

The Baby Jesus in a Drop of Blood: Evidence, Credibility, and Truth in Post-Reformation Catholicism

Stefania Tutino

Abstract: In the spring of 1693, a strange occurrence shook up the peaceful little town of Bolsena. While visiting the site of the well-known medieval miracle, Agostino Berton, a hemp and textile seller, witnessed yet another miracle: the apparition of an image of the baby Jesus inside a drop of blood. In this essay, I examine the investigation conducted by the Roman leaders over this case and discuss its implications for the relationship between credibility and truth in seventeenth-century Catholicism. Over the course of the Middle Ages, theologians, canonists, and jurists had provided an important reconsideration of the category of credibility as both a feature of the Christian faith and a necessary (and, in some cases, sufficient) basis for legal judgment. By the early modern times, credibility had come to occupy a central place in Catholic discourse. This centrality led to novel insight into the relationship between truth and evidence, faith and belief, causing new moral, doctrinal, and epistemological tensions. My essay uses Agostino's story as a springboard to explore some of those tensions.

1. *Introduction*

This volume investigates several early modern developments of the rhetorical/forensic tradition of persuading somebody of the truth of one's case by means of arguments, clues, and conjectures, seen alongside other methods of verification and proof, such as logical or mathematical demonstrations and statistical probabilities. Taken together, the essays in this collection provide a wide-ranging discussion on how early modern culture grappled with problems of truth, knowledge, and certainty, in the face of different and at times competing intellectual, philosophical, religious, and political pressures. In this essay, I seek to approach these themes in the context of early modern Catholic theological debates, in which the discussion around proof, evidence, knowledge, and certainty was never disjointed from the issue of divinely-revealed truth. The topic of my essay is the relationship between the truth and the credibility of religious beliefs. The distinction between truth and credibility is a useful lens for us to examine how early modern Catholic theologians engaged with the dialectic between the kind of knowledge that can be attained by means of human reason, and the kind of

certainty that can be achieved by means of divinely-revealed truth. Analyzing the complexity of this dialectic, I argue, enables us both to appreciate important epistemological, theological, and cultural aspects of post-Reformation Catholicism, and to put early modern Catholic culture in conversation with wider and deeper currents in early modern European thought.

2. *Truth and Credibility in Pre-Modern Catholic Discourse*

Since at least the times of Augustine, the relationship between credibility and truth has been a central, if ambivalent and complex, aspect of Catholic theology. Augustine clearly stated that the truth of doctrine cannot be verified by means of human reason, and therefore the only reliable criterion we have to distinguish true faith from false beliefs is the authority of the Christian Church insofar as it is inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit. As he famously put it, “I would not have even believed in the Gospel unless the authority of the Catholic Church had convinced me” (*c. ep. Man.*, 5).¹ Once the Church points us in the right direction, embracing the faith is an act of the will, which we can accomplish only with the supernatural assistance of God’s grace. At the same time, Augustine also stated that the intellect does have a role to play in the process of believing. In his *De libero arbitrio* he openly stated that the Christian God, far from condemning men’s impulse to know, actually encourages it. For Augustine, however, intellectual knowledge comes after, not before, our will’s decision to believe. Quoting the verse in the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus told his audience “seek, and ye shall find”, Augustine commented that “what is believed without being known cannot be said to have been found, and nobody is able to find God unless he comes to know what he has first believed” (*de lib. arb.* 2.2).² In other words, while Augustine insisted that the Christian faith is certainly knowable and therefore credible, at the same time he also stated that no dogma of faith is credible enough for us to believe it on account of its credibility alone.

By the Middle Ages, Augustine’s teaching concerning the nature of religious belief was not the only alternative available to Catholic theologians, but it had

¹ “Ego vero Evangelio non crederem, nisi me catholicae Ecclesiae commoveret auctoritas”. For a discussion of the implications of Augustine’s distinction between ‘believing’ and ‘believing in’ in the development of the Western Christian notion of belief see Shagan (2018: 48-55).

² “[N]am neque inventum dici potest, quod incognitum creditur; neque quisquam inveniendō Deo fit idoneus, nisi ante crediderit quod est postea cogniturus. Quapropter Domini praeceptis obtemperantes quaeramus instanter”. The bibliography on the nature, development, and implications of this aspect of Augustine’s theology is veritably immense. Among the classic works, see Holte (1962); van Fleteren (1973). For a recent and synthetic overview on Augustine’s thought concerning the relationship between faith and knowledge see Kenney (2015).

become the authoritative one. There were at least two reasons for this. First, Augustine's insistence on the authority of the Church as the only criterion for truth reinforced the epistemological, and not simply theological, supremacy of the ecclesiastical leaders. Secondly, Augustine successfully navigated between two extremes: the classically inspired rationalism that condemned any belief that could not be reasonably proved, and the anti-rationalist or mystical view that belief was not merely prior but necessarily antithetical to human reason.

Thanks in large part to the long reach of this aspect of Augustinian theology, credibility had become an important feature of both the theological and the juridical medieval debates. From the theological point of view, Aquinas's view on the relationship between reason and faith reaffirmed and in fact reinforced Augustine's and provided a crucially influential model of how to integrate credibility into religious belief. Aquinas claimed that the Christian faith (unlike other religions or systems of belief) was perfectly compatible with right reason, though he admitted that some aspects of the Christian doctrine, such as the mystery of the Trinity, are impossible to understand fully by means of intellectual arguments and must be believed by faith.³ Despite his insistence on the compatibility between knowledge and faith, and more particularly on the credible nature of the true faith (at least to the extent that faith can be credible), Aquinas clearly stated that belief is primarily an act of the will rather than the intellect. Although believing requires intellectual assent, that assent derives "not by reason, but by will" (*ST, IIa IIae*, q2, a1).⁴ To put it differently, for Aquinas our intellect is tasked with assenting to the true faith, but it is our will, inspired by faith, that directs the intellect to embrace the true doctrine.

