



Joe Nickell, PhD, is CSI's senior research fellow. He has worked professionally as both a stage magician and a private investigator, and he is author of such books as *Looking for a Miracle* and *The Science of Miracles*.

Secrets of 'The Flying Friar': Did St. Joseph of Copertino Really Levitate?

Supported by records citing eyewitness testimony, St. Joseph of Copertino was a seventeenth-century religious marvel who laid claim to the power of levitation. Reportedly, as stated by the title of a new book by Michael Grosso (2016), he was *The Man Who Could Fly*. Although I had addressed both the topic of levitation and Joseph himself briefly in a book (Nickell 1993, 211–216) as well as in a BBC television documentary (“Secrets” 1999), I determined to look more deeply into the strange life of “the flying friar.”

Future Saint

Born Joseph Desa in the Italian village of Copertino (or in English Cupertino), he lived his sixty years (1603–1663) during a superstitious period that included the European witch obsession. Joseph—whose father had fled to avoid debtor’s prison and whose mother gave birth to him in a shed—was thought stupid. As a boy he loitered at churches and—though always apologizing for fits of reverie—was taken in at a Capuchin monastery. There he prayed on his knees so often and so long (a habit that would later prove useful in his “levitations”) that his knees became infected. When his trying to operate on them himself led to a lengthy convalescence, he was thought worthless and was dismissed.

Nevertheless, with some help from his mother, he joined the Order of Conventuals in 1625 and, three years



St. Joseph of Copertino is lifted in flight at the site of the Basilica of Loreto, by Ludovico Mazzanti

later, became an unlikely priest. (He was aided by a stroke of luck: the bishop who was to administer the final exam was called away and so waived the test!) Already given to long meditations, Joseph often yielded to fits of ecstasy—emotional outbursts that began to prompt talk about him and even to herald certain mystical phenomena reported around him (Grosso 2016, 15–23).

The superstitious believed Joseph was able to divine the thoughts of others, to effect cures, to engage in combat with the devil (at least in a story he himself told), to have the supposed power of bilocation—that is, to be in two distinctly different places simul-

taneously—even to miraculously multiply food, like Jesus (Dingwall 1962, 23). But it was the “levitations”—which only began with his ordination as a priest in 1628 and therefore seem contrived—that secured his evolving notoriety and ultimate legacy.

Subsequently, Joseph’s wonderworking increased, becoming “more frequent and more dramatic.” He attracted crowds and was taken on tour by a ruling prelate, where he impressed the credulous as a prophet, a healer and exorcist, and an ecstatic. He had also begun his “levitations” and had become in effect “the reluctant star of a traveling spiritual circus,” whereupon he came to the attention of the Holy Inquisition. He was accused of being ostentatious and of having “affected sanctity,” but after two years he was found innocent. Rome later sent him into a sort of exile, away from public exhibitions (Grosso 2016, 23, 24, 26–28). He was at Grotella for sixteen years and lived the last six at Osimo.

In time, the prelate who had taken the friar on tour would tell Roman authorities, “I can say nothing except that he was a saint who went into ecstasy and was adored by everybody” (Chiappinelli 2008)—hardly a ringing endorsement of one who purportedly flew like a bird. Another, a traveling companion to Joseph for years, suddenly requested to be sent away from him (Grosso 2016, 29)—a mystery that seems to bespeak some dark secret, possibly knowledge of deception.

Performance Art

What Grosso calls Joseph's "strange performances" do indeed seem to reveal him as a "performance artist" (Grosso 2016, 72, 165). They were especially common during his dramatic, lengthy Mass (that could last up to four hours). In what I suspect was feigned entrance-ment, his ecstatic state would render him immobile as a statue, his body perhaps taking on the form of a cross. Then he would seem to "rise and float." I would wager that he 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.

He might then begin to "fly"—or leap—about, as he himself described it, "like a small bird in a cage when it can get out and fly away." On occasion, he would soar (bound through the air) to some elevated perch. (These flights were his greatest feats, as we shall see in the following section.)

Around Good Friday, certain odd movements of his body might occur, as if caused by an invisible power: he would be flung down, lifted up, shoved forward, or jerked back. Sometimes when he came to break the host (the consecrated wafer), it would become (or so he would act out) incredibly heavy or impossibly resistant, whereupon he would fall down heavily and then, weeping on his knees (seemingly a prerequisite for what followed), supposedly "levitate backward."

For instance, during a Duke's visit Joseph began to wail, then gave a great scream and flew into the air *backward in a kneeling position* (original emphasis, Bernini 1722, 85). But did he simply spring backward? Details are too unclear: Did kneeling become crouching and afterward a crouch return to kneeling—the truth concealed by the friar's tunic? In other instances, details are also important. Bernini (1722, 30) in one instance describes Joseph "now going to the altar, *jumping onto* the last step of the pulpit" (emphasis added). (For all of this, see Grosso 2016, 71–76, and his own sources.)

Once, some talented young singers were brought to Joseph's room to perform for him. Their singing sent him into such ecstasy that he fell on his

knees, then rose and floated just above the ground. In confirmation, the three boys "put their hands between Joseph's tunic and the ground" (Parisciani 1963, 443). Readers might want to pause here to consider what I will explain as a probable trick in the next paragraph (assuming the account is not merely hearsay and embellishment).

