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Evidence for St. Joseph of Copertino's Levitations

Michael Grosso

Documentation — The evidence is historical and consists of written narratives. The core documents depose eyewitness testimony given under oath. More than one hundred and fifty cases have been collected; in light of what we know, we may infer that the people who actually observed Joseph levitate numbered in the thousands, for Joseph was a public figure for thirty-five years, and his levitations, spontaneous and unpredictable, occurred throughout that period. Original records of sightings exist in letters, diaries, biographies; they are inscribed on relics, monuments, official documents, located in the many churches and convents of Italy where Joseph lived or visited; in addition, in the Vatican Archives, we find numerous *riti*, compendia, and 13 volumes of *processi* covering all aspects of his life. Finally, we may inspect paintings, etchings, and other representations of famous flights, e.g., an occasion when Joseph was gazing at the House of Loreto from a distance and ecstatically flew to the top of an olive tree, hovering there like a bird on a branch.

Gustavo Parisciani provides the massively useful, critical resources for the evidence of Joseph's levitations and other paranormal phenomena. In 1963, Parisciani published a 1,080-page book (in Italian), *St. Joseph of Copertino: In Light of the Newest Documentation (San Giuseppe da Copertino [1603–1663] alla luce dei nuovi documenti*, Osimo, Ancona: Pax et Bonum) and other, related books on all aspects of the saint's life — e.g. his trials with the Inquisition, his impact on the history of Poland, and so on. To support important statements of fact, he typically provides testimony from one to five or six witnesses. Also, Count Dominic Bernini's biography of Joseph (1722) is useful for its frequent eyewitness citations. Recently, the first English translation and abridgement of Bernini has been made, and it will soon be available.¹ Bernini is emphatic: Joseph's story would be *incredible*, were it not for the copious eyewitness testimony.

Where — Witnesses who attested to Joseph's paranormalities were from all parts of Italy (tiny towns and famous cities), and from Germany, France, Poland, Bohemia, and Spain. By the time Joseph died, his reputation had spread to most of Italy and often drew pilgrims from other European countries. There was a huge spike of "miracle" claims after his death when people came from all over to witness his body on display in Osimo. In ages of faith, a saint's tomb often became the scene of alleged healings and other paranormal effects.

When — Except for possibly a few years of slackening but not ceasing, for the last thirty-five years of his life (1628–1663) Joseph pretty steadily experienced levitations. It was not a rare phenomenon for him. They began after he was ordained a priest in 1628, and apparently *increased* as time went on until they occurred daily and sometimes several

times daily. The records show no sign of “decline effect” in the display of his aerial talents. Diminished vitality and even being near death had no effect on the “force” causing the flights. After Joseph got into trouble with the Inquisition, thanks to his levitations, he prayed for them to stop completely, and begged his brethren to pray for the same. They had only temporary success delaying the onset of his ecstatic seizures. The liturgical calendar was one element of timing that did influence his levitations. Holidays like Good Friday, Easter, Christmas, the images and the meanings, deeply affected the form and intensity of his levitations, as Parisciani shows at length in Chapter 15 of his major study. The passage of clock time never impaired Joseph’s capacity for levitation, but the form and emotional tone was influenced by the symbolism of liturgical time.

Who — All kinds of people witnessed and deposed testimony certifying Joseph’s levitations: foreigners, ordinary illiterates, theologians, clerics, artists, pilgrims, doctors, surgeons, dukes, princesses, kings, popes, cardinals, and a raft of lynx-eyed Inquisitors from Rome and Naples. All souls were not soothed by the phenomena; some felt “sacred fear” and ran away, some like a German Lutheran Duke were thrown into violent doubt about their beliefs, and others were suspicious of uncanny, perhaps devil-tainted powers being in play. One of Joseph’s awestruck superiors decided to use him to edify the public and dragged the obedient but reluctant friar on a tour with him around the province of Lecce, visiting about fifty different convents. The trip took about a year. As it turned out, Joseph performed very well on this spiritual road show, so well that the Inquisitors took notice and made his life miserable by calling him to Naples for questioning. He was forced to defend himself against the charge of “ostentatious sanctity” and was accused of “exploiting the credulity” of the masses. In the end, he was acquitted of all charges, but an undercurrent of fear and suspicion shadowed Joseph for the rest of his life. The point: There was never any suspicion about the reality of his phenomena; the grumbling was from concern over the origins of his powers and the purity of his motives.

