

Emile Zola was a French nineteenth century novelist who achieved great notoriety in his life as a writer and political activist.. A professed atheist and declared enemy of the Catholic Church, He had a particular disdain for the Marian shrine in the South of France, Lourdes, and was dismissive of the pilgrims who visited the site. He even wrote a novel poking fun at the incredulity of the Catholic faithful for their foolish religious practices..

What could have been a major turning point in his life occurred in a most unexpected place!

Hoping to conduct further research on a future book, Zola accompanied a young eighteen year old girl who was afflicted with three incurable diseases, an advance case of Lupus, pulmonary tuberculosis and leg ulceration the size of an adult's hand, to Lourdes. According to the Zola, the woman was a ghastly sight; her face was eaten away by the lupus. Eventually the young woman went into the baths. When she later emerged she was completely cured with no sign of her previous diseases. Zola did not want to look at her and simply walked away. His only remark was addressed to one of the doctors, "She is still ugly".

Amazingly, he was to witness a second cure at Lourdes. Once again he refused to believe in what was likely a miracle and a response to heartfelt prayers. His terse reply was telling. "Were I to see all the sick at Lourdes cured, I still would not believe".

If one chooses to be willful and closes his eyes to the truth, than no miracle is going to make a difference.

In the forty-one verses of John's account of the healing of the man born blind, one phrase turns up repeatedly: "He opened my eyes". In Sacred Scripture, to have one's eyes opened is a way of saying that one is given sight. A man who had spent virtually his entire life begging was brought from darkness into light not only physically but spiritually as well. Jesus' giving spiritual sight to a man born blind is an image of his giving sight to the spiritually blind. We learn that he came to believe in Jesus as the one sent from God, and later became his disciple. His final words are worth noting. "Lord, I do believe". He has arrived at full sight and full faith.

The Pharisees stubbornly maintain that Jesus is not from God and is a sinner. They do not accept the blind man's account of how he came to see for that would mean God worked a miracle through Jesus. After mocking the man born blind, they expel him from the synagogue. He is the first person in the gospel to be rejected and persecuted because of Jesus.

Of course, the supreme irony is that the Pharisees themselves are blind to the truth. "Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, "Surely, we are not blind, are we? Jesus said to them, "If you were blind you would have no sin, but now you are saying, 'I see,' so your sin remains" (Jn. 9: 40-41). The Pharisees are blind to what is in front of their eyes. Those who do not recognize their blindness, insisting that they can see, are closed to Jesus' teaching and remain in their spiritual blindness. Jesus cannot aid those who are confident that they do not need his help.

And what of us who are believers? Have we kept silent about our Catholic beliefs out of fear of what others may think of us? Are we frightened of the personal cost of witnessing to the teachings of our faith.. Do we fear the consequences of providing testimony as disciples of Jesus? Do we choose to close our eyes whenever it is inconvenient to keep them open? For example, do we see the ultrasound image of a preborn child in the womb of its mother? Do we turn away from graphic images depicting the plight of poor migrants? Are our minds closed to the truth? Do we pick and choose what we want to accept in the gospels? At times, do we choose to be willfully blind? How many believers are without sight today?

May the words, "open my eyes", be one of our daily prayers. Let us repeat the prayer of One Richard of Chicester, a late medieval Christian scholar: "Dear Lord, three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly day by day".