From the point of view of the juridical debates, medieval canonists and jurists realized that even though, in principle, the goal of any juridical procedure was that of finding out the truth of the facts, nevertheless there were many instances in which arriving at a certain knowledge of the truth was impossible. Some cases involved acts that, by their nature, were not committed in front of witnesses and for which there was no factual evidence; other times the facts under dispute had happened long before the trial took place, and therefore all evidence was lost and any potential witness was long dead. In all those cases, canonists and jurists allowed the defendants to prove their cases by means of witnesses *de credulitate* rather than *de scientia*-witnesses, that is, who could attest to the credibility of the accused rather than to the truth of the facts.⁵ Also,

³ See especially Aquin. *ST, IIa IIae*, q8, a2, and q9 a1.

⁴ Two recent and useful introductions to this aspect of Aquinas's thought are Stump (2003) and Bauerschmidt (2013).

⁵ See Bassani (2012). On the role of witnesses in canon law see also Fiori (2013).

over the course of the Middle Ages jurists progressively allowed more and more room for the judges to issue their sentence based not on the certainty of truth, but on the conviction that one of the party had provided a more credible version of the events than the other.⁶

Medieval theologians, then, recognized that the credibility of Christian beliefs was an important component of faith, and that it was certainly subordinate, though not antithetical, to the divinely-revealed truth of the dogmas. Yet, they did not always agree on when human reason reached its limit and had to give way to the grace of God. Likewise, even though jurists and canonists realized that the certainty of the truth of the facts was sometimes out of reach, they did not always agree on the probatory value of testimonies *de credulitate* and on the extent to which it was morally safe and legally legitimate for a judge to use reasonable conjectures to issue his sentence. For all these reasons, the boundaries between credibility and truth were not set and fixed, but rather mutable and often contested.

In the early modern times, the need to find a balance between things that needed to be believed on faith and things that needed to be proven by reason became distinctively urgent for Catholic theologians, for several reasons. First, the Protestant Reformation made it more necessary (and more difficult) to mark the boundaries not only between orthodoxy and heresy, but also between devotion and superstition.⁷ The Catholic effort to convert new souls on a global scale introduced new forms of unbelief and compelled European theologians to find new strategies to address them.⁸ The revival of skepticism and historical Pyrrhonism forced Catholic theologians and intellectuals to present ever more solid evidence of the credibility of their faith.⁹ Finally, new developments in natural philosophy put pressure on the traditional view of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural.¹⁰

Because of these factors, the credibility of Christian belief, that is, the plausibility and believability of the truth of Catholic doctrines, assumed a central role in the post-Reformation Catholic discourse. This led to novel and significant epistemological, doctrinal, and moral tensions, as Catholic leaders tried to come

⁶ See Ullmann (1946); Franklin (2015: 28-33); Damaška (2019: 33-34). For the epistemological contributions of theology to the development of modern European law see also Whitman (2008).

⁷ On increased importance of credibility in post-Reformation Catholic theology see Motta (2005: 197-214).

⁸ On the epistemological consequences of the global missionary enterprise see Županov (1999); Fabre (2007).

⁹ In addition to Popkin (2003), see Dooley (1999) and Paganini (2008).

¹⁰ On the relationship between the natural and the supernatural in miraculous apparitions see Clark (2007); on the role of medicine in validating sanctity see Siraisi (2001) Bouley (2017).

to terms with a complex and diverse set of devotional, polemical, and theological challenges.¹¹

Naturally, Catholic theologians knew that proving the credibility of the faith was not the same as proving its truth, and that the level of certainty, the argumentative strategies, and the nature of evidence and proofs pertaining to the latter were different from the ones pertaining to the former. As Catholic intellectual and institutional leaders reasserted the infallible certainty of the truth of the Church of Rome, they refined with increasing precision and sophistication their methods to evaluate the strength of philosophical arguments and the authenticity of historical documents used in support of its credibility.¹²

Despite this novel attention to credibility and plausibility, however, we should not forget that early modern people lived in a cultural, intellectual, and social environment in which human truths coexisted with supernatural truths, and therefore the presence of the divine was not only the center of their daily lives, but also the foundation of their epistemological universe. Furthermore, the supernatural is, by definition, beyond the boundaries not simply of the law of nature, but also of human cognitive abilities: the credibility of the supernatural depends not on human corroboration, but on divine revelation. Precisely because the Church needed to cultivate the true supernatural and protect it from human fraud and deceit, it relied increasingly more regularly on the historical and critical method, which could help Catholic theologians, historians, and scholars to sort out the divine wheat from the fraudulent chaff. Yet, negotiating between dual needs – to promote the truth of doctrine on the one hand and to establish its credibility on the other – was often problematic. This does not mean that the Catholic leaders always sacrificed the credible on the altar of the true. Rather, it means that the relationship between true, reasonable, and credible presented specific challenges for them. This essay examines a small episode in the history of seventeenth-century Catholicism, whose implications can help us explore some of those challenges.

3. *The Miracle(s) of Bolsena*

In the spring of 1693, a strange occurrence shook up the peaceful little town of Bolsena. This was situated in the northern part of the Lazio region in central Italy, next to the eponymous lake. The person unwittingly responsible for the commotion was Agostino Berton, a hemp and textile seller from the Susa Valley

¹¹ See Tutino (2022).