Because of Joseph's station, the boys would have been compliant, not aggressively skeptical. Note that the friar's feet

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are never mentioned, indicating that he rose while still apparently kneeling. But recall my earlier suggestion, regarding the "backward levitations," that Joseph could subtly move from kneeling to a pre-crouch position by placing the bottoms of his toes flat on the floor. As he 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.

The Levitations

Now let us examine some of the more extreme defiances of gravity that Joseph supposedly accomplished. 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. (After all, there were numerous "levitating" saints before Joseph, a partial list naming fifteen [Smith 1965, 37, 38; see also Rogo 1982].) Thus, the witnesses would, in all good faith, unintentionally exaggerate what had actually happened.

Let us start with an incident in which Joseph "flew" to the feet of a statue that stood more than a man's height above the ground; there he adored it while "floating midair" (Grosso 2016, 81–82). In fact, all the time he "embraced" (i.e., held onto the feet of) the statue! Perhaps with muscular ability he extended his body horizontally to add to the effect.

A more significant example is a story told in the first biography of the friar (Bernini 1722, 150). A priest walking with "Padre Giuseppe" (Father Joseph) had mentioned the beautiful sky when, suddenly:

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 when he landed on his knees on a branch that kept shaking ... as though a bird were perched on the branch. Padre Giuseppe stayed up there about a half hour ...

Note the use of the word *bounding*¹ plus the fact that olive trees are typically of low height (described as "short" and "squat" ["Olive" 2017]). Remember too that Joseph was practiced in kneeling for long hours. Besides, bounding upward was one thing, but after coming out of his supposed rapture he had to have help getting down! So the other priest fetched a ladder for the catlike friar.

Another example is also instructive. The account (Bernini 1722, 26) quotes a deposition by some shepherds (who were probably illiterate), apparently given years later. Father Joseph was dancing excitedly in the name of the church, when he:

... 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. This was all the more marvelous because 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 . . .

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.

It is apparent from his movements that he bounded, in increments, onto the altar where he “rested between the candles”—that is, on the *support* that held *them*. And there, for the several minutes duration, he was “embracing”—in other words, holding onto—the tabernacle (which contained the Eucharist). He was never simply *floating* in air, as sources may seem to imply.

Conclusions

Not only do the accounts indicate Joseph’s most dramatic aerial traverses were launched by a leap—not by a simple slow rising while merely standing or kneeling (Smith 1965, 49)—but, moreover, I find that they appear to have continued as just the sudden arcing trajectories that would be expected from bounding. They were never circuitous or spiraling flights like a bird’s. Invariably, Joseph’s propulsions began with a shout or scream, suggesting that he was not *caused* to leap by some force but *chose* to. Analogous to martial artists who yell when executing some technique (like breaking a board with their hand), his cry may have been to help him focus and commit to the act and so dispel fear. It might also have served to turn all eyes on him. He might have found 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.

Grosso (2016, 80) gushes that the duration of Joseph’s levitations—from only seconds to fifteen or thirty minutes or more of “sustained floating”—“seem to point to the reality of an unrecognized force of nature.” Certainly, he insists, they were “enough to render implausible the claim that they were tricks of perception.” Yet 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. In other accounts, such details may have been left out because the narrator was simply relying on his impressions.

Eyewitnesses are fallible, as we know all too well. People insisted they *actually* saw what they thought they saw—or they remembered much later what they believed they had seen, minus, for example, in some instances, the friar’s initial rushing forward before actual lift-off. Moreover, the canonization (saint-making) process itself, requiring evidence of miracles, could well have fostered some pious exaggeration on the part of a late beloved friar’s brethren and flock. There is also the “gross exaggeration” of biographies that were published more than half a century after Joseph’s death.² Also, as a practical matter, the original records that led to his canonization are no longer available for study (Smith 1965, 48–49).

Today, I think few would be deceived by witnessing such feats—though we might well be impressed by the acrobatics. Certainly most of us, understanding gravity, will not expect to see actual levitations or flying—although there are the tricks of magicians and fakirs (Nickell 1993, 183, 211–216; 1995, 29).³ Even now, however, we can marvel at the flights of basketball players like “Doctah” Julius Erving, who “added razzle-dazzle acrobatics to the game, and was the first to spend seemingly endless moments in the air, levitating toward the basket.” Although Michael Jordan would become the master of this feat, being dubbed “Air Jordan,” in fact “the

Doctah supplied the original formula” (Musiker 2008, 24–25). If we can be so impressed in the twenty-first century, imagine such effects in the superstition-ridden seventeenth, and I think we can begin to understand the “levitations” of “The Flying Saint.” ■

Notes

1. Hence, the noted Anglican haigiographer Baring-Gould (1914, 297) used the phrase “extraordinary bounds,” and Smith (1965, 48) extrapolates “that St. Joseph appears to have been a gymnast.” (For an opposing view, see Rogo 1982.)
2. Grosso’s most-used source for the levitations is Bernini, whose 1722 text appeared nearly six decades after Joseph’s death.
3. Although I do not suggest Joseph used one, springboards were available since the Middle Ages to propel acrobats (“History” 2018).

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