

Where science has no answers: Catholic politics and Neapolitan identity in the miracle of San Gennaro

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Introduction

It is a fact that scientific 'progress' has not been able to bring about universally scientific ways of thinking and believing. Creationism, linked most often to fundamentalist religious groups, is still with us, and there are organizations of persons who believe the world is flat. But even more significant than a lack of belief in science and technology is ethical opposition to the activities of the scientific establishment. In Europe this position finds its most powerful voice in the Catholic Church, which styles itself as the moral voice of Europe. It would be too simplistic to portray the attitude of the Vatican toward science as one of pure antagonism, however, for in practice the relationship between the two is much more complex: the Vatican II Council was a move toward modernization, toward dispelling ignorance and superstition, but the Vatican has always been concerned about the question of the limits and authority of science: this concern is clearly manifested in the current conflicts between Catholic Church authorities and the scientific community over reproductive technologies, genetic research, and weapons technology, among others. These are not merely disputes between the Church and science, they are struggles over social power, especially in countries in which the background culture is clearly Catholic but the secular areas of society (law, medicine, commerce, technology, education, etc.) espouse a scientific and 'rational' worldview. The question addressed in this paper, therefore, is this: what strategies does the Church employ to influence people's beliefs and perspectives concerning science and ethics? It is important to understand the processes which form people's viewpoints and beliefs because in democratic societies, rule by majority (and directed by the majority's viewpoints and beliefs) makes it difficult for institutions to react quickly to social and environmental problems. Both science

and the Church have a difficult time trying to address the world's problems in a climate of public distrust, opposition or plain disbelief.

The Church's attitude toward science, by no means clear-cut even at the top levels of the Catholic hierarchy, becomes much more complex at the lower levels, in the local setting. Here the institutional interest in restricting science's authority interacts with local worldviews and identities in interesting ways. We focus on Italy, a country with a relatively high acceptance of the Church's voice on current world issues. For example, in the mid-1990s, when our fieldwork took place, 57% of Italians believed that it is appropriate for the Church to take a stand on environmental issues; likewise 57% for abortion. The focus of our paper is a religious ritual in Italy with a large audience: the Miracle of San Gennaro in Naples, in which the dried blood of Naples' patron saint who died more than 1,600 years ago becomes liquefied once per year. We argue that this ritual is more than just a colorful piece of Mediterranean folklore or remnant of superstitious devotion: it is an extremely useful arena for the Church to get its messages across.

The Miracle's Sequence of Events in 1994

The ritual itself is composed of a number of segments and in its entirety lasts seven days, but we concentrate here on the day on which the blood turns to liquid, that is, September 19 of each year. The ritual takes place in the main Cathedral of Naples and is attended by more than 5,000 persons, both men and women, from all levels of Neapolitan society. The ritual celebration begins in the morning before nine o'clock, in the small chapel of San Gennaro within the main Cathedral. Prayers for Italy and the family are led by an altar attendant. The atmosphere is expectant, reverent. Then the VIPs of the celebration arrive, including the left-wing mayor of Naples, the Cardinal and other Catholic officials. Members of the audience shush one another to be quiet. A white handkerchief waved by a church official tells the audience that the Miracle has already occurred. Those present in the chapel applaud, some cry and go down on their knees. "The Saint has said 'yes'", the people say to each other. The Cardinal waits for the crowd to quiet down before he announces what took place. When he opens the safe and takes out the ampules of blood, the blood has liquefied immediately. According to the Cardinal's speech, this is a sign that San Gennaro's blood is living blood.

The ampules of blood are taken from the chapel to the main altar of the Cathedral in a formal procession. They are carried high on a palanquin where everyone can see them. The bronze bust of San Gennaro is carried separately

on its own palanquin. The crowd tries to touch them as they are carried to the altar. From outside can be heard the sound of shots being fired, which tells those in the city that the Miracle has occurred. At the altar the Cardinal tells the audience what happened, joking that the Saint is unpredictable – the blood liquefied before anyone could have expected it (the blood is usually expected to turn to liquid sometime during the day, but not necessarily during the ritual itself). After his speech, the Cardinal shows the ampules of blood to the journalists who are present at the front of the Cathedral. The television cameras film the Cardinal moving the ampules back and forth so that it is clear to all that the blood is in liquid form. The Cardinal also shows the blood to the applauding guests of honor and the rest of the audience. The Neapolitans are told that the ampules of blood are available to be kissed that evening and for the next several days. The official part of the ritual celebration has ended at about eleven A.M.