¹² On the link between historical authenticity, documentary criticism, confessional politics, and theology see Prosperi (1991); Grafton (1991; 2009), Quantin (2011).

(in the Piedmont region of northern Italy). Every year, Agostino spent about six months at home gathering his inventory, and six months traveling throughout the Italian peninsula to sell his merchandise. The town of Bolsena was one of his regular stops. Despite having visited the town many times, Agostino had never seen what was probably Bolsena's most famous site: the church of St. Cristina, which in the thirteenth century had been the setting of a much-celebrated miracle.

As the story goes, in the early 1260s a Bohemian priest who secretly harbored doubts over Christ's real presence in the Eucharist happened to be in Bolsena, and asked to celebrate mass in the church of St. Cristina. When the time came to consecrate the bread into the body of Christ, the Bohemian priest began to think about his doubts. As he broke up the wafer after the consecration, a few drops of blood fell from the sacred host, staining both the altar marble and the corporal. This showed not only the priest but everyone else in attendance that the body of Christ was truly present in the Eucharist. Since the Middle Ages, people had been venerating those stained objects as relics. The corporal was (and still is) preserved in the Duomo of Orvieto, while the stained marble slabs of the altar remained in the church of St. Cristina, protected by glass and covered by shutters.

During Agostino's visit to Bolsena in the spring of 1693, one of the local clergymen, surprised to learn that Agostino had never visited the church, invited him to see the miraculous marble slabs. Agostino, by his own admission, was not entirely convinced that "the true blood of our Lord Jesus Christ" had stained the marble. As he told the local ecclesiastical authorities, "I didn't believe in it too much, but I didn't believe in it too little either; I sort of believed in it so and so". Thus, when he was taken to see the marble slabs, he accepted the invitation not so much out of "devotion" as curiosity, "just to see" the source of so much excitement (ACDF, St St H 3 b, fol. 68r).¹³ When the priest began opening the shutters and revealing the marble slabs one by one, Agostino maintained his moderately skeptical attitude [...] until he saw the last slab. As Agostino looked at the blood stains in that last piece of marble, a vision started to materialize in front of his eyes: "a tiny baby, beautiful, white, and naked, who was moving toward me" (fol. 67r).¹⁴

¹³ "[I]nterrogato circa la sua credenza, se quelle gocce [sic] fossero vero sangue di Cristo Sig. nostro, rispuose [sic]: 'Io all'ora non ci credevo né troppo né poco, ma così via via, né ci havevo divozione, ma stavo così così a vedere' e soggiunge che dopo aperta la cassetta e veduto il detto bambino, all'ora credette che fosse vero sangue". The "Relazione de prodigii succeduti in Bolsena" can be found in: Vatican City, ACDF, St St H 3 b, fols. 67r-78v.

¹⁴ "[A]sserì d'haver veduto nella 4.a che dal proposto fu aperta in ultimo luogo, e sta nel pavimento avanti l'altare, un piccolo bambino, bello, bianco, e nudo, e si veniva muovendo".

Immensely moved by this vision, Agostino started to shout the names of Jesus and Mary, telling everybody about the baby. The people around Agostino gathered to look at the slab, and as Agostino showed them where the baby was, a few of them said that they, too, could see the child on the bloody marble. In the following days, more and more people gathered to see the bloody stains, and quite a few seemed to have the same vision that Agostino had had. The local clergymen were immediately on the case, and began interrogating Agostino as well as other witnesses present at the time of the presumed apparition. A few days later, mindful of the sudden and widespread excitement that Agostino's vision had provoked in and around the city, Cardinal Savo Millini, the Archbishop of Orvieto, decided to go to Bolsena and personally conduct a full-blown investigation.

4. *The Investigation*

Cardinal Millini's diligence demonstrates the scrutiny to which the seventeenth-century Curia wanted to subject all miracles, prodigies, and supernatural intervention. By their very nature, divine occurrences could not be fully verified by human means, but a thorough and scrupulous investigation could help ascertain that those occurrences were neither the work of the devil nor the results of human fraud and deceit.¹⁵

In addition to the discerning attitude that the seventeenth-century Curia manifested toward all miraculous events, we should remember that visions and apparitions specifically were the object of intense debate in early modern Europe. As Stuart Clark has shown, over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, interpreting and judging the theological and epistemological significance of visions had become "vastly more complex and precarious" than ever before. Several intellectuals, philosophers, art theorists, and students of medicine and psychology had begun questioning the extent to which human vision could or did provide a faithful representation of the outside reality. Insofar as religious apparitions were concerned, Catholic theologians who wanted to validate the truth and orthodoxy of visions had to grapple with two specific sets of objections. The first came from the Protestants, who attacked the Catholic insistence on miraculous apparitions and divine visions as the result of the clergy's frauds and/or the devil's work; the second set came from the growing cohort of skeptics who believed that visions and apparitions had no supernatural origin but were rather the effects of bodily or mental illnesses, or the prod-

¹⁵ On the attitude of the seventeenth-century Curia toward these supernatural occurrences see Tutino (2020).

ucts of human imagination.¹⁶ For all of these reasons, then, Agostino's vision was immediately and accurately scrutinized by the local ecclesiastical leaders.

