

Apparitions of the Virgin Mary: A Protestant Look at a Catholic Phenomenon:Part One

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From the Christian Research Journal, Winter, 1991, page 20. The Editor-in-Chief of the Christian Research Journal is Elliot Miller. end header>Devotion to the "Blessed Virgin Mary" (as she is commonly called by Catholics) has been a centerpiece of Catholic belief and piety for centuries. However, the last century and a half has seen a dramatic increase in Marian devotion. This resurgence of the "cultus of the Virgin" can be attributed to two primary factors. First, Mary's already exalted status in the church was substantially enhanced by Catholicism's official acceptance of the Marian dogmas known as the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950).[1] The second force behind Mary's growth in popularity, especially among the laity, is not so much doctrinal as experiential. It is her alleged appearances to people throughout the world.

These appearances (called apparitions) have occurred with increasing frequency since the nineteenth century, and have attracted widespread attention. Pope Pius XII, in calling attention to the apparitions, referred to the nineteenth century as the "century of Marian predilection [i.e., preference]." And the present century cannot be far behind: one leading Marian scholar notes that there have been more than 200 reported apparitions since the 1930s alone.[2] With the various shrines dedicated to the particular apparitions attracting millions of pilgrims each year, it is easy to see that this phenomenon is having a substantial impact on the almost one-billion-member Roman Catholic church.

The focus of this two-part article will be to address this somewhat mysterious matter of Marian apparitions. In approaching this unusual phenomenon, many questions immediately arise. What actually is an apparition? What were the circumstances surrounding these supposed appearances? How does the Catholic church officially evaluate these claims? And more importantly, at least for evangelicals, what is the biblical perspective on these events? Are they supernatural in origin, or is there some natural or psychological explanation?

The intent of this article, therefore, is to address these questions through providing a survey of the phenomenon itself (especially its effect on Catholic piety), as well as furnishing a biblical and theological critique. Since this phenomenon is attracting the attention of millions of people throughout the world, it demands careful examination in the light of Scripture.

Glossary

Marian dogma: A truth concerning the Virgin Mary which is proposed by the Catholic church as an article of divine revelation.

pious belief: A belief that is recognized by the church as being in harmony with Catholic teaching.

Immaculate Heart of Mary: A symbol both of Mary's maternal love for humanity and of her total commitment to God.

Immaculate Conception: The dogma defined in 1854 by Pope Pius IX declaring that the Blessed Virgin Mary was conceived without the taint of original sin.

Assumption: The dogma defined in 1950 by Pope Pius XII declaring that the Blessed Virgin Mary was bodily assumed into heaven upon her death.

WHAT IS AN APPARITION?

The word "apparition" comes from the Late Latin word *apparitio* which means "appearance" or "presence." An apparition refers to the sudden appearance of a supernatural entity which directly manifests itself to a human person or group. Within a Catholic context, it could be the presence or manifestation of any supernatural figure. Catholic scholar Louis Bouyer describes an apparition as "a manifestation of God, angels or the dead (saints or not) appearing under a form that surprises the senses." [3] This revelation to the senses involves seeing, but frequently the other senses as well. Some apparitions -- usually of Mary -- have included the hearing of voices, touching the figure, and even the smelling of specific fragrances.

Apparitions, however, are commonly associated with the broader category of religious visions. A respected Catholic dictionary, edited by Donald Attwater, defines an apparition as "the name sometimes reserved for certain kinds of supernatural vision, namely, those that are bodily or visible, as is often used for the manifestation of our Lady of Lourdes, of St. Michael on Monte Gargano, etc. Owing to the meaning of the word in popular use (ghost, spook), 'appearing' better expresses these events." [4]

While present-day Western psychology frequently equates religious visions with hallucination, Catholicism maintains that an authentic apparition is of a different category. In a hallucination, the content of what is reported is delusory; it is solely a subjective experience with no correspondence in objective reality. [5] A genuine apparition, on the other hand, is a real subject/object encounter in which the source of the perceived reality is independent of, and external to, the seer or visionary. One Catholic author describes it this way: "An authentic apparition, therefore, is not a purely subjective experience. It results from a real, 'objective,' intervention of a higher power which enables the beneficiary to make true contact with the being that appears and makes itself known." [6]

The church fully acknowledges that many so-called apparitions can be explained as nothing more than hallucinatory experience. But it maintains that if it can be shown that the seer has experienced a real objective presence that is not of this world, then an authentic apparition has occurred.

