

"I BELIEVE IN THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS"

(The Story of a Miracle)

By Deacon Jack Sullivan

Part I The First Event

Is the Communion of Saints merely some vague, some theological abstraction we so often robotically recite in the Apostles Creed? To be sure, we often pray to the saints for their help and intercessions. But do they actually communicate with us? The word "Communion" is properly defined as a mutual participation, or an exchange. One would think that the saints, being bathed in the light of God's limitless love could not possibly be oblivious to our needs! I have found through my recent experiences of suffering and affliction, followed by rather dramatic healing, that they actually do communicate with us in many remarkable and meaningful ways.

This story of mine began on June 6, 2000, when I embarked on a rather incredible and mysterious journey. You see, I suddenly awoke that morning with excruciating and debilitating pain in my back and both legs. At a local hospital a Ct-Scan revealed a serious succession of lumbar disc and vertebrae deformities turning inward and literally squeezing the life out of my spinal cord, causing severe stenosis. I was in constant agony, day and night. Walking was nearly impossible as I was completely doubled over like a shrimp, only facing the ground. The ER physician insisted I seek immediate treatment from a spinal surgeon in one of the major hospitals in Boston, as my condition could easily result in permanent paralysis!

Upon receiving this news I became extremely apprehensive because it could take many months for me to find a spinal specialist, make appointments, undergo surgery, and then a long period of recovery and rehabilitation. It was now mid-summer and I remembered that I was also scheduled to begin my third year of studies in the diaconate formation program for the Archdiocese of Boston in early September. I had just completed my second year of a four year formation program leading to my ordination. And I had my heart set on returning to my classes and being ordained.

Finally, in late July, I met with the chief of spinal surgery at one of the major hospitals in Boston. After reviewing my MRI and Myelogram he stated, "Without question, yours is the worst back I've seen in all my years of performing spinal surgery." He suggested that I scrap my plans for returning to classes because I needed immediate surgery. The doctor then scheduled my surgery for early September, the same date my classes were to resume. Returning home, I was totally distraught realizing I would have drop out! I turned on the TV to get my mind off this calamity. Switching channels, I accidentally stopped at the EWTN channel. It was there that I was introduced to Cardinal John Henry Newman. The program dealt with Cardinal Newman's uniquely difficult life and the crisis he faced in his vocation as an Anglican priest.

Despite his prominent stature in the Angelican Church, he dared to do the unthinkable! Notwithstanding England's hatred for Catholics at that time, he converted to Catholicism and ultimately became a Catholic priest, and subsequently a Cardinal of the Church. As a result, he was condemned and shunned by almost all who knew him. One Newman Scholar characterized his life and spirituality as follows: "His life was indeed an agonizing journey in faith. When involved in one field of action, the ground would suddenly give way beneath him, redirecting him toward a new problem or project. Nevertheless, he persevered in faith and became one of the greatest writers in Church history, often called the father of Vatican II. One can certainly interpret from his writings a true sense of abandonment to the will of God, which represents the key to his spirituality."

At the conclusion of the program, the viewing audience was asked to submit details of any "divine favors" received after praying for Newman's intercession to the postulator for his beatification. The Church had been waiting 120 years for a miracle to beatify him. Because of this request, I prayed to him with all my heart, "Please Cardinal Newman, help me to walk so I can return to classes and be ordained." I didn't pray for complete healing for that would be too presumptuous; merely to grant me this small "divine favor" which at that time was so urgent. Then I went to bed. To my utter amazement, I woke up that following morning completely pain free, when for months I was in constant agony. Remarkably, I could walk normally with complete strength in my back and legs. But then I remembered that my surgery was scheduled in three weeks!

Because of these medical inconsistencies, I was then directed to Dr. Robert Banco who is considered one of the finest spinal surgeons in the US. When he examined me, everything appeared to be normal and perfectly functional, until he viewed the MRI and Myelogram. He was astonished to learn that my spinal condition hadn't changed at all. And yet, I had no pain or disfigurement. Totally mystified, he admitted that something uniquely remarkable was happening, "I've never seen anything like this before!" He then suggested that I should cancel my surgery and RETURN TO MY CLASSES! He couldn't recommend such difficult and dangerous surgery without any symptoms, such as pain or disfigurement. He agreed to stay with my case for, "this situation can't possibly last very long." In fact, it lasted for nine months. I was totally pain free and ambulatory throughout both semesters.

