

The Levitations of St Joseph of Copertino: Explained?

Bob Rickard

Independent Researcher

A Life in the Air

This article concerns a critique by the author Joe Nickell (Nickel, 2018) of Michael Grosso's two books on Joseph of Copertino: *The Man Who Could Fly: St Joseph of Copertino and The Mystery of Levitation* (2016); and *Wings of Ecstasy: Domenico Bernini's Vita of St Joseph of Copertino* (2017). Dr. Grosso (1937-) is an independent philosopher who taught humanities at several New York universities and writes on religious and other aspects of consciousness research.

The idea of human levitation is, by its very nature, subversive and surreal. The phenomenon – if we temporarily accept such a thing in order to examine it – rests upon eye-witness testimony that the human body is seen to rise into the air, hover, or even move some distance on a trajectory. At the same time, the idea of levitation as a symbol of transcendence is both profound and ancient. Narrative accounts of it, usually by surprised witnesses, have been reported from most cultures and ages. Despite this historical and cultural persistence, there has been little scholarly discourse about such reports, leaving unresolved the puzzle of how to reconcile eye-witness evidence with the common experience of everyday physics.

Whether 'real' or imagined, in many societies, levitation is the prerogative of a shaman, ascetic or holy person; a token of divine favour; and sometimes imitated by magicians and occult adepts. In the context of anthropology, it is seen as a component of a shaman's journey (in both the symbolic and mystical senses). In the context of modern scientific discourse, however, it is aggressively dismissed as an embarrassing error made by the ill-informed, the piously credulous or the deliberately fraudulent.

In my own research into the subject, it was inevitable that I would encounter the levitations associated with the seventeenth century Catholic Saint, Giuseppe Desa of Copertino (1603-1663) – to whom I will refer as Joseph – because of the exceptional nature of the deposed evidence. Joseph is of particular interest because the three major

scholars of historical levitation narratives – Josef Görres (1776-1848),¹ Fr. Herbert Thurston (1856–1939),² and Olivier Leroy (1876-1976)³ – all agree that Joseph is the single most impressive example of a Christian levitator; a man, of whom it was said, “spent half his life in ecstasy in the air” (Cendrars, 1949, p. 137).⁴

His phenomena, as reported in the narratives about him, have two main interrelated components: the levitant is typically experiencing an ecstatic state of consciousness, and yet, by some unknown process, the elevation, it is claimed, is observed to be enacted bodily in our consensual reality. I offer no theories of my own here; there are, currently, only guesses and suppositions about the nature of that hypothetical process. We understand why skeptics and scientists regard this contentious subject with suspicion. Reports of it are, like those of many anomalous phenomena, exceedingly rare. It also seems to manifest spontaneously; therefore, first-hand and eyewitness accounts of it must be treated with appropriate care. In Joseph’s remarkable case, however, his levitations occurred with some consistency for more than three decades, providing many opportunities for good observation and documentation.

His witnesses were of two kinds. The first were from the religious community in which Joseph was embedded, for they were able to observe the phenomenon at close quarters. This familiarity adds considerable value to their testimony and invites closer examination. Testimony from the other group – occasional visitors and the like who, despite having an expectation of witnessing a levitation (due to Joseph’s fame), were nevertheless taken by surprise by the sudden and intense nature of his flight. These must inevitably be treated with greater caution.

Of course, reliability and accuracy are important considerations, especially with historical documentation. Most biographical accounts of historical saints were compiled long after they died and often include elements of mythologising, so it is only right to test their veracity. Fr. Thurston, a Jesuit scholar, acknowledged this in his influential chapter on levitations. He highlights the problem that arises when:

¹ Görres – a historian and philosopher of religion published his four volume encyclopedia *Die Christliche Mystik* between 1836-1842. It was reprinted in French in 1802 as *La Mystique Divine, Naturelle et Diabolique*, as five volumes. I have used second French edition, published in 1861.

² Thurston first wrote on the subject in a two-part article in the Catholic periodical *The Month* (April and May 1919), which Leroy credits with inspiring his own efforts. Both parts were united to become the first chapter in Thurston’s pioneering study *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (1952).

³ Olivier Leroy’s survey – *Levitation* (1928) – published in French and English in the same year – is reckoned to have the most comprehensive list of levitants. Leroy is also significant because he devised and applied a five-point test for assessing the evidential value of historical narrative accounts. His biographical dates (absent from the literature) were acquired from the general catalogue of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

⁴ I used the Paragon House edition *Sky: Memoires* (1992) p. 78; translated by Nina Rootes.

...the marvellous event, deposed to by a single witness in extreme old age who had heard the story in his youth from some third person unnamed, is set down as a fact with the same trustful confidence with which the biographer records the details attested independently by a dozen different contemporaries who had lived in daily intercourse with the Saint and had been the spectators of all his actions (Thurston, 1952, p. 2).⁵

In Joseph's case, however, the key sources easily fulfil the second part of Thurston's prescription; eyewitness. Eyewitness accounts were recorded during Joseph's lifetime by people who knew him well. Joseph's case is also remarkable for involving 35 years of nearly continuous eye-witness testimony. The number of levitations (in their various forms) attributed to him far exceeds that of any other saint in the extensive annals of Christian hagiography.

In reviewing Joseph's levitations for his encyclopaedia of Christian mysticism, the German historian and philosopher Görres declared that, as far as he knew, "with no historical fact has so much care been taken to bring the truth to light" (Görres, 1861). A more recent agreement came from a review in the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* by the philosopher and former head of the Parapsychological Association, Professor Stephen Braude, who wrote: "the case of St. Joseph provides the earliest outstanding evidence for human levitation and quite possibly the best from any era" (Braude, 2016).

Joseph Desa and his Elevations

Joseph's spontaneous ecstasies began "immediately after his ordination" as a priest at the age of 25, in March 1628 (*Acta Sanctorum*, cited by Thurston, 1952, p.101), and increased gradually to occur nearly every day – sometimes several times a day – until his death in 1663 (Bernini, cited by Grosso, 2017, p. 272). These levitations would proceed from a singular state of consciousness, described in the accounts as a rapture (*rati*). Joseph's diarist and close friend, Don Arcangelo Rosmi (d.1654) – who stayed at the Franciscan sanctuary in Assisi for most of Joseph's 14 years there (ie. 1639–1653) – reckoned that he

⁵ There can be no more relevant example of Thurston's first type – ie. the absence of hagiographical rigor – than in the life of St Francis of Assisi (c.1181–1226). Despite earnest statements by his later biographers – written around half a century after Francis' death – that he levitated during ecstatic prayers, both Thurston and Leroy found no evidence in the earliest accounts of his life that Francis had risen into the air. Yet the idea persists that he had and is still being stated as a fact on some Catholic websites today, eg: the *Franciscanmedia* webpage; see: tinyurl.com/c6xfawjx .

had recorded around 70 of these elevations by Joseph during that period alone (Bernini, cited by Grosso, 2017, p.137). When Joseph was moved to Pietrarubbia his ecstasies were observed daily; and, again, in his stay at Fossombrone, these ecstasies were described as “uninterrupted” (Bernini, cited by Grosso, 2017, pp. 97,101-104).

In emphasising this remarkable continuity, Abbot Rosmi makes an extraordinary statement: he felt that it would be superfluous to record any more of Joseph’s elevations because they had become *so frequent and so familiar*. He reasoned that “if [70] is not proof enough another three hundred would be meaningless.”⁶ Many of these events would have been in the privacy of Joseph’s tiny cell where, according to Bernini. “Every time he would say his devotions he would go up.” Who knows what important details have been lost to this unfortunate (but quite understandable) decision?

By the time Joseph died, Rosmi’s 70 examples were certainly exceeded. The modern Franciscan scholar Fr. Gustavo Parisciani, who studied the witness depositions in the Vatican archive for Joseph’s time in Assisi, noted that they included at least 150 eye-witness accounts (Grosso, 2017, pp. 224-225). This is just a fraction of Joseph’s almost daily manifestations over 35 years, and many of them – as the pictorial references remind us – were outside, in the open, and in the midst of many people.

Joseph was also observed levitating nearly every time he said Mass. On other occasions his levitations were spontaneous, apparently triggered by his heightened aesthetic sensitivity. Whenever he noticed something beautiful or heard some pious phrase or inspiring music, he was thrust instantly into an intense ecstasy. Invariably, as he rose into the air, he would utter a great cry – more of a scream than a shout – which frightened onlookers. Many of these first-hand narratives describe clear observations made under good conditions by different types of observers in a variety of environments and were deposed under solemn oath by serving Catholics, during his life or within a few years of his death.⁷

⁶ Arcangelo Rosmi, *I tre diari (1645-1652) dell’abate Arcangelo Rosmi su san Giuseppe da Copertino*, (‘The three diaries (1645-1652) of the abbot Arcangelo Rosmi on St. Joseph of Copertino’), sometimes translated as *Diary of 14 year tenure in Assisi*. This diary was included with Nuti’s *Vita*, in Fra Giuseppe Desa da Copertino, *Processo Assisano di Beificazione* (1666) published in 2013 by the Historical Society of Lecce.