APPARITIONS OF MARY

Throughout the middle ages countless numbers of supposed supernatural manifestations were reported to the church. These included everything from physical healings (often connected to ancient relics) to statues and crucifixes which were reported to have bled. While many of these unusual occurrences have been discredited or rejected in modern times, apparitions have generally remained popular and credible in the eyes of Catholics. People in the past have reported seeing apparitions of Jesus, various saints, and even the Devil himself. But the most enduring and recognizable apparitions are those of the "Blessed Virgin Mary."

Apparitions of Mary have been reported in church history as early as the fourth century. In fact, while official statistics are

not kept, some Catholic theologians have speculated that there have been as many as 21,000 claimed sightings of Mary throughout history.[7] Though this figure may be excessive, the Vatican "has acknowledged a 'surprising increase' in recent years in claims of 'pseudo-mysticism, presumed apparitions, visions and messages' associated with Mary." [8] As referred to earlier, the distinguished Marian scholar Rene Laurentin has counted over 200 reported apparitions in the last 60 years alone. Another international study produced similar figures, and stated that the reports covered 32 different countries.[9] In an article discussing Mary's growing popularity, Insight magazine stated that "claims of apparitions of Mary are on a worldwide upswing." [10]

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S EVALUATION

With so many apparitions being reported throughout the world, how does the Catholic church go about evaluating them? The answer is, very cautiously and deliberately. Obviously, the church has much to lose in the area of credibility if it recognizes an apparition which later turns out to be inauthentic or even fraudulent.

As well, this phenomena is very elusive. How does one go about evaluating a reputedly supernatural manifestation which is, except to the visionaries, invisible? It is safe to say that while the church is open to the possibility of these supernatural manifestations, it is at the same time highly skeptical. In the words of one Catholic scholar: "The church accepts the authenticity of a supernatural intervention only with great circumspection. She requires that the facts, which she submits to a severe examination, should in themselves be striking and also insists on waiting before passing judgment." [11]

According to the Catholic church, apparitions come under the heading of "private revelations." The messages of approved apparitions add nothing to the official (public) revelation of the church which is found in the apostolic sources of Sacred Scripture and Tradition. While official revelation ended with the apostolic witness, private revelations have continued in the church. Since they contribute no new piece of revelation which is fundamental to the life of the church, apparitions are not binding upon the conscience of individual Catholics. Catholics are free to accept or reject the various apparitions authorized by the church. However, if a Catholic believer is inclined to reject authorized apparitions, he or she should do so with appropriate modesty, guarding against any indulgence in undue criticism.

In deciding whether a particular apparition is indeed authentic, the church follows a very deliberate and careful regimen. The process of checking out these ethereal and unusual events has developed over many centuries of simply struggling with the matter. First of all, if there is sufficient reason to warrant an investigation of a particular claimed apparition, the inquiry begins with the local bishop. He convenes a diocesan commission which is usually made up of various theologians, psychologists, and other trained professionals. Members of the commission attempt to weigh and evaluate the evidence through such means as interviewing and examining the visionaries, and testing both the messages and the possible fruit of the events (e.g., healings, other miracles, increased spiritual devotion, etc.).

Of paramount importance in evaluating an apparition is determining whether the message communicated by this supposed supernatural presence is in fact aligned with official Catholic teaching. If anything contained in the apparition is contrary to Catholic teaching, then it is inauthentic and should be rejected. One Catholic source states:

If the message or messages of an "apparition" are at variance with a revealed doctrine or the teaching of the church, that is a clear sign of nonauthenticity, or conscious or unconscious falsification. It is for ecclesiastical authority (and first of all for bishops in their respective dioceses) to determine if an apparition attributed to Mary meets the guarantees of authenticity. Only then may public veneration in the place of apparition and promulgation of the message be authorized. The decisions of ecclesial authority in this matter are not infallible and do not command the inner assent of faith. Nevertheless, when the authority "interdicts" -- says no -- the external compliance demanded of the faithful binds the conscience to obedience. In no way could Mary work against the Church of her Son. [12]

Along with not contradicting official church teaching, apparitions should also not cause division or disunity in the church. Rene Laurentin states that "one of the criteria that a vision comes from God is that it does not divide the church, but remains in charity, order, and obedience." [13] The following five characteristics, Laurentin believes, are exhibited by genuine apparitions, and can thus be used as part of a criteria in evaluating such phenomena: 1) manifests the hidden presence of God, 2) renews community life, 3) leads to conversion of hearts, 4) promotes the reawakening and stimulation of faith, 5) helps to renew hope and dynamism in the church. [14] These characteristics give some guidelines in evaluating whether a given apparition is bearing genuine fruit.