Much to the disappointment of the local devotees in Bolsena, who were excited by the prodigy of the already miraculous slabs, the initial investigation uncovered some upsetting details. First of all, the testimony of Agostino, the first and most important witness to the miracle, quickly started to lose some of its credibility. Given the spiritual magnitude, as it were, of Agostino's alleged vision, the local ecclesiastical authority interrogated him several times over the course of a few weeks, but Agostino kept changing his story, exposing "a few contradictions". At the beginning Agostino "assertively affirmed" that he had seen a baby; indeed, he had told quite a few people that what he saw was "certainly and without a doubt a baby". Yet when asked about his vision in the following days, he backtracked his earlier statement, stating not that he saw a baby but rather "thought he could see something whose shape resembled that of a baby". One time Agostino told the ecclesiastical judge that the baby in question "was lying on top of the drop of blood, was about as long as half of my index finger", and seemed to have "all the limbs that a baby must have, that is, a little head, the arms, and the legs". The next time he was interrogated, Agostino retracted again. He declared, in the presence of the archbishop, "I do not remember the position the baby was in", attributing the faultiness of his memory to the fact that as soon as he saw the baby, "my insides got turned upside down, and the fear and awe that I felt made me too distracted to look carefully". During his last interrogation, Agostino seemed even less certain: "I cannot verify and say for certain that it was a baby, but I think I saw it". In fact, Agostino's best piece of evidence for the truth of his vision was not his clear memory and recollection, but rather "all the commotion and fear of God that I felt inside" as a consequence of the vision. Agostino believed this clearly indicated that what he saw "must have been a baby", for otherwise he wouldn't have reacted with such powerful emotion (ACDF, St St H 3 b, fols. 67r-68r).¹⁷

¹⁶ On the epistemological difficulties in interpreting religious visions see Clark (2007: 161-235, quot. at 205).

¹⁷ "Questo fatto però non ha altra prova se non la deposizione del detto Agostino, quale anche patisce qualche contradizione, poiché nella prima che fece alle grotte dice assertivamente: 'Viddi in questa goccia di sangue un piccolo bambino, bello, bianco, e nudo, e si veniva muovendo, et ad altra voce dissi agli astanti che vedevo detto bambino e lo vedevo indubitatamente e col dito indice glielo dimostravo'. Ma nell'altra data in Orvieto alli 19 dice: 'Mi pareva di vedere un bambino più presto che altra cosa'. [...] Dice ancora che 'giaceva steso sopra la goccia di detto sangue a corpo di sopra et era appunto longo circa mezzo dito, et osservai benissimo che detto bambino haveva tutte le parti che deve havere un bambino, cioè la testina, le braccia, le gambe'. Nell'altro esame poi fatto in Orvieto alla presenza del S. Card. Mellini Vescovo il giorno seguente dice: 'Non mi ricordo in qual positura stasse, cioè se steso da una parte o dall'altra, poiché in riguardo d'esser mi subito rivoltato tutto il

In addition to Agostino's contradictory statements, another piece of bad news came from the history of the site. Digging among the historical accounts of the miraculous slabs, the local ecclesiastical authorities had found that no source ever mentioned a baby. Some sources reported that some people had seen one of the blood stains assume the shape of the *Hecce homo*, but the image of Christ crucified was not exactly the same as the image of a tiny white baby.¹⁸

Despite all this, however, local clergymen were not yet ready to discount Agostino's vision. First, they reasoned that the inconsistencies in Agostino's depositions could be attributed to "the commotion he felt" as he had his vision, not to mention the "fear that in one of his examinations the Cardinal [Millini] instilled in him, threatening him with all sorts of terrible corporeal punishments in case of perjury". With a slightly polemical hint, the local authorities noted that the undue pressure from the Bishop might have convinced Agostino to qualify his earlier certainty and specify that he only "seemed" to have seen the baby (ACDF, St St H 3 b, fols. 68v-69r).¹⁹ In addition, a few other people who were present when Agostino saw the baby confirmed that they too saw a baby in the blood. What is more, the local authorities mentioned that when Cardinal Millini celebrated mass in that same church a few days after the vision, he personally saw that in another marble slab "it was possible to clearly see the portrait of our Lord Jesus Christ inside the drop of blood". The archbishop's opinion that one of the blood stains had taken the shape of Jesus's effigy was confirmed by a few witnesses, including Ludovico de Megliorati, who was "the medical doctor" serving the region (fol. 69v).²⁰ Of course, the cardinal and the doctor saw something very different than Agostino did: the effigy of

sangue, e per il timore e tremore che havevo non ci abbadai più che tanto'. E più a basso ad un altro interrogatorio risponde: 'Non posso verificare e dire se quello certamente fosse un bambino, ma mi parve di vederlo e dall'essermi tribolato et essendomi venuto anche il sudore con sentirmi dentro me stesso con più timor d'Iddio per questo credo che quello fosse un bambino, come ho detto'".

¹⁸ See ACDF, St St H 3 b, fols. 72r-73r.

¹⁹ "Ancora si ponderi, se le suddette contradizioni tra la prima deposizione di Agostino e l'altra che fece alla presenza del S. Card. vescovo possino toglierli la fede, mentre possono forse attribuirsi allo stordimento che provò in quell'atto, et al terrore che nell'altro esame gli pose il S. Cardinale minacciandogli oltre lo spergiuro anche le gravissime pene corporali se avesse depresso il falso, si come S. Em.a dice, che ciò fece per assicursi bene della verità in materia così grave. Onde può essere che Agostino intimorito modificasse l'aparizione [sic] fatta nel primo esame con dire 'mi pareva'".