⁷ A witness would be cautioned: “whether everything he had written might be nothing more than an hallucination, or imagination, and the transport he had glimpsed simply a reflection of the sunlight, an optical illusion or the result of some other natural cause” and again “warned to take extreme care not to exaggerate the facts out of a misguided sense of devotion, and to describe them without altering them in any way, since saints have no need for their causes to be upheld by misrepresentations of this kind” and finally, before signing asked “if he wished to modify any part of his deposition” (Cendrars, 1992, pp. 96-97). The result is somebody’s carefully considered statement of what he believed he saw.

These oaths are significant because they were usually administered by a person's Superior or Confessor under solemn caution of eternal peril to their souls. In the Catholic milieu of those days there could hardly be a more serious vow. It was common, too, for such evidence to be sealed until after the death of both the witness and the levitant. Therefore, Fr Thurston argued, this evidence was "often more remarkable, and notably better attested, than any to be found in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*."

Send in the Clown

It is not my intention, here, to make a case for the reality of levitation; instead, I argue that the historical narratives of Joseph's elevations are of a quality that deserves an impartial discussion. My critique was precipitated by two short articles by Joe Nickell for the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI),⁸ in which, without much research and with assumptions beforehand, he dismisses the voluminous and complex subject of human levitation, and Joseph's elevations in particular.

In both of his articles, Nickell makes it clear that he attaches very little importance to the authority or the reliability of the extant documentation of Joseph's elevations. In fact, he employs the same rhetorical strategy that CSI publicly deplores in its campaign against the proponents of 'pseudoscience.' This is sometimes called the 'straw man' technique – in which parts of the testimony are cleverly adapted, or omitted, to set up a false argument, making it all the easier to demolish later.⁹ In Nickell's method, this is to show how his own ready-made hypotheses are correct.¹⁰ Nor does Nickell show much intellectual curiosity

⁸ Joe Nickell, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Fellow for the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI). A former stage magician, private investigator, and teacher, he is author of numerous investigative books on mysteries and anomalous phenomena. For further details, see: tinyurl.com/55684565. Nickell wrote on "both the topic of levitation and Joseph himself briefly"; firstly in *Looking for a Miracle* (1991, pp, 211–216); and in an article 'Secrets of 'The Flying Friar': Did St. Joseph of Copertino Really Levitate?' in *Skeptical Inquirer*, vol.42, no.4 (July/August, 2018). All my Nickell citations are taken from this latter work. It is online at: tinyurl.com/55684565. It seems that the publication of Michael Grosso's two books on the life and phenomena of St Joseph galvanised Nickell to refute Grosso's conclusion that levitation was an actual but unknown force.

⁹ Straw man – see its Skepdic webpage: tinyurl.com/yjsd2vrw "One of the characteristics of a cogent refutation of an argument is that the argument one is refuting be represented fairly and accurately. To distort or misrepresent an argument one is trying to refute is called the straw man fallacy. It doesn't matter whether the misrepresentation or distortion is accidental and due to misunderstanding the argument or is intentional and aimed at making it easier to refute. Either way, one commits the straw man fallacy."

¹⁰ Skepdic - *ibid*: "In other words, the attacker of a 'straw man' argument is refuting a position of his own creation, not the position of someone else. The refutation may appear to be a good one to someone unfamiliar with the original argument."

about the subject, apparently more concerned with discovering Joseph's fraudulent activities for which there is not the slightest evidence.

Why is it important to challenge Nickell's explanations? The debate might benefit the study of religious experience by improving our understanding of religious experiences and their deniers; for example, there is a distinct possibility – due to the impressive outreach of CSI propaganda – that Nickell's errors and misconceptions will enter public consciousness as 'received wisdom' and a lauded example of how to combat 'superstitious' beliefs. A natural scepticism should offer a *balanced* alternative to the extremes of disbelief as well as of belief.¹¹ It is logically a sounder strategy to suspend judgement until better information or further investigation can establish the grounds for a more decisive acceptance or rejection. If rejection is made simplistically, frivolously, or with prejudice beforehand, it is neither fair, nor honest, and clearly 'unscientific' scholarship.

Of course, Nickell and the CSI are correct in demanding a good standard of evidence for extraordinary claims such as human levitation, but they lose the plot in demanding that only "extraordinary" evidence is permitted.¹² Nickell's own upfront claim to have explained Joseph's phenomena is itself an extraordinary statement, and one that falls apart upon examination. Writing in 1951, Thurston's common-sense proposition was that levitation "is a matter peculiarly suitable for investigation" because "the fact, if it be a fact, *requires no expert evidence to attest it*" [my emphasis]. He explains:

Given sufficient day-light and fairly normal conditions the most uneducated witness is competent to declare whether a particular person was standing upon the ground or elevated in the air, the more so because, owing to the state of trance in which the subject of the inquiry is found, it is quite possible for the witness to approach and satisfy himself by the sense of touch that the spectacle presented to his eyes is no illusion (Thurston, 1952, pp. 2-3).¹³

¹¹ As a Fortean, I use 'scepticism' to denote the Pyrrhic philosophy [see: Wiki: 'skeptikos'] implying "someone who is unsatisfied and still looking for truth." Contrast this with the assertion by the rationalist-reductionist 'skeptics' of CSI, that there is nothing further worth looking for. The Fortean response is an honest "I don't know" and our version of Occam's Razor is: "Cut away the false and let's see what's left."

¹² This contradicts the mantra of the skeptics – attributed to the Blessed Carl Sagan – that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." This mantra is traditionally used to fend off 'pseudoscientific' claims, asserting that the more unlikely a claim is (ie. when compared to orthodox opinion), the greater the standard of proof is required of it. See also: tinyurl.com/2fpwueus

¹³ I will leave the matter of the associated trances, raptures, and ecstasies to a later, more detailed discussion. For now, it is enough to note that Joseph's levitations nearly always occurred during an altered state of consciousness (ASC); but not every ASC resulted in an ascension.

In short, I would argue, with Thurston, that there are no ‘degrees’ of proof. Evidence either proves something or it is not evidence.

In both articles – and before he has formally begun his argument – Nickell rejects all that the vouchers would have us believe, arguing that Joseph’s ‘levitations’ are simply hypothetical. At best, he declares, that *if* they happened at all, they are the product of pious fraud; or else the result of misperceptions and misunderstandings, or what the Bollandists call ‘hagiographic exaggeration.’¹⁴ Nickell chooses the worst case, that the phenomena in these accounts are down to fraud, deception, and dishonesty. I can agree that this might sometimes be possible, but not that it is *inevitable*, or that this is Joseph’s motivation.

To properly show why Nickell’s short shrift is simply wrong, I need to provide an overview of the key documentary sources; some biographical information on Joseph, and then step through Nickell’s most serious misinterpretations and distortions.

The Key Biographical Sources

Of Joseph’s few biographers, the earliest, was Fr. Roberto Nuti whose *Vita di Ven Giuseppe da Copertino* (1678), included many eyewitness accounts. A new edition by the Historical Society of Lecce in 2013 – titled *Fra Giuseppe Desa da Copertino, Processo Assisano di Beificazione* (1666) – also contains Arcangelo Rosmi’s invaluable diary.

The most important biography is by Domenico Bernini (son of the famous sculptor) of which Grosso recently commissioned a translation. Although Bernini’s *Vita* was not published until 1722 – 59 years after Joseph’s death – Bernini had collected testimony that had been recorded during Joseph’s lifetime from 1628 onwards,¹⁵ as well as documentation in support of Joseph’s beatification. Bernini had taken a personal interest in Joseph’s doings ever since, in his youth, he had been taken to see Joseph in his cell, where he witnessed Joseph in an ecstatic trance that lasted half an hour (Grosso, 2016, pp.146, 219-223; and Grosso, 2017, pp. 222-223).

