miraculous events (e.g. see pp. 77–78; 83–84), as well as the theological aspect – the context and the theological meaning of the distinctive types of post-biblical miracles (see e.g. p. 79; 85). The PhD student rightly advises caution against accepting extreme interpretations of reality: “Some see every reality from the perspective of spiritual, while some do so from the standpoint of

material. Hence, the ongoing debate and struggle in an attempt to present the true understanding of the world. The world is a composite reality with material and spiritual realities that one should not neglect each. These extremes are causing many problems in the lives of people, especially when studying miraculous events” (p. 66; see also p. 112).

In chapter three, *Possibility and Credibility of Miracles in the Context of Criticisms* (pp. 114–158), the author discusses the issue of the possibility and credibility of miracles. Of note in this part is the critical analysis of past and present strategies employed to question the possibility of miracle. The PhD student skillfully conducts a sort of a ‘critique of the critics’, deniers of the very possibility of miracle, and clearly demonstrates how both denial and erroneous interpretation of miracle are influenced by a false image of God: “It seems impossible to accept miracles as a reality without denying the nature of God, who wills the existence of the order in the world. Overtly, miracles apparently contradict the nature of God from a deterministic view. This idea is from the deists, who believe God has finished his creative activities once and for all. However, that is not the correct understanding of the nature of God, who is the cause of everything that is” (p. 120). In a similar hermeneutical key, the ‘critique of the critics’, the author analyses the relationship between the miracle and (1) laws of nature (pp. 121–123), (2) God’s relation to the world (pp. 123–127), (3) unknown forces and statistical laws (p. 127-130), (4) the hypothesis of unknown forces in the human psyche (pp. 130–131), (5) the hypothesis of magic (p. 136–137), and the problem of suffering and miracles (pp. 131–136). Although the scope of critical analyses is quite broad (and some points in the discussion are somewhat general – see: (1) miracles and laws of nature, or (3) the hypothesis of unknown forces in the human psyche), what merits recognition are multiple contexts of criticisms that have been taken into consideration. What the analysis lacks in terms of comprehensiveness, though, are references to works by theologians with expertise in the natural sciences (see e.g. the Benedictine priest, physicist, and historian S. Jaki’s *Miracles and Physics*, Christendom, 1989; or publications by Anglican theologians, e.g. J. Polkinghorne, “The credibility of the miraculous,” *Zygon* 37 (2002), no. 3, pp. 751–758, and A. R. Peacocke).

In the latter part of the reflection offered in the chapter the author discusses the problem of arguments for the credibility of the miraculous, as linked primarily with the historicity of miracles. The main focus of the analysis are miracles performed by Jesus – “the research will apply the historical methodology in ascertaining the authenticity of the miraculous events. In other words, the historical criteria use by historians in testing the authenticity of their data will be employed in evaluating Jesus’ miracles” (p. 140). In his close analysis the author follows René Latourelle’s ‘criteria of historical authenticity’, and successively applies the following criteria: the criterion of multiple attestation, the criterion of discontinuity, the criterion of continuity, style of Jesus, the criterion of internal intelligibility of the stories, divergent interpretation and substantial agreement, the criterion of necessary explanation. The emphasis on the perspective of historical authenticity in assessing the reliability of miracle seems to illustrate well the Anglo-Saxon understanding of the issue in question.

Speaking of reliability of miracle the PhD student is aware that just as “It is not under the jurisdiction of science to say miracles are possible or not; they can do so about repeatable events and not miracles” (p. 139), so also the mere fact the criteria for the the historical authenticity have been met does not necessitate belief in miracles: “Miracles are incredible if one does not believe in the existence of God who creates and sustain[s] the world on a daily basis” (p. 157). The relationship between miracle and faith is presented accurately.

In chapter four, *Recognition of Miracles and Their Functions* (pp. 159–210), the author describes the process of recognition of miracles and their functions. He begins his analysis by explaining what is generally the recognition of the miracle and what functions it has (especially in canonical trials during the process of beatification and canonization). The PhD student correctly defines the scope of participation of non-theological sciences in recognition of miracles: “The issue of the recognition of miracles is not an easy task, and yet [it] must be done with right intentions. Miracles are not a scientific matter, and any attempt to subject them to a condition where they do not belong would yield a negative result” (p. 161). He analyses two methods of recognising miracles: spontaneous and theological recognitions. Detailed discussion centres around the latter method only (pp. 167–172), while spontaneous recognitions are considered only in general terms (pp. 166–167), which, in turn, has led to some repetition (see pp. 160–161). Author’s analysis of the process of recognition of miracles in the light of teaching the Church’s Magisterium is commendable (see: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Norms Regarding the Manner of Proceeding in the Discernment of Presumed Apparitions or Revelations”), as is the issue of relationship between the Church and modern science. Of dubious merit are separate discussions (and in very general terms) devoted to process of canonization of saints (pp. 184–185) or the canonical trial of healing miracle by the Church (pp. 185–187). These should have been included in the section entitled *Magisterium and Recognition of Miracles*, whereas the issue of the role of the physician in certifying miracles (pp. 188–189) in *Relationship between the Church and Modern Science*.