What — What specifically did witnesses see and find so *evident*? First, we should underscore the simple conditions under which good eyewitness testimony for levitation may be obtained. Normal vision and ordinary language skills are all that is necessary to depose adequate evidence that so and so was raised from the ground. This differs sharply from claims about healing miracles or extrasensory perception, where doubts and questions of interpretation come up more readily.

Joseph was often observed levitating while hearing or serving Mass. During the elevation of the Host he would stop, freeze, and hover in space, his toes lightly touching the ground or lifting up gently, perhaps a palm’s length. In other sightings, he would move up and down inches or feet above ground fairly rapidly; these anomalous movements almost invariably were preceded by a shrill, explosive scream. He would fly forward toward a platform and freeze, and then fly backwards, which he later explained signified feelings of humiliation or self-reproach. Other times witnesses observed movements through the air that performed actions: for example, he helped install a large heavy cross in the ground that several men were struggling to move; flew over the heads of a Spanish ambassador, his wife and her retinue, in order to avoid talking to the ambassador’s wife; soared thirty meters in the air to contemplate Cimabue’s painting of the Madonna; carried another man up into the air and healed him of a long-standing mental disorder; and so on and so forth.

As to the speed of the *moti*, again we find a wide range from the hoverings observed during Mass to cases of speedy transfer that struck some witnesses as instantaneous.

As for the temporal duration of the flights, sometimes he would alight somewhere for a few seconds, or remain aloft for minutes—quarter and half hours are often cited in the *processi*—and there are reports that Joseph spent hours lost to the world and suspended in space. But references to very prolonged elevations are sketchy, and I don't attach much weight to them; also, in a few cases, it's not clear if ecstasy or levitation is being described. Hours of ecstasy are more credible than hours of levitation.

It matters little whether we speak of levitations that last one or fifteen minutes or half an hour or more. More important is that these are periods of time in the air that cannot be dismissed as based on quick impressions that might induce illusions. It's harder to discount a claim about something that lasted in broad daylight for minutes or much longer than a claim about something that flickers briefly before your eyes, perhaps in shadowy or emotionally charged circumstances. As to how high the friar flew, we read reports of him floating to the ceiling of his cell and to the top of olive trees and high up to embrace Cimabue's Madonna on the wall of the Assisi basilica.

Circumstances and phenomenology — The circumstances of Joseph's levitations were unpredictable, uncontrollable, and quite varied. Joseph never levitated in a normal state of consciousness; he was always "beside himself." The immediate trigger was always something he associated with the sacred. I mentioned the Mass and its high moments, but almost anything sacred could set into motion Joseph's ecstatic raptures. Consider a few recorded specifics: the sight of a painting of the Madonna, a tangible relic of a saint (especially Francis, Anthony, Catherine), a few notes of Giovanni Palestrina's music, the peal of a bagpipe, the daily chants and litanies of the choir, the mere utterance of the word *paradise*, sheer good spirits or sheer playfulness with his companions, or the sight of a Christ child doll, a sculpture of the Immaculate Conception, or even a leaf.

Joseph's levitations were omnidirectional. He levitated up and down, forward and backward. He often landed on his knees in ecstasy, and from his knees rose rapturously into the air. In the midst of an ecstatic state, Joseph would often freeze like a statue; other times he would scream and beat his feet rapidly on the ground. Using his arms and legs, he would shape his body into a cross. Mainly the levitations were involuntary; at most he could delay or divert them. In the long run, the effort to quell them was a complete failure. In Joseph's experience, the effect of gravity was diminished *and* intensified; the power was bipolar and could weigh him down, indeed, slam and press him helplessly flat on the ground as well as cause him to soar aloft. In these states, bystanders would poke, jab, and try to wake him, to no avail; yet he could selectively listen and come back to normal awareness if called under holy obedience. On three recorded occasions, he embraced and took up somebody else with him.

It appears from the frequency and variety of circumstances that Joseph was disposed by some internal need to "explode" (his term) into ecstatic states as often as circumstances allowed. From 1645 to 1647, don Arcangelo Rosmi, his diarist, recorded about seventy cases of ecstatic levitation, and then chose to stop counting. In most cases, he reasoned, seventy observations of something should be decisive. By 1645 Joseph was

becoming ecstatic several times during the same Mass. During his last six years in Osimo he would levitate daily, if not many times daily, according to Parisiani.