The key historical archive in the Vatican library, houses the 13 volumes of Bernini’s *Vita*; the legal briefs (*processi*) and minutes of the official Inquisitions for Joseph’s beatification and canonisation; as well as collected letters, diaries and memoirs of those who knew him in life (Bernini, cited by Grosso, 2017, pp. 224-225). The closest most of us

¹⁴ The Bollandist Society was founded by the Jesuits in the early seventeenth century to study and preserve the hagiographical literature on Christian saints. Their primary work – the *Acta Sanctorum* – currently extends to 68 volumes, arranged by a saint’s feast date; Joseph’s is 18 September. See: tinyurl.com/mrv789x5 and tinyurl.com/24fhx3ez

¹⁵ Nickell does not acknowledge this earlier date for the collection of accounts when he refers to the eventual publication date of 1722.

can get to these primary narratives is in the various modern volumes published (in Italian) by the Historical Society of Lecce, compiled by the Fr. Parisciani and his colleagues.¹⁶

Besides Michael Grosso's two-part analysis of Joseph's life, I must add two other comprehensive commentaries on Joseph and his phenomena that I have found very helpful. The first is by the anthropologist and historian of the occult Dr Eric Dingwall (1890-1986), who compiled an invaluable bibliography on Joseph (Dingwall, 1947, pp. 9-37). Next, the Swiss-born French novelist Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961), who kept a literary diary during the second world war of his own extensive research into Joseph's levitations (Cendrars, 1992, pp. 25-148).

Joseph's Character

For his own discussion, Nickell selected a small number of incidents out of the very many (and often more instructive) narratives available. His choice is narrow and curious, appearing in retrospect to be selected because they could be reduced to a few telling phrases that are, by his method, easier to 'explain away.'

Nickell opens his case with the disingenuous statement that Joseph "laid claim to the power of levitation." Perhaps others made this claim about Joseph, but nowhere in the records of Joseph's (or Grosso's) words does Joseph make such a claim himself. If he had, it would have been quite out of character and contrary to Joseph's well-documented spiritual humility.

Like St Teresa of Avila and many other levitants, Joseph never sought the upliftings and prayed fervently for them to cease, especially when he was in public. The evidence supports Joseph's claim that the sudden onset of his raptures and their intensity, completely dominated any sense of self or will that he might have had. From childhood, his purpose in cutting all physical attachments to this world, was to "dissolve" himself into the God he adored. Those moments in which he felt subsumed into the Divine presence were utterly private. He would feel unable to have any ability to do or will anything by or for himself, oblivious to anything except his ecstasy. Sometimes, the only voice that could reach him was a call to return from his Superior to obey under his priestly vows. Everyday life in the friary became unpredictable, if not genuinely surreal, such as – as Cendrars delightfully puts it – when an entranced Joseph could unexpectedly launch "from his place in the refectory, brandishing a sea urchin!" (Cendrars, 1992, p. 41).

¹⁶ Its full title – *San Giuseppe da Copertino (1603-1663) alla luce dei nuovi documenti* – proclaims Parisciano's discovery of new documents from all the locations where Joseph had stayed.

The return from these raptures – suddenly finding himself in an awkward position, surrounded by fussing and curious people – left Joseph completely confused. What was a deeply personal moment became a public spectacle that left him exposed and embarrassed. It also left him open to the accusation of ‘showing off.’ All clergy are warned against the ‘sin’ of presuming their own sanctity or claiming to have God’s special attention. Indeed, when Joseph was later examined during several sessions with the Inquisition, he would have been scrutinised very carefully for such signs of ‘self-importance.’ Instead, Joseph was completely exonerated. Whatever was causing Joseph’s aerial trajectories was not the kind of comic-book superhero ‘power’ that Nickell enjoys lampooning.

Nickell’s misdirection, then, sets the tone for what follows, and its effect is to undermine Joseph’s character and, by association, any ‘ridiculous’ suggestion that “levitation” might merit honest and serious investigation or discussion. There is no sensitivity in Nickell’s caricature of Joseph as a slightly furtive priest, whose pretend humility hides an athletic skill with which he deceives his susceptible religious brothers by performing ‘impossible’ feats. Cendrars’ portrait of Joseph, by contrast, is a joyful celebration of the phenomenal surreality of levitation. To counter Nickell’s caricature of Joseph, it is necessary to provide some additional insight into Joseph’s character and background.

From an early age, Joseph’s humility was apparent. He was known for eschewing any personal possessions and privileges and throughout his life readily accepted the most menial and degrading of tasks. In his simple view, his ordination allowed him to fulfil priestly duties and so better serve his God. Inevitably, this intensified his raptures. However, in Nickell’s sardonic interpretation, because Joseph’s levitations began “only” after his ordination, they “therefore seem contrived.” Then, Nickell implies that Joseph ‘performed’ his ‘fake’ levitations because they “*secured his evolving notoriety*” [my emphasis]. This seems to refer to a specific time in Joseph’s life when he was exploited by a superior (which I will mention later). By taking it out of its context Nickell has made it seem incriminating.

Contrary to Nickell, the records consistently demonstrate Joseph’s humility and deference to his superiors. During the decades that he was under ‘official’ observation, Joseph had to ask permission for most acts, including leaving his cell. His raptures isolated him from this world and it often proved very difficult for his colleagues to bring him back to ‘normality.’ Time and again, we read in the accounts that he seemed impervious to every effort to ‘revive’ him except one; he responded only to the command of his superiors who reminded him of his priestly vows to obey them. This ‘obedience’ was Joseph’s only

remaining link to the everyday world except, as Joseph himself said, when the rapture was ended by God.

Finally, it seems that Nickell has fundamentally misunderstood the Catholic processes of beatification and canonisation when he asserts that the ‘saint-making’ process itself required “evidence of miracles.” The legalistic *process* does not require miracles, considering them to be a non-essential supplement to the primary criterion; which is, simply, a demonstrable and heroic level of holiness. In the modern Church, ‘miracles’ are invariably seen as a distraction; their circumstances critically examined; and steps are taken to see that no unofficial cult status develops around them.¹⁷

A Saint is Born and Made

Joseph was born in Copertino (in the ‘heel’ of Italy) on the 17th of June, 1603. A sick child in a disadvantaged but pious household. His father was in hiding from debtors and his mother worn down by poverty and the deaths of several children. Of his very early years little is known except that for long periods Joseph was bedridden. Lying in the dark, isolated, emaciated, and weak, he became increasingly preoccupied with the inner world of prayer, sometimes kneeling for hours at the small family shrine. By the age of five, he was said to be “holy” and already practising fasting and even, some say, self-mortification.

Joseph’s ecstasies began in his eighth year. His mother would carry him to daily Mass because his knees were infected from constant kneeling to pray. He would cut the swellings himself to relieve them, but that only made them worse. These ruined knees troubled Joseph for the rest of his life; yet Nickell has shone a spotlight on them to make them useful in his ‘theories.’ He suggests that the young Joseph’s habit of praying on his knees “so often and so long” had, instead, strengthened Joseph’s athletic abilities so that they would “later prove useful in his ‘levitations.’”

A short period of schooling was curtailed because Joseph appeared to others to be “mentally retarded, dazed, detached” – a characterisation that goes back beyond Görres to the earlier records. This is still a common description of Joseph in many publications (even those approved by the Church), suggesting ‘laziness’ or ‘stupidity.’ Frequently, we see Joseph described as socially and mentally backward, unable to complete the simplest task. However, I agree with the modern opinion that it is far more likely that this impression is due to Joseph’s persistent states of deep dissociation which were evident from

¹⁷ The debate about whether ‘miracles’ are required for beatification and canonisation is a perennial one for Catholics. The modern Church, for example, is fairly aggressive in playing down their importance, according to a report on the arguments for and against, in the Washington Post (16 July 2013; online at [tinyurl.com/948ndfd7](https://www.tinyurl.com/948ndfd7)).

childhood. His later life showed he could indeed function with some degree of social and mental normality.

Eventually, Joseph was briefly apprenticed to a shoemaker, then sent to tend a convent's donkey in Altamura. After that he was moved on to the Capuchin Friars, in Martina Franca, to be a lay brother. At each place he was branded as "ignorant, untutored, barely literate." His periods of dissociation were interpreted as 'wilful laziness,' for which he was frequently punished. Nevertheless, he never complained. In 1625, aged 22, he was accepted by the Friars Minor at La Grottella, on the outskirts of Copertino, where despite his supposed 'backwardness,' he was welcomed for his humility, "natural simplicity and detachment." Three years later, he was ordained as a priest. For the first time in his life, he felt happy and had a vocation.

Joseph's early 'raptures' emerged from his prolonged trance-like praying. Experienced several times a day, every day, they could be triggered by the slightest hint of wonder, beauty, innocence or holiness. The sight of a leaf, a clear blue sky, a lantern at night, a lamb (even a sea-urchin), a doll of baby Jesus, candles on an altar, Catholic phrases, names of saints, or singing – especially icons of the Madonna – would bring on intense ecstasy.

