Discerning certain phenomena sometimes raises the question about the mutual relationship between the terms “paranormal” and “supernatural.” Both terms have histories depending on two ongoing contexts: the first is an evolving scientific context and the second a Catholic theological context that continuously tries to be interdisciplinary. These two contexts intermingle in discernment exercises where scientists collaborate with Catholic theologians.

“Paranormal” presupposes a frequency norm. A paranormal event occurs infrequently. For example, in a class of perceptual acts, an extra-sensory or telepathic perception is relatively infrequent and is called “paranormal.” Sensory perception is the normal mode.

A “supernatural” event, besides being paranormal in the sense described above, must also be linked with God's being and must therefore fulfill two other requirements: (1) its interpretation is in perfect harmony with Catholic faith; and (2) no other interpretation is possible.¹ For example, an extra-sensory perception of a situation in outer space is interpreted, say, as disproving the divinity of Christ; that perception, whether real or imagined, is not supernatural even if it is called paranormal. And even if it does not disprove the divinity of Christ or any other Catholic doctrine,

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¹ This statement attempts to condense a process of discernment described in detail in three analytic sections entitled as follows: (a) confirmation of the facts and their exceptional nature; (b) establishment of the necessary correlation between the facts and the religious context of the dialogue; and (c) establishing the exclusive character of the “hierogenic” relationship. Louis Monden, S.J., Signs and Wonders: A Study of the Miraculous Element in Religion (New York: Desclée, 1966) 325-43. The hierogenic exclusivity is discussed in a previous chapter entitled ”The Absence of Major Miracles Outside the Catholic Church,” ibid. 251-321.
if the extra-sensory perception can be interpreted as the work of a created spirit or a psychic force, that perception is not supernatural even if it is called paranormal.

How is the above distinction to be applied to flowers or petals materializing from thin air? Many such materializations, recently named "apports" in paranormal psychology, have been reported and documented at least since 1867 when a certain Ms. Nichol, at a seance and in the presence of competent investigators, materialized fifteen chrysanthemums on the room table.  

Nor was this an exceptional event. In a doctoral dissertation submitted in 1918 to the theology department of the Catholic University of America, Baron Johan Liljencrants discussed how apports of various objects like flowers were witnessed "rather frequently." A similar opinion about "flowers which emit perfume" was expressed in 1933 by Herbert Thurston, S.J., on the testimony of C. F. Livermore whom he acknowledged as a man "of recognized integrity." And in 1944, G. W. Butterworth made the following statement: "Flower materializations, which are far more common, also provide, for Spiritualists, an illustration ... ."

Many alternative interpretations are offered for these events and some of them hypothesize that intense longings and unconscious desires at the psychic level produce or rearrange atoms and molecules at the physical level. Although such hypotheses have not been empirically verified, neither have they been rejected as physically or psychically impossible: "hierogenic exclusivity" has not been established.  

In view of these and similar opinions of eminent scholars, prudence would — for the present at least — seem to favor the view that, in the absence of other evidence, a shower of petals be considered as merely paranormal and not supernatural.

How would this scholarly distinction affect devotional exercises

of popular piety? Minimally if at all. Two alternative ways are foreseen: misinterpretation of a paranormal event as a "hoax," or rejection of the distinction as irrelevant to the free expression of faith. The fact of pluralism in popular beliefs is likely to increase in importance in exercises of communal discernment.