

# When Food Restriction is Motivated by the Divine: A Case Report of Anorexia Mirabilis

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## Background

- A less encountered or researched is a kind of anorexia termed *anorexia mirabilis*, where food restriction is motivated by religious reasons.<sup>1-3</sup>
- In the middle ages, religiously motivated food restriction was most often associated with holy women but could lead to malnutrition and death.<sup>4-6</sup>



Carlo Dolci (1616-1686), Italian. *St Catherine of Siena*. Oil on panel, 24.4 x 18.1 cm. © Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, England/Bridgeman Images.

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- One such practice would be starvation outside of Eucharist to only nourish self with the blood and flesh of Christ
- We present a case of anorexia mirabilis and discuss its implications for the consult/liason psychiatrist.

## Case

Patient is 41-year-old Roman Catholic Italian female with past medical history of amenorrhea since age 14 who was brought to the ED by EMS for altered mental status in the setting of 30 pounds weight loss over the previous two months (BMI 14).

High dose IV thiamine started for Wernicke Korsakoff syndrome

Remarkable serum labs: Na 125, K 4.7, SCr 0.35, ALT 172, AST 144, albumin 3.0, TSH 36, T4 0.9.

Though delirious but able to sustain attention for a brief interview on the first day of admission.

She denied restrictive eating or purging. She denied concerns about her weight or body shape, stated she had been consistently eating full meals, and wanted to immediately discharge home. She was homeschooled with a high school education and lived with 8 other family in a 2-bedroom apartment.

Another sibling later disclosed that the patient practices starvation to assist in God's fight against the devil. Previously, collateral with grossly thin mother and sister were assertive denial of patient restriction behavior, and fixation on question of mercury poisoning from tuna packages.

APS was contacted when revealed that sister – who was HC PoA - obstructed 2 past EMS responses for patient, prior to property manager's 911 call.

It eventually became clear that the patient was hiding food and not eating. Intake and disorganization improved on olanzapine.

On the 33rd day of hospitalization, the patient was seen leaving the floor with family members. Although attempts were made to persuade the patient to remain in the hospital, and after administrative counsel, patient was allowed to discharge against medical advice via surrogate decision.

## References

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## Discussion

- The 2022 movie *The Wonder* starring Florence Pugh depicts a fictional case of anorexia mirabilis.



- A psychiatric interview can include asking about religious or spiritual practices both as a way to build rapport with a patient, but also as a means to better understand a patient's world view and motivations.
- When a patient's report of their condition is inconsistent with their clinical presentation, obtaining collateral, sometimes from several persons, becomes essential.

## Conclusions

- Anorexia mirabilis is distinguished from anorexia nervosa on the basis of motivation: religious beliefs vs. body dysmorphia.
- Routinely asking patients about the role of faith or spirituality can help uncover less obvious reasons for persistent weight loss.