²⁰ "L'altro prodigio veramente notabile e concludentissimamente provato, qual parimente può conferire a comprovare la detta apparizione del bamibino consiste in che havendo voluto il S. Card. col suo zelo verificare il suddetto fatto, et essendosi perciò trasferito a Bolsena come si è detto, dopo haver celebrato la messa nella grotta la detta mattina de 21 ove stanno le dette sante reliquie coll'intervendo di Mon. Governatore che si rogò dell'atto, come protonotario apostolico, e di altre persone qualificate fece aprire le 4 cassette e [...] fu osservato da Lodovico de Megliorati medico della terra che nella sagra pietra esistente nella prima cassetta si vedeva in mezzo della goccia del sangue l'effigie di nostro S. Giesù Cristo".

Christ is not the same as the image of a baby, and besides, the two visions did not even appear on the same marble slab. But the local authorities reasoned that the second vision, confirmed by a few trustworthy people including a cardinal and a medical doctor, was evidence that something miraculous was indeed going on in Bolsena; in turn, this would at least partially corroborate Agostino's vision.

Most importantly, those recent supernatural activities did not appear out of the blue, as it were. Since they happened at the site of a much older and exceedingly well-established miracle, they served not as an inspiration to create some kind of new devotion, but rather as a way to reinforce an existing one. And because the protagonist of all those supernatural events, both in the thirteenth and in the seventeenth centuries, was none other than the Eucharist, the local clergymen concluded that those recent prodigies were to be celebrated because they would "much contribute to further instill in the people's heart the veneration for the most holy Sacrament" (ACDF, St St H 3 b, fol. 77v).²¹

5. *The Credibility of Miracles and the Truth of Doctrine*

The report prepared by the local ecclesiastical leaders in Bolsena provides a fascinating view into the difficulties of harmonizing the concerns for credibility with the need to promote the truth. On the one hand, local clergymen were perfectly in step with the seventeenth-century Curia's renewed attention to credibility and authenticity in matters of miracles. They did not hesitate to launch an investigation into Agostino's vision, and were not shy to admit the factors that discredited the authenticity of the prodigy and undermined the credibility of its main witness. On the other hand, the local clergymen also knew that at some point, the push to investigate a dubious vision must leave room for the necessity of promoting an orthodox and meritorious manifestation of faith.

In other words, the clergymen in Bolsena realized that something about Agostino's vision of the baby did not add up, but they also realized that his dubious vision did not sanctify a new site or promote a new cult. Rather, it served as a way to renew the memory of an ancient, well-established, and fully verified miracle, which would rekindle the people's devotion to the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Thus, while they acknowledged that Agostino's story lacked credibility, at the same time they did not endorse credulity. Since it was possible

²¹ "Pare dunque [sic] che l'uno e l'altro di questi prodigii si possano dire provati ma particolarmente il 2 e che debbano molto conferire per accendere maggiormente i cuori alla venerazione del SS sacramento".

to fold Agostino's story into a series of other 'smaller' prodigies, which were in turn anchored to a 'big' and officially verified miracle, they thought this was a perfect example of when reason should make room for faith.

The local clergymen thought that this strategy of downplaying not only the contradictions of Agostino's vision, but also its value as a specific and individual miracle, allowed them to bring this story to a satisfactory and definitive end. Since people venerated the relics of St. Cristina because of a thirteenth-century miracle that had been fully certified and approved, there was no need to further investigate the credibility of Agostino's vision; that vision was not a specific and individual miracle but rather a simple confirmation of the pre-existing one, and as such a reminder of the holy power of the Eucharist.

Yet one loose end remained. As Agostino had repeatedly told his interrogators, before his vision he had had some doubts about the miraculous marble slabs; Cardinal Millini believed it was necessary to get to the bottom of those doubts and make sure that Agostino was not harboring potentially heretical thoughts. So as soon as the investigation ended, Cardinal Millini returned to Rome bringing not only a copy of the official report on the case but also Agostino Berton himself. Millini sent all the paperwork over to the Roman Inquisitors and told them that Agostino was willing to come to them voluntarily; in this way they could examine him and absolve him for any sin he might have committed, "so that in due course he can go back to his town" (ACDF, St St H 3 b, fol. 64r).²²

On May 1, 1693, Agostino appeared in the tribunal of the Holy Office and gave his deposition. He told the Roman Inquisitors the story of his visit to the church of St. Cristina, and that "I saw, or I believed that I saw, a baby in the middle of a blood stain" in one of the miraculous marble slabs (ACDF, St St H 3 b, fol. 80r).²³ He also confessed that during the visit to the church, "I had some doubts, and maybe I didn't believe that those blood stains were the true blood

²² "Avendomi oggi NS comandato ch'io facci pervenire in mano di VS Ill.ma il processo di quanto è ultimamente occorso nella terra di Bolsena della mia diocesi d'Orvieto [...] gliene accludo il transunto in forma pubblica, accioché possa esaminarsi dalla Sacra Congrega.ne. E perché Agostino Berton si trova qui, venuto meco, e ha necessità di sbrigarsi sollecitamente per andarsene al suo paese ove si era incamminato, prego perciò VS Ill. ma dopo che avrà veduto detto processo ad avvisarmi quando dovrò mandarlo da lei, accioché ella e il P. Commissario possano sentirlo". Millini's letter to the *assessor* of the Holy Office, 28 April 1693, can be found in: Vatican City, ACDF, St St H 3 b, fol. 64r.