At Grottella, these ecstasies increased in frequency and duration as he spent more time 'adoring' a particular icon of the Virgin Mary and Child. His first levitation happened on 4th October 1630, when he was 27. According to Parisciani, it was during a public procession. Joseph "soared into the air and remained ecstatic and immovable before the eyes of the stupefied crowd."¹⁸ This point illustrates our evidential difficulty well. It implies that Joseph was seen clearly, by large numbers of the public, in the open air, to rise off the ground and remain there for some time, not 'flying' or falling back down, but stationary in the air ... but, alas, we have no more solid evidence of it. Within four years, Joseph was known throughout Apulia as a "new St Francis."

The records for this period show that Joseph spent most of his year fasting like St Francis (i.e. seven drastic fasts of 40 days each in a year). He hardly slept, and regularly mortified his body with a scourge and a celice.¹⁹ These whippings were sometimes so severe that the walls of his cell were spattered with blood. His Superior had to order him to cease. That Joseph was able to function with any degree of normality in all this was itself a

¹⁸ Abbot Rosmi suggests a different occasion; that Joseph first levitated at Assisi, while meditating upon an icon of Madonna and Child. It is possible that this icon was being paraded (Rosmi, cited by Grosso, 2017, p. 213).

¹⁹ Celice – a device for self-mortification or penance, ranging in type from a coarse sackcloth shift to a spiked belt, chain, or garter, worn under clothing. Joseph is also said to have used two cords (one in each hand) studded with bent pins and "star-like wheels" (Bernini, cited by Grosso, 2017, p. 20).

kind of miracle; and yet Nickell fails to show us how his fantasy Joseph could be super fit and ready in an instant to perform feats that exceeded Olympic records.

One Trail, Three Trials

In 1636, Joseph's idyll at Grottella came to an end. A newly appointed Father Provincial – Fr. Antonio di San Mauro – wished to make an inaugural tour of 50 friaries around the Apulia region taking Joseph with him. He calculated that the prospect of seeing a levitation during a Mass would swell the congregations, thereby bolstering his own standing. Joseph was horrified by the prospect of public exposure, but was ordered to obey under his priestly vows. The year-long tour of the province certainly succeeded, but the prelate had underestimated the public interest in Joseph – rather than, as he had hoped, in himself.

Joseph's innate reluctance to 'stage' his Mass angered San Mauro and they had argued publicly to Joseph's dismay. The idea of deliberately invoking God's presence for a reason he considered both trivial and impious terrified Joseph. Nor could Joseph find any words to describe the overpowering intimacy of that sacred moment in which he elevated the Host and surrendered himself to Divine will. San Mauro would not accept that it was something over which Joseph had no conscious control.

The region of Apulia was known for being religiously conservative, having a residual dislike for characters such as Joseph, whose notoriety disrupted the *status quo*. Some of the rural clergy became disturbed by the excitable talk of 'miracles.' The tension climaxed in a town called Giovinazza, where officials ordered the prelate's party to return to the town so that they could scrutinise Joseph more closely. Inevitably, during his Mass, Joseph levitated, his scream frightening the congregation as he rose into the air. As Nickell was to do some six centuries later, the officials fell back upon the idea that it was a "theatrical campaign on the part of Joseph and his confreres to present him as some sort of messiah." But such an unlikely act would be completely reckless, if true. The peril was real; as Grosso notes of that time: "Recently, three men were burned alive because they said Mass in public without having been ordained" (Grosso, 2016, p. 25).

When he returned to Assisi, an angry San Mauro accused Joseph of "feigned sanctity," calling Joseph "downright crazy" for ruining his 'show.' Several years later, when Joseph faced the Inquisition in Rome, that accusation placed him in genuine peril. San Mauro was also summoned by those inquisitors and asked to explain his behaviour towards Joseph. The prelate dodged cleverly, replying: "I can say nothing except that he was a saint who went into ecstasy continually and was adored by everybody." Nickell, triumphantly, calls this, "hardly a ringing endorsement of one who purportedly flew like a bird."

The Expected Inquisition

Nickell writes that the Vatican sent Joseph “into a sort of exile” and that, for the rest of his life he was deliberately ‘hidden’ by the Church. The facts behind this complex situation are not quite the sinister cover-up by the Church that Nickell implies. Not only did Joseph want to avoid public exposure, he welcomed his isolation as an opportunity for proper ‘humiliation.’²⁰ In 1638, a couple of years after the notorious chaos at Giovinazza, a disgruntled Vicar Apostolic of a vacant diocese – Monsignor Joseph Palamolla – sent a formal notice to the Inquisition at Naples drawing attention to the hermit of Grottella, accusing him of performing healings and miracles “as if he was another Messiah.” It was the Inquisition’s job, after all, to keep a watch for would-be messiahs, and head-off heretical threats to official dogma.

Joseph was ordered to report to the Inquisition in Naples. Unable to ride a horse, he walked there – some 300km from Grottella – with a companion minder. Charged with ostentation – not deception or heresy – he faced three separate Holy Office examinations over several months. His case was then forwarded to Rome, where Joseph was questioned further to determine his motivation and piety.

San Mauro was in as much jeopardy as Joseph. If Joseph was cleared, San Mauro risked being labelled a ‘false accuser,’ and if it was determined that Joseph’s phenomena were of demonic origin, San Mauro risked being implicated as an accomplice. Evidently, San Mauro had not bargained on the third outcome: that Joseph was vindicated as guileless and that, by implication – if not by actual observation – his phenomena were genuine. While Nickell acknowledges that Joseph was finally declared blameless, like San Mauro he never processes precisely what that meant for the validation of Joseph’s phenomena. Nickell continues as though Joseph had, instead, fooled the Inquisitors the whole time their unblinking attention was upon him.

In all, this period lasted nearly two years and plunged Joseph into a deep depression. The examination period took so long, in part because the Inquisition simply did not know what to do with him. At both Naples and Rome, Joseph had been ordered to conduct Masses under their full scrutiny before congregations of mainly clergy. During these Joseph was seen by all to levitate at the key moments. The Inquisitors decided, therefore, to keep him away from public attention completely – whether Joseph wanted it or not – lest heresy or a cultish following should spring up about him. For the remainder of his years, he was moved around in secret and monitored at each location.

²⁰ Humiliation - ie. not shame, but the opportunity to be completely and humbly subservient to God.

Ironically, it gave Joseph the privacy for which he yearned. Instead of being sent back to Grottella, Joseph was ordered to stay at the monastery in Assisi. After five years there, in 1653, he was transferred to the Capuchins at Pietrarubbia for three months, and thence to Fossombrone, where he stayed for three years. Each relocation was prompted by an increase in local interest in Joseph. At Fossombrone, for instance, parts of the church were removed by the public to better see Joseph's Masses.

Eventually, Joseph arrived at Osimo, in 1657, where he died among his fellow Franciscans on the 18th of September 1663, aged sixty. Among the many clergy who came forward promptly to declare under oath their own observations of Joseph's flights, were three Cardinals (who, in all probability, had also attended his Inquisitions).

The Levitations of St Joseph: Explained?

Like many saints, Joseph's life was full of mysterious concomitant phenomena: bilocation, prophecy, telepathic diagnosis, healings, and so on; but we are concerned here solely with reports of his elevations. Joe Nickell's critique of Joseph's levitations begins with a visit to the friar's small cell by a boys' choir; their sublime singing sending Joseph into ecstasy and elevation. Nickell boldly promises to the reader that he will explain Joseph's levitations "as a probable trick," "assuming," he adds in a rather disingenuous and patronising manner, "that the account is not merely hearsay and embellishment." Presumably, these three – a trick, a rumour, or a confabulation – are the only explanations Nickell is willing to consider. Parisciani, summarising Bernini, describes what happened when the Choirmaster of the Assisi's Sacred Convent...

...brought three young singers of outstanding talent to Joseph's room to perform. Upon hearing the boys sing, he immediately went into ecstasy, falling into a kneeling position, then rising and floating above the ground. To confirm what they were seeing, all three boys 'put their hands between Joseph's tunic and the ground (Nickell, citing Parisciani, 1963, p. 443).

Nickell quickly diverts our attention by declaring that these boys were "compliant, not aggressively skeptical." Certainly, they would have been cautioned to be on their best behaviour, and it is likely that they might feel some awe while singing for the famous ecstatic wonderworker. But Nickell does not mean *that* kind of compliance. He is setting the stage for the boys to be cast as poor witnesses. He feels certain that they would be so credulous that they saw what they were *conditioned* to see and not what they actually saw.

Nickell somehow knows that what they ‘actually’ saw was someone taking advantage of their ‘compliance.’

But why should they have been “aggressively skeptical”? They were not there as CSI investigators, they were there to sing. Nickell quite rightly points out that, in this period, other cases of saintly levitation were well-known and publicly discussed; therefore, he deduces, the boys and any adults present were “credulous seventeenth-century peasants” who “would, in all good faith, unintentionally exaggerate what had actually happened.”²¹ Nickell is not yet done with patronising. “Note,” he continues, with a knowing wink to his readers, “that the friar’s feet are never mentioned.”

