

“Thinking Theologically: About the Mystery at the Heart of It All”
A Sermon Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
July 6, 2008 - the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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I would like to begin this sermon with a story taken from one of the books I’ll be reading on vacation. It’s from Justin Catanoso’s *My Cousin the Saint: A Search for Faith, Family, and Miracles* (William and Morrow, 2008). To the author’s great surprise, he did indeed have a saint in the family, Gaetano Catanoso, his grandfather’s cousin, a 100% Vatican-certified miracle worker. The story concerns a miracle the saint worked after he had died.

Patrizia Catanoso knew she was in for a restless night. The thoughts she took with her to bed were too gruesome. Earlier that day, the son of a close friend had been struck by a car while riding a motorcycle on a country road just outside of Chorio, a rugged mountain village in southern Italy. The collision was head on, and the boy, just seventeen, landed in the road like a box of ceramic dishes. He now lay in intensive care in a hospital in the city of Reggio Calabria, cracked and broken, on life support. Patrizia worked as an administrative assistant at the hospital and had visited the boy’s father there.

“The doctors tell me there is no hope,” her friend sobbed. “They are just waiting to pull the plug.”

Patrizia is a sensible woman, levelheaded, able to empathize easily with the suffering of strangers. But such pain rarely followed her home. Life is often short and cruel; hospital work teaches you that. But a young boy, a family friend, crushed by misfortune on a blind curve? She thought of her own two children, Salvatore and Michela, just a few years younger than her friend’s son. She crossed herself and kissed her fingertips.

Understand now that Patrizia is no religious mystic. She is not one to burn candles before a statue of the Virgin Mary. Her eyes, dark and penetrating, suggest that she can spot nonsense a mile away, especially when she cocks an eyebrow. She favors long denim skirts and flat shoes. As for jewelry, she wears only a plain, gold wedding band. Her faith is the same: simple, honest, never showy.

Yet at home in bed that night, Patrizia felt compelled to pray—not to Jesus, not even to God—but rather to the only person she calls on in times such as these—her great uncle, Gaetano Catanoso, a humble mission priest who died in 1963, the year after she was born. He was no ordinary priest. Her parents and grandparents believed Gaetano had lived the life of a saint during six decades of Christ-like service to the poor of southern Calabria. The Vatican agreed to such an extent that Gaetano had been venerated by Pope John Paul II and was on track to become canonized. That rare Catholic honor confirmed to the faithful that the priest possessed divine powers

to work miracles through God's grace. Patrizia never bothered her great uncle with frivolous matters of lost keys or soccer victories. But she prayed hard for her friend's son.

Sometime before dawn, in that twilight zone between sleep and consciousness, Patrizia saw an image, a face, blurry around the edges but soon recognizable. It was Padre Gaetano, his soft eyes and sweet smile as real as if he were kneeling beside her bed.

"Don't worry," the image spoke to her. "He won't die. Ask the sisters for a handkerchief and tell them to pray."

Patrizia opened her eyes as the image disappeared. In all her years of prayers, she had never, ever, experienced anything like this. It was morning. She dressed and left her apartment in a hurry, driving quickly through Reggio's side streets to a small church in the hilltop neighborhood of Santo Spirito. She hustled past the courtyard statue of her great uncle and spoke in a rush to the nuns inside the Mother House, nuns from an order Gaetano Catanoso had founded in 1934. They parted with a sacred handkerchief that belonged to the late priest and vowed to keep the dying boy in their prayers throughout the day.

At the hospital, Patrizia's friend was still there, still sobbing. "It's almost over," he said, slumped in a waiting room chair.

But Patrizia told her friend—pray, pray to Padre Gaetano.

She went to the boy's curtained bay in intensive care. He lay nearly lifeless, tubes sprouting from his arms and mouth. A nurse friend tried to shoo her away. Leave him alone, she implored, it's his time. Patrizia held her tongue, clutching the handkerchief, waiting for the woman to leave. Trembling, her heart racing, she unfolded the white cloth and gently passed it over the boy's face. *Am I doing this right?* She passed it over his body as well and tucked it under his pillow with a prayer card bearing the face of Gaetano, the same face that came to her in her sleep barely an hour earlier. She said another prayer and left.

