

Going Beyond the Powers of Nature: Challenging the Legitimacy of the Miraculous  
Claims of the Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Catholic Church

by

Jessica Lynn Regan

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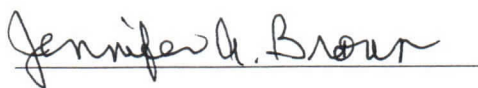
Approved by



Dr. Eric Sterling  
Thesis Director



Dr. Matthew Jordan  
Second Reader



Dr. Jeffery Elwell  
Provost

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## Introduction

*All our progress is an unfolding, like a vegetable bud. You have first an instinct, then an opinion, then a knowledge as the plant has root, bud, and fruit. Trust the instinct to the end, though you can render no reason.*

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

Predictions, apparitions, miracles, bilocations, prophecies, crucifixes, fates, and destinies all play an important role in the religious community. People use them to strengthen their beliefs and enhance their chances of obtaining eternal glory in the afterlife. In his novel *The Lady in Blue*, Javier Sierra uses the bilocation of María de Ágreda to lead the reader to believe that apparitions were used by the Catholic Church to retain its power and influence over its followers. Although Sierra maintains that his book is a work of fiction, my research revealed sufficient evidence to confirm Sierra's assertion that the Catholic Church of the sixteenth and seventeenth century used events which are not easily explained by natural laws to retain and to gain followers.

In order to substantiate Sierra's claims and to validate my position, I highlight the complex relationships between the Catholic Church and María de Ágreda. This thesis examines the special abilities María de Ágreda purportedly possessed and the emphasis the Catholic Church placed on her apparitions. A detailed examination of her life enables an understanding of her alleged abilities and her role in the Church. In addition to reviewing the Church's use of María de Ágreda's abilities, I also examine the lives of

other individuals and entities who also purportedly possess special abilities. Additional information used to substantiate Sierra's claim is obtained from an examination of the chronovisor, the apparition at Fatima, and the "Sleeping Preacher." Based on information and evidence obtained in the examination of these areas, I will validate Sierra's claims that the Church, of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, used apparitions to gain and to retain followers.

My thesis contains six chapters with each chapter examining and providing evidence upon which my conclusion is based. The six chapters are: the Catholic Church; Javier Sierra; María de Ágreda; the chronovisor; other miracles, prophecies, apparitions, and predictions; and my conclusion. The focus of each chapter is summarized in the paragraphs below.

### The Catholic Church

As a search for the truth begins, it is extremely important to understand the past and to put into context the events that were happening in the world during the alleged bilocations and apparitions. In particular, in keeping with Sierra's research, it is important to understand the state of affairs of the Catholic Church of the late 1500s and early 1600s.

The Catholic Church has been in existence for over 2,000 years, which makes it one of the oldest institutions to survive the challenges posed by an unpredictable world. Catholicism was one of the most powerful religions and was stronger than many civilizations until it became fragmented through various reformations. These reformations splintered the Church into a number of new churches.

Although the Church faced numerous trials and tribulations in Europe in the 1500s and 1600s, it continued to spread the word of Christianity throughout the Americas. The Catholic Church was weakened by the struggles it faced and worked to regain its status as one of the most powerful religions; however, its power and influence had been damaged by Martin Luther, King Louis XIV, and the Enlightenment. It no longer wielded the authority it once had. Its influence was dwindling, and from 1350-1650 the number of followers was dwindling as well. The Church had to attract converts and keep as many of its followers as possible. As a result, the Church started publicizing unexplained events such as apparitions, teleportations, and bilocations to make the Church seem to be chosen by God to lead followers to eternal glory and to have them bask in a joyous afterlife. The depiction of the joyous afterlife drew followers who feared death and the loss of friends and loved ones.

Thus, the Church's desire to recover from the loss of political power and its desire to re-establish its growth rate created a strong motive to use unexplained events to retain its influence and power. This motive is further explored in chapter one.

### Javier Sierra

In order to make an informed decision about Sierra's conclusions, it is important to understand key aspects of Sierra's life. Sierra was born in August 1971 in a small town in northern Spain, where he was a practicing Catholic. Having grown up a devout Catholic, he was extremely familiar with the traditions and teachings of the Church. This religious background, no doubt, served as an inspiration and a subject for many of his works, including *The Lady in Blue*.



When Sierra was nineteen years old and a student at Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Complutense University of Madrid), the inspiration for writing a book about *The Lady in Blue* was born. He began to research a great mystery centered on an apparition that is supposed to have occurred over a series of years, beginning in 1620. In 1998, after seven years of research, Sierra published his book *La dama azul*. It is a thought-provoking novel which evoked a passionate desire in me to search out the truth regarding Sierra's assertion that the Church used events not explained by natural laws to attract and to retain followers.

Chapter two also explores and debunks the possibility that Sierra had a personal grudge against the Church and intentionally and maliciously attacked it. The details provided substantiates Sierra's and my conclusions regarding the actions of the Church.

### María de Ágreda

In his novel *The Lady in Blue*, Sierra primarily focuses on the purported ability of María de Ágreda to bilocate. He pays little attention to her extremely religious lifestyle. According to María de Ágreda's biographer, Bishop Jose Jimenez Samaniego, as a child María de Ágreda experienced ecstasies and visions. The life she chose to live, from the time she was born until the time she died, was centered on fulfilling the Word of God.

At the age of twenty-five, María de Ágreda was appointed as *locum tenens* (Mother Superior) and remained in this position until her death in 1665. "What preceded her death ... was a beautiful pilgrimage marked with simplicity of life style" (Esposito 9). From the age of twenty-five until her death at the age of sixty-three, María de Ágreda

remained cloistered. Behind these walls she devoted herself to God and the sanctification of her spiritual daughters.

She detailed portions of her life and the events surrounding one of her unusual abilities in a book titled *Mystica ciudad de dios (The Mystical City of God)*. In this book, María de Ágreda explains and records the information she received from a vision she had of Mary, the Virgin Mother. She indicated that her book would give followers a glimpse into the afterlife.

María de Ágreda suffered from almost constant illnesses, and spiritually from a life full of temptations (Colahan 93). Based on an image she had of herself, she began to apply extreme forms of penitence which led to trances, visions, and, at times, levitations. According to Clark Colahan, it was during these trances that she bilocated to New Mexico and Texas. She claimed to have made over five hundred trips to preach to the indigenous Indians about the Word of God.

María de Ágreda received the name “The Lady in Blue” from the missionaries serving in New Mexico. One of the indigenous tribes in New Mexico claimed to have seen a lady enveloped in a blue haze and radiating a blue appearance. Although the bishop in charge of the New Mexico missionary never saw the apparition, he identified the figure seen by the natives of the Americas as María de Ágreda based on the radiation of the color blue. Since the nuns of the Franciscan convent wore a blue habit, it must have been a member of the Franciscan convent who bilocated and converted the indigenous tribe, and it seemed, only María de Ágreda would have the ability to bilocate.

Through the name “The Lady in Blue,” María de Ágreda became a well-known legend. She was transformed from being an actual, ordinary nun to a person claiming to

bilocate and then becoming a mythical figure adored and revered by many. Her appearance in the New World supposedly resulted in the conversion of scores of non-believers into believers. Interestingly, María de Ágreda never achieved sainthood. The details behind the denial of sainthood became evidence to substantiate the thesis.

Sierra was intrigued by stories that were strange and curious, and María de Ágreda certainly satisfied his taste for out-of-the-ordinary experiences. Chapter three provides details which highlight how the Catholic Church used María de Ágreda's purported abilities to emphasize the presence of God in a person's daily life and to express a need for followers to comply with church doctrine to achieve eternal glory in the afterlife.

Sierra used María de Ágreda to substantiate his conclusion that the Church used miracles to retain and to obtain followers, but he needed more evidence to further validate his claims. This evidence came from a secret Vatican project – the Chronovision Project.

### Chronovisor

While investigating María de Ágreda and her purported ability to be in two places simultaneously, Sierra learned that the Church might be conducting scientific experiments with a time travel device called the chronovisor. Sierra wanted to determine the purpose, validity, and capability of the device. Paramount to his research was his discovery of a secret scientific project in which a machine seemed capable of viewing past events. According to Sierra, this device was known as the chronovisor, and the project was dubbed by the Vatican as the Chronovision Project. Sierra explores the

capabilities of the chronovisor to determine if the Church had discovered formulas or algorithms which could help explain “The Lady in Blue’s” ability to bilocate. From the beginning, Sierra doubted the existence of the chronovisor.

An Italian priest, Father Pellegrino Maria Ernetti, claimed that the chronovisor existed and that he, along with Wernher von Braun and Enrico Fermi, had in fact built the device. According to Father Ernetti, the chronovisor received, decoded, and reproduced electromagnetic radiation left behind from past events. The chronovisor has never been verified, and its existence cannot be confirmed. Father Ernetti indicated that the device was destroyed in 1994. Unfortunately, all of the people who would have worked on the machine died without confirming or denying the existence of the device.

Even if there were an actual Chronovision Project, evidence suggests that it failed to produce any tangible results. Certainly, the deathbed confession of one of the purported members of the Chronovision Team leaves no doubt that the device was unsuccessful; however, the success of the chronovisor is not essential to Sierra’s book. The Chronovision Project is important because followers received confirmation of their beliefs through the chronovisor’s well-publicized revelations. The media, which had been led to believe in Father Ernetti’s account of various historical religious events, distributed articles which affirmed that the Church’s teachings enabled her to retain followers and to attract converts. Chapter four discusses the existence of the Chronovision Project and the failure of the device to explain bilocations.

#### Other Miracles, Prophecies, Apparitions, and Predictions

Although Sierra wrote about María de Ágreda, he could have chosen other well-

publicized religious events of significance to the Catholic Church. One such event, which is similar to bilocation, is an apparition. Like bilocations, apparitions also play a significant role in influencing a follower's behavior. In the period 1350-1700, there were numerous, highly publicized sightings of the Virgin Mary and other saints.

According to Church records, Mary, the Holy Mother of Christ, appeared in several different countries in order to spread the message of God. In each appearance, she delivered a specific message. Her appearances have had such an impact on the devout followers that they continue believing for decades after the event has occurred.

A good example of the powerful impact the visions had on the followers can be seen in Mexico. Mary appeared to Saint Juan Diego in Guadalupe, Mexico, in December 1531. After the appearance, many felt strong admiration for the Lady of Guadalupe. The admiration continues to this day. "She is the flag, representing Mexicans' aspirations; she is the country's most important icon, the essence that binds it together" (Colle 12). Mexicans crawl on their bare knees for miles in the hopes that their sins will be forgiven. They look to the Lady of Guadalupe and the Church to give them a sign of hope.

Strangely enough, the appearance of the Lady in Blue occurred not long after the Guadalupe apparition. During this period, the Church was experiencing a significant amount of turmoil. The unexplained apparition at Guadalupe and the purported bilocations of the Lady in Blue reinforced followers' belief in God's activity in their daily lives. After paranormal experiences such as these, people generate a record of the event and share it with other people. These stories help restore believers' hope of reuniting with relatives, of receiving eternal bliss, or of improving their quality of life. Through these stories the Church increases its influence and encourages followers to embrace the

promise of a glorious afterlife. The Church may also use these stories to convert a non-believer into a believer. These events also strengthened the Church's influence and power over its followers. Multiple incidents tend to lend credence to Sierra's conclusion and are further explored in chapter five.

To further substantiate and validate Sierra's claim, I researched another, but much less-publicized religious figure who purportedly possessed abilities similar to those of María de Ágreda. Reverend Constantine Blackman Sanders, better known as the "Sleeping Preacher" from Mooresville, Alabama, claimed that he could view events occurring in other locations even though he never physically went to that location. Reverend Sanders was sickly and frequently fell into deep trances. It was during these trances that he claimed he was able to view events as they were occurring at other locations. He shared these stories with his congregation members, who were amazed at the accuracy. The main difference between the "Sleeping Preacher" and María de Ágreda was the publicity each received. In contrast to the Catholic Church, the Methodist Church tried to keep Reverend Sanders' claims private. Today, few people have heard of Reverend Sanders, even people who live near Mooresville, Alabama.

### Conclusion

Javier Sierra contends that his book is a work of fiction, but there is sufficient evidence to support Sierra's implication and conclusion that the Catholic Church of the sixteenth and seventeenth century used miracles to retain followers and to gain converts. In addition to the events surrounding María de Ágreda's purported bilocations, there are many other apparitions, prophecies, and predictions which would help validate Sierra's

conclusion. Since the early days of civilization, people have had an insatiable desire to learn what lies beyond the world they know, and the Catholic Church is eager to assist them in their pursuit. Since the Catholic Church places such high emphasis on its Saints and their workings, it is easy to understand how people could be enticed to believe in the existence of miracles, the power of the Church, and the Word of God.

## The Growth of the Catholic Church

*And I say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shalt be loosed in heaven.*

- Jesus of Nazareth

According to Catholic doctrine, the Catholic Church traces its origin to Jesus of Nazareth (Keeler 11). Since its beginning, it has faced many challenges in its fight for survival and later in its fight for preeminence. The Church has played a major role in both the history of world religions and the history of western civilization. It has become one of the most influential religions, wielding political, social, and economic power. At times the Church possessed more power than some civilizations.

The word *Catholic* is derived from a Greek word for *universal*. “Writing in A.D. 110, St. Ignatius of Antioch was one of the first to use the phrase *katholike ekklesia* (literally, ‘catholic church’)” (Keeler 1). Since the early Church lacked a strong organizational structure and did not rigorously define the boundaries of Christianity, it struggled to maintain a consistent orthodox standard of beliefs (Keeler 27). The Church continued to struggle to survive until the Council of Nicaea defined and asserted the core belief that Christ is the one and only true God in deity with the Father and also when Constantine I officially recognized and legalized Christianity. Christianity continued to



attract followers and to gain support. In 383, the Roman Empire proclaimed Catholicism to be the state religion.

