

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.

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

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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, unfailingly 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 canonization 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 Massabielle.

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 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 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