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DISCERNING THE MIRACULOUS: NORMS FOR JUDGING APPARITIONS AND PRIVATE REVELATIONS

by
Frederick M. Jelly, O.P.*

On February 25, 1978, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) issued "Norms for the Congregation for Proceeding in Judging Presumed Apparitions and Revelations." Pope Paul VI had approved these norms the preceding day, February 24, 1978. These norms were the result of an examination of the problems arising from presumed apparitions and private revelations and the messages that are usually associated with them. This examination actually began in the annual plenary assembly of the CDF in November of 1974, three years earlier. These norms were given little publicity and are little known.

The members of this congregation were deeply concerned about the good of the faithful, especially during these times when the news of alleged apparitions is rapidly disseminated and large numbers of people make pilgrimages to the places where miraculous visions are said to have occurred. The CDF saw itself as responsible for clearly establishing the norms to be used in a process of making sound judgments as quickly as possible regarding the authenticity of such heavenly appearances and messages. During the past two centuries, the Vir-

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For additional reading, Father Jelly recommends the following works by René Laurentin: *The Apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary Today* (Dublin: Veritas, 1990) and *The Church and Apparitions: Their Status and Function, Criteria and Reception: Report at the National Conference on Medjugorje, Notre Dame, Indiana (U.S.A.), May 12-14, 1989* (Milford, OH: The Riehle Foundation, [1989?]).

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gin Mary figures predominantly in these apparitions. Because the number of reports of her apparitions has been greatly increasing, especially in the past two years, it is timely that the Mariological Society of America address the topic, as a service to the pastoral mission of the Church in these matters which call for careful theological consideration. In accord with the theme of our present meeting, "Mary and Popular Devotion," let us bear in mind that while we are concentrating on Marian apparitions, our hope is that whatever light might be shed on this complex and delicate matter might also be beneficial for placing all popular piety in the total picture of Catholic faith, devotion, and discipleship today. Following the spirit and the letter of Vatican II, we seek to present Marian apparitions and private revelations, as well as the private and/or liturgical devotions connected with them, in such a way as to strike a happy medium between vain credulity and sterile skepticism. Perhaps we could label our position as one of critical or moderate realism.

In the hope that it will engender fruitful discussion of the complex problems involved, my presentation proposes to treat the following points: first, a clarification of the major terms used when speaking of apparitions; second, the procedures and norms for judging apparitions as given in the CDF document; third, an application of these norms in actual cases of alleged apparitions; and, lastly, some pertinent pastoral and theological considerations and some practical conclusions.

1. Clarification of Key Terms and Concepts

Apparitions here refer to occurrences similar to the visions of the Virgin Mary to St. Bernadette of Lourdes or to the three children at Fatima. The visionaries or seers behold an object that is not naturally visible to human beings. So, an authentic supernatural vision or apparition is quite different from illusions or hallucinations that result from pathological conditions or even diabolical intervention. An authentic vision is a charism or a charismatic grace—*gratia gratis data*. These charismatic graces are given to an individual or a group primarily for the spiritual good of others or for the Church as a whole. For example, the Sacred Heart devotion

presented in the apparitions to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque was given for the upbuilding of the whole Church. Such gifts are not given primarily for the sanctification of the individuals, even though visionaries have frequently shown signs of growth in the spiritual life through their extraordinary experiences.

Apparitions are not to be confused with the divine enlightenment of the gifts of the Holy Spirit—*gratia gratum faciens* (grace which makes one holy or pleasing before God). These latter are bestowed on the individual for the sake of transforming union with the triune God through Jesus Christ. Not even mystical phenomena, such as the rapture and ecstasy which can accompany graces of infused contemplation (as found, for example, in Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Sienna, John of the Cross), are to be classified with the substance of holiness which is charity. Indeed the great mystics, such as the three doctors of the Church just mentioned, were always most circumspect about extraordinary phenomena.

