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Participants include the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy, Equality Now, Marie Stopes International, the National Abortion Federation, the Feminist Majority, the Sierra Club, Population Concern, Center for Research on Population and Security, the American Humanist Association, and Atheists United. The list includes groups from more than a dozen countries.

Kissling claims her coalition will ask UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to “review” the status of the Holy See. Their complaint is that the Holy See delegation is able to block various initiatives to expand women’s rights in UN documents. Over the years, beginning at the International Conference on Population and Development, the Holy See has become the main voice in opposition to expansion of abortion in UN documents. The Holy See participates in a loose-knit coalition of Catholic and Muslim states that has also stopped the efforts to expand gender to include homosexuality, and to redefine the family to include homosexual couples.

Since the UN works by consensus, any small group of states can theoretically stop any piece of language they find objectionable. Since most states rely on foreign aid, the pressure to bend to the will of the Clinton Administration and the increasingly radical European Union is intense. The Holy See does not receive any foreign aid, so it cannot be pressured in the traditional ways.

Not even Kissling believes her campaign will have the stated effect of taking the Holy See out of the UN. She said as much in an article in the Washington DC-based Legal Times published last summer. Veteran UN observers understand that the Kissling effort is really intended to intimidate the Holy See delegation and to scare away her allies from Latin America and the Middle East.

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said. 1) What the Church recognizes and approves is the supernatural character, the divine origin of the apparitions. She also grants them public credibility which, in the eyes of the faithful, guarantees the orthodoxy of the devotion and the pilgrimage. 2) This public approval of the apparitions does not imply for Christians what theologians call the “assent of faith.” The message of the apparitions, even if it is approved by the Church, retains the character of a private revelation, which is not the direct and explicit object of our faith. The Christian, therefore, remains free to accept or to reject it. However, in deference to the judgment of the Church, the Christian should have an attitude of openness and “pious affection.” 3) With respect to the apparitions or visions which have not been publicly approved by the Church, it is fitting to maintain an attitude of prudence and reserve. The Church allows us to carry out certain forms of prayer, but in a private manner. She warns us against massive demonstrations that might risk abusing the faith, and, especially, she warns us against the risk of credulity, or of devotion that would endanger the proper balance of faith and Christian hope. 4) With regard to revelations that have been totally turned down, it behooves the Christian conscience to bind itself through obedience to the Church’s decision. That decision was not made without close scrutiny. There is need here to purify the religious sentiment, which we know is forever exposed to what I call: “the tide of vain credulity” and the need for supernatural signs.

My conclusion is precisely that our pilgrimage, in the footsteps of Bernadette and

her message, is for us a challenge to be rooted in our faith and to purify it by adhering to the essentials. Lourdes is the meeting place to which our Lord invites us, that we might be strengthened in our certitudes and our faithfulness as believers.

Our certitudes rest upon what is at the heart of the Gospel: the revelation of the Son of God. We need not look for any other truth than that: “God sent his son into the world ... that through him the world might be saved” (John 1:11, 17). This is the central truth of our faith. There is no other. “I have told you everything in my Son,” writes St. John of the Cross. And the entire message Bernadette received from the Blessed Virgin does nothing else but recall the mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is to reconcile all mankind in the tenderness and forgiveness of the Father.

Already St. Paul was preoccupied with maintaining the faith of his disciples within the very center of the mystery of Christ: “Only you must continue in your faith, firm on your foundations, never to be dislodged from the hope offered by the gospel which you heard” (Col. 1:23). And to Timothy, he adds: “For the spirit that God gave us is no craven spirit, but one to inspire strength, love, and self-discipline” (2 Tim. 1:7)

Our faithfulness as believers is founded on our faithfulness and, I might add, our loyalty, to the church, more specifically to the magisterium which the Lord has established for this mission of evangelization – a mission which implies, first of all, spiritual discernment with respect to every event of a supernatural character.

The faithful Christian is the one who defers to the judgment of the Church and does not try to put aside his own prudence

by undertaking new and unprecedented devotions. Much less is it a question of taking pleasure in visions, which, instead of building up the faith, risk leading it astray in dubious prophetism.

In closing, I would like to share a conviction of mine. The best antidote for this craving for the sensational and private revelations is to participate directly and effectively in the Church’s mission. A Christian who teaches religion, for example, shares too much in the seriousness of the transmission of the Christian mysteries and in faith education to burden himself with new revelations. The Gospel and the Creed are enough for him. A Christian who wishes to witness to his faith in the midst of human realities runs less risk of being won over by predictions whose obvious effects are to render the faith weak and lead one to abandon the apostolic field, where the vocation of the baptized lay person is to be found.

Bernadette presents us with the picture of truth and simplicity in the faith. We should look at her. She is the icon given to us by the Blessed Virgin to discover, in her, why and how we should believe.