²³ "D'ordine del Sig. Card. Mellini son comparso a questo SO perché essendo io stato esaminato pochi giorni sono tanto alle grotte quanto a Bolsena come anche in Orvieto sopra l'haver io veduto un bambino cioè di parermi d'haver veduto un bambino in mezzo d'una goccia di sangue che si conserva accanto la chiesa di S. Christina di Bolsena nel luogo ove dicono il luogo del santissimo miracolo". Agostino's deposition to the Roman Inquisitors can be found in in: Vatican City, ACDF, St St H 3 b, fols. 80r-82v.

of Jesus Christ". Agostino specified that he was never certain that the blood was *not* Jesus's; he simply didn't fully believe that it was, and "this kind of incredulity and doubt lasted just until I saw that blood drops in the last slab", along with the miraculous baby. As soon as he had the vision, Agostino experienced a powerful internal and spiritual commotion that "made my blood curl and filled me with devotion". Right there and then "my doubts and incredulity abruptly ended, and I firmly believed not only that those blood stains truly were the ones that fell from the wafer consecrated by that incredulous priests, but also that they truly were the blood of Jesus Christ". Agostino was sure that his vision could not be the result of any heretical thought or devilish trick; after all, it was that vision that put an end to his doubts and made him into a firm believer. Yet he also knew that harboring doubts about the miracle might have been an error, and he had "come to this Tribunal to ask for forgiveness" for it (fol. 81r-v).²⁴

After Agostino finished his account, the Inquisitors asked him to elaborate on the exact nature of his doubts. Did he ever question that the consecrated host does in fact contain the real body of Christ? Agostino immediately reassured the Inquisitors that as far as the doctrine of the real presence went, he had never believed anything other than the true and orthodox doctrine of the Church.²⁵ The Inquisitors then asked again: could Agostino "explain in detail the doubt and incredulity" he harbored concerning those blood stains in the marble? Agostino repeated that he was "doubtful and rather incredulous of the fact that those blood stains were the true blood of Christ". Agostino explained that "I have never seen those blood drops actually dripping from the host", which is what had happened to the doubtful Bohemian priest in the thirteenth century. Had Agostino personally witnessed the miracle, he said, "I would cer-

²⁴ "[I]nvitato [underl. in ms.] dal Sig. prevosto di Bolsena di cui non so il nome a vedere dette gocce di sangue vi andai a vederle e rimirando quelle che erano sopra le pietre incastrate nel muro stavo dubioso, e parevami di non credere che quel sangue fosse sangue vero di Giesù Christo parendomi d'essere incredulo circa ciò, e questa incredulità e dubio mi durò sin tanto che io viddi quella goccia di sangue che era posta sopra la pietra situata alla parte destra di detto altare, qual goccia mi parve più bella e più fresca dell'altre et all' hora mi si cominciò a commovere il cuore et il mio sangue internamente e poi totalmente mi si commosse quando al lume d'una torcia accesa io viddi e mi parve di vedere in detta goccia di sangue un bambino di carne in mezzo alla detta goccia et all' hora mi cessò totalmente il dubio e l' incredulità e fermamente credei che quelle gocce di sangue realmente fossero di quelle che caderono dalla sudetta ostia spezzata dal sudetto sacerdote incredulo e fermamente credi [sic] che quelle fossero gocce di sangue di Giesù Christo per la gran commotione che io sentii in me stesso che mi cagionò sudori e gran devotione e se havessi errato in tal mio dubio et incredulità sopradetta io son venuto qua a domandarne perdono a questo S. tribunale".

²⁵ "Inter. an credat et semper crediderit quod in ostia rite consecrata ab omni sacerdote sit verum corpus et verus sanguis DN Jesu Christi. Res. Io credo et ho sempre creduto che nell'ostie e nelle particole consecrate da sacerdoti nel modo che comanda S.Chiesa e Christo sig. nostro vi sia il vero corpo e sangue di Giesù Christo e che quelli che si comunicano ricevono il corpo e sangue di Nost. Sig". (ACDF, St St H 3 b, fol. 81v).

tainly have believed without any doubt whatsoever that the blood coming from the host was Jesus Christ's". Evidently, Agostino thought that in order to believe in a miracle, he needed some kind of proof. Seeing "that baby in that blood stain" provided the confirmation that Agostino needed, which is why after that vision "I had that extraordinary spiritual commotion and immediately believed, as I still today believe, that those blood stains were the blood of Jesus Christ" (ACDF, St St H 3 b, fols. 81v-82r).²⁶

From his responses to the Inquisitors, we can glean that Agostino had some kind of personal theory on how credibility and faith should be balanced. The dogmas of the Catholic religion, he thought, should be embraced by faith, and no proof was required of their truth other than the fact that the Church taught them as such. This is why Agostino never doubted the doctrine of real presence. For miracles and prodigies, on the other hand, Agostino thought that the standard was different: they had to be credible in order to be believed, and seeing them with one's own eyes provided sufficient evidence that they had truly happened.

The Roman Inquisitors could not find any fault with Agostino's way of thinking about truth and credibility. The seventeenth-century Roman Curia, after all, did not seek or want to promote credulity, because credulous people were pray to all sorts of superstitions, unorthodox beliefs, and unregulated forms of devotion. While Agostino's attempt to differentiate between what needed to be believed on faith and what required some kind of credible evidence might not exactly mirror the terms of the theological debate over the boundaries between truth and credibility, evidently the Roman censors didn't find it erroneous either. After listening to Agostino's explanation concerning the nature of his earlier doubt and the reason for his newfound certainty, the Inquisitors dismissed him with no penalty and no requirements other than the standard obligation to keep the interrogation in the strictest confidence.²⁷

A couple of days later, Agostino's vision was further examined by the *consultores* of the Holy Office to verify that nothing inappropriate had occurred. On

²⁶ "Int. ut distincte explicet in quo consistebat eius dubium, seu incredulitas, in ordine ad dictas guttas sanguinis positas supra dictas petras marmoreas. Res. Io ero dubioso et alquanto incredulo che quelle gocce di sangue poste sopra dette pietre di marmo e mostratemi dal detto Sig. prevosto fosse vero sangue di Giesù Christo perché io non havevo vedute dette gocce né detto sangue grondare dall'ostia consecrata e se io havessi veduto grondar sangue dalla sudetta o da altr'ostia consecrata haverei certo creduto e credere che il sangue che grondasse fosse sangue di Giesù Christo e non vi haverei dubio alcuno, e dico che doppo che io viddi quel bambino in detta goccia e che mi sentii internamente quella grandissima commotione subito credi [sic] e credo anche adesso che dette gocce di sangue siano sangue di Giesù Christo".