According to the tradition formed from the writings of Saints Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and John of the Cross, apparitions may be corporeal, imaginative, or intellectual. Corporeal apparitions are visions in which the eyes of the seer perceive an object normally imperceptible to the sense of sight. This may result from an external reality or a power directly impressing an image on the sense of seeing; God may cause the phenomenon directly or by the mediation of another (e.g., an angelic power). (Although the writing on the wall was visible to all, St. Thomas teaches that Daniel alone was the prophet, because he was given the gift of interpreting the writing.) The imaginative type of apparition can result from the supernatural impression of an image or phantasm on the internal sense, apart from the external sense of sight. It may take place while the visionary is awake or asleep (e.g., the dreams of Joseph in the Old Testament). An intellectual vision or apparition occurs when the seer is given a simple intuitive understanding of a supernatural mystery. This highest form of apparition occurs without any intermediary, with God acting directly upon the human spirit without doing violence to the individual's freedom.

The accounts of the Marian apparitions, such as those at Lourdes and Fatima, along with many current reports of those not yet approved as worthy of our belief, such as Medjugorje, indicate that the visionaries perceived something corporeal and physical. The imaginative type may apply in certain cases, but a purely intellectual apparition appears unlikely. The senses usually occupy a significant role in Marian apparitions.

Although apparitions in Scripture are a part of the divine disclosure in the deposit of faith in public revelation, finalized in the witness of the apostles to Christ in the Church, our consideration concerns those visions which are accompanied by private revelations that do not make any substantial addition to the deposit of faith and morals necessary for salvation. Even after the proper ecclesiastical authorities have approved such apparitions and they are proposed by the Church as worthy of pious belief, they are not the formal object of divine Catholic faith which, as a theological virtue, can terminate only in the authority of the revealing word of God. According to Vatican II's *Dei Verbum*, the magisterium of the Church has the charism of infallibility only when Scripture and Tradition, in mutual interdependence, form the foundation for a dogma—whether solemnly defined by an ecumenical council, by an *ex cathedra* pronouncement of the pope, or by the universal ordinary magisterium, that is, the constant preaching and teaching (*sensus fidelium*) of the Church as a whole. The certitude that can be reached as a result of investigating apparitions and private revelations can never be the certitude of divine faith that we receive in the mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Eucharist, the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, Mary's perpetual virginity, our call to the beatific vision, the resurrection of the body.

The word *miraculous* is used in the title of this paper rather than *supernatural*, because the latter term ordinarily has a much wider application than the former. Supernatural is attributed to a great range of divine gifts which are not miraculous. For example, we hold as supernatural our acts of faith, hope, love; the infused virtues given by God; prayer,

worship, the spiritual and corporal works of mercy; transubstantiation. The Latin text of the CDF document uses the term *supernaturalitas* to apply to miracles or the miraculous in the strict theological sense of the term. When one examines the context, however, they usually mean what the Scholastics called *supernaturale quoad modum* (supernatural in the way the event has transpired): the phenomena or occurrences perceptible to the senses cannot be explained by natural causes. As already indicated, these are charismatic graces bestowed upon individuals or groups primarily for the spiritual good of the believing community as a whole. The object of the discerning process, as it proposes to come to a judgment about the authenticity of apparitions and private revelations, is to examine precisely the evidence for signs of the miraculous. The CDF norms are concerned with the spiritual fruits as one of the signs, but these can be present without miracles. So, the signs of sanctifying graces at work are not sufficient of themselves to show that the apparitions are of heavenly origin. In the order of grace, the *supernaturale quoad substantiam* (the substantively or essentially supernatural) is much more significant for salvation and sanctification, since the divine mysteries were revealed for our healing and holiness. But just as the miraculous has provided motives of credibility or invitations to a deeper or firmer faith in public revelation, so the miraculous seems to have a similar role in helping to certify private revelations that usually accompany an apparition. Some specific consideration about the value of private revelation for a life of Christian faith, devotion, and discipleship will be given later.