Four Categories of Evaluation

After the supposed apparitions have been carefully scrutinized, the commission votes on whether there is genuine evidence of the supernatural connected to the apparition. Upon completion of the investigation, the bishop makes the commission's findings known to further church officials. The church does not always make an official pronouncement, but when it does it is usually years after the apparitions have ceased. The official evaluations given by the church have generally fallen into four broad categories. These categories were described for me by Catholic scholar Mark Miravalle, Assistant Professor of Theology at the Franciscan University at Steubenville, an authority on Marian apparitions. The first category reflects those apparitions that are "prohibited" by the church. This would include any apparition whose content directly contradicts Catholic faith or morals. Since Catholicism affirms that genuine apparitions would never contradict the official teaching of the church, these apparitions would be considered inauthentic, and therefore unworthy of pious belief. The source of this type of apparition could range anywhere from intentional human deception to a manifestation of the demonic.

The second category is where the church says nothing officially about a particular apparition. The vast majority of apparitions go unevaluated and unrecognized. Many of these apparitions, while not contrary to Catholic faith and morals, simply lack conclusive evidence to support a supernatural interpretation. Some of these apparitions, however, while not receiving an official evaluation, have received unofficial acceptance because their shrines are visited by many priests, bishops, and even popes. Such apparitions then are accepted by individual Catholics privately, without receiving an

official word from the church.

The third category is somewhat of a neutral class where the church merely states that there is nothing contrary to Catholic faith or morals. In this case the church is not guaranteeing the authenticity of the apparition, but is giving its negative approbation or approval. That is, since there is nothing in the messages of these apparitions which runs contrary to church teaching, Catholics are free to incorporate the messages into their lives in accord with the leading of their conscience.

Because apparitions are private revelations, the church does not speak with certainty as to the authenticity of the event. Mark Miravalle explains:

Private revelation consists of a supernatural manifestation of Christian truth made after the close of public revelation (Sacred Scripture and Tradition) with the death of the last apostle. The Church can give her "negative approval" to a private revelation or apparition by stating that there is nothing contained in it that is contrary to faith and morals. In approving an apparition or a revelation, the Church does not intend to guarantee that authenticity of the respective private revelation, but states that the content of the apparition can be accepted by the faithful without any doctrinal danger in regard to faith and morals.

Yet, it is considered reprehensible if after the Church has given her negative approval of a private revelation, any member of the faithful were to contradict or ridicule the revelation. Further, if after prudent judgment, it has been personally determined that a given revelation is authentic, the one who has received the revelation should accept it in the spirit of faith, and if the private revelation contains any message for others, those persons have an obligation to accept the truth of the revelation and act upon it.[15]

According to Miravalle, the fourth category is the highest level of evaluation and includes a "positive affirmation" by the church. Apparitions in this category would be officially approved or recognized by the church as "worthy of pious belief." Approved apparitions have been judged as exhibiting characteristics that show forth the intervention of the divine. This level of endorsement by the church is rare. In fact, an article on apparitions in U.S. News & World Report stated: "During the past 160 years, the Catholic Church authenticated 14 apparitions as 'worthy of pious belief'...."[16] The specific differences between category three (negative approbation) and this fourth category are not clearly spelled out.

A SURVEY OF MARIAN APPARITIONS

Having gained an appreciation for how the Catholic church evaluates this phenomena, we will now examine six different claimed apparitions of Mary. The church's response to these six apparitions covers all four categories mentioned above. In examining these alleged supernatural appearances we will focus on several key points. First we will review the historical events of the apparition: its claimed identity as well as any messages connected to it. Further, we will consider any miracles connected to the apparition, along with the influence the specific apparitions are having today (shrines, pilgrimages, etc.). Finally, we will note the church's response to each specific apparition.

Guadalupe, Mexico 1531

Ten years after the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards in 1521, Juan Diego, an Indian and recent convert to Catholicism, claimed to have seen and talked with the Virgin Mary. This religious experience would greatly influence Mexico and all of Latin America.