Naples and the Miracle

The role of the city's patron saint, according to the popular view, is that of protector from the ever-present threat of earthquakes and the volcano Vesuvius. According to popular belief, the occurrence of the miracle each year is a sign of San Gennaro's favor and continued protection: the failure of the miracle to occur signals impending disaster for the city. According to the stories told to us in Naples, the earthquake of November 1980 occurred after the blood failed to liquefy on the ritual of September 19 the same year. According to legend, during the eruption of Vesuvius in 472, when the patron saint of Naples was still Saint Agrippino, and it seemed to the Neapolitans that he would fail to save the city, they gathered by the thousands to pray to San Gennaro in his catacombs. San Gennaro put an end to the eruption and became the city's patron saint and protector. Subsequent earthquakes and eruptions by the volcano have been seen as supernatural punishments that can be avoided by remaining faithful to San Gennaro. For example, the priest we interviewed at the Cathedral told us his interpretation of the earthquake of 1980: a Communist mayor had been elected two years previously in 1978. According to Paliotti (1981:18), Neapolitans have in fact interpreted their history as a struggle between the saint and the volcano, between good and evil.

Any study of Neapolitan culture must take into account the process of self-image making. A large urban center with a high population density, Naples can look back on a grandiose history: from 1266 to 1860 it was the capital of the Kingdom of Naples, and in the year 1500 it was one of only four cities in Europe with a

population of over 100,000 people (the others were Istanbul, Paris and Venice).¹ Yet today it is faced with the present-day realities of chronic unemployment, poverty, pollution, prostitution and organized crime. Its self-image has suffered over the last 50 years from being part of the 'Southern Italian problem' from which Northern Italy would like to divorce itself (see Tapaninen 1996). For Neapolitans, the image of Naples in the eyes of the world is very important. Our informants often asserted that symbols of Naples such as Vesuvius and San Gennaro were immediately recognizable on a worldwide scale, like the Eiffel Tower for Paris, and no one was therefore surprised that researchers would come all the way from Finland to study San Gennaro. Any attempts to improve social conditions in Naples would thus have to take self-image into account. The Church has recognized this, setting itself up as an important and indispensable part of this process through its virtual control of the propaganda surrounding the city's patron saint and the event which (at least in the eyes of many Neapolitans) puts Naples on the map once per year. The Church uses the importance of the Miracle of San Gennaro for Naples to draw approximately five thousand participants and onlookers into its own spaces, and it also promotes the importance of the ritual by attracting the city's and the nation's elite as well as the local and international media, and thus the attention of the world. For example, the Italian television channel Rai Uno announces whether or not the Miracle has occurred on nationwide television the same day, and newspapers carry headlines such as "San Gennaro: Sì". In 1994 a television film crew from Japan was also said to be present, amongst a large number of other journalists.

During the ritual, the Cathedral of Naples becomes a ritual space which lies outside classic 'rationality': it is centered on an event and an object which not only cannot be explained by reason or science, but are in fact full of symbolism and significance which has no meaning from a rational standpoint. Power, rather than rational meaning, is the key to an appreciation of the ritual's effectiveness. The ritual space in which the Miracle takes place, the Cathedral of Naples, is filled with an impressive combination of power symbols. These include the blood of the saint himself poised between life and death (metaphysical power),² the elite

¹ Burke 1994:244.

² The idea of metaphysical power contained in the 'bodies' (whether fluids, relics or representations) of Catholic saints, which Binde (1999:121) argues is the concept underlying the Catholic concept of *grazia*, is characteristic of Southern Italy as a whole. *Grazia*, or the vital bodily power of the saint, is transferred to the human body through contact with, for example, San Gennaro's blood when devotees kiss the ampules following the miracle (*ibid*).

guests, representatives of NATO, the Italian Navy and city government, who represent social power and status, the national and international media representing cultural power, and the collective presence of large numbers of ordinary people which lends importance and legitimacy to this ritual in the eyes of Napoli and the outside world.

Science and the Miracle

A main reason, perhaps, that science has found no answers for the Miracle is that scientists have not been allowed to open the ampules and analyze the liquid inside: the Church naturally views the ampules as priceless relics from Antiquity (they are said to date back to the saint's death in 305 A.D.) which must be preserved for future generations. Preliminary tests, however, seem to indicate that the substance is indeed some kind of blood, and there are currently three pseudo-“scientific” theories as to how the dried blood becomes liquid, all based on the idea that the blood is not really dried but ‘gelled’ or solidified. According to one hypothesis, the church candles warm the blood and ‘melt’ it, according to a second, the heat created from the presence of so many people in the Church melts the blood, and according to a third, the blood liquefies when moved or shaken. The Cardinal referred to this last theory in his speech: the blood had liquefied before he even had a chance to touch it. Once again San Gennaro had confounded the scientists!