Three examples — Some concrete examples of these levitations will help. The first is highly specific about where Joseph *flew* to; there can be no doubt about what is being claimed. This and the following two quotes are from Chapter 22 of Bernini's *Vita* of Joseph: "Fr. Antonio Chiarello, while walking with Padre Giuseppe through the orchard of the convent, at a certain point gazed up into the heavens. 'Padre Giuseppe, what a beautiful sky God has made!' These words seemed like an invitation for Padre Giuseppe to fly up into the sky, and so he did, letting out a loud cry and bounding from the ground to fly up to the top of an olive tree where he landed on his knees on a branch that kept shaking. One reads in the *processi* that it was as though a bird were perched on a branch. Padre Giuseppe stayed up there about a half an hour and finally came back to himself, asking the priest how to get down from the tree. The priest had to get a ladder and in that way he descended from the olive tree." There are several narratives of Joseph coming to himself after having levitated to some high place he was unable to descend from.

Esthetic sensations like church music or the sound of violins carried Joseph aloft. One Christmas he invited some shepherds to bring their pipes and trumpets inside the church. At church he began to sing and dance until the excitement grew. The shepherds later deposed (under oath of course) what they observed: "Padre Giuseppe was so delighted that he began to dance in the center of the nave and, at the sound of the pipes, suddenly sighed and loudly screamed and flew up in the air like a bird, halfway to the ceiling, *where he continued dancing above the main altar*, and went to embrace the tabernacle that was a considerable distance above the main altar. The altar was filled with flaming candles and he rested between the candles without knocking over even one. He stayed that way with his knees above the altar, embracing the tabernacle with both arms, for about fifteen minutes and then returned to himself without having done any damage whatsoever. His eyes were full of tears and he said, 'Praise God, brothers.' We all remained in awe; I said to myself, 'This is truly a miracle.'"

We have time for one more slightly strange example. Walking in the company of two brothers, Joseph noticed three crosses approaching in a procession; he turned and posed a question to his comrades. He wanted to know where they would touch or kiss the body of the crucified Christ. The two brothers replied. "Then Padre Giuseppe began to respond, as the two brothers say in the *processi*: 'I...I...and I' swelling up more and more as though he could not say another word, but instead let out a great scream and all of a sudden flew from the brothers all the way to the cross, embraced it, and landed on his knees supported by the cross-beam about three meters from the ground. At the sound of the scream even the brothers of the convent, along with the two priests traveling with Giuseppe, stopped to contemplate and admire him in his ecstasy for a good long while with tears in their eyes.

"As sunset was approaching, the Superior arrived at Calvary and ascended toward the Cross and stood on tiptoes, stretching out his hand to touch the hem of Padre Giuseppe's tunic and to command him, by virtue of holy obedience, to return to himself. Then Padre Giuseppe, as though he had awakened from deep sleep, recognized the danger he was in and began to cry. He turned toward the cross and embraced it, gradually

making his way on the ground and looking a bit stupefied. The other brothers pulled down the hoods of their robes and went away.”

Since this scene describes an outdoor procession, there had to be other witnesses. Luckily, we have written testimony of the two friars with him on the occasion. These will have to stand in for a large collection of data. The public ecstasies and levitations caused everything around Joseph to stop and be thrown into confusion. So the Church issued increasingly draconian orders to a) move him from convent to convent as soon as the crowds got out of hand, and b) prevent the public and almost anybody from communicating with him, in person or by letter.

The reports concerning Joseph’s phenomena were carefully scrutinized by the Devil’s Advocate — Prosper Lambertini, later Pope Benedict XIV — during the beatification process (24 February 1753). With the documents before him, Lambertiniⁱⁱ vouched for Joseph’s levitations, deferring to the “unimpeachable witnesses.”

Aside from *a priori* denial that levitation is possible, what are the plausible objections to the evidence outlined here? The chief problem for the objector is the massiveness of the evidence: the continuous duration of thirty-five years, the occurrence in so many places, the quality and number of witnesses, and the nature of the circumstances (broad daylight, suddenly, multiple witnesses). And finally the historically provable impact of Joseph’s career is consistent with all the claims of supernormal power, but not with anything else. What else could have caused the Holy Office to keep moving him around from convent to convent, isolating and hiding him from the public? If he had done anything morally or doctrinally suspect, he’d have been nabbed instantly by the Inquisition.