In the eleventh-century, the Great Schism of 1054 raged between the Eastern and the Western factions of the Church. The rift between the Eastern Greek Church and the Western Latin Church was based primarily on doctrinal and political differences.

According to Helen Keeler, the main disagreements between the two churches focused on the Church's declaration of Jesus' dual nature and the affirmation that the Bishop of Rome had higher authority than the patriarch of Constantinople (31). After five centuries of quarreling, the Church split into the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches, a major setback to the number of followers of the Roman Catholic Church. As depicted in figure 1, most Greek-speaking individuals joined the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Latin speaking community joined the Roman Catholic Church ("The Great Schism").

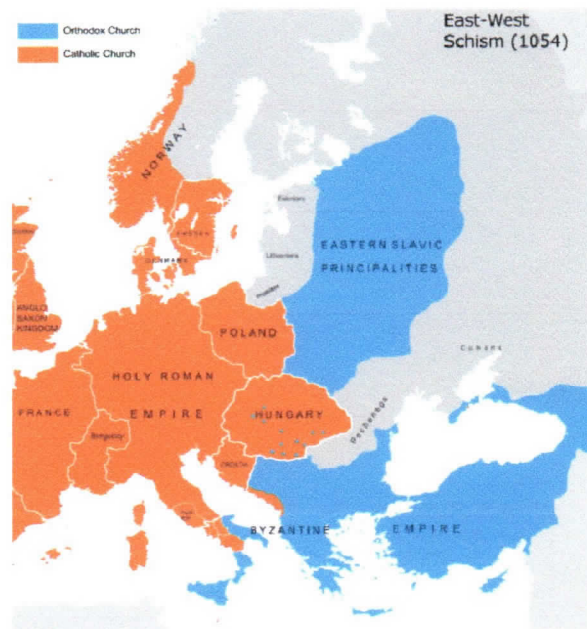


Figure 1. The Great Schism Divide (Todd)

In the fourteenth century, the Catholic Church faced another major challenge, which eventually led to the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. King Philip IV of France demanded that the Church pay taxes in exchange for protection from invaders. Pope Boniface fought unsuccessfully against such a tax. After Boniface's death, Philip successfully had a Frenchman elected Pope. The new Pope immediately moved the papacy to Avignon, France. After seven popes ruled from France, the papacy returned to Rome under the leadership of Pope Urban. Unfortunately, the Cardinals lost confidence in Pope Urban and elected Pope Clement as a second pope. Pope Clement ruled from France and Pope Urban from Rome. "Some countries gave allegiance to Urban, while others aligned themselves with Clement VII" (Keeler 45). The dual leadership lasted for thirty years.

During this time, "the hierarchy was corrupt and disorganized. Wealthy families staffed the leadership position of churches, bishoprics, and Roman Curia. These members of the clergy bought and sold clerical positions. Bishops controlled huge territories on behalf of the Church and Church officials bought and sold indulgences" (Keeler 46). Indulgences are the full or partial remission from penance of sin normally granted through good deeds and prayers. According to Keeler, many members of the clergy failed to administer to the needs of their parishioners, had drinking problems, and kept mistresses (46). Additionally, missionaries no longer addressed social injustices and deplorable conditions. Many Church leaders pursued political power and materialistic goods rather than working for a divine cause. The lack of papal control over the actions of the clergy permitted variation in enforcement of doctrine. One of the early opponents of the lack of papal control over the clergy was John Wycliffe. He penned several works

in which he called for church reformation. Wycliffe attacked the temporal rule of the clergy and the practice of seeking indulgences. Wycliffe's call for reformation became the precursor to the Protestant Reformation.

Another individual, Jan Hus, agreed with Wycliffe on the need for church reform and began to espouse Wycliffe's ideas. The Church felt threatened and in 1415 ordered that Hus be burned at the stake for heresy. After Hus was executed, the call for reformation subsided.<sup>1</sup>

Since the Catholic Church lost some of its prestige and followers, the Church was eager to renew itself and continue spreading the Word of God throughout the world. According to Thomas Bokenkotter, one of the signs that the church was eager to revitalize itself is "found in the work of the missionaries who crossed the oceans in constantly increasing numbers during the sixteenth century" (253). By the end of the eighteenth-century, the Catholic Church was one of only a few religions reaching out and teaching their religious beliefs to indigenous individuals in many different countries. While Catholics were leaders in performing missionary work, they sometimes carried out the missions in a questionable and objectionable manner.

These questionable practices were observed in the missions in New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona. Although the Church believed it was advancing and enhancing the lives of the natives of the Americas, the conversion was actually disrupting their way of life. "In addition to 'saving' souls, most Franciscans also hoped to reshape the natives' cultures. At first, many Franciscans paternalistically and optimistically regarded Indians as pliable, childlike innocents, uncorrupted by Europeans – clay to be molded into ideal Christian communities" (Weber 94). Instead of developing a distinctively American form

of Catholicism, in which the theological and moral teachings of the Church might have been incorporated into extant cultural forms, missionaries sought to impose European culture as well as Christian theology on the native population. The Church insisted that the natives relinquish their deep-rooted theological and cultural beliefs almost immediately. The insistence on the adoption of the European culture as well as Christian theological beliefs made it difficult to gain commitment from the natives.

Even though the natives were treated poorly, many Church followers strongly believed they were improving the lives of the natives and that it was the Spanish government that was responsible for the harsh treatment. According to James MacCaffrey, the Spanish government could not control the state officials who killed and enslaved the natives, “but from the beginning the Church espoused the cause of the Indians, sought to secure protection for them against the state officials, and to restrain if not extinguish entirely the practice of enslaving natives” (326). The protection the missionaries provided the natives convinced many Catholics that the Church was committed to delivering the Word of God to everyone in a respectable way.

Many Catholics criticized the missionaries and claimed they shared responsibility, along with the Spanish government, for the harsh manner that the natives received. They believed that the Church had undertaken some of its missions for the wrong reasons and demanded reform. According to John Shea, the natives were unjustifiably being abused because missionaries “deprived the Indians of liberty” (103) and allowed state officials to enslave many of the natives. In some instances, the missionaries were more interested in accepting government payments to colonize the new lands than working for a divine cause. Even the Franciscan missions in America depended on “financial support from the

Spanish government” (Weber 96). The Spanish government used the missionaries to occupy and to claim the American frontier for Spain. Some Catholics objected to this practice because it appeared the primary reason for missions was for financial gain. In 1622, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith addressed missionary reform. According to Bokenkotter, “the Pope centralized all mission activity under his authority. [The Congregation for the Propagation of Faith] struck at the system of royal patronage, which enabled Catholic governments to control and often exploit the Catholic missionary movement for political purposes” (254).

As the Church was increasing the promulgation of the Word of God to the natives of the Americas, Martin Luther and John Calvin were protesting key points of Catholic doctrine. On October 5, 1517, Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* and attracted many followers because of his call for reforms, including the elimination of clerical abuses such as the sale of indulgences. These followers protested against the Catholic Church rather intensely, but the Catholic Church resisted change. This resulted in the Protestant Reformation and a splintering of portions of the Catholic Church into new churches.

The Reformation spread in numerous countries as many Catholics demanded change. The protests eventually became more than mere theological discussions. For instance, in England, the demand for reformation, as well as Henry VIII’s personal issues with the Church, led to the seizing of Catholic Churches, convents, and monasteries, and to the creation of the Church of England in 1536. Protestantism became widespread and threatened to overtake Catholicism as the most pervasive religion in Europe.

The Catholic Church needed to stop and reverse, where possible, its loss of followers. As a result, the Church chose to convene a council to issue condemnations of

Protestant heresies, to define church teachings, and to issue reform decrees in response to Protestant disputes. In 1563, the Council of Trent, also known as the start of the Counter-Reformation, concluded. The Church agreed to various reforms in order to eliminate inequities, correct injustices, minimize corruptions, and preserve the integrity of Christianity (McBrien 1267). The Council of Trent successfully addressed many of the major issues identified by Luther, including: (1) forbidding the sale of indulgences, (2) defining the morals of convents, (3) requiring clergy to be educated, (4) addressing the non-residence of bishops, (5) abolishing the careless fulmination of censures, (6) forbidding dueling, (7) confirming that the church's interpretation of the Bible was final, and (8) confirming the veneration of saints, relics, and the Virgin Mary.

Another significant decree arising from the Council of Trent was the establishment of the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (*List of Prohibited Books*). Catholics were prohibited from reading any book or article on the prohibited list. The aim of the *Index* was to protect the faith by banning books that contained immorality or theological errors. For reasons that will become apparent later, it is significant that one of the books placed on the *Index* was authored by a Catholic nun: María de Ágreda's *The Mystical City of God*. Although followers were instructed not to read the books on the list, people did so anyway. Curious Catholics wanted to know why certain books were on the prohibited list. Therefore, they read the books to see if the Church's censorship was warranted or if the Church was afraid of a legitimate cry for reformation.

According to Bokenkotter, the reforms issued by the Council of Trent resulted in an upsurge of confidence and vitality. As a result, the Catholic Church began to recover large blocks of followers. Poland turned back to Catholicism; large parts of Germany,

France, and the southern Netherlands were likewise restored to communion with the Holy See, while the Protestants made no significant European gains after 1563. Overseas, Catholic mission gains compensated for the losses suffered in Europe (Bokenkotter 255).

The call for reformation may have ebbed, but challenges faced by the Catholic Church did not. In the 1600s, the Enlightenment brought about a new issue for the Catholic Church. Whereas the Protestant Reformation had questioned Catholic beliefs, the Enlightenment questioned Christianity as a whole. The Enlightenment provided “a different view of the cosmos, the nature of man, of society, of history, of morals, and of religion” (Bokenkotter 259). Critical rationalism, a movement within the Enlightenment, challenged the Church even further. René Descartes is often viewed as its founder. “Descartes applied to philosophy the mathematical method already proven so effective in science” to persuade people to question everything in order to ascertain truth (Bokenkotter 261). The main aspect of Descartes’ theory placed human reason above divine revelation.

The eighteenth century was another rough century for the Catholic Church. There were many more challenges to the Church’s doctrines; however, the Church was not entirely responsible for some of the issues. There was a major political struggle between various European countries. These countries postured to retain power. Each country assumed that if it had control over the Church and the Pope, it would have power over the other countries. Each country expected to receive financial rewards from the Church and believed that the papal elections would provide those rewards. According to Bokenkotter, “the big rival Catholic powers – the Bourbons and Habsburgs, rulers of France, Spain, and Austria – exerted heavy influence on the papal elections, and by their power of veto

were able to block any candidate regarded as unfriendly to their interests” (277). During these struggles, the Church’s goal was to influence solutions which would be of maximum benefit to themselves; however, in many cases, because of the Church’s loss of political power, the results frequently benefited individual states at the expense of the Church.

The French Revolution took over where the Enlightenment left off. The French began a significant reformation of the Church. Their reformation shifted power from the Church to the state. King Louis XVI lost control of France and fled the country, permitting the French Revolution to begin in earnest: “The Revolution began to take on the character of a religion in itself” (Bokenkotter 285). “Temples of Reason” began to take over the cathedrals, and members of the clergy were forced to abandon their old beliefs in fear for their lives. The Revolution called for “the sale of church lands, end of payments to Rome, and the reduction or dissolution of the monastic orders” (Bokenkotter 282). The intent was “to destroy Catholicism, but the de-christianizers did not intend to leave a religious vacuum, for they still shared the *ancien régime*’s principle that no state could survive without a public religion” (Bokenkotter 287). Since France could not survive without a public religion, Deism became the new religion, a setback for the Church. Napoleon Bonaparte reversed this setback when he signed the Concordat of 1801, declaring the Catholic Church as the church of France. This agreement enhanced the Church’s revival.

The Church had survived numerous reformations and revolutions, and could now place more emphasis on improving the plight of all humans around the globe. The Church implemented Social Catholicism to address poverty, injustices, and quality of life



issues. “The social doctrine of the Church developed in the nineteenth-century when the Gospel encountered modern industrial society with its new structures for the production of consumer goods, its new concept of society, the state, and authority, and its new forms of labor and ownership” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 641 §2421). According to Chris Korzen, the key tenets of Social Catholicism included: (a) human dignity, (b) solidarity, (c) social justice, and (d) subsidiarity (23). These formed the cornerstones for addressing the basic rights which would be afforded to all members of society.

Although it seemed that the Church’s trials and tribulations were behind it, that was not the case. The Industrial Revolution (eighteenth and nineteenth century) brought still more challenges. The Church had expanded its reach to numerous countries, but its political beliefs remained focused on monarchical governments. From the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789 until 1903, the Catholic Church

condemned liberalism, rationalism, deism, and democracy as offspring of the ‘atheistic Enlightenment.’ The nineteenth-century Catholic Church was a strong supporter of monarchy and a ferocious opponent of liberalism and democracy. [...] In so doing, it came to oppose the dominant forces for change in modern Europe. (“The Social Catholic Movement”)

Even in the few places where monarchies persisted, kings and queens no longer held real authority; instead the masses were coming to power. Small groups of Catholics, who recognized the value and importance of democracy, protested the archaic political beliefs and demanded reform. The disenchantment grew and eventually the Church’s political beliefs were reformed.