On December 9, 1531, while walking to church, Diego supposedly saw a brilliant vision of a young woman at Tepeyac, a hill northwest of Mexico City. The radiating apparition spoke to Diego in Nahuatl, his own dialect, and identified herself as none other than the Virgin Mary, the blessed Mother of God. Diego, a man more than fifty years old, was ecstatic when he learned the identity of the radiant woman. She instructed him to have the bishop of Mexico construct a sanctuary at Tepeyac which would be a sign of her motherly love and compassion for the people. Diego, convinced that he had dialogued with the true Mother of God, eagerly set out to see the bishop.

Upon finding Juan de Zumarraga, the newly appointed Bishop of New Spain, Diego communicated the apparition's message. The bishop was naturally skeptical, and gave the story little credence. Three days later, during a second appearance of the apparition, Diego asked for a sign that would convince the bishop of his story's authenticity. The woman instructed him to fill his cloak (tilma) with roses, which were blooming unnaturally in December, and take them to the bishop. When the seer unrolled his cloak before the bishop, a permanent image of the Virgin Mary was imprinted on his cloak. The bishop accepted this as a genuine sign of the Virgin's presence to the people of Mexico. This tradition began popular devotion to the one known as "Our Lady of Guadalupe." [17]

The first sanctuary at Guadalupe was erected around the year 1533. In 1709 a basilica was built which displayed Juan Diego's tilma with the famous image upon it. In 1976 a new basilica was built and dedicated in Mexico City, with the old one still standing.

The story of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe has been extremely popular, particularly in Mexico and the rest of Latin America. In 1737 the Lady of Guadalupe was chosen as the Patroness of the City of Mexico, and in 1910 Pope Pius X declared her the Patroness of all Latin America. In 1945, Pope Pius XII stated that the Virgin of Guadalupe was the "Queen of Mexico and the Empress of the Americas." [18]

While more than a dozen popes have expressed love and veneration for the image and its tradition, the apparitions have never been received officially as worthy of pious belief. Nonetheless, the high honors given the Virgin of Guadalupe put it in the second category of "unofficial acceptance." Millions of people come to Mexico to visit the basilica dedicated to "Our Lady of Guadalupe." In fact, Pope John Paul II, in his first "apostolic journey," made a "pilgrimage of faith" to this shrine in January, 1979. During his pilgrimage the pope addressed these words to the Mexican people: "I come to you bearing in my eyes and in my soul the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, your Protectrix. You bear a filial love toward her which I have been able to spot not only in her shrine but also while passing through the streets and cities of Mexico. Wherever there is a Mexican, there is the Mother of Guadalupe. Someone recently told me that 96 out of 100 Mexicans are Catholic but 100 out of 100 are Guadalupeans!" [19]

Lourdes, France 1858

Possibly the most famous of the apparitions of Mary are associated with an obscure village known as Lourdes, in southwest France. Bernadette Soubirous, a fourteen-year-old illiterate girl from the poor village of Lourdes, claimed to have received 18 apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary from February 11 to July 16, 1858.²⁰ These apparitions, which are known around the world, have had a profound influence on Marian devotion among Catholics.

The first apparition took place when Bernadette was standing near the rock formation known as the grotto of Massabielle. There she encountered a bright light which gradually revealed a lady in white who was holding a rosary. While the apparition did not speak, the lady smiled at Bernadette and motioned for her to come closer. As Bernadette recalled it:

I saw a Lady in white, she was wearing a white dress and a blue sash and a yellow rose on each foot the color of the chain of her Rosary....I put my hand in my pocket, I found my Rosary in it, I wanted to make the sign of the cross, I could not get my hand up to my forehead; it fell back, the vision made the sign of the cross, then my hand shook, I tried to make it and I could, I said my Rosary, the vision ran the beads of hers through her fingers but she did not move her lips, when I finished my Rosary, the vision disappeared all of a sudden....[21]

Over a five-month period Bernadette received numerous messages from this Lady, with the primary emphasis being in two areas. The first emphasis was the need for prayer, especially the reciting of the rosary. Emphasis upon the rosary was evidenced by the fact that the apparition herself appeared with a rosary in hand. The second emphasis was the urgent need of offering penance to God for the conversion of sinners. This call was revealed through the apparition's request that Bernadette perform such penitential acts as walking on her knees, eating grass, and drinking from a spring which the visionary discovered through direction from the apparition.[22]

Along with the messages, the apparition disclosed three so-called "secrets" to Bernadette which she was forbidden to reveal. The apparition also stated that the priests should allow the people to come in procession to the sight of the apparition, and that a chapel should later be built there.