2. Procedures and Norms for Judging Apparitions according to the CDF Document of 1978

Whenever there appears to be a heavenly communication from our Lord and our Lady or a saint, the bishop of the place where the apparently miraculous apparition is transpiring has the serious obligation to become fully informed and to initiate the process leading to a decision whether Catholics may come together for public worship in that place. The bishop may have recourse to a regional or national confer-

ence of bishops; the Apostolic See can intervene if the bishop of the place or a representative group of the faithful petition it. If the pope judges it necessary, he can institute such a process. In the case of the reported apparitions of Mary at Medjugorje, it was decided in Rome that the situation would be best studied by the conference of bishops in (what was then) Yugoslavia. The CDF can either approve what the local ordinary has done or start a new investigation, distinct from the one conducted by the local authority—as was done at Medjugorje. Also, the CDF may make a judgment about the apparition on its own or through a special commission. Fr. René Laurentin points out that the pope avoids making any formal pronouncement about apparitions, in order to prevent confusing such a judgment with the exercise of his infallible teaching authority in matters of faith and morals (i.e., matters which must be believed and observed by all the faithful for the sake of salvation). The charism of infallibility has not been given for the purpose of judging apparitions and private revelations.

Let us now review the norms or criteria to be followed by the members of the investigative committee constituted by the bishop of the place where the alleged apparitions are occurring. There are several criteria, both positive and negative, for judging, at least with probability, the character of alleged apparitions and private revelations. The first of the positive criteria requires that moral certainty, or at least great probability, of the existence of the miraculous must be established by means of a serious investigation. The members of the investigative commission accomplish this by seeking out eye witnesses, especially the visionaries themselves; by visiting the place of the alleged apparitions; by conducting interviews with any or all who can provide the necessary information to assure that the actual facts have been established.

The second, third, and fourth positive criteria all deal with the particular circumstances bearing on the existence and the nature of the allegedly wondrous fact. The second criterion deals with the personal qualities of the subjects who claim to have the apparition: their mental equilibrium, hon-

esty, moral attitude, sincerity; their attitude of obedience to ecclesiastical authority; their ability to return to the regimen of normal practices of the faith. (Witness the example of St. Bernadette who, after receiving the apparitions, returned to the ordinary practices of the religious and Christian life.) The third positive criterion deals with the content of the revelation or message: it must be theologically and morally true and free of error. The fourth positive criterion is that the apparition must produce sound devotion and rich spiritual fruits which last (e.g., the spirit of prayer, conversion, increase of charity).

The first negative criterion regards any obvious error relating to the fact of the occurrence, i.e., doubt about whether what is transpiring is truly exceptional. The second negative test would be any attribution of doctrinal error to God or to the Blessed Virgin Mary or some other saint (with the allowance that the visionary may add human elements to supernatural revelation). The third negative criterion would be any evident seeking of financial advantage directly connected with the presumed apparitions, and the fourth negative sign would be seriously immoral acts committed at the time or on the occasion of the alleged apparition by the visionaries and their followers. (This criterion was erroneously applied when a Franciscan of Medjugorje was accused [falsely, as it turned out] of fathering a child several years before the apparition and in a place other than Medjugorje.) The fifth negative sign would be any mental illness or psychopathic tendencies in the visionary, which would surely have an influence on the presumed supernatural fact or occurrence itself. All these criteria, both negative and positive, are not taxonomic or exhaustive; they must be applied cumulatively, as they converge in the process of discerning the miraculous character of the apparition.