In final part of the chapter the author presents different functions of miracles, such as: communication between God and humanity (pp. 191–193), revelation (pp. 193–194), attestation (pp. 194–197), liberation and enhancement (pp. 197–199) and invitation to Christian living (pp. 199–210). In so far as the first four functions may qualify as the classic functions of miracle, as they are described in the subject literature, author’s enlisting as one of the functions of miracle the invitation to Christian living is a very original insight and provides inspiration for further study. The PhD student’s approach to the issue of the function of miracle may be aptly illustrated by the statement: “the functions of miracles were expatiated and analysed with the intention of knowing their imports for Christian living. Miracles have the duty of communicating the glory of God and calling people to salvation. Moreover, miracles have the function of revealing the power, mercy, the coming kingdom and love of God to the people” (p. 210).

With regard to the assessment of the substantive merit of the dissertation, and apart from what has already been commended, of note is the logical continuity between consecutive chapters which gradually reveals the overall structure of the contemporary Catholic theology of miracle. The manner in which the author develops his line of thought justifies the conclusion that he has a firm grasp on the analysis and conducts it with the undertaken goal in mind. Praiseworthy are well-executed chapter introductions and conclusions which exemplify the student's ability at synthesis. Another valuable aspect of the thesis is the skillful incorporation in the undertaken research one of the central issues in fundamental theology, the relationship between faith and reason (see e.g. pp. 113–114; 123; 155–156; 200; 214). Father Anozie's monograph offers arguments that are solid enough to engage in critical discussion with publications that question reasonableness of faith or altogether mock miracle as it is generally understood by Christian theology (see e.g. books by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris or Christopher Hitchens). It furthermore raises the reader's awareness of how the issue of miracle relates to revelation (see e.g. pp. 42, 62, 64, 69). On the formal plane, the author has succeeded in presenting a synthesis of the contemporary Catholic theology of miracle. Despite the problematic issues pointed out above (here meant as 'open for discussion'), I assess as very good the substantive content of Father Anozie's study.

The content of the dissertation also raises some questions for further discussion: (1) The study contains interesting references to the situation of the Church in Nigeria (see e.g.: "According to John Okoye, 'an average Nigerian Christian wants an immediate positive response from God to take away his misfortunes. A quick and instant recovery vindicates for him the presence of God. Where and when this instant result is delayed, this Christian God is pronounced impotent and no right-thinking fellow can be reckless to the point of hanging unto useless God'" (p. 83); or according to the guidelines of Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria: "healing is not a reward for faith but an expressed gratuitous will of God. Faith that is required for healing is the same with which the individual believes in the Word of God and the Sacraments" (p. 84); also see pp. 174, 177). To what extent did the situation influence the student's choice of the issue of miracle as the topic of his thesis? (2) In chapters III and IV the PhD student allows himself to be led along distinctly by R. Latourelle's reflections (*The Miracles of Jesus and the Theology of Miracles*, NY, 1988); what rationale was there behind the choice of this particular theologian? I must admit that the lack of polemic with his understanding of the recognition of miracle is rather disappointingly lacking. (3) We are living in the times of meticulous attention to scientific inquiry. How, and to what extent, can the issue of miracle be promoted in the dialogue between theology and natural sciences? (4) In principle, the author accentuates positive forms of miracle verification (see: Chapter IV). What determined the author's decision to lay special attention on the so-called 'spontaneous recognition of miracle'? (5) In Poland, the theology of miracle was influenced by the output of Rev. Prof. Marian Rusecki. What issues are characteristic for the theology of miracle in Nigeria? What role is attributed to the historical criteria in testing the authenticity of miracles?

3. Evaluation of language correctness and editing

Since English is not my native language, I may not offer a comprehensive evaluation of language correctness. However, to the extent that my language competence allows, I may say that the language of the thesis is correct, accurate, communicative and precise. The dissertation reads well. My evaluation is additionally based on an informed opinion by a philologist and translator of English, whose linguistic assessment of fragments of the dissertation is positive. The student expresses his ideas with clarity and draws valid conclusions. He is fluent in specialist theological terminology. The methods of synthesis and analysis he applies are appropriate to the central issue. The author's interpretation of the source materials as well as the conclusions he draws from them are correct. With respect to style and substance the text is well edited. Bibliography and footnotes meet the required punctuation standard. I would gladly see more items on the list of subject literature. They would not only contribute to a greater overall erudition of the thesis, but would also attest to a greater familiarity with the subject literature. The manner in which the text has been formatted and printed out allows for high readability.

4. Final conclusion

Having assessed the methodological and substantive aspects of the thesis, I consider it to exemplify the level of diligently attained scholarship expected at this stage of academic career. Successful analysis and synthesis of a considerable scope of source material demonstrate the PhD student's ability to make his own observations, formulate informed opinions and draw logical conclusions. The issue explored in the thesis merits further research that would focus on miracle as an argument in the context of the present times.

Rev. Fr. Casmir Ikechukwu Anozie's doctoral dissertation fulfils all substantive and formal conditions specified in the Act of 14 March 2003. Law on Academic Degrees and Title and Degrees and Title in the Arts (Journal of Laws No 65, item 595, as amended). I recommend that Fr. Anozie be admitted to the oral defence of the thesis.



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Opole 22.04.2018