During earlier apparitions to Bernadette, the Lady had been reluctant to reveal specifically her identity. However, during the 16th apparition -- which took place on March 25, 1858, the feast day of the Annunciation -- the Lady revealed her very precise identity. In Bernadette's own words:

After having poured out my heart to her I took up my Rosary. While I was praying, the thought of asking her name came before my mind with such persistence that I could think of nothing else. I feared to be presumptuous in repeating a question she had always refused to answer. And yet something compelled me to speak. At last, under an irresistible impulse, the words fell from my mouth, and I begged the Lady to tell me who she was. The Lady did as she had always done before; she bowed her head and smiled but she did not reply. I cannot say why, but I felt myself bolder and asked her again to graciously tell me her name; however she only bowed and smiled as before, still remaining silent. Then once more, for a third time, clasping my hands and confessing myself unworthy of the favour I was asking of her, I again made my request....At the third request her face became very serious and she seemed to bow down in an attitude of humility. Then she joined her hands and raised them to her breast....She looked up to heaven....then slowly opened her hands and leaning forward towards me, she said to me in a voice vibrating with emotion: "I am the Immaculate Conception!"[23] The Lady of Lourdes had identified herself by referring to the Catholic dogma that had been defined by the church only four years before. On December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX declared the Immaculate Conception to be an official dogma of the church. From his bull *Ineffabilis Deus* we read: "We declare, pronounce and define that the most blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin...." Obviously, by giving such a response the Lady of Lourdes was claiming to be the Blessed Virgin Mary -- the mother of Jesus Christ.

The apparitions were confirmed by the church in 1862 (only four years after they supposedly occurred -- an unusually brief period of evaluation) and the public cult of "Our Lady of Lourdes" was sanctioned.[24] The apparitions at Lourdes actually received the church's negative approval.[25] This is the third category mentioned above where the church states that there is "nothing contrary to Catholic faith or morals." Some of the reasons cited in favor of the apparitions included: medical cures associated with the apparitions, good spiritual effects resulting from the devotion, and the accuracy and reliability of Bernadette's testimony. Bernadette, who became a nun in 1865, died in 1879 and was canonized as a saint in 1933.[26]

Today, Lourdes remains one of the most popular Marian shrines in the world. This year alone five million people will visit the shrine, which will enrich the town nearly \$400 million. Without a doubt its greatest appeal is the many physical healings claimed by people who have visited the shrine. The Medical Bureau of Lourdes who investigates reported healings has stated that by 1988, there were more than 60 miraculous cures sanctioned by the church.[27] People who come to Lourdes frequently bathe in the grotto spring which is reputed to bring about healing. So many people are coming to Lourdes, in fact, there is now a shortage of water. Lourdes has actually had to ration its holy water![28]

Fatima, Portugal 1917

Millions of people make pilgrimages to the mountainous town of Fatima every year. The shrine at Fatima, located in central Portugal, rivals Lourdes as one of the most famous Marian shrines in the world. It commemorates the Virgin's reported appearances to three children on six different occasions from May 13 to October 13, 1917.[29]

The three poor shepherd children, Lucia dos Santos (10 years old) and her cousins Jacinta and Francisco de Jesus Marto (seven and nine), said that they saw the brilliant figure of a lady standing on a cloud above some trees. The Lady requested that the children return to that place on the 13th of each month until October, when she would reveal her identity and make known her requests. Lucia gives an account of the first apparition:

High up on the slope in the Cova da Iria, I was playing with Jacinta and Francisco....We had only gone a few steps further when, there before us on a small holmoak [tree], we beheld a lady all dressed in white. She was more brilliant than the sun, and radiated a light more clear and intense than a crystal glass filled with sparkling water, when the rays of

the burning sun shine through it.

We stopped, astounded, before the apparition. We were so close, just a few feet away from her, that we were bathed in the light which surrounded her, or rather, which radiated from her. Then Our Lady spoke to us:

Lady: "Do not be afraid. I do you no harm."