The prudent application of these norms or criteria is no simple task. Having served on investigative commissions, I am well aware of the complicated questions that arise when the attempt is made to ascertain the real facts in order to arrive at a judgment. The team of experts appointed by the bishop or proper ecclesiastical authority must thoroughly

and objectively examine the situation. The testimony of all involved with the alleged visionaries must be carefully noted, along with any other relevant evidence that may be uncovered. At the end of the process, the team may submit to the bishop one of the following three verdicts or conjectural judgments: *constat de supernaturalitate* (the alleged apparition shows all the signs of being an authentic or a truly miraculous intervention from heaven); *constat de non supernaturalitate* (the presumed apparition is clearly not miraculous or there are not sufficient signs manifesting it to be so); *non constat de supernaturalitate* (it is not evident whether or not the alleged apparition is authentic). In principle, the first two verdicts close the case—declaring it either authentic or not. This third possibility keeps the case open, implying that it could be many years before a final judgment may be made or it falls into oblivion. Meanwhile, the faith and devotion of God's people must be preserved.

If the investigative committee cannot verify an apparition or apparitions as authentic, it must never be concluded that the individual (or individuals) involved was (were) lacking in honesty. Such a verdict simply means that there is not sufficient evidence to describe the visions or revelations as authentic or miraculous.

3. Application of Norms in Actual Cases of Alleged Apparitions

Allow me to share my experience with a case in Lubbock, Texas. In *Origins*, November 3, 1988, there appeared a report of an apparition in which the CDF criteria were applied. The title of the report was "Statement on Rosary Messages in Lubbock." The statement was based on the report which I presented to Bishop Michael Sheehan and to the diocesan consultants of Lubbock, on Wednesday, October 5, 1988. As chairman of the investigatory body, it was my responsibility to read what the visitation committee had together formulated and concluded. The other members of this committee were Fr. James J. Gil, S.J., a psychiatrist from the Jesuit Educational Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Sr. Patricia Smith, R.S.M., who taught theology in St. Mary's Seminary,

Roland Park, Baltimore, Maryland; Fr. George T. Montague, S.M., from St. Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas, and contributing editor to the *New Covenant*; and Msgr. Robert Rehkemper, vicar general of the diocese of Dallas, Texas. The theological, pastoral, spiritual (charismatic renewal) and the psychological elements were represented in the corporate personality of the team.

Although the apparitions at Lubbock did not include the Virgin Mary in a prominent way (as was the case at Lourdes or Fatima), some of the visionaries claimed that she appeared along with Christ in the celestial phenomena which accompanied the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy on the Solemnity of the Assumption, August 15, 1988, at St. John Neumann Parish in Lubbock, Texas. Our committee reported that the recorded phenomena—the sun spinning and pulsating, rosaries changing color, healings, polaroid pictures of the heavenly gates in the sky—were not of a miraculous character. During our investigation, we received testimony from an eye doctor that two individuals who looked directly into the sun during the alleged miraculous occurrence suffered serious eye damage and a third was afflicted with irreparable damage to the eyes.

We studied the Rosary Messages (as they were called) which were received by two women and a man during the recitation of the rosary in St. John Neumann Church. We found them to be generally within the boundaries of sound Roman Catholic teaching and Christian tradition; the Marian doctrine appeared to be functioning soundly within the hierarchy of truths (as found in Vatican II's Decree on Eumenism). Some of the messages did betray an angry God in language that was strident and affected and caused us to question their claim to divine inspiration. Our conclusion about these messages is that they were not of miraculous origin but were inner locutions of the recipients, derived from their spiritual reading, the preaching they had heard, and from their own meditation or contemplative prayer.

The first and most fundamental question asked of us by Bishop Sheehan was "Are there miracles taking place at St. John Neumann Church or not?" Our committee responded:

"The messages are not miraculous in the strict sense but some may be vehicles of grace in the sense that there were clear signs of the pastoral results (confession, spiritual healings and renewal)." It was our opinion that the alleged miraculous phenomena admitted to natural explanation. There were signs of awakened or confirmed faith in the power of God and of the reality of the Blessed Virgin Mary for the thousands gathered at St. John Neumann Church for the celebration of the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Marian Year, August 15, 1988.