It is important to note here that in a secularized world, the Church cannot simply reject science outright; it depends on scientific recognition of the Miracle for legitimization. The Church can only triumph over science because scientists have viewed the miracle as worthy of scientific attention and because limited tests have been performed on the blood (with inconclusive results). The involvement of science thus legitimizes the Miracle, gives it the status of intelligibility in the rational-secular world. This can be seen from a similar miracle of liquefied blood connected to a lesser patron saint of Naples, Santa Patrizia. The nuns we talked to at Santa Patrizia's shrine told us that the female saint's dried blood ‘reacts’ in some way to the liquefaction of San Gennaro's blood (although it is in a different location) and itself becomes liquid around the same time. The Catholic priest at the Main Cathedral whom we interviewed was of a different opinion, however: Santa Patrizia's miracle was not to be considered important because no scientific tests had been conducted on the blood. The Miracle of San Gennaro may be explained by the Catholic Church as a mystery of faith, but it is paradoxically an extremely

well-documented mystery, with tens of thousands of pages having been written on the saint's life, the archaeological findings connected with him, as well as the history of the Miracle of its celebration through the ages. The blood miracles connected to Santa Patrizia, on the other hand, were dismissed by our informant because part of her history was "shrouded in mystery", in other words, unable to be scientifically documented and therefore not useful to the Church seeking status in the secular world. But although the Church needs the recognition by scientific authorities that the Miracle is worthy of study, there is a fine line between scientific recognition and scientific appropriation, and the Church must be careful to avoid the latter. If science were to find an explanation for the Miracle, it could wrest it away from the Church's own control and interpretations.

The Church's Control of the Miracle

A great diversity in devotional expression can be found outside the Cathedral proper, in the carnivalesque atmosphere of vendors hawking candy and souvenirs, a band named "The People's Revolution" dressed in Pulcinella costumes, and children dressed in sackcloth or as angels for the procession proceeding the Miracle. Within the Cathedral, however, the ritual surrounding the Miracle is tightly controlled and overseen by the Cathedral officialdom: here there are no alternative or competing messages concerning the 'meaning' of the ritual other than the one offered by the Church. Nevertheless, there are three things that need to be said about the Church's control over its ritual space: the first is that 'tightly controlled' does not mean that all movement by people was restricted: after the Cardinal announced the liquefaction of the blood and began his long speech, there was a lot of movement on the sidelines and people continued to go in and out of the Cathedral and back and forth.

Second, this control is not a fixed state but a struggle, a process in flux. By this we mean that the Church has had to compete with 'unofficial' religious groups during the miracle, such as the 'relatives of San Gennaro' (*i parenti di San Gennaro*), who are elderly women from the city's poorer classes. These 'relatives of San Gennaro' have their own term of address for the saint, "yellow-face" (due to the bronze bust which represents him in the ritual) by which they cry out to San Gennaro, but which in the Church's opinion is "offensive" to the saint.³ During the 1994 ritual, these women were sitting in the front pews of the small chapel of San Gennaro, loudly chanting a formula prayer to San Gennaro. After a while one

³ From an interview with a Catholic priest who works in the main Cathedral in Naples, September 17, 1994.

of the two assistant priests at the front of the Cathedral, who had until then been answering questions from the many curious people who were swarming to see the bronze bust of San Gennaro, asked for quiet in the chapel. The half-dozen women were silent for about a minute or so, and then started up again, quiet at first and then louder and louder. Later when everyone moved into the large church space to hear the Cardinal's speech, I heard the chanting start up again, (presumably when the same women moved into the larger space) but the prayer had caught on only for a moment before some loud piped organ music from the loudspeakers effectively drowned them out. The official Church had (momentarily) won the contest to dominate the ritual space with its own auditory input.

Third, the Church's control over this ritual process and ritual space is not uni-directional, but represents a dialogue. Many of the ordinary Neapolitans who come to view the ritual already reject what they label 'rationality', in other words order and modernity, which has brought with it neither economic well-being nor a positive self-image for Naples.⁴ Naples is considered a chaotic city where anything is possible – for Neapolitans. Many of the city's inhabitants seek to impress this stereotype on tourists and foreigners. "In Naples, other drivers will honk at you for stopping at a red light", it is said, and taxi drivers warn naïve-looking tourists that the city is crawling with thieves. Only Neapolitans know the ins and outs of life in their city, the 'rules of chaos'. In their opinion, Naples is the only city in Europe in which 'rationality' takes a back seat to emotion. Rationality is considered to be cold and calculating, while Neapolitans consider themselves, on the contrary, to be open, generous, sensitive and warm. Thus the Church may use identity to draw people into a space where it controls the message, but it is the people who created a culture receptive to that message. It was also the people who created and perpetuated San Gennaro's role as the protector of Napoli in the first place.