In addition to the changes in the political environment, technology was also advancing rapidly, and “as late as the 1860s the vast majority of Europeans were still illiterate. But by 1900 illiteracy was virtually wiped out in northern and western Europe; by that date around 95 per cent of the population could read and write” (Bokenkotter 333). As a result of the decline in illiteracy, journalism became an extremely important marketing tool. The newspapers now provided the masses with information and at the same time shaped their opinions. According to Bokenkotter:

Leaders of the Church realized that if it was to survive in this new situation and have any effective influence over the masses, it would have to make important adaptations. In particular, it would have to accept the liberal techniques: freedom of the press, democratic constitutions, separation of Church and state, and civil liberties, including freedom of religion and trade unions. (333)

In the Church’s previous struggles, it had refused to be weakened. It wanted nearly unlimited political and religious power. In 1517, Catholics had called on Pope Leo X to implement reforms, but he refused. According to Keeler, the Renaissance popes were “wealthy patrons of the arts and shrewd statesmen, they saw the sorry state of affairs, but they were enjoying the status quo too much” (Keeler 47). The previous struggles had caused significant damage to the Church, and it recognized its failures. The Church wanted to attract new followers and to retain as many as possible without significant doctrinal changes. Therefore, the Church accepted more liberal approaches to distributing the Word of God. Since technology had improved, the Church could, more efficiently,

publish numerous works and distribute them. The Church established a publishing office and distributed illustrations that highlighted and glorified Catholicism.

Even today the Church uses technological advancements to disseminate its message. According to a *Today Show* broadcast from the Vatican, the Church recognizes the importance of attracting young followers by using modern social networking tools. As a result, the Vatican has a radio station, a web site, and a Twitter account (“The Vatican”). As the population continues to age, the younger generation has to replace them. Therefore, the Church has placed a priority on retaining and converting young followers.

From the above discussion, one can see that the Church has faced and survived many challenges. Through these trying periods of time, the Church had periods in which it gained followers and times when it lost followers. Highlighted below one can see the growth in church followers (see table 1 and table 2).

Analyzing information provided in these tables, a noticeable trend is evident in the period 1350-1650 (highlighted in green in table 2). This is the only period that shows a negative growth in the number of Catholic followers. Between 1350 and 1500, the average rate of loss of Catholic followers was 4% each year for 150 years. The decline was not likely at a constant rate. Probably, there were years of growth interspersed with years of loss of followers. If this were the case, there would be years that the loss of followers would have been less than 4% and some years when the loss was much larger than 4%. These losses may not be alarming, but certainly the negative trends must have been disturbing. Figure 2, derived from data provided in Barrett’s Global Trends, depicts the Church’s negative growth rate.

Table 1

Global trends for 26 statistical categories, AD 33- AD 2200 (Barrett 18)

Area	Year AD	33	100	300	500	800	1000	1200	1350	1500	1650	1750	1800	1850	1900	1970	1990	2000	2025	2050	2100	2200	
<b>GLOBE (238 countries in 2000)</b>																							
Population, mt (millions)		170.66	179.51	191.93	190.32	217.92	263.65	357.44	361.04	422.95	546.66	719.19	903.65	1,202.87	1,619.63	3,696.15	5,266.44	5,666.36	6,055.05	7,823.70	8,909.10	10,106.28	10,561.48
Growth rate, % p.a.		0.08	0.08	0.03	0.00	0.05	0.10	0.15	0.01	0.11	0.17	0.27	0.46	0.57	0.60	1.19	1.79	1.47	1.34	1.03	0.52	0.25	0.04
Increase p.a., m		0.13	0.14	0.06	0.01	0.10	0.25	0.54	0.02	0.45	0.84	1.98	4.14	6.90	9.67	43.82	94.06	80.88	80.88	80.61	46.42	25.58	4.62
Evangelized persons, m		0.21	10.60	32.82	59.40	57.53	56.17	81.31	103.17	86.75	129.76	174.96	229.31	401.24	739.95	2,054.90	3,688.16	4,425.67	5,978.30	7,103.04	8,250.11	8,792.81	
Unevangelized persons, %		20.00	12.25	17.10	31.21	26.40	21.30	22.75	28.58	20.51	23.74	24.33	25.38	33.36	45.69	55.60	68.38	70.38	73.09	76.41	79.73	81.61	83.25
Outreach per Christian		0.01	0.80	14.01	37.80	40.87	44.67	65.71	86.47	75.89	112.84	154.69	204.98	323.86	558.13	1,236.37	1,747.46	1,877.43	1,999.56	2,616.67	3,051.56	3,583.02	3,843.54
Christian, m		0.00	0.61	6.90	24.46	24.44	23.89	25.07	35.06	25.87	33.18	45.01	55.22	75.46	115.84	139.66	203.77	205.62	215.13	252.72	286.81	278.12	292.97
Roman Catholics, m		0.00	0.17	4.91	12.72	15.93	18.88	33.24	47.26	44.83	60.10	82.39	96.43	151.20	286.55	665.95	929.70	994.15	1,057.33	1,361.97	1,564.60	1,685.10	1,849.70
Anglicans, m		0.00	0.00	0.20	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Protestants, m		0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Indians, m		0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Muslims, m		0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Marigal Christians, m		0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Christians, %		0.01	0.45	7.30	19.86	18.75	16.94	18.38	23.95	17.94	20.64	21.51	22.68	26.92	34.46	33.45	33.13	33.02	33.45	34.25	35.44	36.39	36.39
Christian growth rate, % p.a.		0.00	0.13	1.44	0.50	0.03	0.04	0.19	0.18	-0.09	0.26	0.32	0.56	0.92	1.09	1.14	1.74	1.45	1.27	1.08	0.62	0.32	0.07
Christian nat. increase p.a., m		0.00	0.11	0.20	0.19	0.01	0.02	0.13	0.16	-0.07	0.30	0.49	1.16	2.98	6.11	14.13	30.49	27.13	25.37	28.30	18.83	11.52	2.70
Gains: births + converts, m		0.00	0.08	0.79	1.78	1.74	1.92	2.94	3.85	2.96	3.96	4.87	6.42	9.71	16.13	41.23	63.47	55.27	55.11	66.05	63.85	66.76	68.39
Losses: deaths+defectors, m		0.00	0.03	0.58	1.58	1.71	1.88	2.79	3.68	2.95	3.46	4.34	5.17	6.42	9.53	20.70	26.15	27.55	29.20	35.07	43.20	54.56	65.60
World B, m		0.20	9.80	18.81	21.60	16.66	11.50	15.60	16.70	10.86	16.92	20.21	24.33	27.38	18.82	81.853	2,110.73	2,426.11	3,361.83	4,051.48	4,667.10	4,949.27	
World B, %		0.12	5.46	9.80	11.35	7.65	4.36	4.36	4.36	5.03	2.29	3.10	2.82	2.69	6.43	11.23	22.15	35.19	37.25	40.07	42.97	45.48	46.86
World B growth rate, % p.a.		0.03	0.33	0.03	0.01	-0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.15	0.19	0.48	1.47	0.98	1.13	0.56	0.34	0.13	0.03
World B increase p.a., m		0.00	170.45	168.91	159.11	130.92	160.39	207.48	275.13	257.87	336.20	416.90	544.23	674.35	801.63	879.67	1,641.25	1,665.47	1,678.20	1,623.37	1,845.41	1,806.05	1,859.17
World A, m		98.88	94.10	82.90	68.79	73.60	78.70	77.25	71.42	79.49	76.26	75.67	74.62	66.64	54.31	44.40	31.62	29.62	26.91	23.59	20.27	18.39	16.75
World A, %		0.06	-0.01	-0.03	-0.10	0.07	0.13	0.14	0.05	0.18	0.14	0.27	0.43	0.35	0.19	0.68	0.07	0.15	-0.58	0.50	-0.09	0.06	-0.06
World A growth rate, % p.a.		-0.02	-0.06	0.13	0.11	0.27	0.38	0.38	0.12	0.60	0.60	1.45	2.80	2.78	1.64	-14.68	1.22	2.56	-9.58	9.21	-1.36	1.06	-0.88
World A increase p.a., m																							

Table 2

Analysis of Barrett's global trends for 26 statistical categories, AD 33- AD 2200

Year	33	100	300	500	800	1000	1200	1350	1500	1650	1750	1800	1850	1900	1970	1990	1995	2000	2025	2050		
World Population	170.66	179.51	191.93	190.32	217.92	261.65	357.44	361.04	422.95	546.66	719.19	903.65	1,202.87	1,619.63	3,696.15	5,266.44	5,666.36	6,055.05	7,823.70	8,909.10	10,106.28	10,561.48
Catholic	0.01	0.17	4.91	12.72	15.93	18.88	33.24	47.26	44.83	60.10	82.39	96.43	163.20	266.55	665.95	929.70	994.15	1,057.33	1,361.97			
% of Population that are Catholic	0.01	0.09	2.56	6.68	7.31	7.22	9.30	13.09	10.60	10.99	11.44	11.78	13.57	16.46	18.02	17.65	17.54	17.46	17.41			
World Population growth (M)	0.13	0.13	0.06	-0.01	0.09	0.22	0.48	0.05	0.41	0.82	1.71	3.68	5.98	8.14	29.66	78.51	79.98	77.84	70.73			
Catholic																						
Population Growth (M)																						
Population Growth % p.a.	0.08	0.08	0.03	0.06	0.05	0.10	0.15	0.01	0.11	0.15	0.27	0.46	0.57	0.60	1.19	1.79	1.47	1.34	1.03			
Population Growth % p.a.																						

As depicted in figure 2, during the period of decrease in Catholic followers, the European population was also decreasing, but at a slower rate. In the majority of the previous periods, the rate of growth of the number of Catholic followers was greater than the rate of growth of the European population. In 1200, the number of Roman Catholics was estimated at 33.24 million; by 1350, the number of followers had increased to 47.26 million, but by 1500, the number had dropped to 44.83 million. This is a decrease of nearly three million followers.

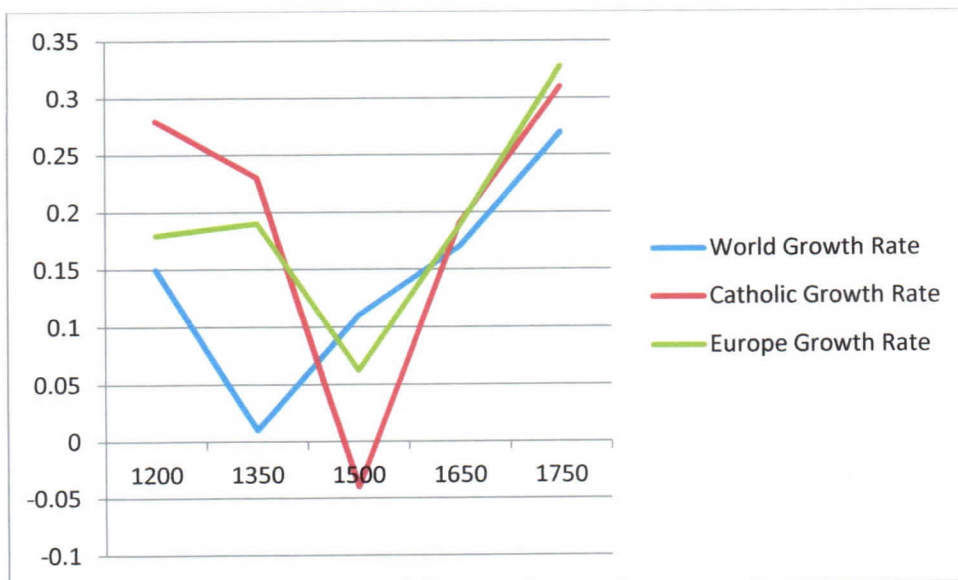


Figure 2. Catholic, Europe, and World population growth rates

The downward trend could have been the result of a combination of a number of the challenges previously discussed including a loss of followers to reformation, the Enlightenment, and political shifts. Additionally, during the period 1348-1350, the Black Death pandemic affected the European continent and caused a decrease of between 25% and 50% of the European population. From 1348 to 1350, the mortality rate from the

Black Death pandemic spiked but then gradually declined. According to Middle-Ages.org, the Black Death pandemic caused “people to become disillusioned with the Church and its power and influence declined.” The Church had good reason to be concerned.

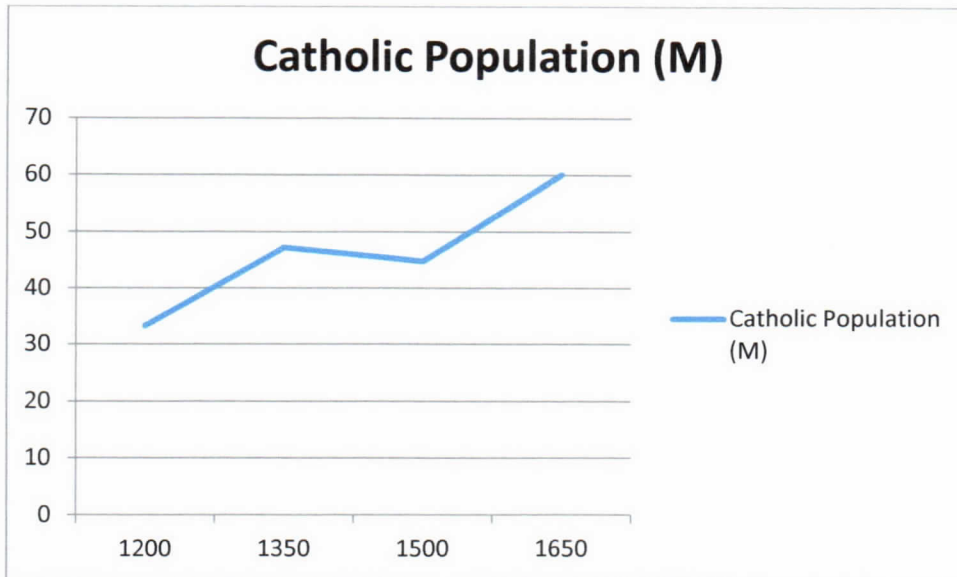


Figure 3. Catholic population 1200-1650

The decrease in the number of Catholics from 1350 to 1500 was followed by significant growth. Interestingly, the data provided by Barrett’s Global Trends indicates that the Catholic population increased by nearly sixteen million followers by 1650 (see figure 3). The growth coincides with an increase in followers due to the work of missionaries and an increase in the number of reported miracles, apparitions, visions, predications, bilocations, and teleportations which the Church used to prove that God was present in the daily lives of its followers (Smith 88). It also coincides with the purported ability of María de Ágreda to bilocate. According to Bokenkotter, missionaries were able

to replace the followers the Church had lost in Europe. The missionaries brought the number of followers back to the status quo. What caused the growth? Did the Church's use of divine signs, to combat Protestantism, cause the growth?