That evening, with her husband, Orazio, she returned to the hospital. Again, she was greeted by her friend. Again he collapsed in their arms in tears. *My God*, Patrizia thought, *the boy's dead*. But through his choked cries and gasps for air, her friend was trying to tell them something different. My son. He is better. He is better.

Patrizia dashed to push back the curtain and there the boy was, sitting on the edge of the bed, his feet dangling. He looked a roughed-up mess, but he was alive. He managed a smile. Patrizia just stared, wordlessly, and then felt a shiver run down her back. The doctors can't explain it, her friend was saying just behind her. His injuries were so bad they were certain he would die. They don't know what happened.

Patrizia Catanoso doesn't believe in magic and never reads her horoscope. She can't be bothered. But she believes in her great-uncle to the very depths of her soul. In him she has no doubts, only faith.

I know what happened, she whispered to her friend, pulling him close, tears streaming down her own face. "*E stato miracolo.*" It was a miracle. (Pp. 1-3)

So, how did you fare—listening to this story, that is? Did it make you squirm, a bit too religious for your more “Just the facts, m’am, just the facts” sensibilities? Or did you revel in its nose-thumbing “the facts be damned” mind-set? Or perhaps you smiled at its naïveté, happy for their sake, but in your heart of hearts there was a sensible explanation for it all. A miracle is just another word for what was going to happen anyway.

My own take on this story is that it does describe a miracle, one that I have no explanation for, and for that, I am not sorry. I revel in explanations, but I also recognize that there is a limit to what we know. And the doctrine of the Incarnation perfectly describes that limit.

On the one side is pure Spirit; on the other, pure matter. Where they meet is the Incarnation: the Word made flesh. *Incarnate*: to make something carnal, fleshly. *Incarnation*: to make what was once pure Spirit, pure Spirit thoroughly entangled with pure flesh, so much so that the two cannot be separated. The doctrine says that it was God’s intention to come down from his lofty heights (to “condescend,” as one of our hymns puts it), the better to rescue his creation from its too fleshly pursuits. You can have too much of a good thing, it seems. So God’s Son is the Word made flesh, and he “lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth,” John 1:14.

The question is, how close you are willing to get to this junction of Spirit and flesh? I keep capitalizing my “S’s,” by the way, when I use the word Spirit, for I want to distinguish God’s holy Spirit from all the other spirits that are out there. The issue is not whether we’re interested in getting close to things in general filled with spirit, but whether we’re willing to get close to the particular things in which God’s holy Spirit resides—the Gaetano Catanoso’s of the world, for example.

Or the bread and the cup which we serve at communion. Here’s a good test case. On the one side are the true believers. “Real presence!” they proclaim; “Christ really is present in the consecrated bread and wine.” “No way,” say the Baptists. “We’re told to do this ‘in remembrance of me.’” “Way,” say the Presbyterians. “The way is by way of the *sign*: the bread and the cup *signify*; they point to the reality of which they partake. They’re visible signs of an invisible reality.

So guess who gets to experience the most miracles. I have no hard data on this, but I’ll bet anything it’s the Catholics. They’re the “real presence” people incarnate, as it were. And the Baptists? My guess is that they’re used to seeing conversion miracles, but not much else. Give them a stubborn, hard-drinking, foul-mouthed backslider and they say, “Oooh, this man is ripe for picking!” And the Presbyterians? You’ll have to answer this one for yourselves, but my guess is they experience miracles daily, but they’re more domestic in nature—the miracle of sunlight, for example, or a hot cup of coffee in the morning. Not exactly Padre Gaetano’s handkerchief passing over a young man’s crumpled body, but there you have it. It takes all kinds.

What kind was Jesus? I have no doubt he lived very close to the limit. Actually, he *was* the limit, the point at which all things were handed over to him by the Father, to use the words from today’s gospel lesson (Matthew 11:27). To believe in him, to want to

be close to him, to want to draw so near that miracles of an extraordinary nature are a common and not an uncommon experience—that is the question facing us. When Jesus plays on his flute and calls us to the dance, will we resist? Will we prefer the sidelines, the better to keep our critical distance—the better not to have to mingle with tax collectors and sinners? Or will we sign on, even if we do not fully understand what we are getting into?

I commend the mystery at the heart of it all to us all.

Amen.