

Consilium 79

Translated by Alice Browne

Concerning the first section of the fourth book. On Miracles

Argument

Among several other deeds performed by a devout servant of God and deemed to be miraculous, was the presumed recall to life of a young man who had been submerged in water and drowned. A certain monk, who was promoting the case, insisted that this was so obviously proved by multiple witnesses that there could be no possible doubt about it. I went over the depositions of several witnesses to this event, and came to the conclusion that a resurrection of this kind had not been proved in any way, for the following reasons.

Summary

1. Someone who wants to prove the resurrection of a dead person is first obliged to prove that they died.
2. It is difficult to prove death, and impossible to prove before the corpse shows signs of putrefaction.
3. There are definite signs that life has ended.

4. People can sometimes appear dead from the violent effects of some diseases, even though they are still alive.
5. Living people are sometimes taken out for burial as dead.
6. A dead person cannot be distinguished from a living person in the throes of some suffocating illness; see also no. 10.
7. People who die of a suffocating illness should not be taken out for burial before the third day; the reason why.
8. The signs of death are equivocal, and can also appear in living people.
9. If death is not proved, resurrection cannot be proved.
10. The resurrection of the dead is a property of human beings alone.
11. Dead animals cannot be resurrected.
12. What a crisis is.
13. Crisis in healing an illness, insofar as the healing results from it, always excludes miraculous causality.
14. A person cannot live without respiration for even a moment.
15. It is impossible for a living being not to breathe.
16. [Ditto]
17. A person can live without visible respiration, but not without transpiration, which is not visible.
18. Which parts of the body are involved in respiration.
19. How a person can live for some time without apparent respiration.

20. It is impossible to be certain that a person is dead, other than by the putrefaction of the body.

The alleged resurrection of the young man under consideration has not been adequately proved, in spite of the depositions of the witnesses. This obviously follows from the single condition, that someone who wants to give true testimony that a dead person has been resurrected, is obliged to know for certain and give indubitable testimony that the person was really dead. It is not just difficult to testify certainly to this before the body starts to putrefy, but completely impossible: see what I said in *Quaestiones*, Book 4, title 1, final question, no. 54, on the authority of Celsus, *De medicina*, book 2, chapter 6. The signs that life has ended are not at all adequately known. It is not just ordinary unprofessional people, like all the witnesses in this case, who can be wrong and think someone is dead when they are still alive: philosophers, and even highly experienced doctors, cannot reach certainty about this, unless they take refuge in some experiments I discuss in the passage cited above, so as to become more certain of the truth in this profound uncertainty. However, the majority of doctors bear witness that these experiments are frivolous and deceptive.

This should not be surprising, because the violence of some illnesses can snatch people so far away from any perception of life that they

do not give the slightest sign of remaining life which would enable people to realise they are alive: for these illnesses, see the passage of book 4 cited above, and others in the same book. As a result, it sometimes happens that living people are taken away for burial: see the stories in Schenck [Johannes Schenck von Grafenburg], *Observat. titul de apoplexia*, book 1, and elsewhere, and other stories in Domenico Terilli, *De causis mortis repentinae*, section 6, chapter 2. I would like to add another equally amazing story, as follows:

This past year, 1656, a young man who was caring for the sick in the Ospedale Santo Spirito caught the plague, fell into a syncope from the violence of the illness, and was carried out for dead. His body was cast out with the corpses of those who had died of plague.

When the corpse-bearers were preparing to take it to the appointed place with the other bodies by boat on the Tiber, he showed some signs of life, and was taken back to the hospital, where he recovered to some extent, but fell into another syncope after two days. Again his body was cast out to be buried with corpses of those who had died of plague, but he revived again. He was treated with the right medicines, eventually recovered completely, and is still alive. But we know that during this plague at Rome other people who still had traces of life were committed to the tomb as dead.

These stories are more than enough to demonstrate that there is no way to distinguish a person who is still alive from one who is actually dead, if he is stricken with some disease inducing unconsciousness, such as apoplexy or syncope or other kind of suffocation. For this reason doctors advise that people suffering from illnesses of this kind should not be taken away for burial before three days have elapsed, even if they appear to be dead: Avicenna I, tertii, tract. 5, cap. 12, and many other ancient authors. Domenico Terilli in the cited passage, François Ranchin, *De morb[is] subitan[eis]*, chap. 1, because they say that at any point during this period of three days they can still revive if they are not really dead. I have explained elsewhere (loc. cit, no. 50) the reason for marking out this period of time.

We can easily deduce from the above that the witnesses in the case could not have testified from certain knowledge that the young man was really dead as a result of drowning in the river: they could only testify that that he appeared to be dead and they all thought that he was, because, as they testified unanimously, he did not move or breathe, he was cold, his eyes were dark, and his face was swollen and remarkable for its deathly pallor.