“Miracles were a necessity to the infant Church. To increase the number of the faithful, the new religion required divine confirmation repeatedly” (Trinity Communications). These miracles or inexplicable events were publicized and emphasized by the Church to gain and retain followers. The miracles themselves did not create faith but gave those with faith evidence of God's works (*Angels and Miracles* 6). In 1752, under the guidance of Pope Benedict XIV, the Church published *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et de Beatorum Canonizatione* (The Ecclesiastical Approval of Apparitions), claims of miracles became scrutinized by a panel of esteemed professionals. The responsibility of the panel is to minimize the number of miraculous claims which are later proven to be false. As a result, the number of events acknowledged to be miracles by the Church has decreased.

Signs from Above: Providence, Destiny, or Naturalism?

*We plan our lives according to a dream that came to us in our childhood, and we find that life alters our plans. And yet, at the end, from a rare height, we also see that our dream was our fate. It's just that providence had other ideas as to how we would get there. Destiny plans a different route, or turns the dream around, as if it were a riddle, and fulfills the dream in ways we couldn't have expected.*

-Ben Okri

In his book *The Lady in Blue*, Javier Sierra examines his faith, challenges the existence of God, and suggests that most purportedly miraculous events can be described naturalistically (i.e., without appeal to supernatural agents of any kind). He believes that even if a naturalistic explanation of an event does not currently exist, one will be found in the future. Sierra asserts that the Church of the sixteenth and seventeenth century used purportedly miraculous events to retain and to gain followers. Sierra reveals, through the character Carlos, how mysteries espoused by the Church are used to satisfy people of faith's desire for outward signs of God's works.

Understanding Sierra's background is paramount to recognizing his inclinations and his reasons for drawing conclusions about María de Ágreda and the Catholic Church. Sierra was born on August 11, 1971 in Teruel, Aragon, a small town in northern Spain, where he was reared a Catholic, like the majority of the Spanish population. Therefore, he was extremely familiar with the traditions and teachings of the Church. His religious



background served as an inspiration and a subject for many of his works, including *The Lady in Blue*.

From an early age, Sierra demonstrated a deep interest in broadcasting and journalism. At the age of twelve, he conducted his first radio program, *Radio Heraldo*. Four years later, he was writing articles for the press. As time progressed, he continued to pursue a career in journalism, the profession he loved. He enrolled in college and majored in journalism at Universidad Complutense de Madrid. When he was eighteen years old, he became one of the organizing founders of the literary magazine *Año Cero (Year Zero)*. His success as a journalist continued when he became the editor of *Más Allá de la Ciencia (Beyond Science)*, a popular monthly Spanish magazine.

Although his early journalistic successes were based on his work on magazines, he also excelled as an author of various novels. In 1995, he published his first book *Roswell, secreto de estado (Roswell, Secret of State)*. The book focused on the mysterious events surrounding the purported visit by aliens to New Mexico. Sierra was particularly interested in the study of great mysteries and searching for a naturalistic basis to explain them. He used this theme in many of his other novels.

Sierra “started to take a serious interest in borderline experiences, in psychic phenomena. He believed that a substantial part of what are called religious phenomena resulted from mental experiences that are poorly understood, mirages that one day science will be able to explain” (Sierra *The Lady in Blue* 19). Certainly, the mysteries associated with individuals who supposedly communicated with figures from the afterlife interested many people.

The idea for *The Lady in Blue* came about when Sierra was a nineteen year-old college student. When he heard stories of a nun who could bilocate, he began to investigate this mystery. In 1998, after seven years of effort, Sierra published *The Lady in Blue*. Even though Sierra thoroughly researches his books, he encourages readers to obtain additional information to substantiate his conclusions. Sierra's novel opened the door to numerous possible interpretations and lured me into searching out the truth and weeding out the fiction. Sierra's decision to investigate and then write about the bilocation permitted him to scrutinize the claims made by the Church in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain and also to explore his personal faith and his doubts regarding religion.

Readers become familiar with Sierra's background and his religious beliefs through the main character in his novel, the protagonist Carlos. While Sierra may not have experienced everything that Carlos does, the reader is still able to understand Sierra's doubts about a supreme being. Carlos' doubts regarding the existence of God became clear after a motorcycle accident led him to have a near-death experience. Carlos' and Sierra's feelings toward God are best described through the following passage:

Everything was suddenly dark and empty. He was unconscious for fifteen hours, and when he came to in the intensive care unit, he failed to remember a single thing that had happened. Nothing. For the first time in his life, Carlos felt cheated. He seemed disgusted by the fact that he was still alive. Angry at everything and everyone. Later, at home with his parents, he explained it like this: when your life is over, there is no light, no angel plucking a harp, no paradise full of loved ones. They had misled

him. For fifteen hours that he was dead, he encountered nothing but darkness. Emptiness. Cold. A vast, empty space in which he had been trapped. (Sierra *The Lady in Blue* 19)

From this near-death experience, Carlos inferred that the “afterlife” is empty and concluded that the “emptiness” meant that there is no God. Carlos also questioned the beliefs and doctrines of the Catholic Church, an institution he had been a part of since childhood. Carlos was a devout Catholic until the age of twenty-three when, after his accident, he left the Church. He no longer believed in God and would not unless convinced otherwise.

Sierra introduces another character, Txema Carrasco, to address Carlos’ doubts. Txema challenges non-believers, generating a discussion of the pros and cons of Church doctrine. Txema defends the doctrines of the Catholic Church and the existence of God. Txema questions whether Carlos’ atheistic beliefs are rationally justified when he states: “What I fail to understand is why you put so much effort into resisting situations in life that, maybe, just maybe, are arranged in advance, no matter by whom, and are out of your hands. Is it because you’re still hoping to ‘catch’ God behind one of your random events?” (Sierra *The Lady in Blue* 70-71).

Txema continually attempts to persuade Carlos to accept God and his eternal presence. Carlos refuses to, stating: “to agree with what you’re saying is the same as accepting that, to at least some degree, someone exists who has traced the blueprints of our lives. And from there to accepting God’s existence is but a single step” (Sierra *The Lady in Blue* 71). Carlos is not ready to accept God’s existence and continues to demand that Txema build a rational faith-based case free of Church misinformation. Sierra sends

him on a journey of self-discovery. Carlos examines his own beliefs and faith, but he is still unwilling to accept the existence of God and innocence of the Church. Instead, he states: “it’s my impression that God is the formula people apply to everything beyond their understanding. Belief in God gets us out of the hard work of thinking” (Sierra *The Lady in Blue* 71). Sierra urges his readers to seek answers using naturalistic laws instead of accepting unexplained events as acts of God. Sierra’s challenge to his readers is: “Look for other proof. Investigate” (Sierra *The Lady in Blue* 123). As Sierra investigates the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Church, he identifies shortcomings in the Church’s process for formally recognizing miracles. As a result, he cautions his readers to be leery of miraculous claims and investigate them instead of merely accepting them. Sierra recommends that his readers should question the existence of God. He understands that when no naturalistic answer is readily plausible, people give credit to God. Sierra implies that automatically crediting God for events which are not easily explained should not be done and the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Church should have been more careful when taking credit for “miracles.” Using Carlos and Txema, Sierra explores the realm of religion and constantly searches for a naturalistic explanation to either prove or disprove his beliefs.

One of Sierra’s beliefs is that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Church found events that could not be readily explained by naturalistic laws – events that appear to be attributable to God – and then publicized them in order to retain followers. The Church claimed that María de Ágreda’s bilocation was the work of God. Sierra wanted to examine María de Ágreda’s life and her purported ability to bilocate to determine if he could find a naturalistic explanation for these claims. His examination would center on

her supposed apparitions, over a series of years, beginning in 1620. Sierra recognized an opportunity to identify a naturalistic basis regarding bilocations and accepted the challenge to review the Church's process for investigating miracles.

Sierra did not plan on writing *The Lady in Blue*, but he was inspired after he stumbled across María de Ágreda's name in an old Mexican weekly newspaper. Unfortunately, Sierra failed to provide sufficient details to identify, locate, or cite the referenced article. The article discussed a seventeenth-century Spanish nun who evangelized New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, supposedly without traveling by physical means to North America. According to Sierra, "the weekly affirmed... that it was God who had granted her the power of being in two places at once in order to augment the dominions of Christianity" ("The Inspiration"). Using the information about María de Ágreda, he wrote an article "Teletransportados cuando desaparece el espacio-tiempo" ("Teleported when space-time disappears") in *Año Cero*, focusing on teleportation (i.e., bilocation). In this article, he linked María de Ágreda to this phenomenon to show that teleportation was not just a modern idea, but had a basis in a supposedly historical event. As a skeptic concerning supernatural bilocations, Sierra was not satisfied with the minimal amount of information he had discovered regarding María de Ágreda; therefore, he decided to examine her life more closely with the intent of writing a novel. After two months, however, his initial analysis turned out to be a dead end, so he gave up on the María de Ágreda story and turned his journalistic attention to locating a copy of the Holy Shroud of Turin to offer his readers a detailed look at another of the Church's mysteries.

As Sierra was collecting material on the Shroud, he happened upon some information which brought him back to his work on María de Ágreda. On April 14, 1991,

Sierra was traveling with Txema Carrasco (a bookseller from Bilbao, Spain and a character in *The Lady in Blue*) on the snow-covered roads of northern Spain in search of copies of the Shroud. The weather began to deteriorate, and the snowstorm intensified. Sierra and his traveling companion, Carrasco, did not have tire chains, so they began to fear they would become stuck as the road conditions worsened. They decided to stop and wait out the storm in a small town just ahead of them. As they approached the town, they happened upon a sign with the name *Ágreda* written on it, the town where María de Ágreda was born. By chance, Sierra had stumbled upon the place where he could further his research on María de Ágreda. Chance may have led him there; however, the answer to the mystery behind María de Ágreda's purported ability to bilocate was not yet ready to be discovered. Sierra and Carrasco knocked on numerous doors with no one willing to answer. It was as if the town was empty and unwilling to divulge its secret. After they failed to find anyone willing to discuss María de Ágreda, they decided to leave and continue their search for a copy of the Shroud. After all, they were not researching María de Ágreda, and no known copies of the Shroud were located in Ágreda. In order to keep to their original schedule, they decided to abandon the mystery of María de Ágreda until they had finished delving into the Shroud.

Their work on the Shroud would have to wait as Sierra's interest was again piqued and his desire to continue his novel about María de Ágreda renewed. According to Sierra's website:

Leaving Ágreda turned out to be not so easy. The weather had forced us to take ...narrow, icy streets, which we soon realized was a mistake. It was then that, as we were turning around, we saw it. Strangely enough, it

hadn't caught our attention until now, even though it had been there all along, hidden behind the snowdrift. Just to our left, only a few steps away, was a massive stone building flanked by the statue of a nun. ("The Inspiration")

Was it providence that helped him discover María de Ágreda's convent? Sierra could not resist. He abandoned his plans to leave Ágreda and instead went to the convent to speak to the nuns about María de Ágreda. From the nuns at the Concepción de Ágreda convent, Sierra learned a considerable amount about the life of María de Ágreda. Sierra was quoted as saying: "that day, at that precise moment, my novel was born" ("The Inspiration").

Although María de Ágreda's entire life was interesting, Sierra focused almost exclusively on her alleged ability to bilocate. Even though María de Ágreda supposedly never left the Spanish convent, she was purportedly seen in New Mexico. Sierra did not believe this happened and sought the truth. As he was searching for the truth, he learned of a remarkable project: the Church was performing experiments with time travel. The project was labeled "the Chronovision Project" (and will be discussed later in the thesis in more detail). He was concerned and convinced that the Church would use time travel as it used bilocation to retain influence over its followers. The chronovisor may permit events to be performed that would allow the Church to declare that God orchestrated them. Events, such as apparitions, could be used by the Church to prey on people's faith and to satisfy their desire for a glorious afterlife.

Sierra became convinced, as I am, that individuals with little or no faith will continue to search for naturalistic explanations for as long as it takes to discredit the

event; however, people with faith believe in miracles, bilocations, teleportations, and apparitions and need little to no proof other than their faith. Sierra's exploration of María de Ágreda turned out to test his faith and question the motives of the Catholic Church.



## Believing the Inexplicable: From Myth to Reality

*A man likes a play when he has become interested in the human destinies presented to him, when the love and hatred, the joys and sorrows of the personages so move his heart that he participates in it all as though it were happening in real life.*

-José Ortega y Gasset

Sierra's novel focused on the life of a Spanish nun, María de Ágreda. He chose her not for her extraordinary devotion to the Catholic Church, but because she claimed she could bilocate. He chose wisely. He delved into the purported phenomenon of bilocation while at the same time examining his beliefs about the Catholic Church. María de Ágreda was the essence of devotion, spending her life honoring, adoring, and praying to God. She was a role model and great ambassador for the Church and an excellent choice for Sierra to use to reflect on his personal religious beliefs.

