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How Lourdes Cures Are Recognized as Miraculous

Doctors Scrutinize Each Case

LOURDES, France, FEB. 11, 2004 (Zenit.org).- Each year more than 6 million pilgrims visit the Marian shrine at the town of Lourdes, renowned for its miracle cures. But who decides when a cure is a miracle?

The Catholic Church has officially recognized 67 miracles and some 7,000 inexplicable cures since the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared in Lourdes in February 1858, as attested in the book "The Doctor in the Face of Miracles" ("Il medico di fronte ai miracoli"), written by the Italian Doctors Association.

Dr. Patrick Thiellier, director of the medical office established at the shrine to scientifically examine alleged cases of healing, collaborated in the book.

In 1905, Pope Pius X asked that all cases of alleged miracles or cures recorded in Lourdes be analyzed scientifically.

At the shrine's French-language Web page (www.lourdes-france.com) the medical office explains that its objective is to be able to declare a cure "certain, definitive and medically inexplicable."

To do so, it applies four criteria:

- "the fact and the diagnosis of the illness is first of all established and correctly diagnosed";
- "the prognosis must be permanent or terminal in the short term";
- "the cure is immediate, without convalescence, complete and lasting";
- "the prescribed treatment could not be attributed to the cause of this cure or be an aid to it."

The sick who come to Lourdes with a pilgrimage group are accompanied by a doctor who is furnished with a medical file describing their present condition.

This file forms the basis from which to work when a pilgrim declares that he has been cured. The file, and the pilgrim who claims to have been cured, are presented to the medical office. A doctor based there will then gather the members of the medical profession present in Lourdes on that day who wish to participate in the examination.

No definite conclusion is given at the end of this examination. The person who claims to have been cured will be invited to meet the medical commission the following year and possibly for many subsequent years.

Finally, after many successful examinations, the file of the cure will be sent, if three-quarters of the doctors present so wish, to the Lourdes International Medical Committee.

This second level of enquiry has existed since 1947. At first it was the Lourdes National Medical Committee; in 1954 it took on the "International" name.

The committee comprises 30 specialists, surgeons and professors or heads of department, from various countries, who meet once a year. The current president is professor Jean-Louis Armand-Laroche.

It allows an assessment to continue over several years in order to observe the development of the patient.

If the International Medical Committee gives a favorable opinion, the file is then sent to the competent Church authorities.

When the file is sent to the bishop of the place where the cured person lives, the case is already recognized as extraordinary by science and medically inexplicable.

It remains for the Church, through the intermediary of the bishop, to make an announcement on the miraculous character of the cure.

To do this, the bishop gathers together a diocesan commission made up of priests, canonists and theologians. The rules that guide the procedures of this commission are those defined in 1734 by the future Pope Benedict XIV in his treatise "Concerning the Beatification and Canonization of Servants of God" (Book IV, Part I, Chapter VIII No. 2).

In sum, the rules demand that there must not be found in the cure any valid explanation, medical or scientific, natural or usual. This is the case for the cures that have taken place at Lourdes. Having established this, it remains for the diocesan commission to determine that the cure comes from God.

Furnished with conclusions reached by the commission, it is up to the bishop to make a definitive pronouncement and to suggest to his diocese and to the world that this cure is seen as a "sign from God."