**Marian Apparitions & National Marian Devotion**

Marian Apparitions

An apparition refers to the appearance of Jesus, Mary, or one of the other saints or angels to a person or group of persons (called seers or visionaries). Below is a summary of key points regarding apparitions:

* **Is it real?** This, of course, is a critical question when someone is claiming to have a vision of Mary. The Church has very thorough criteria and investigates claims with great seriousness. The investigation is undertaken by the local bishop (who, if he desires, can appeal to Rome for assistance). Some of the primary criteria for evaluating the authenticity of an alleged apparition are:
  1. **Message**: typically, a Marian apparition includes the communication of some message from Mary to the visionary. The message is measured against the Public Revelation of the Church: does anything in the message contradict the Church’s official teaching? For example, if the visionary was claiming that Mary said “Jesus is not God,” or “the Eucharist is only a symbol,” this would be a clear indication that the alleged apparition was not genuine.
  2. **Credibility of the Visionary**: the Church also considers the visionary (or visionaries). Is the visionary of sound psychological health (i.e. not suffering from any form of mental illness)? Is the visionary securing monetary or material gain through the alleged visions (i.e. demanding payment in return for passing along the message)? Is the visionary of good moral character (or does this person have a history of lying or misleading others)?
  3. **The Fruits**: Jesus, warning of the danger of false prophets, said: “You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit” (Matthew 7:15-17). In other words, what are the consequences of the alleged apparition for those who have heard of it? Is the visionary spurred to deeper holiness? Are those who have heard of the message drawn to conversion, a deeper spiritual life, and a more complete living of the virtues? Or, is it the opposite? Does the alleged apparition engender sins of division, hatred, cruelty, dishonesty, or disobedience, etc.?

After a thorough investigation, the bishop will make one of three rulings: that the alleged apparition is of supernatural origin (truly of God), that it is not of supernatural origin (a false apparition), or that there is not sufficient evidence to declare one way or the other (in which case, further development and evaluation can be made). In the 2000 year history of the Catholic Church, there are not that many Marian apparitions which have been deemed “worthy of belief” by the Church. Some of the most famous are Our Lady of Guadalupe (Mexico, 1531), Our Lady of Lourdes (France, 1858), and Our Lady of Fatima (Portugal, 1917) – see the links below for more information.

* **Public and Private Revelation**: an apparition is defined by the Church as a private revelation. This distinguishes apparitions from the Public Revelation of the Church, that is, the Deposit of Faith (Scripture and Tradition) which was entrusted by Jesus Christ to the Catholic Church and requires the assent of all believing Catholics. So, even when an apparition has been approved, it is important to remember that Catholics are not required to believe in it. We are required to give the full assent of faith to the Public Revelation of the Church; while private revelations can help to guide us in our practice of the faith, they do not provide anything that is lacking or deficient in the Church’s Public Revelation:

No private revelation can ever be necessary for salvation, though its content may obviously coincide with what is necessary for salvation as known from Scripture and Tradition. The person who believes the teachings of the Magisterium, utilizes devoutly the sacramental means of sanctification and prayer, and remains in Communion with the Pope and the bishops in union with him, is already employing the necessary means of salvation. A private revelation may recall wayward individuals to the faith, stir the devotion of the already pious, encourage prayer and penance on behalf of others, but it cannot substitute for the Catholic faith, the sacraments and hierarchical communion with the Pope and bishops (Colin Donovan, “Apparitions/Private Revelations,” *EWTN*, web 28 Jan. 2015).

National Marian Devotions

In many Catholic countries throughout the world, members of the Church express their devotion to Mary under a particular title. Some are linked to apparitions: devotion to Our Lady of Fatima among the Portuguese, or devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico and the United States (think, for example, of devotion among Americans who pray to Our Lady of Guadalupe for an end to abortion). Others, are linked to events or images: for example, Our Lady of Czestochowa in Poland, a devotion linked to the image of the Black Madonna. See the link below for more information.