María Fernandez Coronel y Arana was born to Don Francisco Coronel and Catalina de Arana on April 2, 1602. Later, she was known as Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda or simply María de Ágreda. Her parents lived intensely strict religious lives, and they expected their children to do the same. As an example of her parents' strong beliefs, every morning her father participated in the Exercise of the Cross (Fedewa 16). As a participant, he carried a large cross on his back for miles at a time in the hopes his sins would be forgiven. María de Ágreda's mother engaged in meditative prayers for three to

four hours every evening and expected her children to do the same (Esposito 5). Thus, María de Ágreda did not enjoy a normal childhood.

At the age of four, María de Ágreda began to have visions and revelations which enabled her to quickly grasp and understand Catholic doctrine. Using her visions as guidance, she mapped out a path to her salvation. Her intricate understanding of Catholic doctrine at such a young age caught the attention of high-ranking Church officials, especially Bishop Don Diego de Yepes. Bishop Yepes was so impressed with María de Ágreda's spiritual fervor that he presided over her Confirmation. Confirmation is a Catholic sacrament which is usually reserved for older children who have "attained the age of discretion" or the age of reason (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 364 §1307). Additionally, he filled her parents' library with religious books to encourage her to use it in order to learn as much as possible about Catholic doctrine. The library became her refuge as she devoted nearly all of her time to reading and studying in the library instead of playing and living like a normal child. María de Ágreda dedicated her life entirely to her passionate devotion and fervent worship of God.

María de Ágreda's insatiable desire to please God could not be fulfilled, so she fell into deep depression and ignored her health. At six years old, she felt God had abandoned her and she became severely depressed, causing her parents to become frustrated (Fedewa 19). "Soon, however, she developed a frail constitution and frequently became ill, an affliction that she interpreted as righteous punishment for her sins" (Fedewa 20). Even though María de Ágreda's health began to fail and her demeanor bothered her mother, Catalina continued teaching her about the Church. When she was seven years old, María de Ágreda vowed to serve the Church as a missionary and applied

for acceptance to sisterhood at the Convent of Saint Ann in Tarazona, Spain. Due to her health, however, she was unable to enter the convent. Her doctors feared she was dying and called a local priest, who administered the rite of Extreme Unction, a Catholic sacrament which “gives spiritual aid and comfort and perfect spiritual health, including, if need be, the remission of sins, and also, conditionally, [restores] bodily health, to Christians who are seriously ill” (*New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*). Her doctors were wrong – or, perhaps, her recovery derived from a spiritual and not medical cause. María de Ágreda survived and became more determined than ever to honor the glory of God. María de Ágreda’s remarkable recovery induced a change in her parents.

María de Ágreda’s mother, Catalina, believed it was the hand of God that saved her child, so she honored His kindness and goodness by opening a convent in her home (Esposito 5). In 1618, Catalina converted the Coronel ancestral home into the Convent of the Conception. According to Marilyn Fedewa:

Catalina’s dream of founding a convent in the Coronel home occurred at a pivotal time in the history of her country’s religious life. Convents and monasteries proliferated in sixteenth-century Spain, facilitated by two serendipitous factors: extraordinary religious passion and economic prosperity. By the early seventeenth century, however, the economy was weak and – all too often – needy men and women professed religious vows in order to obtain free room and board and to avoid military service and taxation. Impoverished nobility were not immune either, turning over expensive-to-maintain estates to the church. (27)

Although other convents were in the immediate vicinity of the Coronel home, the enrollment at the Convent of the Conception continued to rise. In 1633, the enrollment had outgrown the home's limited space, so they moved into a larger building.

At the age of eighteen, María de Ágreda took her final vows and fulfilled a lifelong dream of becoming a nun. She advanced quickly and at the age of twenty-five became *locum tenens* (Mother Superior), a position she held until her death in 1665. Although she remained cloistered until her death, she maintained close friendships with important, high-ranking individuals.

One of the relationships she cherished was with the King of Spain, Felipe IV. The relationship began in 1630 when Friar Alonso Benavides, "the chief administrator, or *custodio*, of [the Franciscan] missions" (Weber 98), wrote to Felipe about a mysterious "Lady in Blue" who allegedly converted scores of natives in the New World. Friar Benavides indicated that María de Ágreda bilocated to New Mexico between 1620 and 1631 and preached the Word of God to the natives of the Americas. As a result of her preaching, the natives sought out the Franciscan missionaries and requested to be baptized into the Catholic faith. The Franciscans could not explain the surge of converts, so "at the urging of Friar Benavides, Sister María de Ágreda wrote a letter to the Franciscans in New Mexico. She recounted her numerous trips to New Mexico, 'transported by the aid of the angels,' and expressed admiration for the friars' work" (Weber 99). She claimed to have traveled over five hundred times to preach the Word of God to the natives. Felipe heard about María de Ágreda's exploits and wished to meet this intriguing nun. According to Augustine M. Esposito, Felipe "frantically sought the counsel of Sor María for her holiness rather than a motive rooted in pure human

curiosity” (15). Felipe thought María de Ágrede’s purported ability to bilocate was interesting, but not as important as her holiness. María de Ágrede kept Felipe grounded, encouraged him to recognize religion, requested that he repent his sins, and begged him to ask God for forgiveness.

In addition to fulfilling her duties as abbess of the convent, María de Ágrede continued her fanatical religious devotions. After years of intense worship, members of the congregation began noticing a distinct change in María de Ágrede’s appearance and actions (Colahan 93). Jane Eppinga stated:

In 1620 during Whitsuntide communion prayers, the congregation gasped at the way Sister [María de Ágrede’s] appearance had changed in her two years in the convent. Even the half-witted beggar at the gate remarked that a dazzling blue light engulfed [María de Ágrede’s] body, and her face bore the expression of heavenly rapture. Then she levitated about four feet off the ground, and her dark countenance transformed into an alabaster radiance not unlike that of the saints. From that time on, church members remarked that wherever she went, Sister [María] left behind a delicious, celestial perfume. (137)

The congregation began touting her saint-like appearance and her unexplained, nearly supernatural abilities. Soon, she drew national attention, some of which had terrifying ramifications. Word reached the Spanish Inquisition, so they opened a case and began investigating her for heresy. The primary investigation focused on “her potentially delusional experiences as the Lady in Blue” (Fedewa 164). To make matters worse, the convent feared the Inquisition would discover a book about the Virgin Mary that María

de Ágreda was writing and use it to convict her. María de Ágreda claimed the Virgin Mary appeared through a vision and instructed her to pen the biography. In her book, she used the controversial term “Immaculate Conception.” The term had disturbed many Catholics and would not be officially accepted as part of Church doctrine until 1854. María de Ágreda completed the biography in 1645 and titled it *The Mystical City of God: The Divine History and Life of the Virgin Mother of God*.

The Spanish Inquisition case, which was brought against María de Ágreda in 1635, was dormant, but not forgotten (Colahan 94). When María de Ágreda’s confessor learned of the Virgin Mary biography, he urged her to burn it for fear the Inquisition would use it against her, so she burned it. Unfortunately, burning the book did not stop the Inquisition from pursuing her. They surmised the book must have contained heretical statements and incriminating evidence; otherwise why would she have burned it?

In 1650, the Inquisition re-opened her case and questioned her for eleven days. The interrogator came with eighty prepared questions. Over two-thirds of the questions focused on the conversions of the Jumanos in New Mexico. The majority of the remaining questions focused on her visions and her writings (Fedewa 170). The Inquisition committee thoroughly questioned and documented María de Ágreda’s answers. All of the questions and her answers were published and made available to the public. The document reports María de Ágreda as saying, “the nuns who were my superiors were extremely fond of this business of outward signs of holiness; they made commitments to various lay people, and once they had allowed some to see, they did not want to say no to others” (Colahan 117). According to recorded statements, María de Ágreda was aware that the Church used “signs of holiness” to promote the Catholic

Church and commended the sisters for using her trances to gain converts. María de Ágreda had been used as evidence that God was at work in the Catholic Church.

Of particular interest were María de Ágreda's answers to the Inquisition questions regarding her bilocation to the Americas. The Inquisition had obtained a report written by Friar Benavides, the director of Franciscan Missionaries in New Mexico. In the report, Friar Benavides details his understanding of the events surrounding the conversion of thousands of natives from the Americas. In response to Inquisition questions and Friar Benavides' report, María de Ágreda stated:

A report or paper was done eight years, more or less, after [the bilocations] happened, on the occasion of Father Alonso de Benavides, director of New Mexico, having returned to Spain, and he did it with other grave fathers who were from this province. About some things it is accurate, while about others they have added and exaggerated; it is not believed that the fault lies with such good fathers who take their responsibilities so seriously, but it results rather from the fact they gathered their information from nuns and friars, for I was always most guarded about making statements on these matters except in the secrecy of the confessional. (Colahan 119-120)

María de Ágreda also stated: "whether or not I really and truly went in my body is something about which I cannot be certain" (Colahan 121). The above passages highlight and exemplify María de Ágreda's vagueness. Her vague answers could have been the result of fear of being burned at the stake, or they could have been caused by the amount of time between the alleged bilocations (1620-1631) and the interrogation (1650).

Regardless, the answers leave the Inquisition as well as other readers wondering which statements were accurate and which were exaggerated. Eventually, María de Ágreda's doubts regarding her ability to bilocate and her vague answers were enough for the Inquisition to acquit her of all charges.

After the Inquisition, María de Ágreda maintained that the natives of America were converted, but "the way and the 'how' are not easily known since it happened so many years ago; since the Indians said they had seen me, either I myself or some angel who looked like me did go there" (Colahan 127). In other statements, María de Ágreda blamed Church officials for promoting her personal experiences as being the miraculous workings of God. In one particular instance, María de Ágreda took issue with one of the reports made regarding her bilocations. She said the chairman wrote the report "on my orders, when the truth is that I went along with it passively, not actively, and that I was horribly pained that the report was put together" (Colahan 123). María de Ágreda claimed that Friar Benavides took her words literally instead of metaphorically when she said she used the wings of Saint Michael and Saint Francis in her work (Colahan 123).

Sierra gathered this information regarding María de Ágreda and believed, now more than ever, that a naturalistic answer could be found to explain the sightings. After all, María de Ágreda herself claimed to be unsure of how and even if she bilocated to the Americas. Additionally, the Franciscan friars profited handsomely from their service in New Mexico. They controlled and enslaved the natives using threats of force and allowed settlers to use the native slaves to work in return for protection, escort, and deference (Gutiérrez 111). As a result the Franciscans dictated all aspects of the political



environment and yielded more power than the New Mexican governors. For their efforts, each friar was awarded the rank of bishop.

Based on official New Mexico records, the Franciscans also exaggerated the number of Jumano Indians who were converted to Catholicism. Instead of converting 500,000 as originally claimed by Friar Benavides, the actual figure recorded is less than 80,000. In addition, the number of converts who accepted all aspects of Catholicism and abandoned all of their pagan beliefs is believed to be only a few thousand. (Gutiérrez 92-93). Friar Benavides also admitted that he never saw the apparition and relied on the reports of the natives of the Americas. In fact, Friar Benavides initially claimed that the Lady in Blue was Mother Luisa de Carrión. It was not until ten years after María de Ágreda's first appearance that Friar Benavides learned from Padre Bernardino de Sienna that the Lady in Blue could have been María de Ágreda (Fedewa 60). Since Friar Benavides exaggerated on all aspects of the success of his New Mexican missions, did not see the apparition, obtained financial gain from the mission, and never appeared before the Inquisition, it is likely that his letter regarding the Lady in Blue was also fabricated.

Sierra read Friar Benavides' reports carefully and focused on a couple of passages. The passages indicated that Friar Benavides had found the "method [María de Ágreda] used to transport" or the "formula for bilocation" (Sierra *The Lady in Blue* 227). The key words in these passages were "method" and "formula." Sierra implies that these terms are characteristic of naturalistic laws; María de Ágreda's apparitions were not an act of God but rather a naturalistic formula that others could duplicate. The chronovisor may be the device which could expose the secrets to duplication. Sierra planned to link

María de Ágreda's purported bilocation to something naturalistic such as the Chronovision Project.

## Visions of the Past: Time Travel

*How can the past and future be, when the past no longer is, and the future is not yet? As for the present, if it were always present and never moved on to become the past, it would not be time, but eternity.*

- Saint Augustine

During Javier Sierra's investigation of María de Ágreda's purported bilocations, he discovered information regarding a secret Vatican time travel experiment, the Chronovision Project. The discovery roused Sierra's interest as he questioned the purpose and role of the Church in the experiment. After his examination, he concluded that the Chronovision Project did not provide a naturalistic explanation for bilocations, but it did highlight the Church's plans to use information gained from time travel.

To understand the importance of the Chronovision Project to both the Church and the scientific community, one must understand time travel. Stephen Hawking, a cosmologist, attempted to prove that time travel is impossible; instead, using his work, "physicists have now demonstrated that a law that prevents time travel is beyond our present-day mathematics" (Kaku xvi). Since laws of physics are unable to disprove the existence of working time machines, "physicists have had to take that possibility very seriously" (Kaku xvi). Although scientists and physicists have not developed a formula which defines the relationship of variables to permit time travel, this does not mean that time travel is not possible. Being unable to disprove an event does not necessarily mean

that the event is possible. In fact, many philosophers believe that the existence of a large number of logical contradictions provides overwhelming proof that time travel is not possible.

The Vatican's time travel experiment focused on teleportation, which requires the development of a formula that can identify "the precise location of every atom in a living body" (Kaku 55) at any given moment in time. Unfortunately, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle states that the precise location and the velocity of an electron cannot be known simultaneously (Kaku 55). However, the Uncertainty Principle did not stop Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen from trying to find a solution. They believed that physics had no room for probability. They too failed to prove the Uncertainty Principle wrong, but their experiment did provide key information regarding quantum entanglement. Quantum entanglement, in relation to teleportation, is the transmission of information from one location to another without the information having to travel through the intervening space.

