

As this is St. Philomena parish, I suspect a number of you know her story, whether it's the clues revealed from the inscription on her tomb or the details of her life, including her martyrdom at the tender age of 13, details that would be revealed in a vision so many centuries later.

But one thing that's worthy of note about her are the many miracles attributed to her intercession. There are numerous accounts of miraculous healings attributed to her heavenly prayers. St. John Vianney encouraged the faithful to invoke her intercession for their needs.

It raises the question of the intercession of the saints. Why does it seem that some are granted and others are not? It's a good question that I'll table for another occasion. But another question is regarding miracles. In the 21st century, do we really believe in miracles? A miracle maybe can be defined this way: It's something that occurs which is both amazing and improbable, and for which no explanation can be given.

While our faith calls us to be open to the miraculous, our Church carefully investigates accounts and matters that are presented as miraculous.

As we are today hearing Jesus speak about the miraculous bread that comes down from heaven that when consumed, one *will live forever*, I want to tell you about a miracle.

On August 18, 1996 in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, as he was distributing Holy Communion, a priest, Fr. Alejandro Pezet, was told that a consecrated communion host was left in the back of the church. He picked it up, and because it was contaminated, rather than consume it, he put it in a glass of water, then placed it in the tabernacle to allow it to dissolve. Eight days later, Fr. Pezet went to check on it to see if it had. He noticed that it didn't dissolve, but also didn't look like a communion host. It had morphed and seemed to have blood on it. This perplexed him, so he called the archbishop of Buenos Aires, Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio, whom we today know as Pope Francis.

Archbishop Bergoglio instructed him to have it professionally photographed. After doing so, it was returned to the tabernacle and remained there for several years, to wait and see what would happen. Nothing happened. It remained unchanged. Eventually Archbishop Bergoglio instructed that a small piece of it be sent for scientific analysis. They did not tell the doctors and scientists what it was. The study confirmed that it was muscle tissue from a human heart.

This prompted them to send another sample to an expert, a forensic pathologist in New York: Dr. Frederick Zugibe, who held a Master of Science in Anatomy/Electron Microscopy from Columbia University and a PhD in Anatomy and Histochemistry from the University of Chicago. He was known worldwide for his ability to analyze the heart of a deceased person and determine the cause of death. Again, with no awareness of what it was, this expert analyzed it and Dr. Zugibe confirmed that it was tissue from a human heart, from the wall of the left ventricle, which is the part of the heart that pumps blood throughout the body.

One thing he couldn't understand is that because it contained a large number of white blood cells, he concluded that the sample and its cells were still alive. Even more, because the white blood cells had penetrated the tissue, it indicated that the heart had been in severe stress, as if the person had been beaten severely about the chest. Dr. Zugibe asked those who had given him the sample, how it was procured and kept alive. He was stunned when they explained to him that it was a communion host from Mass.

This was not the first Eucharistic miracle. One goes back to the 8th century, the Miracle of Lanciano in Italy, and has its own amazing story. But it wasn't until the 1970s that the host from that miracle was scientifically analyzed. The two samples were compared, and it was determined that they came from the same person. Both had type AB blood, the same as what has been found on the Shroud of Turin.

Going back to what I've presented over these recent weeks, the loss of belief in the True Presence in the Eucharist, perhaps we can strengthen our belief by ensuring that our hearts ready. I'll cite three ways to help with that:

- First, by acknowledging our need for God's mercy and seeking it in regular confession. The Eucharist is not a gift we earn for good behavior, yet we recognize that we need to make our hearts ready for it. Regular confession cleanses our hearts and allows them to receive grace.
- Second, by fasting for at least an hour before receiving (including chewing gum). This clears the way for the unique gift of grace, heavenly food.
- Third, by taking time to pray before we begin Mass. It helps to focus and to open ourselves to whatever our Lord would want to reveal and to give.

One more thing. I recall once describing this story, and I noticed a young lady who happened to be in 5th grade (and thus almost the age of young Philomena), conveying her amazement to her mother as she heard the details of the Eucharistic miracle—a child's amazement. I think about how cynicism takes us over as we age—the skepticism, even as we hear the details of this miracle. And I think of Jesus' words: "...unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3-4). Let us put aside the obstinacy and hardness of our hearts. Let us have a mind that is open to this miracle and hearts that are ready.