And then another disappointment! The very day after my last class in April of 2001, the pain returned in full fury! But thanks to Cardinal Newman, my prayer was answered, for remarkably, I had just completed my third year, when previously it was medically impossible to do so! Dr. Banco later recounted that there was absolutely no medical or scientific explanation as to why I was totally pain free and for so long a period of time, given the fact that my physical condition hadn't changed at all.

But now with the return of the intense and incessant pain, I definitely needed the surgery. It was scheduled for August 9, 2001. He scheduled it as soon as he could, hoping I might have sufficient time to recover for my 4th year classes beginning in early September. I was also faced with another difficult challenge that summer. As a prerequisite for entry into my fourth year, I had to complete 120 hours of pastoral internship at one of the major hospitals in Boston, requiring considerable walking. My condition that first night was so critical that I needed a wheelchair to get around. I continuously prayed to Cardinal Newman for strength to walk; otherwise, I would have to leave the program. With Cardinal Newman's help, somehow I managed to complete it!

THROUGH IT ALL, I SOON REALIZED THAT IF CARDINAL NEWMAN HAD TO UNDERGO HIS MANY TRIALS AND AFFLICTIONS AS A PRE-REQUISITE FOR ATTAINING HIS FAITH'S GOALS, SO, AFTER HIS EXAMPLE, MUST I! Influenced by Newman's insights, I concluded that so many of us today seek to attain their faith's goals without any cost or pain, without any trials or afflictions. In this connection Newman once wrote, "True religion has two sides to it, a beautiful side and a severe side. And we all will surely stray from that narrow path that leads to life, if we indulge ourselves only in what is beautiful, while casting aside what is severe." It was Newman's ongoing support that helped me to persevere through these most difficult times. I gained strength when reflecting on his renowned poem, "Lead me on kindly light of Truth amidst the encircling gloom,,, I ask not to see the distant scene; one step is enough for me." And by persevering, I begin to discern God's loving Spirit guiding me, prompting me to follow his kindly light of truth along the narrow path He had chosen for me.

Part II The Second Event

To this day Cardinal Newman continues to inspire and support me in many mysterious ways. I soon came to realize when experiencing the grueling events encompassing my internship and leading up to my healing, that I must learn to persevere patiently, after Newman's own example, always trusting in God's love. And Newman's example of faith had a profound effect upon me, as I confidently approached the awesome day of my surgery.

The surgery performed by Dr. Banco however, proved to be much more difficult than originally anticipated. My dura mater (Protective fibrous lining surrounding the spinal cord housing the spinal fluids) was very badly torn. It also seemed very unlikely that my badly damaged and compressed spinal cord would decompress to its normal size because nerve tissue normally can't regenerate. For days thereafter I continued to suffer incredible pain, day and night, with no relief in sight. Even high dosages of morphine didn't help. On the fifth day after surgery as I laid motionless in my bed, I was informed by one of the doctors that I "should forget about returning to my classes," scheduled to begin in three weeks, "because it would take many months to recover, if at all!"

Upon hearing this tragic assessment, I suddenly felt a strong urge at least, try to get out of bed; to attempt to walk! Inch by inch I slid to the edge of my bed in horrific pain. With the nurse's help I put my feet onto the cold floor, leaning on the bed with my forearms for support. It was this moment of agony and frustration that led me again to prayer. The exact same prayer I said the year before and under the same circumstances. "Please Cardinal Newman, help me to walk so that I can return to classes and be ordained."