Recall my earlier suggestion...that Joseph could subtly move from kneeling to a pre-crouch position by placing the bottoms of his toes flat on the floor...then moves slowly into a crouch using his well-developed muscles (you see where this is going), the still-apparently kneeling friar is witnessed rising upward—or rather his knees are seen to rise, giving that illusion. The rest is child’s play, literally. The boys are invited to place their hands between the tunic and the floor. It would probably not occur to them to reach far back and search for the actual placement of Father Joseph’s feet (Nickell, 2018).

Deceptively simplistic, or simply deceptive? Had Nickell bothered to read further into Joseph’s career, he could hardly have failed to notice the many accounts in which witnesses gather around an enraptured Joseph while he remains stationary in mid-air. Inevitably, some of them would press forward to touch his robe or even to kiss his elevated feet. Often, ingenious methods are mentioned – by reference to nearby objects – to estimate the distance of his feet from the floor. Sometimes they did much more; testing the extent of Joseph’s ecstatic anaesthesia by burning, piercing, or even striking him (Nuti, cited in Grosso, 2017, pp. 116-117).²²

Nickell underestimates the intelligence and ingenuity of the people of those days, even though a great many of the witnesses were not peasants or illiterate. Even the ordinary countryfolk were capable of natural curiosity, and the narratives include many an ingenious attempt to, for example, measure the distance between Joseph’s feet and the ground.

²¹ As opposed, perhaps, to those who in bad faith, intentionally exaggerate what they imagined happened?

²² Joseph’s biographer, Fr Nuti recorded that often “to bring him back they would drag him on the ground, pinch him, twist his fingers, put candles in his mouth and the like.”

A typical example is the following incident – summarised from documents by Thurston – deposed by Tobias, a “gentleman” who was waiting outside the room of St Bernardino Realino, in the region of Lecce, in 1616:

As he sat with his eyes on the room door, he noticed that the door was not completely shut and that through the aperture a certain glow or radiance of light was streaming. The appearance puzzled him, and he began to wonder whether there could be a fire within. He drew near and pushed the door a little further in order to peep into the room. Thereupon he perceived Fr Bernardino in a kneeling attitude before his prie-dieu, his face turned towards heaven, his eyes closed and his whole body lifted a good two and a half feet above the floor, while rapt in ecstasy (Thurston, 1952, pp. 22-24).

Thurston notes that Tobias “gazed for a while” with feelings of “reverence mingled with fear” before silently creeping away. Later, in giving his testimony, Tobias was asked “to take good heed and bethink himself whether all of what he had described was not rather a hallucination or fancy of his brain and whether the radiance and light was not a reflexion of the sun’s rays or an ocular deception of some other natural effect.” Tobias replied:

The thing was so clear...I noticed the light...not only once but twice, thrice and four times...and so I began to debate with myself how there could be any fire in the room, since the rays which issued from it could only have been made by a great fire [likened to a blacksmiths] and so I stood up and pushing the door saw with my own eyes Fr Bernardino raised from the ground as unmistakably as I now see your Lordship (Thurston, 1952).

Tobias was then “again admonished and bidden to be careful not to be led by any mistaken sense of devotion to exaggerate or to represent the facts otherwise,” which he did. Thurston then adds, “in looking through the score or so of such printed processes, I have found very little trace on the part of witnesses or commissioners of a desire to manufacture evidence of marvels.”

The Joy of Illiteracy

Nickell’s next selection focuses upon the accounts of Joseph soaring through the air towards an altar and apparently hovering in the air above it before landing on it. One

Christmas, Joseph invited some shepherds to bring their music into the church. Entering the nave with them, he began to sing and dance, and the excitement grew. Bernini records what the shepherds believed they had observed:

[Joseph] 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... for about fifteen minutes... (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 26., my emphasis).

Surely observing someone in the air for that length of time would be able to replace any reservation with some assurance. Being 'compliant' is now not enough; Nickell states with astonishing certainty that these shepherds "were probably illiterate."²³ "It is apparent from [Joseph's] movements," he writes confidently, "that [Joseph] *bounded in increments*, onto the altar" [my emphasis]. Bernini's account implies no such thing. Joseph's aerial dancing – *above* the altar, not on its top surface in any normal sense – becomes the suggestion that Joseph must have "rested" on brackets that held the candles and, by "embracing" them, supported himself in the appearance of 'mid-air.'²⁴

"In other words," Nickell writes, "[Joseph] was never simply floating in air, as sources may seem to imply." The witnesses had deposed under oath, so that is precisely what they were implying. He doubts that witnesses who watched this aerial 'dance' for fifteen minutes could tell the difference between a man hanging on to something and one who was hovering in mid-air where there was nothing to hold on to.

Nickell has a response ready and waiting. Rather too triumphantly, he telegraphs, ahead of his 'reveal', that he has figured out Joseph's "rising and floating." The answer when it comes, seems anticlimactic, inadequate, and pure supposition:

²³ What on this earth has literacy got to do with the ability to perceive? Nickell offers no evidence that literates perceive better than illiterates. His perception of these "peasants" reminds me of their French fellows who reported to the great French scientist Lavoisier, in 1772, that they had seen a meteorite crash to earth, only to be dismissed because, Lavoisier declared, "There are no stones in the sky!"

²⁴ Bernini's text does indeed say Joseph "embraced the tabernacle with both arms"; but, in the same paragraph says that "the tabernacle was a considerable distance above the main altar" the surface of which was "filled with flaming candles." The "marvellous" implication here is that Joseph did not disturb the candles but hovered above them, kneeling and stationary, for 15 minutes, surely enough time to visually confirm the matter?

I would wager that [Joseph] mimed this by stretching himself upward until he artfully stood on tiptoe, then danced lightly in place so as to create the illusion of ‘hovering’ just above the ground.

The matter of how Joseph got up there in the first place, is quickly evaded or re-imagined. Nickell, dazzled by his own revelation, bounds onto the altar of his newfound theory. Where the narrative says Joseph “flew up” rather gracefully, Nickell would have us believe it was by energetic, incremental “bounding through the air to some elevated perch.”

Yet there is some mystery surrounding Joseph’s ‘take-off’ method. The narratives seem to imply that it was instantaneous, whether Joseph was kneeling or standing. Nickell suggests otherwise; Joseph must have simply moved from where he was standing or kneeling. That this movement was not noticed, he says, is because it happened quickly and is forgotten, by the distracting shout or when eyes begin to follow Joseph’s astonishing aerobatics. Nickell is thinking conventionally, looking for some kind run-up, crouching to spring, or backing-up to make that “bounding” leap forwards. He cannot find the clue because it is not there in the sworn narratives.

Just to be clear, in the entire archive available there is no mention of anyone spotting Joseph – athlete or not – practicing or rehearsing such circus-type movements as “bounding through the air.” Nickell could have asked instead, why *wasn’t* Joseph spotted cheating?, but that would have undermined his own brilliant theory.

The Sound of Sandals Falling

Nickell, next, fusses over what he calls Joseph’s “extreme defiances of gravity.” The first of these “defiances” is when Joseph sometimes appears to hover in-place in mid-air (suggestive of a ‘freeze-frame’ in a video or still photograph), much as Rosmi describes happening during Joseph’s very first levitation in 1630 in Assisi. At other times he would be, as witnesses describe, travelling through the air while unnaturally ‘frozen’ in a particular pose (eg. kneeling). The duration of Joseph’s ‘hovering’ during flights towards, or above, the altar, varied between a few seconds to thirty minutes or more of “sustained floating” in position. Nickell emphatically disagrees:

Our analysis revealed that Joseph did not hover in the air but, after rapidly ascending, he then rested on some support such as a tree limb or held onto some fixed object such as a statue.²⁵

We understand that anomalous phenomena do pose a questionable challenge to scientific materialistic rationalism; and this is compounded by anomalies that contain other anomalies within them. Bernini provides an account of a paradox. On this occasion the whole congregation and choir (including two later Cardinals) saw Joseph soar “through shutters of the choir to stop suspended in the air before the tabernacle.” His face was brightly radiant. Bernini describes this flight as moving “slowly” through the air (cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 145). As he stopped in that mid-air kneeling position, they saw an even more astonishing detail. Joseph’s sandals fell to the floor (ibid.). In that moment, it appears, normal gravitation was restored, but only for the sandals, not for the levitant. How this datum would have delighted Charles Fort.

When Grosso suggested that these mysterious suspensions “seem to point to the reality of an unrecognized force of nature,” and that their astonishing duration is “enough to render implausible the claim that they were tricks of perception” – Nickell, rather petulantly, accused him of “gushing.”