The Messages of the Miracle

What is interesting is the process by which the Church has increasingly, over the years, incorporated the saint and the miracle into itself and has created a mes-

⁴ The church recognizes this and draws a parallel here between its own interests and those of Neapolitans. The Church survived its battle with Communism which was especially intense in Italy, but it views the Capitalism as an equally potent threat because it promotes rational secularism, and in this concern the Church finds a sympathetic audience in Naples. As the Cardinal pointed out in his speech: "Communism has fallen, and Capitalism has won, but often we forget what the victory of Capitalism has brought with it. Capitalism brings wealth, but only to a few at the expense of the many."

sage from both. This message is directed at two audiences: Naples and the world. But in a sense the image of Naples which is broadcast to the world, intended to place Naples 'on the map', is meant for Neapolitans themselves: so they can see themselves observed by the outside world, occupying center stage, so to speak. This message is thus one of pride, identity, and status. For Southern Italy, pride, identity and status mean linking the present to the past and the future, looking back on past glory while looking forward to a role in the European Union and the world (for instance the hosting of the G7 summit in Naples in 1994). The now-institutionalized cult of San Gennaro is useful here, as the 1,600-year-old patron saint links Naples to its past, and the miracle itself is symbolic of both promise and renewal for the future: at least for the coming year.

There is, however, another, more important message communicated by the ritual, and it is a message whose impact is greatest on those who are physically present in the Cathedral space dominated by the Church, who can 'see' the Miracle with their own eyes. The message is this: the Church has something in its control which the scientific establishment cannot claim for itself because it cannot explain it. In fact, only the Church can offer an explanation for this phenomenon, "witnessed" by 5,000 persons annually. By standing within an institutionalized space and witnessing an event for which only the Church has answers, those present automatically participate in an awareness of the limitations of science, technology, and 'rationality'. Furthermore, only the Church can link the Neapolitan participants to the past of their city and guarantee its future protection in quite this way. At the same time, the Church can offer participants a chance to be 'on center stage' so to speak, as they become part of a phenomenon being observed by the world. The official Church thus uses the idea of an unexplained phenomenon in its control to undermine the dominance of scientific rationality and suggest that the Church, not science, possesses answers critical for the personal and collective well-being of Neapolitans.

Body, space and ritual

Through this ritual, participants become ritualized into a new awareness of a world turned upside-down: they experience first-hand the victory of inexplicable forces over scientific understanding, together with the thousands who share the same space with them, including the elite of the modern secular world: politicians, generals, and the media. Participants find themselves in a space in which science plays no part, has no answers, a circumstance which naturally suggests that there

may well be other times and places where science is not omniscient. By the very fact that their bodies are present and thus participating in these new relations, persons' perceptions are changed (Bell 1990, 1992). Living out this experience guarantees that this realization, however subtle, will be impressed on the person present: this is how bodily acts and participation can alter relationships of power. Just as Roy Rappaport (1979:200) pointed out that the act of kneeling creates a subordinated kneeler, so the fact of being present in the Cathedral during the Miracle has the potential to create a person who, for the moment at least, is 'freed' from subjection to scientific authority. Those present at the Miracle become self-conscious participants in a ritual space and time which both lies outside modern rationality and exalts Naples not just as a city but as an ideal – and identifying with this ideal and sharing in the city's elevated status binds Neapolitans to the institution offering the transformation.

The Catholic Church must make its position on world issues communicated, listened to and legitimized in order for its viewpoint to be included in the discourse on social issues at the national and international level. But at the local level, many micro-processes underlie this effort. Perhaps the relevant power at the local level is not always the power to directly influence people's perceptions through oral or written discourse, through appeals to logic or emotional propaganda. The Miracle of San Gennaro suggests that the relevant power may be the ability to dominate a space which in turn has the potential to create ritualized bodies. This must always be a space imbued with power, and in different cultural contexts these manifestations of power will be different. By dominating the ritual space during the Miracle, the Church is able to show (even without the speech of the Cardinal which subtly mocks the ineffectuality of science to explain the Miracle) that there is at least one place where the message, and thus the values of the Church are supreme. And most significantly, this supremacy is not only in the sense of what it can explain, but also what it can offer Naples in terms of self-image making and identity maintenance. Rituals are never final solutions to a problem (Bell 1992:110), and the Miracle of San Gennaro does not offer a final solution to the difficulties facing Naples, the threat posed by Vesuvius, its chronic social problems and negative image. But a recurring ritual can alleviate these tensions and put off indefinitely their escalation into full-blown crises: it can make Naples famous for a day, or promise protection from disaster for the coming year. The temporary solutions offered by the Miracle are what draws people inside the Church-dominated space. Once there, the Church takes advantage of the opportunity to offer suggestions on social

issues, most notably on family and youth, representing an effort to get Catholic values reproduced in future generations. This is not the same as forcing these discourses upon the people, who come voluntarily and partake of the message to varying degrees. What is important is that the ritual space and the messages within the Cathedral belong to the Church: it has won itself a space in which the socialization of new ritualized bodies is at possible, at least for the moment.

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