I’m not sure what can be said to explain away all this testimony. Still, some might insist there was nothing to these claims.

1) It was a fraud engineered by the Church, which, after all, was in the midst of a Counter-Reformation and used Joseph as an instrument of propaganda. Wasn’t the Pope gleeful when Joseph wowed the Lutheran Duke of Brunswick and converted him to the Catholic faith? And so on. Actually, it’s ludicrous to imagine the Church would consciously manufacture a monstrous myth about a levitating saint, using what would have to be a clumsy simpleton to exploit some political advantage. For this to work, we would have to presuppose an enormous web of super-clever imposters and a super-stupid, credulous flock to make it work and go unexposed for four centuries. The fatal flaw of this view is that not one shred of evidence exists to support it. All the evidence in fact shows that far from using Joseph politically or trying to beef up a myth of his super-saintliness, the Church constantly cut him down to size and sought to make him completely invisible, forcing him to spend the last six years of his life in virtual solitary confinement.

2) It is well known from experiments—like the famous one about the gorilla in the midst of the basketball players—that eyewitness testimony can be flawed and defective.ⁱⁱⁱ I’m an example to prove this; I didn’t see the gorilla. I was successfully tricked into *not* seeing the gorilla. But suppose I met a gorilla in my backyard. I have no doubt I would see it. The experiment illustrates a technique of stage magic called misdirection; but Joseph’s levitations were not staged to deceive and mislead the attention of witnesses, as the gorilla demonstration was. What the latter proves to me is

how easily people can be indoctrinated into *not* noticing things that are there. Some people, for example, convinced of the impossibility of levitation, might not “see” the evidence, even if it were piled up in heaps before them. The much touted experiment and what it’s presumed to imply says nothing that subtracts from the weight of thirty-five years of accumulated reports and observations.

3) We are not being suspicious enough. Perhaps Joseph was a closet hypnotist who cunningly caused thousands of people to hallucinate that he was levitating for about thirty-five years. The trouble with an idea like this is that it was part of Joseph’s nature to be obedient to absurd, zenlike extremes, and that any attempt on his part to deceive the flock would promptly have been noticed and stopped, with unfortunate results for him. Joseph had the temperament of a hermit and no taste at all for power or fame. The fact is that his “power” to levitate made much of his life miserable.

4) Some might automatically dismiss these claims about Joseph because they are *too old*. More broadly, there is much suspicion among academics these days concerning the uses of historical knowledge. There are good reasons to be on guard against deception; but you have to take things case by case. In my view, the historical case for Joseph’s levitation is as strong as one could hope for in dealing with such a rare phenomenon as levitation. If evidence is good, it remains good no matter how old it gets; facts are timeless entities. If we threw out the evidence for a case as strong as that of Joseph’s levitations, we’d have to throw out a good part of history. While many historical claims are in doubt because of scant, weak, and insufficient evidence, the story of Joseph’s levitations provides an abundance of documentation whose cumulative impact is very difficult to evade. Stephen Braude, in his discussion of this evidence, wrote: “No doubt many will be tempted to dismiss the evidence for Joseph’s levitations as nothing more than the ravings of religious fanatics. But this would be an inexcusably glib response to a remarkable body of material.”^{iv}

ⁱ See Grosso, M. (forthcoming), *The Strange Case of St. Joseph of Copertino: Ecstasy and the Mind-Body Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Also, forthcoming, *The Life of Joseph of Copertino* by Domenico Bernini (1722), translated by Cynthia Clough, edited and abridged by Michael Grosso.

ⁱⁱ Lambertini was an Enlightenment pope, rational and mild-tempered, a friend of Voltaire and the new science. See Renée Haynes (1970), *The Philosopher King: The Humanist Pope: Benedict XIV* (London: Wedenfeld & Nicolson).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Chabris, C. & Daniel Simons (2010), *The Invisible Gorilla: And Other Ways Our Intuitions Deceive Us* (New York: Crown).

^{iv} Braude, S. (1986). *The Limits of Influence: Psychokinesis and Philosophy of Science*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.