The Backwards Boy

We are not yet done with the “defiances of gravity.” Besides vertical and ‘floating’ elevations, there are other important variants which are extremely rare in the already rare annals of human flight. Although Grosso provides several instances of each, Nickell (probably wisely) makes no attempt to exorcise them.

As Leroy points out, the *Bull* of Joseph’s canonisation, acknowledges that “No saint can be compared to Joseph in this respect” (Leroy, 1928, p. 89). For example: in a choir, Joseph heard the phrase *Mater Divine Gratie*, and promptly flew *forward* up and “over three rows of friars” (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 152).

Another is Joseph’s eerie flights *backward*, which challenge reason as well as gravity, and certainly defy Nickell’s comic hypotheses about ‘kneeling’ and ‘bounding’

²⁵ Note how Nickell has turned his original speculation into an established explanation.

launches. While helping to clean a relic of St Francis, in Assisi, he shot up and *backwards* over the heads of the brothers behind him (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 144).

The most famous of these retro-flights occurred in 1650, when Prince Johan-Frederick of Brunswick visited Assisi to consult Joseph about his career. During the service, Joseph “gave a great scream and flew into the air *backward in a kneeling position*” (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, pp. 82-85, my emphasis).

Equally well-observed, were the moments when Joseph carried another person into the air with him. It is difficult to believe that these flying companions were also athletes, complicit in the ‘act’? I counted four of these double levitations in Bernini’s *Vita*: an early incident in Copertino when he lifted up a friar he was hugging. Bernini describes Joseph’s “spinning dance” on the floor which continued into the air as Joseph carried the man upward: “one out of his mind because he was afraid, the other out of his mind because he was a saint” (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 70). In Assisi in 1642 he raised the Father Custos Raffaele Palma (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, pp. 68-69). In another instance, he lifted a shepherd into the air and swung him around by holding only “one hand under the arm” (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 80). The most famous of these incidents happened when he lifted a ‘lunatic’ into the air by his hair and hovered there for some time (Bernini, cited by Grosso, 2017, p.152; also cited in Leroy, 1928, p. 95).²⁶

A Host of Troubles

Officiating at daily Mass presented a serious trial for Joseph. Most times, he would fall into deep rapture at several points of the service, but when he raised the Host, his body nearly always followed. Stranger still, this was a type of proto-levitation²⁷ in which he ‘froze’ just prior to the moment of ‘take-off’ – as recorded by Bernini and Parisiani (of an incident in 1647) – “his whole body” was observed in this strange suspension:

²⁶ I give the case in full, later (below).

²⁷ Leroy distinguishes “levitation proper” from seemingly “cognate phenomena” including “performing feats” and was careful in his analysis to remind us to be cautious about movements that can also be imitated by hysterics and athletes (1928, p. 161). Skeptics are fond of pointing to the extraordinary poses struck by hysterics as recorded by the French neurologist Prof. JM Charcot at the Salpêtrière Hospital, in the 1880s. But where the skeptics are attempting to downgrade the anomalous behaviour observed in cases of ‘possession,’ for example, both Leroy and Cendrars were keenly aware that borderline cases, such as these proto-levitations, could not be dismissed so easily and may reward further investigation.

It was normal for his body to rise up in the air during [Mass]. He would rise with his feet barely touching the ground; only the tip of his big toe touching, a position not only unnatural but incredible...*and continued this way until the end of the sacrifice.*" (Parisciani, *ciarde* in Grosso, 2016, p. 75, my emphasis).

We might keep an open mind on Joseph's tableau, but I would like to make a slight diversion of my own to say that this possibly anomalous variation of levitation is not unique to Joseph, having been clearly observed in three other mystics. One of them, Maria von Moerl (1812-1863) – the celebrated stigmatic of Kalten, in the Tyrol, who was studied by Görres – was often seen in a kneeling position, but leaning further forward than seemed natural. Although there are no reports of her levitating, an observer noted that it seemed as though she was floating over the bed without pressing on it. And, like Joseph, she too was 'frozen' in her pose for some time beyond the moment an observer might expect her to fall. One account describes her "almost daily" rapture:

It is recorded that often she did no more than touch the surface of her bed with the tips of her toes. M.D. de Moy, professor of law at the faculty in Munich, wrote a letter to Monsieur Bore describing the position in which he himself had seen the ecstatic: 'Her hands were joined together, her head and eyes raised toward heaven, she was on her knees, her body leaning forward as if supported by the invisible angels who held her up, for the angle of her body was contrary to all the laws of balance, and her knees left hardly any impression on the coverlet of the bed' (Cendrars, 1992, pp. 118-119, *See Figure A*).²⁸

²⁸ Also worth citing for its description of the observation, is the second case; that of St Douceline (1214-1274), a Beguine nun from Provence. Typical of her many ecstatic levitations was a rising up, leaving "only the tip of her big toe" touching the ground "and she has remained thus from the moment of taking communion until the evening, toward the hour of Compline." See also Leroy (1928), pp. 47-48, citing her biography. In these cases the centre of gravity of the body is beyond the 'pivot' (ie. the knees). In a normal case, the torque caused by body weight moving beyond the 'pivot' would have caused the person to fall forward. The third, Victoire Claire of Coux (d.1883) who, during ecstatic trances of between ten and 20 minutes, was seen rising above her chair "more than a thousand times during the first years of our friendship" according to a correspondent of Albert de Rochas (1837-1914) – another pioneering French investigator of levitation – "her right leg bent up, the other touching the earth but by a toe [...] it was impossible for anyone to keep up normally (Leroy, 1928, p.132).



Figure A. During her ecstatic visions, the young Austrian stigmatic – Maria von Moerl (1812-1863) – was frequently observed in an extremely unnatural position. Kneeling on her bed, she seemed to be leaning forward beyond the moment an observer might expect her to fall. Like Joseph, she would be ‘frozen’ in her pose for some time.

Once again, the difficulties we face in identifying genuine phenomena when there is so little evidential detail is highlighted. Where Nickell seems willing to toss the baby out with the bathwater, others, aware of the danger of being too premature, are willing to look deeper and further for significant details. In the case of Joseph, Maria and others, that significance is in the anomalous *duration* of the pose or movement beyond the moment we would expect any natural pose to collapse, plainly seen by her observers. Nickell, however, accepts none of this, suggesting that Joseph had mastered the art of misdirection:

That he could stand on tiptoe and even seem to slightly rise and hover may only indicate wonderful strength, balance, and acting; *I suspect such acts were fundamentally stunts* that may have led *credulous seventeenth-century peasants* to believe it was accomplished by levitation [my emphasis].

The Mass, argues Grosso, is a solemn religious rite, a species of sacred performance. It is a pity Nickell cannot see past the word 'performance' without thinking someone is trying to fool him. For Joseph, the Mass was more than a symbolic performance; it was an intense participation with divinity itself. At its end, he would sink to the ground groaning, as he returned to the depressing weight of earthly flesh. In the presence of sin – as Joseph described it – the Host wafer sometimes became (for him) as rigid and heavy as iron, and he would fall to his knees weeping. He told his brothers that at these moments, he felt the withdrawal of the divine presence. Sadly, Nickell sees in Joseph's collapse *only* "a prerequisite" to "levitate backward."

The Trembling Branches

Nickell rages most of all at the seemingly trivial reports of Joseph springing high into the topmost branches of a tree only to remain there for some time. For example, just moments before one such incident, a priest walking alongside Joseph had mentioned the beautiful sky. Nickell continues (citing almost correctly):

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] stayed up there about a half hour (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 138).²⁹

We know that Joseph did not need much encouragement to soar above this world, but Nickell's purpose here is to remind us of his pedestrian theory of Joseph's prowess at kneeling and leaping, which he now takes for a proven fact. Nickell establishes (via *Wiki*) that that olive trees are "short and squat" – as if that proves that Joseph's tree was likewise – and was therefore within the reach of "bounding."

He acknowledges the witness' observation that Joseph had "landed on his knees on a branch that kept shaking gently, as though a bird were perched on the branch" and yet has nothing further to say about the nature of the 'mundane' feat of leaping upward, say a

²⁹ With impressive antiphrasis, Nickell introduces the idea of 'springboards.' They "were available since the Middle Ages to propel acrobats," he says, adding with surprising caution, "although I do not suggest Joseph used one."

man's height, to land in a kneeling position (with ruined knees?) on a branch so slender that it "kept shaking," and, even more astonishingly, maintaining that balance and position for nearly 30 minutes. Instead, Nickell mocks the "prowess of the supposedly catlike friar" who, when he came out of his trance (after half an hour up there) and, realised his predicament, cried for help. Joseph's companion Antonio had to fetch a ladder to help him down.