Lucia: "Where are you from?"

Lady: "I am from heaven."

Lucia: "What do you want of me?"

Lady: "I have come to ask you to come here for six months in succession, on the 13th day, at this same hour. Later on, I will tell you who I am and what I want...."

After a few moments, Our lady spoke again: "Pray the Rosary every day, in order to obtain peace for the world, and the end of the war."

Then she began to rise serenely, going up towards the east, until she disappeared in the immensity of space.[30]

One of the central messages of the apparitions at Fatima is the call to world peace. The reference to the "end of the war" in the first apparition refers to the First World War, which in 1917 was still raging in Europe. During one of the apparitions, a prediction was made that the First World War would come to an end, but that another one would soon break out.

Additionally, a prediction was made regarding Russia, that it would "spread its errors throughout the world, causing wars and persecutions of the church." The only way to avert such a bleak future, according to the message of Fatima, is to have people pray and do penance to God for the worldwide conversion of sinners.

The Immaculate Heart of Mary

The messages of prayer, penance, and conversion are similar to the messages given at Lourdes. However, the message of Fatima (specifically the second apparition) specifies just how the world is to be converted: through daily recitation of the rosary and by worldwide devotion to the "Immaculate Heart of Mary." While the rosary will be discussed in detail in Part Two of this article, Marian scholar Mark Miravalle explains briefly the significance of devotion to Mary's Immaculate Heart in the Fatima apparitions:

The message of the second apparition offers a considerable contribution to the development of the fundamental Marian call to prayer and penance for reparation and conversion. Here Mary states that it is the wish of Christ that His Mother is more greatly known and more greatly loved throughout the world, to be specifically promulgated through a world devotion to his Mother's Immaculate Heart, symbol both of her maternal love for all humanity and for the pains suffered by that maternal Heart from the outrages committed against her by the very objects of her love, her earthly children. The message goes on to present her Immaculate Heart as a spiritual refuge in the midst of a temporal suffering and hardship. Mary accentuates the role of her Immaculate Heart as having essentially a role of intercession, as a Christ-intended path bringing the wayfarer to salvation, and never as a devotion that poses the Immaculate Heart as its own final goal.[31]

The second apparition calls on people to consecrate themselves to Mary's Immaculate Heart; that is, to give oneself totally to God through Mary's Immaculate Heart. The Gospels, we are told, contain references to Mary's pure and loving heart: "But his mother treasured all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:19, 51). Since Mary put herself totally at God's disposal and was obedient to God's requests, Catholics argue that she can also help others to give themselves solely to God. Consecration to Mary's Heart then is to allow Mary to use her full powers of intercession in and through a person's life to draw him or her to God. Mary is seen as a mother who is uniting her children.

Just as in the apparitions at Lourdes, the Lady of Fatima gives the children secrets concerning the future. The messages of Fatima are interpreted as being apocalyptically urgent. Will people respond to her call for prayer (primarily the rosary), penance, conversion, and peace?

Each monthly apparition revealed more of the Lady's desires: during the third apparition she shows the children visions of hell, in the fourth she requests that a chapel be built on the site of the appearances, but it is the sixth apparition for which Fatima is most famous.

During the sixth apparition the Lady revealed her identity -- "I am the Lady of the Rosary." Following the apparition celestial miracles took place in the presence of thousands. The New Catholic Encyclopedia describes the sixth apparition and the miraculous events which followed it:

On that date, in wet and dismal weather, she announced to them that she was Our Lady of the Rosary, and called for amendment in men's lives. Then the sun appeared and seemed to rumble, rotate violently, and finally fall, dancing over the heads of the throng before it returned to normal. Many of the crowd reported having seen this 'Miracle of the Sun' that was repeated twice more....[32]

In 1930, the apparitions at Fatima received the church's negative approbation, the same evaluation given to Lourdes. Fatima has received the official praises of Popes Pius XII, Paul VI, and John Paul II. As well, numerous magazines are dedicated to Fatima's Our Lady of the Rosary.

