

Baculus Pastoralis

**Jean Honoré,
Archbishop of Tours**

The Tide of Vain Credulity: The Church's Role in Apparitions

**First Printed in
*Fidelity Press, July-August, 1989***

One may well ask why, among the many reported apparitions, the Church approves of some to the exclusion of others. Are there reasons that could appear to some people to be discriminatory? Briefly, what are the criteria, the objective norms used to determine which ones merit the sanction of the Church's approval or its reserved judgment, if not outright disapproval?

Let me begin by recalling the Church's general attitude towards the phenomenon of apparitions and of the supernatural. Contrary to what certain Christians may think, this attitude is not one of favorable disposition, but rather of skepticism and of the most extreme reserve. Instinctively conscious of the incertitude of the human judgment in a field as complex as that of the supernatural, the Church remains on the defensive. The reasons for such an attitude are easily understandable.

First, there is the constant risk of deception and fakery. The Church believes there is a devil and that his seductive powers can be exercised under the cover of the supernatural at the expense of the believers. Religious history is fraught with such exploitations.

Secondly, the Church fears that the faithful will be carried away with the tide of vain credulity and superstition. Devotion is secondary to faith: private revelations will never have the same importance as the Gospel Revelation. It is this latter Revelation that has been confided to the Church, and that is the one the Church must protect and transmit. Its mission is primarily in that intangible fidelity to the Word she has received from the Lord. By approving too hastily the message of apparitions she fears she may be catering to a spontaneous craving for the supernatural to the detriment of the faith which, in fact, is more obscure and more demanding.

Finally, we must not disregard the fact that the supernatural is always susceptible to interpretations and transpositions on the aesthetical level which, fostering forms of sentimental and naive piety, unflinchingly shock the critical intelligence of many believers, especially those engaged in dialogue with unbelievers who, in turn, risk finding in these manifestations new alibis to refuse to believe.

These are some of the reasons that

prompt the Church to exert the greatest circumspection in the matter of the supernatural and revelations.

However, if the Church knows that Revelation was closed with the death of the last of the apostles, she also knows that the history of salvation continues from one century to the other, and that the Lord is ever present among his people. He is present in the work of grace and holiness accomplished in his Church through the Holy Spirit. He is present in the ministry of the Word and of the Sacraments, which characterizes the mission of the Church sent into the world to preach the Gospel to every creature. He is also present in certain manifestations of His power and his sovereignty over the world from which supernatural events emerge and, in particular, Marian apparitions.

Again, it is to his Church that He, in some way, gives the mandate to recognize, interpret, and approve these apparitions by proposing them to the veneration and the devotion of the faithful. Therefore, it is the Church's duty to perform this difficult task of discernment which permits us to declare, in reference to an apparition, "The finger of God is there." The Church accomplishes this discernment through the magisterium who, in virtue of the Apostolic succession, are endowed with the power of grace. And thus, the recognition of apparitions and the approval of pilgrimages are decisions of the Church's magisterium in which its authority is engaged.

This function of the magisterium is carried out along very definite lines and procedures that often require long delays between the information gathered within the confines of the diocese and the investigation made by the Roman Congregations. We find that the same attention and strictness is observed here as in the canoniza-

tion processes. More than the various methods of procedures, I believe I must signal out the different criteria that are followed.

There is first of all, as I have said with regard to Lourdes, the conformity of the message with the Gospel Revelation and the dogmatic tradition of the Church. God's word is the foundation of our faith. The first condition, therefore, is that the message transmitted by the seers be in complete agreement with this Word. At Lourdes the Blessed Virgin's revelation that she is the Immaculate Conception was a determining factor in the Church's approval of the Massabieule.

On the other hand, we must consider the contents of the message relative to Christian attitudes such as invitation to prayer, penance and conversion of the heart, brotherly love, hope, etc. In this matter, Lourdes, like Pontmain, presents (in the simplicity of the words and expressions) a startling likeness to the evangelical Beatitudes.

A more difficult point is the revelation of "secrets" which sometimes accompany certain apparitions, such as La Salette and Fatima. Most often these secrets deal with predictions concerning the future, about which the magisterium of the Church exercises an extreme prudence.

Another important criterion of evaluation is the truthfulness of the seers. The investigation always begins with a profound examination of their personality: psychic equilibrium, conditions of life, level of maturity, etc. One expert after the other interrogates the witnesses who must not contradict themselves in the testimony. The fact that the Church-approved apparitions were often witnessed by children or young adults does not lessen the rigor of the scrutiny and a severity (in controlling the declarations) that can be likened to a regular court procedure. The great concern is to forestall the risk of manipulation by the adults.

Thus, it is only at the end of this long and patient study of the facts that the Church's magisterium arrives at its conclusion. It is often preceded by the popular movement, but it remains independent of all outside pressure.

Let us now draw a few conclusions from what we have