²⁷ "Quibus habitis et acceptatis, dimissus fuit cum impositione silentii sub iuramento quod praestitit tactis sacris etc, et ex quo dic. se nescire scribere, facit signum crucis". (ACDF, St St H 3 b, fol. 82r).

May 4, the *consultores* found no doctrinal fault, and therefore believed that the Holy Office should no longer be concerned with this case. Two days later, the Inquisitors approved the resolution of the *consultores* and left the Archbishop, Cardinal Millini, in charge of the next steps.²⁸

We have no record of any official decision taken by Millini or any other prelate concerning Agostino and his vision. As far as the Roman leaders were concerned, Agostino Berton disappeared into oblivion: nobody else within the Curia was ever again confronted with him or his vision. This is a good indication not only that the Roman authorities had no interest in further investigating Agostino, but also that neither Millini nor any other local ecclesiastical leader had any interest in promoting the supernatural aspects of the story of Agostino's vision. The church of St. Cristina did not need another recent and relatively dubious miracle, because it could already count on the well-established and fully accepted medieval one. To put it differently, Millini and his colleagues both in Bolsena and in Rome agreed that the only purpose of the baby's apparition in the blood stain might well have been to get rid of Agostino's incredulity and make him believe that the medieval miracle was both credible and true.

This is exactly the way in which Agostino's story would be framed forty years later, in one of the few (if not the only) instance in which Agostino's name resurfaced. In 1731, the apostolic protonotary of Orvieto Andrea Pennazzi published a lengthy history of the medieval miracle of Bolsena, accompanied by a rich account of the relics connected with it and the reliquary in which they were kept in the Duomo of Orvieto.²⁹ The aim of this work was that of promoting both the devotion to the Eucharist, and the centrality of the diocese of Orvieto in that devotion, reinforcing the tradition – later refuted by Ludovico Antonio Muratori and many other scholars – according to which the miracle of Bolsena was instrumental in convincing Pope Urban IV to establish the feast of the *Corpus Domini*.

In a section devoted to narrate all the supernatural events and prodigies associated with the site and relics of the original miracle, Pennazzi made a brief mention of Agostino Berton's vision. Pennazzi was not interested in defending the truth of the apparition, and in fact he openly admitted that several people, including high-ranking clergymen, were skeptical because they believed that "if the vision of the baby Jesus had been really true, God would have allowed other people to see this miracle" and not solely Agostino. Thus, they judged it

²⁸ "Fer. 2 die 4 Maii 1693; DD Consultores fuerunt in voto in causa apparitionis del bambino e testa di Salvatore in guttis sacris existentibus in ecclesia S. Christianae Vultinii nihil extare spectans ad SO, ideoque causam remittendam esse E.mo Millini episcopo Urb. iuxta formam concilii. Feria 4 die 6 Maii 1693, E. mi approbaverunt dictum votum DD Consultorum". (ACDF, St St H 3 b, fol. 63r).

²⁹ See Pennazzi (1731). On the reliquaries and especially the Corporal see Freni (2000).

more likely that the baby Jesus was the fruit of “Agostino’s imagination and not a true apparition” (1731: 90).³⁰

This widespread skepticism, however, was not a problem for Pennazzi, because the apparition of the baby Jesus was not the miracle he wanted to tell. Rather, the miracle was the conversion of Agostino himself, from doubt and incredulity to complete faith. In this respect, Pennazzi thought that Agostino’s vision was a perfect reenactment of the original (and true) medieval miracle: just as the medieval miracle occurred in order to “remove any shadow of infidelity from the priest who celebrated Mass in Bolsena”, so in his infinite mercy God almost wanted to renew the miracle in order to remove also Agostino’s incredulity” (1731: 88).³¹

6. *Conclusion*

Agostino Berton was involved in a miracle that the ecclesiastical authorities, after conducting a thorough investigation, did not judge credible enough to be believed. Despite all the inconsistencies in Agostino’s account, however, no one seemed to suggest that Agostino had made up the story. Indeed, the only thing that Agostino gained from his vision was a newly strengthened faith, and therefore the Inquisitors who interrogated never doubted that Agostino had behaved with good intentions and were overall pleased with the outcome of his visions.

I am not trying to prove that the ecclesiastical authorities were right (or wrong) in their assessment of this case; I am neither able to, nor interested in, establishing Agostino’s ‘real’ motivations. The point I seek to make is that from the perspective of the seventeenth-century ecclesiastical authority, good faith did not necessarily produce ‘right’ faith (just as, by the same token, bad faith did not necessarily result in doctrinal punishment). In other words, even though the censors knew that faith cannot be reduced to a matter of reasonable evidence and demonstrable proofs, it must include a measure of credibility. Conversely, the ecclesiastical leaders of course believed that making up miracles is not acceptable, and yet they also realized that credibility must sometimes take a step back to protect faith.