Suddenly I felt a tremendous sensation of intense heat and a strong tingling feeling throughout my body. It seemed to last a very long time. I also felt an indescribable sense of resplendent joy and peace, the likes of which I had never encountered. It was as though I was in God's presence and lifted up to heaven! Then I felt a strong surge of strength and feeling of confidence that I could finally walk! When I began my prayer I was leaning on my bed in utter agony. But when this experience subsided, I found myself standing completely upright. I then shouted to the nurse, "I have no more pain!" And during these precious, divine moments, I had absolutely no will power of my own, nor any awareness of my affliction or surroundings, caught up, as I was in God's mysterious presence. I remember simply longing to remain in this unforgettable state; to permanently enjoy these remarkable moments!

Immediately after this experience, I began to walk upright, without any pain, and with strength in my back and legs. All I wanted to do was walk, walk without ceasing; first around my bed, out the door, up and down the corridors. I was discharged two hours later without any need for pain medication nor rehabilitation! Within a few days I was walking a mile or two daily. Oh...The date of my healing? This wondrous event occurred on August 15th, the Feast of our Lady's Assumption, body and soul into heaven. It was later determined that my recovery and regeneration of the nerve tissue of my spinal cord on that unforgettable day was unexplainably accelerated in one mysterious moment. And to everyone's astonishment, I returned to my classes on time! It was also at this time that I reported my "divine favor" to the Postulator for Newman's cause for beatification.

In an interview by the BBC, Dr. Banco concluded, "The spine is usually the size of a quarter, but in Jack's case it was compressed to the circumference of a piece of string. He should have been paralyzed long before. After the surgery, it would normally take many months, if at all, for the compressed nerves in his spine to decompress to its normal size, but with excruciating pain and severe headaches. He had none! Recovery ranges from weeks to months depending on its severity. Jack's condition was the worst I'd ever seen and surgically the most difficult! But in Jack's case, there was no period of recovery, whatsoever. You see, after his prayer to Cardinal Newman, his condition was as if he never had a spinal problem or even surgery, for that matter! There is absolutely no medical explanation for what happened to Jack. It was truly a miracle! In all my years before Jack's surgery or since, I've never seen anything like it."

One year after my surgery on September 14, 2001, the Feast of the triumph of the Cross, at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston, I was ordained a permanent deacon along with eleven of my classmates. And on that very same day - the afternoon of my ordination, I received an e-mail from the postulator for Newman's cause stating, "The fathers of the Birmingham Oratory have this day voted to formally initiate the process for the beatification of their founder, the Ven. John Henry Cardinal Newman and to take your case to Rome."

Was this notification a providential sign from God that my prayers to Cardinal Newman to be ordained were miraculously answered or merely another coincidence? I don't know. But what I do know is that it was a beautiful sign, affirming that not only did my healing come from God at Cardinal Newman's intercession, but also by persevering amidst all of my pain and suffering, some greater good would result, in terms of my recovery and subsequent ordination. Further, some higher purpose might also be achieved, that Cardinal Newman would soon be counted among the blessed in heaven!

I believe these remarkable events beautifully describe the concept of our communion with the saints in heaven. I soon realized that THIS COMMUNION IS SELDOM A ONE-TIME EVENT, BUT USUALLY AN ONGOING PROCESS OF GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT IN REVERENCE AND FRIENDSHIP ALWAYS LEADING TO SOME GREATER GOOD, SOME HIGHER PURPOSE, FAR BEYOND OURSELVES! The circumstances surrounding my recovery were definitely not a one-time event, but two events, occurring almost one year apart thereby prolonging my agonizing affliction. It was a long, convoluted, and often agonizing process with many ups and downs, twists and turns! I've been told that it took upon itself the complexion of Newman's own life. A life characterized by a systematic series of obstacles and misfortunes challenging his faith, while in the passionate pursuit of truth. AND TO REACH MY FAITH'S GOAL, I SOON REALIZED, I HAD TO TRAVEL THAT VERY SAME NARROW AND OFTEN PAINFUL PATH AS HE. We must often endure similar sorrows, and afflictions of the saint whose intercessions we seek, before we can possibly share in that saint's victory!