Is it possible that a device to realign and reunite electrons actually existed? An Italian priest, Father Pellegrino Maria Ernetti, claimed that the chronovisor aligned and united electrons to permit time travel. He claimed that he worked with Enrico Fermi, one of the creators of the atomic bomb; Professor de Matos, a Portuguese physicist; Wernher von Braun, a German rocket scientist; and numerous other scientists. According to Ernetti, the secret Chronovision Project explored time travel, allowing mankind to view past events as they actually occurred. Peter Krassa maintains that the chronovisor consisted of three components as depicted in figure 4 and discussed below:

First a multitude of antennae, which were able to pick up every conceivable wavelength of light and sound.... The second component was a species of direction finder, activated and driven by the wavelengths of light and sound which it received. You could set it to a given place, date and even person of your choice.... The third component was an extremely complex array of recording devices, which made possible the recording of sound, and particularly of images, from any time and any place. (21)

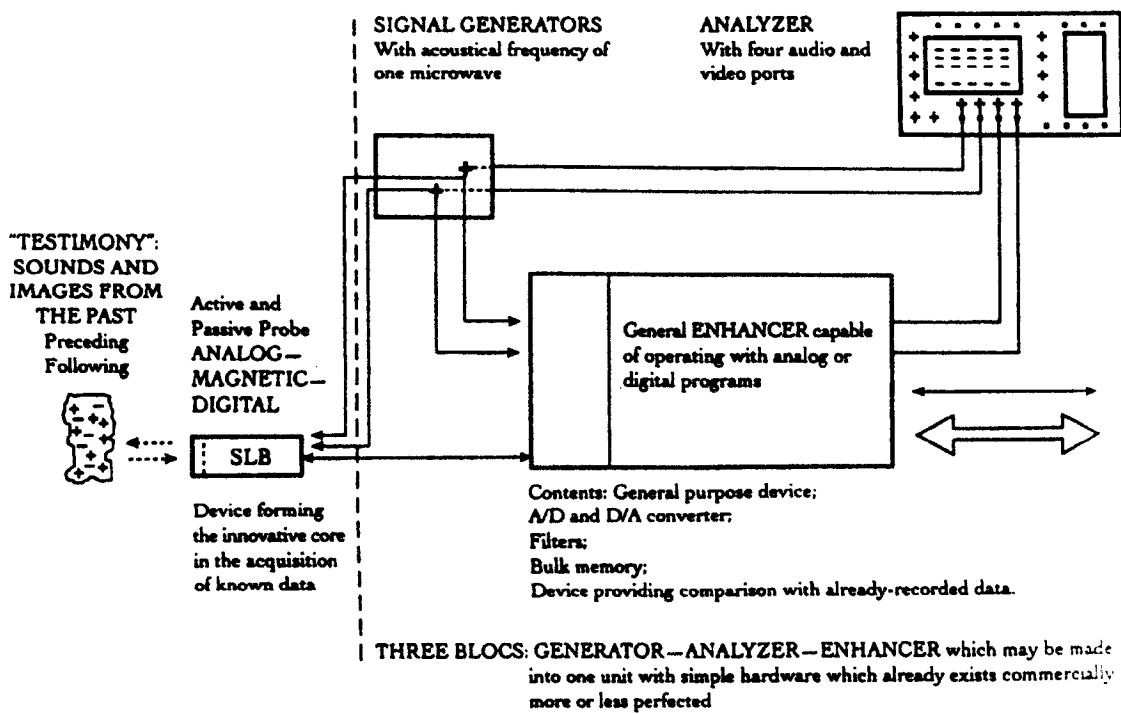


Figure 4. What the chronovisor may have looked like (Krassa 58)

Since the Catholic Church conducted and funded the Chronovision Project in the physics lab at the Catholic University of Milan, it would have legal rights to an extremely

valuable device. According to Krassa, Father Ernetti and Father Gemelli informed Pope Pius XII about the project and explained its potential. Pope Pius XII's response was, "this experiment may perhaps become the cornerstone of a building for scientific studies which will strengthen people's faith in a hereafter" (Krassa 9-10). Pope Pius XII recognized the value of the chronovisor to gain Church followers by providing proof of an afterlife, but it is unlikely that he appreciated its full potential or its value.

The successful development of a chronovisor could potentially pose a social, moral, and ethical dilemma. According to Kaku, "the first country that is able to build such a system would be able to unlock the deepest secrets of other nations and organizations" (68). Countries could view top secret meetings, which would jeopardize a nation's security, they could steal technological advancements and patents, and they could disrupt a nation's financial stability. Successful development of a chronovisor would result in one of the world's greatest weapons.

Father Ernetti asserts that the initial objective of the Chronovision Project was to retrieve images and sounds from past events. The Vatican requested the view be into historical religious events. The Chronovision Team believed that it was possible to do more than merely view historical religious events; they believed "that [they] could intervene in [them]" (Sierra *The Lady in Blue* 179). While the Vatican may have initially wanted only a "glance at history," Sierra suggested that the power provided by the chronovisor would permit the Church to change the past and to re-write it so that it would be favorable to their beliefs.

A device as incredible as the chronovisor could not be kept secret from the public. In the early 1950s, people learned of a Benedictine priest at San Giorgio Maggiore

monastery in Venice who had, supposedly, developed a device that permitted time travel. Father Ernetti could not remain silent and leaked many of the details of his project. People questioned his success. Therefore, Father Ernetti claimed that he teleported and watched the play *Thyestes*. The reason Father Ernetti chose to view and to report on a play written in 169 B.C. is unknown, but he chose a play which had a significant number of lines lost to time. To support his claim that he watched the play in person, he completed the lost portions of the play and handed over papers containing the *Thyestes* manuscript to Professor Giuseppe Marasca. Professor Marasca assembled *Thyestes* and leaked the details of the chronovisor and *Thyestes* to the media.

Once Father Ernetti's story was publicized, he told the media that not only did he watch *Thyestes*; but he also claimed he watched the Crucifixion of Christ. As proof, he distributed a photo of Jesus that he supposedly took at the Crucifixion to numerous media outlets (see figure 5). The earliest article that contained Father Ernetti's photo of Jesus was "Inventato la macchina che fotografa il passato" in *Domenica del Corriere*.



Figure 5. The alleged photograph of Christ taken by Father Ernetti (Maddaloni)

According to Father Ernetti, the Vatican disapproved of his dissemination of details concerning the chronovisor and forbade him to discuss it any further (Krassa 71). Eventually, the excitement surrounding the chronovisor lessened, and some of the media abandoned the story, but other members of the media continued to pry into the project.

In 1993, “Ernetti admitted to a Spanish reporter that the photo of Jesus had not come from the chronovisor; the revelation appeared in *Más Allá*” (Krassa 72). Father Ernetti’s photo was the mirror image of the face of Jesus on a woodcarving made by Cullot Valera, a Spanish sculptor. Surprisingly, the Spanish reporter who broke the story was Javier Sierra. Father Ernetti unwittingly provided Sierra with valuable information he needed to further his novel, *The Lady in Blue*. Father Ernetti provided Sierra with evidence sufficient to discredit the success of the chronovisor, yet Sierra wanted more evidence that the Church intended to use the chronovisor to gain followers.

The information Sierra received from Father Ernetti regarding the Chronovision Project may also have explained María de Ágreda’s trances. Father Ernetti claimed that during an experiment in which he was “filtering harmonics out of Gregorian chants he heard the voice of Father Gemelli’s late father speaking” (Krassa 14). Members of the Chronovision Project claimed to have stolen the sound being used by the “seventeenth-century woman” (Sierra *The Lady in Blue* 185) and used it to vibrate the electrons in such a fashion that created “quantum entanglement” (Sierra *The Lady in Blue* 185). María de Ágreda’s body may have reacted to Gregorian chant music, which may have caused her trances and her visions. María de Ágreda’s reaction is similar to that of the natives of the Americas, who frequently fell into trances during their religious ceremonies while using hallucinating drugs and chants. During their trance, the natives of the Americas claimed



that they spoke to relatives who were in the afterlife. As a musicologist, Father Ernetti studied Gregorian chants and applied its hypnotic theories and principles to the chronovisor. While the developers of the chronovisor recognized the value of the “vibratory energy that was involved,” (Krassa 196) Father Ernetti did not understand “that the energy was at a frequency far outside of [his] range of instrumentation” (Krassa 196). Music may be the key to finding a solution to time travel, but technology needs to improve to unlock the secrets of time travel through teleportation. By connecting music to the trance, Sierra connected various similarities of the Chronovision Project to María de Ágreda’s purported ability to bilocate. Sierra learned that the Church withheld critical information and forbade its release.

Another challenge Sierra encountered in validating his claims against the Church actions is that he did not have access to or ignored Father Ernetti’s deathbed confession. In his confession to a distant relative, Father Ernetti acknowledged his failures and his lies regarding the chronovisor. According to Father Ernetti, his soul was “forcing him to remember something of very great importance to him” (Krassa 166). He claimed he reincarnated multiple times and recalled events from previous lives. Father Ernetti stated that in one of his past lives he lived in Rome during the time of Ennius and watched *Thyestes*. Father Ernetti indicated that the chronovisor was not the source of the missing lines of the play; rather, his recollections from a previous life allowed him to retrieve the lost lines.

Father Ernetti also claimed that during one of his lives, he was a contemporary and a friend of Nostradamus, who also “experimented with a chronovisor” (Krassa 195). Therefore, the concept of the chronovisor was not new. Father Ernetti stated:

Nostradamus believed it could be done by changing the vaporous body, that the body could be transformed in such a way that it could slip easily between times. We felt that we could achieve the vaporous body through alchemy...in such a way that we felt we could change the experience and control it with the body. Chief among our concepts was that of a round room...a round chamber in which are placed the akashic records. Off of this chamber are a multitude of paths, like a sun and rays. We believed that the vaporous body could enter the chamber and go in any direction it wished. Each ray represents a different lifetime and a different time.

(Krassa 195-196)

Father Ernetti admitted on his deathbed that the chronovisor did not work; however he truly expected to see a successful one during his lifetime. He believed his failure was the result of his belief-structure, which did not allow him to separate action from time. He believed that when he returned in his next lifetime, technological advancements would allow him to create a workable chronovisor.

Although Father Ernetti exaggerated the capability of the chronovisor, he adamantly insisted the “Chronovision Project” was real. The chronovisor was developed, but he had lied about the persons who helped him develop the device. Instead of Enrico Fermi assisting in the development of the chronovisor, a student helped him. Father Ernetti refused to release the name of the student and indicated that the student was sworn to secrecy.

Sierra’s failure to mention any of the information available in the deathbed confession indicates that he either was not aware of it or he refused to let it sway his

beliefs. If Sierra had access to Father Ernetti's deathbed confession, the search for a naturalistic answer may have taken a different path. Sierra believed he could demystify María de Ágreda while showing that the Church used purported miraculous apparitions to gain and retain followers.

Why did the Church sanction the Chronovision Project, and why did the experiment continue after the project lead had proven to be unstable? According to Father Ernetti's report, Pope Pius XII wanted to convince followers of the existence of a glorious afterlife. From this account, I surmise that Sierra's claims are accurate. Additionally, I believe that people of faith are driven to believe that God is responsible for teleportations and apparitions, rendering naturalistic laws unnecessary, and that the Church perpetuates this type of thinking by withholding or delaying the release of information.

## Predicting the Unpredictable: Believing the Unbelievable

*Miracles are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see.*

-C.S. Lewis

Although I focus on María de Ágreda's alleged ability to teleport, many other miracles and apparitions lend credence to Sierra's belief that naturalistic laws can explain most if not all miracles. For centuries, people have had a desire to learn what lies beyond the world they know and what they can expect in their future. Their desire to know whether there is life after death is boosted and heightened from prophecies, apparitions, predictions, miracles, and the Church. A closer observation of various miraculous events will validate Sierra's claim regarding the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Church.

Miracles are not a new phenomenon. The Old Testament, for instance, describes a significant number of them, such as the one in Exodus 3:1-3 which details the miracle of the Lord appearing and speaking from a burning bush that remains unconsumed by the fire. Richard Swinburne defines a miracle as "an event of an extraordinary kind, brought about by a god, and of religious significance" (1). Before Pope Benedict XIV published the ecclesiastical approval of apparitions, miraculous events were not as thoroughly investigated. They are now examined with greater circumspection and skepticism. In *Muses, Madmen, and Prophets*, Daniel Smith builds a case that beginning in the early

sixteenth century a higher emphasis was placed on the sciences and a rational explanation of events. He states:

Between the beginning of the Reformation in the early sixteenth century and the rise of psychiatry in the late eighteenth, there rests a 250-year blooming of a new empirical frame of mind, a “scientific revolution” that mitigated the centuries-old authority of the Church and instituted the Enlightenment ideals of rationality and skeptical inquiry. That revolution is what made the transformation of voice-hearing from a religious to a pathological experience possible. (65)

Before the sixteenth century, the Church declared events which were not easily explained using naturalistic laws to be the work of a supernatural being. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the committee evaluating unexplained events no longer began by assuming the event was the work of God and worked to prove their assumption was wrong. Instead, they began by assuming the event could be explained using naturalistic laws (Smith 88). Skeptics even questioned whether the person viewing or participating in an unexplained event had a “pathological experience.” As a result of the increased scrutiny, “over the last two hundred years, the number of supposed miraculous events which were explained using the physical world of sciences has caused religion to examine their processes for declaring events to be works of God” (Smith 88).

According to Ingo Swann, “Catholic theologians have always agreed that God can grant private revelations, suspending the normal laws which veil from mortals the persons and realities of the supernatural world and manifesting them to direct sensory or intellectual perception of selected individuals” (13). Taken literally, when the normal

laws of nature are suspended, a miracle occurs. The key is to ascertain whether the laws of nature were suspended during a purported miraculous event.