³⁰ “[A]lcuni erano di parere e fermamente credevano...che se la veduta del Bambino fosse veramente vera, Iddio con questo accesso avrebbe anche ad altri scoperto il Miracolo per la sua gloria. [...] e tanto più che vi era chi credeva [...] il Bambino apparso essere immaginazione di Agostino, e non apparizione reale”.

³¹ “[S]iccome Iddio per toglier l’ombra dell’infedeltà del Sacerdote che celebrò in Bolsena stillò Sangue dall’Ostia sacratissima...così la sua misericordia infinita volle quasi rinovare il Miracolo ravvivando quelle Gocce sacratissime del suo Sangue su quelle Pietre sparso, e facendovisi anche vedere, per togliere altresì l’incredulità d’Agostino”.

This ambivalence is a manifestation of the complexity of the relationship between certainty and probability, revealed truth and credible knowledge, faith and reason. While the advent of modern secular reason has undoubtedly changed the intellectual, cultural, social, and political context in which these debates take place, I don't think it has eliminated the complexity entirely. In fact, even our modern secular society is steeped in moral and epistemological uncertainty, and the process of distinguishing between facts and opinions, evidence and arguments, proofs and conjectures is not easier today than it was five hundred years ago – in many ways, it might have become even more difficult. Perhaps learning how our predecessors tried to come to terms with their doubts in this regard might help us to understand better the roots of our own.

Stefania Tutino
UCLA
tutino@history.ucla.edu

References

1. Manuscript sources

Vatican City, ACDF, St St H 3 b.

2. Primary sources

Aquinas, Thomas, 1948, *Summa theologiae*, ed. by Pietro Caramello, 5 vols, Marietti, Rome and Turin.

Augustine, 1841a, *De libero arbitrio*, PL Migne, vol. 32, Migne, Paris.

–, 1841b, *Contra Epistolam Manichaei*, PL Migne, vol. 42, Migne, Paris.

Pennazzi, Splendiano Andrea, 1731, *Istoria dell'ostia sacratissima*, Montefiascone.

3. Studies

Bassani, Alessandra, 2012, *Sapere e credere. Parte Prima: La "veritas" del testimone "de auditu alieno" dall'alto medioevo al diritto comune*, Giuffrè, Milan.

Bauerschmidt, Frederick C., 2013, *Thomas Aquinas. Faith, Reason, and Following Christ*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Bouley, Bradford A., 2017, *Pious Postmortems. Anatomy, Sanctity, and the Catholic Church in Early Modern Europe*, The University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

Clark, Stuart, 2007, *Vanities of the Eye. Vision in Early Modern European Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Damaška, Mirjan, 2019, *Evaluation of Evidence. Pre-Modern and Modern Approaches*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

- Dooley, Brendan, 1999, *The Social History of Skepticism: Experience and doubt in early modern culture*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Fabre, Pierre-Antoine and Bernard Vincent, 2007, eds., *Missions religieuses modernes. "Notre lieu est le monde"*, École Française de Rome, Rome.
- Fiori, Antonia, 2013, *Il giuramento di innocenza nel processo canonico medievale. Storia e disciplina della "purgatio canonica"*, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann.
- Franklin, James, 2015, *The Science of Conjecture. Evidence and Probability Before Pascal*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Freni, Giovanni, 2000, "The reliquary of the Holy Corporal in the cathedral of Orvieto: patronage and politics", in Joanna Canon and Beth Williamson, eds., *Arts, Politics, and Civic Religion in Central Italy 1261-1352*, Routledge, New York, 117-177.
- Grafton, Anthony, 1991, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- , 2009, *Worlds Made by Words: Scholarship and Community in the Modern West*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.
- Holte, Ragnar, 1962, *Beatitudo et Sapientia*, Études Augustiniennes, Paris.
- Kenney, John Peter, 2015, "Faith and Reason", in Meconi, David V. and Eleonore Stump, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 275-291.
- Motta, Franco, 2005, *Bellarmino: Una teologia politica della Controriforma*, Morcelliana, Brescia.
- Paganini, Gianni, 2008, *Skepsis: Le débat des modernes sur le scepticisme*, Vrin, Paris.
- Popkin, Richard, 2003 (revised ed.), *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Prosperi, Adriano, 1991, "L'elemento storico nelle polemiche sulla santità", in Gabriella Zarri, ed., *Finzione e Santità tra Medioevo ed Età Moderna*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Turin, 88-119.
- Quantin, Jean-Louis, 2011, "Reason and Reasonableness in French Ecclesiastical Scholarship", in *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 74: 401-436.
- Shagan, Ethan, 2018, *The Birth of Modern Belief. Faith and Judgment from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Siraisi, Nancy G., 2001, "Signs and evidence: autopsy and sanctity in sixteenth-century Italy", in Id., *Medicine and the Italian Universities, 1250-1600*, Brill, Leiden.
- Stump, Eleonore, 2003, *Aquinas*, Routledge, London.
- Tutino, Stefania, 2020, "Historical Authenticity and the Expanding Horizons of the Seventeenth-Century Catholic Church", in *The Journal of Modern History*, 91: 1-39.
- , 2022, *The Many Faces of "Credulitas": Credibility, Credulity, and Belief in Post-Reformation Catholicism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Ullmann, Walter, 1946, "Medieval Principles of Evidence", in *The Law Quarterly Review*, 77: 77-87.

- Van Fleteren, Frederick E., 1973, 'Authority and reason, faith and understanding in the thought of St. Augustine', in *Augustinian Studies*, 4: 33-71.
- Whitman, James Q., 2008, *The Origins of Reasonable Doubt. Theological Roots of the Criminal Trial*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Županov, Ines G., 1999, *Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.