Here, it should be noted that an apparition need not be judged authentic in order to deepen the faith and devotion of individuals. However, the function of the investigative committee is to ascertain whether the phenomena are truly beyond human explanation, lest that which was thought to be miraculous be later explained as the result of natural causes, with the result that our faith is exposed to ridicule. The grace of God is operative in the ordinary events of life. Apparitions are extraordinary events, that is, not part of our daily lives; they illumine the "ordinary" sacramental ways in which we are sanctified.

The committee answered Bishop Sheehan's second question—"Should the Rosary Messages be promoted?"—in the following way: If the Rosary Messages are conveyed as the pious messages of good people and not as private revelations miraculously produced, the content of two of the recipients may be shared with others; that of the third person involved, while not containing doctrinal errors, seems spiritually unbalanced and the recipient appeared to be emotionally unbalanced.

The third question from Bishop Sheehan was, "Is it prudent for the bishop to give permission for the Queen of Peace Center to promote the Marian devotions which have developed in the parish?" Our response was, "Given the present circumstances, it does not seem prudent for the bishop to approve the Queen of Peace Center." (It must be added that there were plans to make the Center what might be called "the American Medjugorje.") Although the motivation for those at the Center appeared to be primarily devo-

tional and pastoral, there appeared to be signs encouraging a "miracle-mania" mentality.

The final question from the bishop was: "What is prudent for the parish to do in the future regarding devotion?" Our response was that it was prudent, first, to allow the rosary devotion to continue (large groups of people assembled to recite this time-honored and approved form of prayer together). Second, any Rosary Messages that might be received in the future should be submitted for the bishop's approval before being published. Third, that a bishop's committee should be constituted as an advisory group to the pastor of St. John Neumann's Parish relative to these matters. Fourth, that consideration should be given to the future pastoral care of the individuals involved in this whole affair, and that people involved must be warned against the harmful effects of gazing at the sun, as well as against an other-worldly attitude suggesting that they abandon their sources of economic support. (Some were about to give up their jobs to devote their time to the proposed center.) Fifth, we recommended to the bishop that in pastoral explanation of the Rosary Messages, care should be taken that the piety engendered be not individualistic, but rather that it lead to real community and social concern.

The five members of the committee were selected by Bishop Sheehan in consultation with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' General Secretariat in Washington, D.C. We completed our mission as a team, but there was consultation with myself as chairman afterwards. To the best of my knowledge, Bishop Sheehan and his advisors in the diocese of Lubbock did see fit to follow our recommendations. Upon reflection, I believe our verdict was *constat de non supernaturalitate*: it is clearly not miraculous. However, since this expression from the CDF document was not explicitly used in the case, there may be further investigations in the future.

Although the members of the committee rendered a negative judgment, there was no evidence that there was anything improper or questionable in the motives and conduct of those most closely associated with the events at Lubbock.

We felt it was our responsibility to answer the questions which the bishop proposed in a way that would not be unfair to the individuals involved or that would not question the faith and sincerity of those attracted to the activities of the Queen of Peace Center.

I also served on a commission, appointed by Archbishop J. Francis Stafford, to investigate reports of alleged apparitions in the archdiocese of Denver, Colorado. Our report to the Archbishop was clearly *non constat de supernaturalitate*, i.e., it is not evident that the apparitions are miraculous and authentic, although evidence thus far points toward a negative verdict. On May 11, 1993, Archbishop Stafford made the following statement:

In response to many requests, both national and local, for information regarding the status of the investigation into the alleged apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Mrs. Theresa Lopez, I wish to make it known that the work of the commission is proceeding according to established ecclesiastical norms. Such investigations require prudent and prayerful discernment and therefore adequate time must be afforded them, even though the evaluation of the alleged apparitions is proceeding, I can state that from the information available, there does not appear to be evidence that would indicate a supernatural origin for these alleged events. The situation will continue to be evaluated with prayerful vigilance.