In a similar incident, during his stay at Fossombrone, Joseph was in the garden with some brothers. They watched him "soaring through the air *on a level with the crowns of the trees* in the garden. He remained there, *kneeling in the air, for more than two hours*" (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 138, my emphasis).

Numinous Screams

Perhaps the most disturbing feature of Joseph's elevations – as Nickell notes – were the great screams he made as a prelude to taking off. Without much reasoning, Nickell believes that this association – scream and 'leap' – demonstrates that Joseph's phenomena were *not* spontaneous; that he "was not *caused* to leap by some force but *chose* to" [my emphasis]. Nickell wonders whether these shouts "may have been to help him focus on and commit to the act and so dispel fear." I assume Nickell means Joseph's own fear, because there is no doubt the screams did frighten his witnesses. Nor is Nickell the first to consider whether these sudden bursts of intense sound might be "analogous to martial artists who yell when executing some technique." It is certainly an interesting association and can be explored further; but then Nickell's cynicism kicks in again, suggesting that:

...it might also have served to turn all eyes on him, [so that] if he yelled, not when he first started moving, but only the instant before he left the ground, people would be more likely to think they saw him simply rise up.

Again, this sounds fair, except that it presupposes Joseph's duplicity, for which there is simply no evidence. It also directly ignores Joseph's own (very rare) comment on the screams, when he told his companions that they seem to relate to the sudden increase in

the intensity of his ecstatic state as he is instantly and completely overwhelmed by the Divine presence (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 137).

Nickell is certainly correct in recognising the disorientating effect of Joseph's scream upon those who heard it, but not convincing about Joseph using it to distract from his imminent 'bounding.' While Joseph himself did not seem particularly aware of its effect *on others*, those hearing it for the first time were profoundly shocked by its unexpected unearthliness. It was very loud and weirdly frightening and no one who heard it ever forgot it. As Bernini noted, some people bowed, some prayed, some cried, and some ran from the scene. A few examples would be appropriate here. When Joseph rose up towards the Cimabue ceiling painting in the basilica at Assisi, Bernini recorded: "It all happened so quickly that *those present were filled with sacred terror*,³⁰ marvelling to each other, and remaining in a stupor" (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 62). Even a pope was not immune to that reaction. When Joseph was brought into the presence of Urban VIII, he bowed to kiss the papal feet and promptly rose into the air. Urban was said to have been "frozen with fear," but later vowed to depose his evidence (cited by Leroy, 1928, pp. 97-98).

Perhaps the most famous example of the reaction to the chaos caused by Joseph in full shriek and flight, was the visit in 1646 to see him by the Grand Admiral of Castile (who was also the Spanish ambassador) and his family, which left them – in Thurston's words – "dazed" and "stupefied." The reluctant Joseph was ordered to say Mass as usual. The visitors watched as he entered through a small door, and as soon as he saw a statue of Virgin Mary above the altar:

[Joseph] screamed and flew a distance of twelve steps above the heads of the Admiral and the women, to embrace the statue...After remaining in that pose for some time, he gave another scream and, still flying through the air returned near the little door...leaving everyone dazed if not traumatized. The wife of the Admiral fainted, and [he] had to revive her splashing water in her face...The Admiral himself...did not faint but became weak-kneed and flustered (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, pp. 80-81; also, Thurston, 1952, p. 98; see *Figure B*).

³⁰ We are reminded that Rudolf Otto coined the word 'numinous' to convey what Bernini has called "sacred terror." This is no ordinary fear but one that stimulates awe and reverence, much like the original meaning of 'panic' (Otto, 1950, 14ff).



Figure B. This chaotic scene shows possibly the most famous of Joseph's levitations. During a visit, in 1646, to Assisi, in which the Grand Admiral of Castile and his family were deeply affected by Joseph's flight. Engraving by Gioan Antonio Lorenzini (1665-1740), a friar in the same order as Joseph (Franciscan Minor Conventuals).

A Cure for Dualism and Disbelief

Significantly absent from the testimony of most primary witnesses is any sense of *disbelief* about the levitation they had just seen; to the contrary, witnesses were struck with an

authentic recognition of ‘otherness.’ Their difficulty was not one of belief but of processing the implications of what they had witnessed.

No one ever shrugged and said “look, he’s only bounding!,” “I saw him take a run up,” or “he’s only hanging on to those candlesticks.” For most witnesses, instead of *disbelief* in their own perceptions, the experience left an immediate and powerful feeling that they had perceived or been affected by a different kind of ‘reality’ from the one they were familiar with. Some witnesses (mainly Catholics) reported (as we might expect) with “their faces bathed in tears” that it confirmed their belief in miracles. Some even claimed that the super-reality of Joseph’s levitations was “the cure” for Cartesian “dualism”; and others were immediately converted.³¹

The only significant account of such ‘disbelief’ that I have found (to date) is not straightforward either. It requires another diversion, but I believe it will illustrate the point. It happened during the aforementioned occasion in 1649, when Johan Frederick, the Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg – then aged 25 and heir to the Holy Roman Empire – changed his faith from Lutheran to Catholic after a visit to see Joseph in Assisi. He was accompanied by two attendants and stayed for several days in which the party could closely observe Joseph in flight on multiple occasions. I take the following account from Fr Thurston’s translation of the Latin original in the *Acta Sanctorum*:

[The Duke] was led, with his two chamberlains, next morning to the door of the chapel where Joseph was saying Mass. From there the visitors could see Joseph, a little before Communion, with his loud cry, in kneeling posture, fly five paces from the altar and return there with the same cry in like manner. On the next morning the Duke wished again to assist at the Mass said by Joseph, and this time he could see him raised a palm off the floor and remain thus suspended about a quarter of an hour, elevating the Host. On seeing this, the Duke began weeping. [He] conversed with Joseph till midday; and returned to visit the saint in his cell after Vespers...and assisted at Compline, and following the procession [declared] himself ready to become a Catholic...He then returned to Brunswick to arrange his affairs, and the following year he came back to Assisi, where he abjured Lutheranism in the

³¹ i.e. negating Descartes’ split of our perceptual ‘sensorium’ into the seemingly separate realms of body and mind.

presence of Joseph and [two] Cardinals (*Acta Sanctorum*, op.cit., 1024, 43-44; cited by Thurston, 1952, p. 98).³²

Both of the 'chamberlains' were Counts; and the one we are concerned with was, like the Duke, a Lutheran. When the Duke seized every opportunity to witness Joseph's elevations over several days, the Lutheran Count, somewhat anti-Catholic, became thoroughly disturbed by the events. The record continues, describing how Joseph, sensing this disbelief reacted as he held the wafer:

[Joseph] began to wail, gave a great scream, and then flew into the air backward in a kneeling position. [He] then returned to the altar where he remained in ecstasy for some time...Questioned afterwards by the superior, but still unaware that strangers were listening, he could only tell that he had fainted; that before the swoon he had been trying in vain to break the holy wafer...The Duke, startled by Joseph's "great scream," asked for an explanation. Joseph tried to explain his struggle with the wafer and sudden faint. He told of having such feelings before, when he felt the presence nearby of "some hard-hearted heretic." Unknown to him, among the witnesses was the Lutheran Count who had complained to the Duke's company that: "It was a cursed day that I came into Italy. At home I always enjoyed a quiet mind; but in this country, puzzles about faith and conscience keep pursuing me (*Acta Sanctorum* and Thurston, 1951, *ibid*).

This conversion is hardly mentioned in conventional political histories, and was, at the time, embargoed even by the Duke's family. But a rare history of Catholic conversions – footnoted by Thurston – tells us that this doubter was Henry Julius Blume, who barely

³² Freidrich's conversion Catholicism in 1651, and lacking a male heir, meant that he had to relinquish his Protestant titles to his brother Ernest-Augustus, father of George I, later Hanoverian king of England. The event fascinated Sir William Crookes, the English physicist and pioneering investigator of spiritualistic phenomena, who researched the documentation, noting that "despite the great distrust between Catholics and Lutherans at that time, the Duke was, nevertheless, quickly and diplomatically accommodated by Franciscans." *Quarterly Journal of Science*, (New Series), vol 5, (January 1875), pp. 31-61. Crookes continues: "[The conversion] seemed to show "great ignorance of the future. No conversion could seem more important to the interests of Catholicism; [yet] any other [available] candidate] would have had a more permanent influence. Ironically, many years later, the Duke became the employer of Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) one of the luminaries of the Enlightenment. For full details, see my article 'Leibniz and the Flying Monk', *Fortean Times* 403:48-51.

three years later, was himself converted to Catholicism (Räss, 1868, pp. 450-452, 558-571).



Figure C. “This altarpiece by Placido Costanzi (1702–1759), was painted in 1750 for the Colonna family to commemorate the spectacular levitation of Joseph, rising into the air with the demented young man.