Wishing to avoid embarrassment from falsely claimed miracles, the Church established stringent procedures for evaluating “miracle potential.” Using committees such as the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, each supposed event undergoes intense scrutiny. In the 1750s, Pope Benedict XIV issued the treatise *De servorum Dei beatificationis* (The Ecclesiastical Approval of Apparitions), which resulted in Article 1399 of the Canon Law. Article 1399 forbids anyone from publishing purported miracles until the event is approved by the Church. According to Kenneth Ryan, the Church created Article 1399 because it was “reluctant to set forth as established Catholic faith what is only the statement of an ordinary fallible human being or beings” (130). Even when multiple people witness and/or write about miraculous events, the end result may produce different versions of the same event (Swann 11).

The Church’s ecclesiastical approval of apparitions stated that only after careful investigation would an apparition be acknowledged as the work of God. The approval process would not just approve events which would permit assent of the Roman Catholic Church, but would advance the cause of all human faith (Swann 14). As part of the investigative process, the Vatican seeks a number of medical doctors to serve on a committee to investigate all claims of miracle cures. Although the duties and responsibilities of the membership are not over-taxing, the Vatican has a difficult time finding doctors to participate because many doctors are not ready to agree that “unexplained cures are literally inexplicable” (Cornwell 231). Many doctors believe that cures are explained through naturalistic laws, so they continue to search through these

laws until they find a way to explain the miraculous event. Doctors recognize that the human body is complex and patients respond differently to treatment. They also recognize that the medical profession is an incomplete science with more to be discovered regarding the workings and inter-workings of the organs of the body. Therefore, they continue to search for naturalistic answers – answers which, I believe will eventually be discovered. As a result of their in-depth search, ninety-nine out of a hundred purported miracles were rejected (Cornwell 230). Had the Church done a better job of scrutinizing miraculous events in the sixteenth century, they would likely have had a ninety-nine percent rejection rate as well. As was explained earlier, many of the early purported miracles were proven to be false and proved to be an embarrassment to the Church.

In 1983, the Vatican relaxed its rules regarding sainthood but did not relax the requirement that all claimed miracles be scrutinized extensively. The number of saints has since risen, but the numbers of unexplained events have decreased significantly. In his book *Breaking Faith: The Pope, the People, and the Fate of Catholicism*, John Cornwell states:

There are about 11,000 saints in the records of the Church, 10,000 of whom were the subject of established cults before the formal process for saint-making began at the end of the Middle Ages. John Paul had created almost a thousand blessed and saints by the turn of the millennium.

Wherever he travels he likes to beatify and canonize, demonstrating that the Church in its holiness is coextensive with every language and culture.

To make more saints faster, he has altered the rules, halving the number of

miracles necessary to prove sainthood from two to one. But he will not relent on the ‘inexplicability’ test of the supporting miracles, even though some of his advisers have suggested new criteria that could create more miracles and even more saints. (230)

Having relaxed the Catholic Church’s requirements and simplified the four-step process to canonization (declaration of sainthood), Pope John Paul II made it easier and faster to beatify and canonize. He did this to acknowledge the contributions of various nations. Throughout his travels, the Pope declared many individuals to be “Blessed.” According to the laws of the Church, step three of the canonization process is known as Beatification. A person is beatified when the Church believes the dead person has entered heaven and can assist individuals who pray to him or her. A beatified person is considered “Blessed.” To become a saint, a miracle must have been performed.

The processes for evaluating and verifying purported miracles and identifying candidates for canonization have always been a source of discussion. Serious discussions began in the sixteenth century when the Catholic Church attempted to more clearly separate its teachings from that of the Protestant churches. Sixteenth-century Protestant theology considered the Word of God, written within the scriptures, as sufficient proof that God is omnipotent (Shaw 22). In contrast, the Catholic Church, at the Council of Trent, emphasized that miracles are an outward sign of the presence of God in the daily lives of its followers and that miracles have occurred since the scriptures and will continue to occur. The Church’s explicit emphasis on the possibility for miracles deviated from the beliefs of many Protestants. This difference created contentious discussions between the Jesuits and some Protestant Christians. “Some Jesuits even wrote tracts



arguing against Protestant claims that miracles had ceased [...] and [that] the lack of miracles amongst Protestants showed them to be upstarts who had no such tokens of apostleship” (Shaw 27). These writings caused many Protestants to write works which were contra-miracles. At the same time, England witnessed an increase in the number of claimed miracles by the Catholic Church. This increase in miracles caused some Protestants to claim the “evil origin” of Catholic miracles (Shaw 23).

During this period of philosophical disagreement, many Protestants focused on discrediting a number of the purported visions. Ingo Swann classifies a vision as being “most often experienced internally, as if in ‘one’s head’” (16). In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James investigated people who claimed to have had religious visions and found similar personal traits. In his book *Muses, Madmen and Prophets*, Daniel Smith summarizes James’ findings: James found that people who claimed to have visions suffered from:

fits of depression, anxiety, obsessions, and compulsions. They have been the reclusive, the anguished, the neurotic, and the maladjusted among us, people who today would likely attract a psychiatric diagnosis. What is more, religious experiences have often been the direct cause of mental pathology. Direct contact with God, if there is such a thing, appears to be one of the more painful experiences known to humankind. (Smith 89)

Through her own admission and from the accounts of Javier Sierra, María de Ágreda possessed many of the traits described by James. In María de Ágreda’s *The Mystical City of God*, she acknowledges having a vision from the Virgin Mary and documents it.

María de Ágreda's *The Mystical City of God* created an issue for the Catholic Church because the book was based on her vision of the Virgin Mary. Published in 1665, the book soon appeared on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (List of Prohibited Books). Her book violated Article 1399 of the Canon Law and was thus a source of controversy among theologians (Brown 8). Article 1399 of the Canon Law requires "ecclesiastical permission for publication of revelations, visions, miracles, or for the frequenting of non-recognized places of apparitions" (*Our Lady of the Roses*). The Church had not acknowledged the vision as being legitimate, so permission to publish the book had not been granted. It was not until 1681 that Pope Innocent XI removed the book from the list (Brown 8). However, the controversy over the book continued, and for the majority of the eighteenth century it vacillated from being on and off the *Index*. As a result, the Church halted the "Process of Beatification" of María de Ágreda (Brown 9).

The Church professes that the Holy Scriptures are the last public revelation since the Apostles died; however, "the Church, in approving mystical phenomena, affirms that there is nothing against faith or morals in the content of the revelations, but does not guarantee their truth" (Ryan "Foreword" xi). Apparitions are one of the mystical phenomena that the Church accepts as signs from God. Swann defines apparitions as an "unexpected sight or phenomenon" (15). On the other hand, Swann defines a vision as "experienced internally, as if in one's head" (16). Swann acknowledges that people who saw apparitions are considered, by mainstream science, to be "victims of hallucinations, or as mentally unsound when compared to what is considered psychologically and scientifically normal" (9). Swann also points out that the seers of an apparition "are

relatively few in number and in all cases have been children or educationally challenged adults” (11).

Church records indicate that the Virgin Holy Mother Mary reportedly appeared in numerous countries in order to spread the message of God. People have reported seeing her in Mexico, France, Portugal, and Israel. While people recognize the scrutiny they will receive and the unwanted questions regarding their mental health, they continue to report apparitions. Although Saint Juan Diego, born a working class Aztec, knew his faith and mental health would be challenged, he reported an apparition of the Virgin in 1531 in Guadalupe, Mexico. He reported that the Virgin Mary told him she would “remedy sufferings, deprivations, and misfortunes” (Swann 28). The message was the good news both the Spanish and the Aztecs wanted to hear, for it offered peace and a better way of life. The Spanish methods of torture, rape, and pillage were not being successful in converting the Aztecs to Christianity, and the Spanish were not pleased with their quality of life in the harsh environment. Although “the authenticity of this apparition did not rest upon investigations and inquiry to which apparitions are usually submitted” (Swann 29), both sides were willing to accept the apparition and the message. Today, some people believe that Juan Diego was of an unsound mind, but the majority of the Mexican Catholics believe in him and still make the trek to the site of the apparition in the hope she will reappear. The reported appearance of Lady Guadalupe caused the people of Mexico to rally around her and to rally around the Catholic faith. She provided hope for a better life. The people of faith did not need scientific proof to dream of peace and prosperity.

Another apparition that gained a significant amount of attention took place in Fatima, Portugal in 1917. In this apparition, “The Lady of the Rosary” appeared six different times to three children, Lucia dos Santos and Jacinta and Francisco Marto. During her appearances, the Virgin supposedly revealed three secrets to “three illiterate children who emerged with news and predictions, some hoped for, but others found incomprehensible at the time” (Swann 122). Of particular importance to the followers were the content of the three secrets. Two of the secrets were intentionally withheld from the public for over twenty-four years, and the third secret was withheld for over eighty-three years. The first two secrets were revealed in 1941. Parts of the third secret were revealed in 2000. The three messages revealed by Our Lady of Fatima in 1917 to the children were as follows:

1. The first part of the secret: “is the vision of hell. [...] Plunged in this fire were demons and souls in human form, like transparent burning embers, all blackened or burnished bronze, floating about in the conflagration, now raised into the air by the flames that issued from within themselves together with great clouds of smoke, now falling back on every side like sparks in a huge fire, without weight or equilibrium, and amid shrieks and groans of pain and despair, which horrified us and made us tremble with fear” (“The Three Secrets of Our Lady of Fatima”).
2. The second part of the secret: “You have seen hell where the souls of poor sinners go. To save them, God wishes to establish in the world devotion to My Immaculate Heart. If what I say to you is done, many

souls will be saved and there will be peace. The war is going to end: but if people do not cease offending God, a worse one will break out during the Pontificate of Pius XI. [...] To prevent this, I shall come to ask for the consecration of Russia [...] If My requests are heeded, Russia will be converted, and there will be peace; if not, she will spread her errors throughout the world, causing wars and persecutions of the Church.” (“The Three Secrets of Our Lady of Fatima”)

3. The third part of the secret: “Our Lady also warned that: ‘If My requests are not heeded, Russia will spread her errors throughout the world, raising up wars and persecutions against the Church, the good will be martyred, the Holy Father will have much to suffer and various nations will be annihilated’ [...] The third part of the secret has not been revealed to the world in its ‘entirety’ by the Pope and the Vatican. There are still parts missing.” (“The Three Secrets of Our Lady of Fatima”)

According to the Church, the secrets describe hell, World War I, World War II, and the shooting of the Pope. Accounts of hell are documented in the Bible; however, the singling out of Russia is baffling. Although Russia’s treatment of its citizens was undoubtedly sinful, the secrets of Fatima do not address the even more serious atrocities committed by the Germans. More disturbing was the withholding of the secrets. One can surmise, as I do, that the Church used the event and kept its memory alive to attract followers.

The Catholic Church was not the only church in which members had visions, prophecies, and predictions. A less-publicized Methodist preacher, Reverend Constantine Blackman Sanders (better known as the “Sleeping Preacher”) from Mooresville, Alabama, experienced a life remotely similar to that of María de Ágreda. As a preacher in North Alabama, his followers “credited him with the ability to make predictions, help cure the sick, assist in locating lost objects, and relate happenings in other locations while in a sleep or trance” (*Old Brick Church*). Like María de Ágreda, Sanders fell into trances and while in the trance had visions. His trances continued throughout his life and were witnessed by numerous individuals. After awaking from a trance, he allegedly knew about events which had occurred in neighboring towns. The main difference between the “Sleeping Preacher” and María de Ágreda was the amount of publicity each received. The Methodist Church attempted to keep the events private, but witnesses leaked details to the media. Eventually, in 1876 a book titled *X+Y=Z, or the Sleeping Preacher* was published. Once exposed, various media outlets carried the story, publicizing the preacher’s purported abilities. The Methodist Church de-emphasized the events and refused to acknowledge or publicize them. Eventually, the story subsided and little is mentioned of his life.

Sierra challenged the purported miraculous apparitions of María de Ágreda and challenged the motives of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholic Church in over-publicizing these types of events. Based on the number of miracles that were proven to be false, the questionable use of miracles to discredit Protestantism, the failure of the Church to promptly release information regarding purported miraculous events, and the

need to retain and regain followers which were lost during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, I believe Sierra's conclusions are accurate.

### Bringing it All Together: Overwhelming Evidence

*A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty – it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man.*

-Albert Einstein

After seven years of effort, Javier Sierra penned his novel *The Lady in Blue*. He claims the novel is a work of fiction, but he does not indicate which of his statements are based on fact and which are based on fiction. He lets the reader determine which are which. Determining the validity of his analysis and pinpointing the inaccuracies are crucial to substantiating his conclusion that the Catholic Church of the sixteenth and seventeenth century used purported teleportations, bilocations, and apparitions to retain and to gain followers.

After careful review, my analysis indicates that Sierra's claims are justified. The supporting arguments, rationale, and proof were gathered, presented above, and are recapped here – beginning with a review of the actions of the Catholic Church. As time progressed and the Church gained followers, it faced and responded to various challenges. Some of the most significant challenges were the result of immature processes and weak governance. For example, the rapid growth rate experienced by the Catholic Church “in the seventeenth-century resulted in the ordination of an all-time high



number of new ministers – close to three percent of the population” (McBrien 1212). Many of the new ministers were not sufficiently trained to assume their new position and were more interested in their own materialistic and financial well-being than spreading the Word of God. The action of the clergy led to discontent and calls for reform. The Church’s inability to remedy the situation rapidly permitted reformation movements to gain followers and eventually to split from the Church. The loss of followers to other churches, to diseases, and to other causes resulted in the growth rate of the Church dropping below the growth rate of the European population for the first time in the history of the Church.

Figure 6, derived from Barrett’s Global Trends, depicts a negative growth rate which begins around 1200 and does not begin to recover until 1500. During this period, the Church lost approximately three million followers (See figure 7).

