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Chronicle: Pontmain and Marian Apparitions

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CHRONICLE

Pontmain and Marian Apparitions

On January 17, 1971, a celebration took place at Pontmain¹ honoring the centenary of the apparition there of the Blessed Virgin to some children on January 17, 1871. The centenary celebration coincided with the annual ecumenical week of prayer, and one could see traditional devotion and ecumenical brotherhood in harmony. Present at the services were Cardinal Gouyon, archbishop of Rennes, 12 bishops, coadjutors and auxiliary bishops; the Orthodox Church was represented by the Archimandrite Stephanos and by bishops representing the Russian, Ukrainian and Armenian orthodox churches. The moslem world was represented by the Grand Mufti of France, Mohamed El Afly and the first *iman* of the Paris Mosque, Mohamed Benzouaou. The Prior of Taizé and the spokesman of the Anglican Church in Paris sent assurances to the Bishop of Laval of their brotherhood in prayer. Among those invited, M. Jean Guilton of the *Académie Française* and several other personalities who have been urging Church union took their places near the regional representatives. The union in prayer of all churches was strikingly manifested in an ecumenical celebration which followed Mass and the recitation of the rosary. The homily for the day, given by Father Carré, O.P., famous preacher at Notre Dame in Paris, developed three themes of Pontmain: the apparition, the children, and people who pray.²

¹ *Le Maine Libre*, January 18, 1971.

Ouest-France, Rennes. Numéro du lundi, 18 January 1971, p. 6.

Journal de la Grotte, Lourdes. No. 1, January 20, 1971.

² *Ouest-France*, Rennes. Numéro du lundi, January 18, 1971, p.

For the centenary, Canon René Laurentin (with the help of Canon Durand, archivist of Pontmain, and the Cistercian Sisters of Laval) has made an exhaustive study of the events and meaning of Pontmain, now being published in three volumes. The first volume, written chiefly for the general public, recounts the story of the apparition, offers a history of the sanctuary, and of the witnesses. He also discusses in basic terms the meaning of Pontmain.

The second volume, *Preuves*, considers each of the many statements from the period scientifically by citing all the texts which form the basis of each statement. *Documents*, the third volume, gathers together 110 principal documents on the history of Pontmain, notably those concerning the witnesses.³

What happened on January 17, 1871? Historically, the Franco-Prussian war was raging, coming closer to the village. In the early evening four children saw a woman appear in the sky. She was dressed in a long blue beltless robe decorated with stars; each of her blue shoes had a golden buckle. On her head was a black veil which fell behind her shoulders, and underneath the veil was a golden crown in the form of a diadem, decorated only with a red margin. The woman was glorious, shining, and the most beautiful creature the children had ever seen. During the three hours of the apparitions, the witnesses did not suffer from the cold; even though other bystanders did. Each child gave the same description of the events which followed: The apparition of an oval around the woman, of a white streamer under her feet with the message: *MAIS PRIEZ MES ENFANTS, DIEU VOUS EXAUCERA EN PEU DE TEMPS. MON FILS SE LAISSE TOUCHER*⁴; a red crucifix, two small white crosses appeared, and finally, the white veil which ended the apparition. Never once did the woman speak.⁵

³ *Journal de la Grotte, Lourdes*. No. 1, January 20, 1971. (RENÉ LAURENTIN and ALBERT DURAND. *Pontmain, histoire authentique*, 3 vols.: 1. Un signe dans le ciel. 2. Preuves. 3. Documents. Paris. Apostolat des éditions, Lethielleux, 1970.)

⁴ So pray, my children, that God may hear you soon. My son will allow himself to be moved.

⁵ *Cahiers Marials*, January 15, 1971. New Series, Number 76, p. 49.

Pontmain and Marian Apparitions

As always, in such cases, one wonders what the true meaning of the apparition could be. Many scholars today see the apparition at Pontmain as particularly important to modern times, citing especially the emphasis on simple prayer, on the cross in each person's life, and Mary as mother of God, mother of prayer, mother of the Church.

After the apparition in 1871, Pontmain became a shrine to 200,000 pilgrims a year. A basilica was erected in 1873. Over the past decades the devotion itself has become less nationalistic, more trans-national and ecumenical.⁶ The message of Pontmain does not just symbolize current trends in theology: ecumenism, and the theology of hope; it is actively promoting them.

A recent dissertation presented by Father Philippe Seveau, M.S.C., to the Facultas Theologica Marianum in Rome is concerned with an interesting theological problem; it is entitled "The Evangelical Correspondance of the Message of Mary in the Major Apparitions."⁷ Written under the direction of Father Vincenzo M. Buffon, O.S.M., a professor at the Marianum, it discusses apparitions in general, then delves into several in particular: Rue du Bac, La Salette, Lourdes, Pontmain, Fatima, Beauraing, Banneux, and Syracuse. In each case, the facts are examined carefully in the light of the Gospels. The study thus integrates the apparitions with modern scriptural and theological concepts, adding to research already undertaken by Father Laurentin and others.

Father Seveau could not profit entirely from recent works on Pontmain. It is now known that Sister Jeanne-Marie Lebossé, who was among the children who witnessed the apparition, later retracted her testimony. It is interesting to study this case in the light of the psychological explanations given in Laurentin's book and in comparison, for example, with St. Thérèse of Lisieux who was tormented by scruples regarding an apparition.

⁶ *Journal de la Grotte*, Lourdes, No. 1, January 20, 1971.

⁷ PHILIPPE SEVEAU, M.S.C., "Correspondance Evangélique du Message de Marie dans les Grandes Apparitions." A doctoral dissertation presented to the Facultas Theologica Marianum, Rome, 1970.

It is obvious that the study of such a subject is of interest to various sciences. However, there are innumerable accounts by visionaries which Church authorities have rejected as not authentic. Approved pilgrimages which certain apparitions have created can gain a new illumination thanks to theological, biblical and liturgical research, along with the help of the historical sciences and those dedicated to the study of man (psychology, sociology, etc.)

There is obviously much to be done in this area; new areas of scholarship must be opened up and all areas re-examined in order to attract more scholars to the field.