The Lunatic Gets a Lift

Having criticised Nickell’s choice of weak cases, I thought it only just to offer a few that I think are evidentially more impressive and which defy Nickell’s theories. Joseph, as previously noted, is one of the very few saints who have publicly lifted other people along

with him into the air. This should be an impossibility – even for a specialist in “bounding” and “dancing” –unless it is alleged that Joseph prearranged it with an accomplice and had practised it to perfection; for which, there is not the slightest evidence. Of Joseph’s handful of incidents, I choose the famous incident of him healing the ‘lunatic.’ Leroy’s translation of the account given in Bernini’s *Vita*, as recorded in the *Acta Sanctorum* reads:

A lunatic had been brought to the monastery for Joseph to cure him. This lunatic was a noble citizen of Assisi named Balthasar Rossi. He was led to the saint bound to a chair, for he was dangerous and used to assault people, saying they were mad. Joseph ordered the man to be set free, made him kneel down in the oratory, and, laying his hand on his head. Said: “Do not fear, Chevalier Balthasar; commend yourself to God and his Holy Mother.” With these words, he clutched the lunatic by the hair, uttered his usual cry, and was raised off the floor with Balthasar, whom he held for a time in mid-air to the amazement of the bystanders. Then, *after a quarter of an hour*, he sank to earth again and dismissed the nobleman with these words, “Now, cheer up, Chevalier! (Bernini, cited in Leroy, 1928, p. 95; Cendrars, 1992, p. 28; and Grosso, 2017, pp. 69-70, my emphasis, see *Figure C*).

The Operation

Secondly, in the following account, two doctors are attempting to treat a sore on one of Joseph’s legs. The incident occurred shortly before his death and is important for being carefully observed at very close quarters, for fully fifteen minutes, not by “credulous peasants,” but by the two medical professionals. Here is the deposition made by one of them, the surgeon, Francesco de Pierpaoli:

At the time of Brother Joseph’s last illness, I had to cauterize his leg, in compliance with the orders of Dr. Giacinto Carosi. Brother Joseph was sitting on a chair with his leg resting on my knees. I was already applying the iron to carry out the operation; I saw that Brother Joseph was in a state of bliss, unconscious and completely abstracted. His arms were extended, his eyes open and gazing toward heaven, his mouth was agape and his respiration seemed to have ceased completely.

I observed that he was elevated about a span³³ above the chair, but otherwise in the same position as before the rapture commenced. I tried to lower his leg, but without success; it remained stretched out. A fly had settled on the pupil of his eye, and the more I tried to chase it away, the more obstinately it seemed to come back to the same place; in the end, I had to leave it there.

In order to observe Brother Joseph more closely, I went down on my knees. [Dr. Carosi] was also examining him, and we both recognized the fact that Brother Joseph was very visibly transported, out of his senses and, furthermore, he was indeed suspended in the air as I have already said.

This situation had been going on for a quarter of an hour when Father Silvestro Evangelista, who lived in the convent at Osimo, came in. After observing the phenomenon, he commanded Joseph, by his holy vows of obedience, to come back to himself, and he called him by name. Joseph smiled and came back to his senses (Bernini cited by Leroy, 1928, p.100; Grosso, 2017, p. 122).

Conclusion

Nickell's underlying argument – unreasoned and unreasonable – is that 'human bodily levitation' does not, cannot, exist; therefore, there is no scholastic or scientific value in studying it, regardless of the supporting depositions. When Nickell announces that there is "nothing to see here" it is because, when *he* looks, he sees only trickery and "compliant" illiterates or peasants.³⁴

Nickell's explanations conceal one last rhetorical trick; a form of that special pleading that William of Occam called "multiplying the entities." For Nickell to be correct, he would have us believe there was widespread collusion at all levels of the Catholic Church and related political hierarchies. Is it conceivable that Joseph would be so bold and foolhardy to continue performing 'tricks' during inquisitions? If so, the slightest slip would have been the end of him and his burgeoning legend, and a great blow to Catholicism. For quite

³³ Span - Approximately 6-9 inches, estimated against the spread of a human hand from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the little finger. See: <https://tinyurl.com/sep8ztdc>

³⁴ Perhaps this is a species of invested interest, like an observer effect? Much as the Duck says: "when I find a thing it's generally a frog or a worm." Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Ch.3. 'A Caucus-Race and a Long Tale.'

different reasons, the Church discretely concurred and drew the curtains (albeit ineptly) around Joseph. As Grosso puts it:

To explain the whole mass of reports and claims as pie in the sky, we would have to assume that large numbers of people were having the same illusion, systematically misinterpreting the movements of one friar for thirty-five years, and that all grades of people were swearing in public that they saw things they only imagined. We would have to assume that numerous Church authorities were lying or exaggerating and for some unknown reason hiding and shunting around a completely innocent, non-meditating friar. One would have to posit an incredible amount of mendacity and stupidity on the part of Rosmi, Nuti, Bernini, Lambertini, and all the process deponents who recorded their observations (Grosso, 2016, p. 87).³⁵

Most damning for Nickell's argument is that despite acknowledging in his opening sentence that Joseph's phenomena were "supported by records citing eyewitness testimony," throughout his critique he provides no justification for why any part of this voluminous body of sworn evidence should be so frivolously dismissed. Nor does he provide any explanation for why so many witnesses agreed upon what they had deposed they had seen.

Finally, Nickell follows the flawed methodology of many of his eminent forebears and colleagues by taking a phenomenon out of its context to criticise it with *a priori* assumptions. Whether Joseph actually levitated or not, the narratives of those who believe he had acquired some evidential value from their social, religious and folkloric context. The Church has openly declared that it has no interest in levitations as 'evidence' *only* for physical phenomena (as a scientist might). In their 1638 examination, the Inquisition, for example, paid more attention to Joseph's moral virtues – such as his indifference to poverty, his ready obedience and serenity – than to his strange screams or backward flight. Yet the legalistic hagiographic *processi* meticulously recorded the *whole* evidence

³⁵ Eric Dingwall agrees. In the appendix to his account of Joseph, Dingwall writes that he could not believe that all the Catholic officials who vouched for Joseph's elevations on record "were all lying or engaged in a system of deceit for the purpose of bolstering up the reputation of a fraudulent friar" (Dingwall, 1947, p. 162).

(including the physical phenomena). If there were no heretical or demonic associations, a levitation naturally became a testament to the Catholic faith and the catechism.³⁶

Obviously, Nickell is writing for his followers; anyone else might not be so easily swayed. In his article's opening statement, he boasted that he "determined to look more deeply" into Joseph's "strange life." It is remarkable how quickly that determination evaporated, to be switched with the bait of his favourite suppositions. On one of the CSI websites, Nickell formally declares "that mysteries should neither be hyped nor dismissed, but instead carefully investigated with a view toward solving them." Regarding this work on Joseph, Nickell begins with apparent dismissals, did not appear to have investigated much (and that not carefully), and far from solving anything has only added misdirection and confusion. This is hardly the fair or rigorous treatment we might expect from the grand inquisitor of CSI.

The levitations of St Joseph, explained? I don't think so.

References

Braude, S. (2016). 'The Man Who Could Fly: St. Joseph of Copertino and the Mystery of Levitation, by Michael Grosso.' *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, Vol. 30, No. 2.

Cendrars, B. (1992). *Le Lotissement du Ciel (Sky:Memoires)*. Paragon House.

Dingwall, E.J. (1947). *Some Human Oddities Studies in the Queer, the Uncanny, and the Fanatical*.

Eire, C. (2023). *They Flew*. Yale University Press.

Görres, J. (1861). *La Mystique Divine, Naturelle et Diabolique*.

Grosso, M. (2016). *The Man Who Could Fly: St Joseph of Copertino and The Mystery of Levitation*

Grosso, M. (2017). *Wings of Ecstasy: Domenico Bernini's Vita of St Joseph of Copertino*.

³⁶ For a full treatment of the different attitudes of the Protestants and Catholics towards the interpretation and usages of miracles, see Professor Carlos Eire's recent book *They Flew* (Yale University Press, 2023). The subject is a puddle with a deceptive depth that Nickell, to his credit, carefully avoids stepping into.

Leroy, O. (1928). *Levitation*.

Nickell, J. (1991). *Looking for a Miracle*. Prometheus Books.

Nickell, J. (2018). 'Secrets of 'The Flying Friar': Did St. Joseph of Copertino Really Levitate?' *Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 42, No. 4.

Otto, R. (1950). *The Idea of the Holy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Parisciani, (1963). *San Giuseppe da Copertino: Alla Luce Dei Nuovi Documenti*.

Thurston, H. (1952). *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*.