But all these signs are equivocal, and are common to the dead and to people who are not really dead, but suffering from the diseases I

have mentioned, that is, a strong apoplexy, syncope, or some kind of suffocation, and hence they do not prove that a person is really dead. So, if death is not proved by the presence of these signs, resurrection cannot be proved, as it can only happen to dead people. Other animals cannot be resurrected after they die, as their forms are destroyed at death and cannot return from non-being to being, as I have explained elsewhere in the passage cited.

The testimony of the witnesses not only does absolutely nothing to prove the resurrection of the young man, but the sequence of events does a great deal to prove the contrary, that is, that he was not dead at all, but still somehow alive and suffering from the suffocating effects of drowning, and when this was overcome by nature he came back to life.

They say that the young man had been submerged in the river, and was pulled out of the water after an hour. After four more hours, he vomited a lot of mucous matter from his mouth, together with some water, and then came back to life in accordance with the prayers of the devoted servant of God. However, the witnesses do not agree about the time when he ejected this matter from his mouth: some stated that it happened before there was any sign of movement, others that it happened after he showed signs of life. However, in either case, we can be certain that that this event was not a miracle,

and not even something to count among events that have usually caused great wonder in people who hear about them. It is clear that very many people have come back to life after being suffocated either through drowning or in some other way, not just after a few hours, like this young man, but after a whole day, or even after three days. It happens in this way: respiration is cut off in the water, and, with their spirits oppressed, and an apoplectic condition induced, people are thought to be dead when in fact they are still alive.

Transpiration preserves their life, gradually increasing until it ends with free respiration, which makes it obvious that they are still alive. There is obvious proof that this is what happened to the young man, from the fact that he expelled mucus and water from his mouth, and then nature, relieved by their exit, was allowed to breathe freely, and recalled him to life. This sequence of events makes it all the clearer that the result should be attributed to nature, because it happened following a crisis, which, when it is good and happens suddenly, is defined as a movement excited by nature to expel disease-inducing matter from the body and vanquish illness. Galen, book 3, chapter 1, *De crisisibus*. Now I have proved elsewhere, in the passage cited, question 4, number 13 and following, that a movement of this kind, since it is caused by nature and battles the illness, always excludes a miracle, insofar as the result follows from it: see Galen, *ibid*. This is why it is established that natural movements of this kind never occur in the miracles listed in sacred history, in the Old and New

Testaments, or other texts canonized by Holy Church, in order to teach us clearly that their effects resulted from divine power alone, without any dependence on nature.

People of the opposite opinion have adduced the following argument to prove that the young man was really dead, but it is not valid. They say that a human being cannot live without respiration even for a moment, because, as Galen says, *De locis affectis*, book 6, chapter 5, it is impossible for a living being not to breathe [*spirare*]; so, as the young man in question was without respiration for so many hours, as all the witnesses stated unanimously, we must definitely affirm that he had departed this life, because life is inseparable from respiration: Galen, *ibid*.

The answer to this difficulty is that it is a true statement that no one can live without respiration, if this is understood to refer to any kind of respiration, for there are two kinds of respiration. One, which is properly called respiration, is made known to us by visible motion of the chest and other parts of the body; the other, which is imperceptible to us, and works by means of the heart and the arteries, is called transpiration. Someone can live for days, not just hours, without the respiration we know, which is the perceptible motion of the chest and lungs, but never without transpiration: see Galen, in the passage cited above, and Avicenna, *I tertii tract. 5 cap.*

12. This happens for the following reason: when innate heat reaches a point of extreme weakness, because of the violent effects of some illness, it no longer needs the amount of cooling that would demand the cooling action of the chest and lungs: Avicenna, *ibid.* So, because no external¹ signs make transpiration apparent to us, but a person is still alive as long as it is present, I cannot affirm that the young man was dead, and the witnesses cited could not affirm that he was dead from the fact that they had seen he was not breathing, because the absence of this kind of respiration cannot distinguish a dead person from a living one.

Therefore we must conclude with certainty that the only way to be certain that a person is dead is from the corpse beginning to putrefy. This had happened to Lazarus, whose corpse was stinking, as he had been dead for four days. As I have said elsewhere, his resurrection happened in this way so that there could be no doubt about whether he was dead, or whether there was clear evidence of such a great miracle.

This conclusion should be so certain that other tests to see whether someone is alive or not should have no standing, as they are all deceptive and deserve no credence. Many things of this kind are made public by various authors, and people put some faith in them

¹ Reading *extremus* in printed text as typo for *externus*.

when they should not. A very light piece of wool moved close to the mouth, a cup of water placed on the chest, a mirror to catch spirit exhaled from the mouth, burnings, substances to induce sneezing, and whatever else there may be, are all unfit for purpose, for after they were all used extensively and a man was determined to be dead, it was discovered that he was still alive. Fortunato Fedele, *De relationibus medicorum*, Book 4, chapter 1 relies on substances to induce sneezing, although we see every day that these substances can be administered without effect to people who are still alive, and obviously so.

Therefore, since this sign of putrefaction, which is the only way to be certain of death, was not present in the young man, and there was no other way of truthfully judging he was dead, such from the length of time he had lain as if dead, or any other certain and obvious sign, it follows that we cannot affirm that he was resurrected.