Beauraing and Banneux, Belgium 1933

Two of the most recent ecclesiastically recognized apparitions of Mary took place in the small towns of Beauraing and Banneux in Belgium. In Beauraing, a small town 60 miles southeast of Brussels, five children from two families claimed to have received 33 apparitions of the Virgin Mary covering the period from November 29, 1932, to January 3, 1933. The apparition identified herself as "the Immaculate Virgin," "the Mother of God," and "the Queen of Heaven." [33]

In Banneux, it was reported that Mariette Beco, an eleven-year-old girl from a poor family, received eight apparitions of the Virgin Mary from January 15 to March 2, 1933. The young Mariette claimed that she first saw the apparition of Mary standing in the family vegetable garden. Over a number of weeks a beautiful Lady dressed in a flowing white gown, and holding a rosary, appeared to her during the evening and claimed to be "the Virgin of the Poor."

While these apparitions are not nearly as popular as Lourdes and Fatima, in 1949 both of them were recognized as worthy of belief. In fact, according to one Marian scholar, they were given the rare "positive affirmation" of the church.

This is the fourth category of evaluation that was discussed above.

Bayside, New York 1970

One of the most popular and controversial claims of Marian apparitions, at least in the United States, comes from the visionary experiences of Veronica Lueken of Bayside, New York.[34] Lueken, a New York housewife, claimed that on April 7, 1970 she began receiving regular visits from the Blessed Virgin Mary. The apparitions took place outside of St. Robert Bellarmine Catholic Church in Bayside, Queens, New York.

According to Lueken, the Virgin announced that she would appear on the evening of major feast days of the church, especially those dedicated in her honor. Revealing herself as "Our Lady of the Roses, Mary Help of Mothers," the apparition requested that a shrine and basilica be built in her honor at the sight of the apparition.

The messages given at Bayside are very critical of many current trends within Catholicism. Lueken has spoken against the Catholic charismatic movement, the use of most modern Bible translations, and even the practice of receiving the eucharistic host in one's hand rather than in the mouth at communion. The messages frequently denounce many of the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s.

Other messages have denounced abortion, occultic practices, and even freemasonry. A consistent theme in the Bayside messages is that the world faces an imminent apocalyptic judgment because of the moral disintegration in society.

The Bayside apparitions were investigated by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn. The Diocese reported that there was nothing miraculous or sacred about the apparitions or messages connected with Bayside. In fact, the commission stated that the apparitions were inauthentic, primarily because some of the messages challenged the authority of the church.[35]

Even though the apparitions of Bayside have been denounced as inauthentic by the local bishop, thousands of people still attend vigils at the supposed site of the apparitions. Lueken's alleged visions have been widely publicized and literature concerning "Our Lady of the Roses" shows no sign of dying out.

The five apparitions we have discussed above are only meant to serve as a survey to this provocative topic. There are a host of other apparitions that could be described such as: Rue du Bac, Paris (1830), La Salette, France (1846), Pontmain, France (1871), and Knock, Ireland (1879). Apparitions of Mary are springing up around the globe. In fact, in recent years apparitions have been reported in Argentina, Spain, Egypt, Japan, Yugoslavia, America, and even Africa. In Part Two of this article we will discuss the controversial events now taking place in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, the most significant of currently reported apparitions of Mary. This writer will discuss his impressions from his recent visit there. I will also discuss how apparitions have influenced Catholic piety, including such practices and objects as the rosary, scapulars, and other aspects of Marian devotion. Finally, the second half of this article will include a detailed evaluation of the phenomenon of Marian apparitions from a Protestant evangelical perspective.

NOTES

1 For an in-depth and critical analysis of these dogmas, as well as of Mariology overall, see Elliot Miller, "From Lowly Handmaid to Queen of Heaven: The Mary of Roman Catholicism" (two parts), CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, Summer and Fall issues, 1990.

2 Rene Laurentin, quoted in Jeffery L. Sheler, "What's in a Vision?," U.S. News & World Report, 12 Mar. 1990, 67.

3 Dictionary of Mary (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1985), s.v. "Apparitions," 25-26.

4 Donald Attwater, ed., A Catholic Dictionary (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), s.v. "Apparition," 30.

5 The Encyclopedia of Religion, s.v. "Visions."

6 Dictionary of Mary, 25-26.

7 Kenneth Woodward, "Visitations of the Virgin," Newsweek, 20 July 1987, 54-55.

8 Sheler, 67.

9 Catherine M. Odell, Those Who Saw Her: The Apparitions of Mary (Huntington, ID: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1986), 30.

10 Charlotte Low, "The Madonna's Decline and Revival," Insight, 9 Mar. 1990, 61.

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