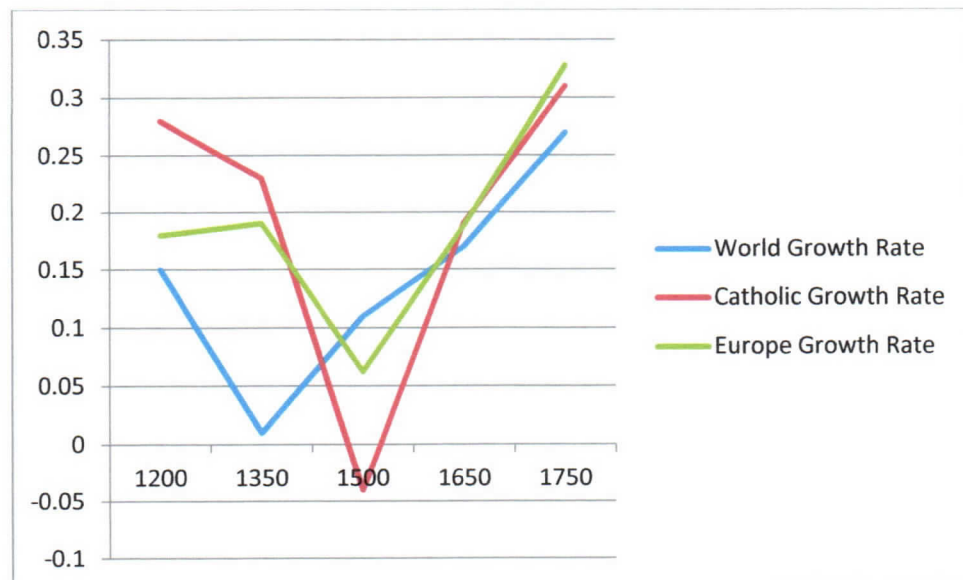


Figure 6. Catholic, Europe, and World population growth rates

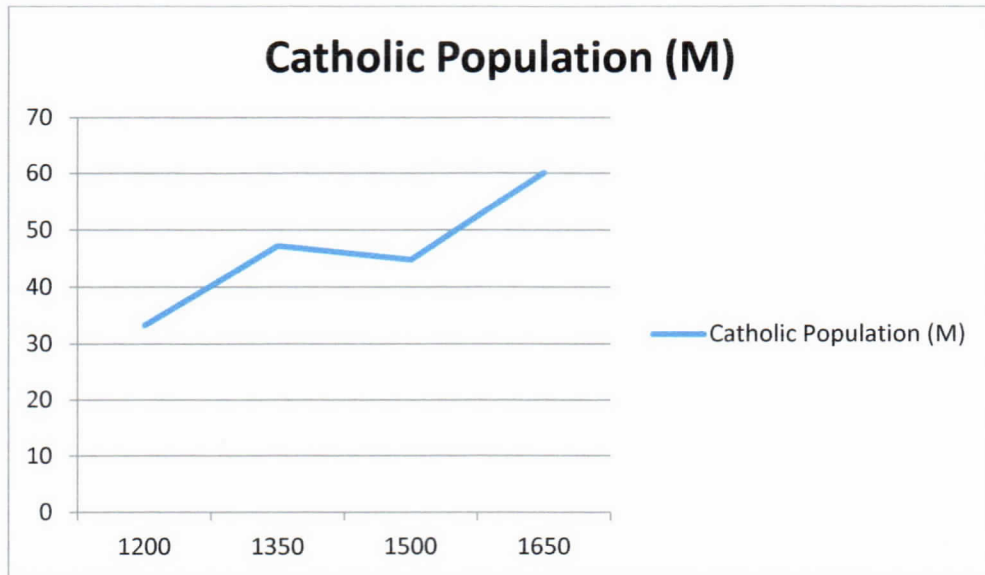


Figure 7. Catholic Church population (1200-1650)

In the 1500s, the population growth rate begins an upward trend. This corresponds to the time frame that the Church implemented the reformations adopted by the Council of Trent. One of the Council of Trent's dictums professed that miracles demonstrate God's choice of Catholicism and His presence in a follower's everyday life. After the Council of Trent emphasized the value of miracles, England witnessed a significant increase in the number of purported miracles (Smith 88).

After an embarrassing number of purported miracles were proven false, the process for acknowledging and approving miracles was made more stringent. The new process was not in effect until forty years after the Council of Trent and the losses in the number of followers had stabilized. Missionaries had successfully used miracles, apparitions, visions, predictions, bilocations, and teleportations to attract new followers in sufficient numbers to offset the number of followers lost in Europe to Protestantism and disease (Bokenkotter 255). Two of the miracles used to increase the number of followers

were the apparition of the Virgin Mary at Guadalupe and the bilocation of the Lady in Blue. Strangely, these events were not witnessed by the missionaries, but were highly publicized. Coincidentally, the missionaries received stipends for gaining followers and for colonizing new lands.

Although some of the evidence regarding the abuse and misuse of miracles, visions, apparitions, bilocations and teleportations by the Church is circumstantial, clearly missionaries used these types of events to gain and to retain followers. The fact that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Church did not discourage missionaries from using these types of questionable practices nor did they act promptly to disavow the occurrence suggests passive acceptance. The passive acceptance validates and justifies Sierra's view of the Church.

A review of María de Ágreda and her works adds to the evidence supporting Javier Sierra's claim. Although María de Ágreda made spreading the Word of God the sole focus of her life, her fanatical religious practices ultimately contributed to her delusional visions, unverified ability to bilocate, and the focus of an investigation by the Inquisition. Her life's work should not be minimized; however, her ability to bilocate was never observed by a credible witness, her book violated the Vatican policy regarding visions and ended up on the Vatican do not read list, and the Inquisition found her to be incoherent.

Although María de Ágreda claimed to have made over five hundred trips to New Mexico, missionaries did not witness any of the trips. The only potential citing of María de Ágreda was witnessed by indigenous natives from New Mexico who claimed a lady with a blue aurora around her appeared to them and told them to travel to one of the

missionaries and accept Christianity. Friar Benavides initially identified the Lady in Blue as Mother Luisa de Carrión. It was not until ten years later that Friar Benavides learned from Padre Bernardino de Sienna that the Lady in Blue could have been María de Ágreda (Fedewa 60). In a letter to the Bishop, Friar Benavides even credited María de Ágreda with the conversion of five hundred thousand followers. This number turned out to be grossly exaggerated. According to official New Mexico records, the number of converts is estimated to be only a few thousand (Gutiérrez 92-93). Even though the Inquisition requested that Friar Benavides appear before them to confirm his statements, he never did. When the Inquisition asked María de Ágreda about her trips to New Mexico and Friar Benavides' claims regarding the bilocations, she was quoted as saying that others embellished the story and the events. Additionally, she pointed out that the Church publicized the bilocations to attract followers. María de Ágreda was never beatified nor was she ever declared a saint; however, the Church used the event for years before denying her sainthood. Eventually, the Church declared "there can be no true bilocation, because to be in one place by definition means not to be elsewhere. All bilocation is, in fact, seeming bilocation" (McBrien 176). Sierra used María de Ágreda's trials and tribulations to highlight the fact that the Church did not promptly disavow the purported ability to bilocate nor did they dispute María de Ágreda's claim that the event was publicized to gain followers. Again, the passive acceptance validates and justifies Sierra's and my view of the Church.

As Javier Sierra was investigating María de Ágreda's life, he learned of a secret Vatican experiment which would allow the church to view past events. Even though the bilocations occurred in the 1620s and the experiment was not conducted until 1950,

Sierra uses the experiment to establish a persistent pattern of exploitation regarding the use of purported miraculous events to retain and to gain followers. The Vatican experiment, known as the Chronovision Project, was known and sanctioned by Pope Pius XII as evidenced by his conversation with Father Agostino Gemelli.

Father Gemelli and Father Ernetti were working together on their experiment when a wire on their tape recorder kept breaking. In frustration, Father Gemelli pleaded to his deceased father for help. Amazingly, both Father Ernetti and Father Gemelli heard a voice say, "Of course I shall help you" (Krassa 9). Father Gemelli told the Pope of the experiment and told him about the voice. In response, the Pope said, "This experiment may perhaps become the cornerstone of a building for scientific studies which will strengthen people's faith in a hereafter" (Krassa 9-10). Although the chronovisor did not work and the scientists purported to have worked on the project probably never did, Father Ernetti adamantly claimed that the project was real and that the pope planned to exploit its power. Father Ernetti, the Chronovision Project leader, took many of the facts surrounding the Chronovision Project to his grave; however, on his deathbed Father Ernetti claimed that the results of the experiment were actually based on first-hand knowledge of events he personally witnessed in a previous life. Father Ernetti believed that he had reincarnated numerous times and could accurately discuss previous events because he actually lived through them.

Regardless of whether the device worked or even existed, Father Ernetti and Father Gemelli convinced Pope Pius XII that it did (Butler 10). Interestingly, the pope did not request that the chronovisor allow him to witness the trials and tribulations of God. He was more interested in gaining and retaining followers. Sierra used the chronovisor to

depict a pattern whereby the Church used and publicized miraculous events to gain and to maintain followers. The approval of the Chronovision Project and the Pope's plans to use the results validate and justify Sierra's and my view of the Church.

Sierra chose to write about the life of María de Ágreda and the Vatican's Chronovision Project to highlight the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Church's use of miraculous events to gain and retain followers. Sierra did not address other apparitions which occurred during this time frame, but a review of several of the events confirms the pattern of misuse of the events. For example, the only person to view the apparition of the Virgin Mother at Guadalupe was a native member of the Aztec nation. Even though missionaries were not present at the apparition, they eagerly espoused, embraced, and embellished the story. The apparition convinced the Aztec nation to accept the Word of God and to convert to Catholicism. Their conversion correspondingly improved the quality of life of the missionaries by providing significant financial gains and by reducing the number of violent attacks. The incentives which were given to the missionaries for gaining followers invited abuse as eager missionaries used questionable practices and exaggerated their successes. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Church was slow to adopt missionary reforms. The failure to rapidly review apparitions and to disapprove of the abusive missionaries' practices validates and justifies Sierra's and my claims.

Another apparition which occurred shortly before the purported bilocation by the Lady in Blue was the appearance of the Virgin mother to three young peasants in Fatima, Portugal. The Virgin Mary allegedly revealed three secrets to the children. The Church disclosed the contents of the first two secrets twenty-four years after the apparition and partially revealed the contents of the third secret eighty-three years later. The Church has

not totally revealed the third secret nor have they indicated when the remainder of the secret will be disclosed. Withholding the secrets for such a long time allowed the Church a significant amount of time to capitalize on, publicize, and retain focus on the apparition. The failure to quickly disclose the contents of the three secrets validates and justifies Sierra's claims that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Church used miraculous events to retain and to gain followers.

The previous paragraphs discussed the Catholic Church's disclosure and treatment of information surrounding unexplained and miraculous events. As my thesis progressed, research revealed a series of unexplained events being performed by a Methodist preacher from North Alabama. Similar to María de Ágreda, Reverend Constantine Sanders would fall into trances and have visions. Members of his congregation reported that when Reverend Sanders came out of a trance, he reported on events occurring in neighboring towns. He would tell them of past events and could help them locate lost items. The Methodist Church was unsuccessful in keeping Reverend Sanders' story from being published; however, neither the preacher nor the Church capitalized on the purported special abilities. Eventually, interest in Reverend Sanders lessened and ultimately faded. Today few people have heard of the "Sleeping Preacher." Although, the "Sleeping Preacher" may have attracted followers to his Church, the number of new followers was small and localized. In contrast to the Catholic Church, the event was neither publicized nor endorsed by the Methodist Church.

## Conclusion

*You don't need an explanation for everything. Recognize that there are such things as miracles, events for which there are no ready explanations. Later knowledge may explain those events quite easily.*

-Harry Browne

Javier Sierra claims, as I do, that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Church used visions, apparitions, bilocations, teleportations, and miracles to retain and to gain followers. During the period in which the Church experienced a positive growth rate, it failed to adequately investigate claims of miracles, and it was extremely slow to acknowledge that some of the previously unexplained events could actually be explained by the laws of nature. The Church's passive reaction allowed persons to believe that purported miracles were signs that God existed and manifested Himself in a followers' daily life. The Church also used difficult-to-explain events to attract and to maintain followers who were seeking peace, serenity, and reuniting with family in the afterlife. Eventually, the Church recognized the harm and embarrassment from officially recognizing claims of miracles that turned out to be false. As a result, the process to recognize miracles became more stringent and required extensive investigation to validate and to justify a decision. By the time the processes were changed, many of the purported miracles had already become entrenched, and followers were not ready to abandon their faith or beliefs. People of faith adamantly believe that events which are not



easily explained are the work of God, and it is not necessary to prove or disprove the authenticity of an event. I agree with Stephen Jay Gould, a paleontologist and professor of zoology and geology at Harvard University, and Doctor Sean Carroll, a physicist at the California Institute of Technology, who believe science and theology should be kept separate. In his article *Nonoverlapping Magisteria*, Gould states, “The lack of conflict between science and religion arises from a lack of overlap between their respective domains of professional expertise--science in the empirical constitution of the universe and religion in the search for proper ethical values and the spiritual meaning of our lives. The attainment of wisdom in a full life requires extensive attention to both domains” (Gould 16-22). Dr. Carroll teaches that theology should focus on values. For example, God is love, kindness, and justice. These are values which can never be proved or disproved by physics. He believes that theoretical physics should focus on studying the laws of nature.

Although many Catholics accept bilocations and apparitions as works of God, others openly question them. Belief in the existence of God has driven people to believe that supernatural laws explain bilocations and apparitions, rendering naturalistic explanations unnecessary.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> In 1999, Pope John Paul II apologized for the malicious execution of Hus.

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