Part III The Beatification

For eight long years after my healing, the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints vigorously and scrupulously investigated my petition. Hospital and doctor's reports were scrutinized, testimony of witnesses were taken and transcribed at the local tribunal, and then forwarded to the Vatican. In Rome a team of spinal surgeons from all over Europe examined all the films and medical records. Thereafter, they unanimously voted by secret ballot that there was absolutely no medical or scientific explanation for my recovery. Then a team of theologians, appointed by the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints determined that my unexplainable recovery was directly linked to my intercessory prayer to Newman.

Following this the Cardinals and Archbishops comprising the Congregation meticulously examined all aspects of the case. Then on July 3, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed to the world that my healing was indeed a miracle leading to Cardinal Newman's beatification! Contrary to tradition, the Pope himself announced that he would celebrate the Mass of Beatification instead of the Prefect for the Causes of the Saints in Birmingham, England, on September 19, 2010. Cardinal Newman would be the first non-martyred saint from England since the 13th century!

Two months before the beatification Mass the Holy Father asked me to join him in Birmingham to serve as his deacon and proclaim the Gospel before 80,000 of England's faithful. The Pope also asked my wife Carol to participate by carrying Newman's official relic up to him in the sanctuary for his blessing. In doing so, I believe, the Holy Father officially acknowledged the important role and personal sacrifices deacons' wives make for the ministries of their husbands. In addition, we both were given opportunities to chat with His Holiness, to our mutual delight! I thanked him for beatifying Cardinal Newman and coming to England. Then he thanked both of us "for your gift of Blessed Cardinal Newman to the Church." Indeed, this was a day we will always treasure! I was also given a clump of his hair, the only first class relic of Newman in the world, outside of the original housed in the Birmingham Oratory.

Since Bl. Cardinal Newman's beatification, I have dedicated my ministry in both reverence and gratitude to him, WHO IS ALWAYS WITH ME! I pray daily for his kindly intercessions as well as for the prospect for Newman's canonization, whom I often call "my faithful and special friend." I have also been privileged to serve the faithful at my parish, St. Thecla in Pembroke, Massachusetts. as well as helping out at St. Paul parish in Hingham, Massachusetts. In addition, I serve as the Catholic chaplain at the prison facility in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

Furthermore, I have been very fortunate to have been invited to speak on many occasions about Bl. Cardinal Newman and my miracle to numerous parish collabratives, university Newman centers, and Newman conferences both within and outside of my state. In my talks I try to impart Newman's message of trust and confidence in God's love as well the value of perseverance to both our youth and elderly, especially when immersed in pain, trials, and afflictions. I have also been frequently asked to conduct healing services with Newman's relic. It has been responsible for many remarkable cures. Cures of people afflicted with various forms of cancer, heart disease, spinal deformities, bone fractures, etc.

Now I wish to conclude this treatise of my miracle and Bl. John Henry Cardinal Newman with a reflection that my wife Carol was asked to write as part of the official record of the Pope's visit to the United Kingdom entitled "Benedict XVI and Blessed John Henry Newman."

Reflection of Carol Sullivan:
(A tribute to all deacon's wives)

"Little did I know how much my life would change when Jack asked me for my "OK" the night before the deadline for filing his application to enter the deaconate formation program. Jack threw himself completely into the program despite the many obstacles he encountered. He persevered through many trials, but it was because of these trials that Jack experienced his miraculous recovery leading to Cardinal Newman's beatification. Since his ordination, Jack has immersed himself in his parish and prison ministries, which he loves so much! Our story since my "OK" to his application can only be described as a unique adventure in life. Something you read about in a novel, unbelievable, but true! And through it all, we both remain - very ordinary!"

May I now bless all of you with the relic of Bl. Cardinal John Henry Newman... MAY BL. JOHN HENRY CARDINAL NEWMAN INTERCEDE WITH ALMIGHTY GOD FOR ALL OF YOU, FOR ALL OF YOUR INTERTIONS AND THOSE OF YOUR FAMILIES. AND MAY ALL WHO ARE ILL, EXPERIENCE HEALING..... IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND THE SON, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Amen.