The archbishop made his statement in response to many requests for information concerning the status of the alleged apparitions to Mrs. Theresa Lopez. As a member of the investigative committee, I was asked to draft the initial response to the archbishop. His statement corresponds to the verdict given him by the members of the investigative committee which studied the apparitions in February, 1993. By indicating that the investigation would continue, the archbishop avoided making a precipitous negative judgment or giving an approval before all the facts were fully known.

Concluding Theological Reflections

Fr. René Laurentin points out that a new era of Rome's attitude towards apparitions and private revelations began

when Pope Paul VI deleted certain canons of the 1917 Code of Canon Law on August 14, 1970. These canons regulated *de jure* the publication of all books or pamphlets which speak about new apparitions, revelations, visions, prophecies, miracles, or which introduce new devotions, even though justified as private. The restrictions were especially stringent and numerous, so that it was practically impossible to publicize any presumed apparitions or private revelations. Such prohibitions have not been part of the 1983 Code of Canon Law. Cardinal Seper, who succeeded Cardinal Ottaviani as Prefect of the Holy Office, had an open and pastoral view in the matter, which led to the norms or criteria which we have been considering. This open attitude towards apparitions and private revelations is shared by our present pontiff, Pope John Paul II. There are moments when one might regret this attitude of openness in these matters, especially when the news media wishes interviews on the almost countless claims of Marian apparitions in recent years. Upon reflection, however, it appears much better in the long run to enjoy the freedom of investigating such claims in the open for the sake of the truth and the spiritual fruits which are often involved. We tried to act upon this conviction as judiciously as possible in the Lubbock case, and we continue to manifest the same pastoral concern in the case of Theresa Lopez who claims that Mary is appearing to her in Denver.

Rome has sanctioned the official recognition of devotions inspired by apparitions and private revelations, even before declaring any official recognition of the apparitions themselves. (An African bishop consulted Rome to see whether he could extend formal recognition to a devotion that has been inspired by alleged apparitions, before the apparitions themselves are formally recognized; he received an affirmative reply.) The devotions might eventually lead to the recognition of the apparitions themselves, since one of the CDF positive criteria is that of lasting spiritual fruits that arise from the presumed apparitions. In this way, it is hoped that the spiritual development of the visionaries and all drawn to the devotion will be given the appropriate attention and not be

unnecessarily discouraged. At the same time, bishops, pastors, and theologians all have the special responsibility of providing in the Church spiritual guidance for the faithful, who are in their turn called to intelligent obedience to ecclesiastical authority. Failure to heed these calls can lead to unfortunate circumstances, such as those which have occurred at Bayside, New York.

We cannot build our faith on the sand of alleged apparitions and private revelations, regardless of how well-intentioned the individuals involved might be. If we believe that our salvation depends on what is found in private revelation, or if we place—with vain credulity or naiveté—our confidence in private revelations, we are mistaken and are not building our faith on a solid foundation, namely, the Word of God, Scripture, tradition, and the teaching of the Church. Even with properly approved apparitions, we must maintain a proper perspective—viewing them as an assistance to nourish our divine faith in the central dogmas of Christ, the Trinity, and the Eucharist. In their 1973 pastoral letter “Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith,” the American bishops called authenticated appearances of Mary “providential happenings [which] serve as reminders of basic Christian themes: such as prayer, penance, and the necessity of the sacraments” (no. 100).

In our approach to apparitions and private revelations—whether we are pastors, theologians, or laypersons—we must see them as strengthening the solid ground of our divine Catholic faith by the light that they shed on the truth that saves and the inspiration they can give to the love that unites us in the discipleship of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Son of Mary.

A clear and inspiring parallel can be drawn between the apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Fatima, which led to the observance of the First Saturdays, and the apparitions of Christ to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, which led to the observance of the First Fridays. In his 1956 encyclical on the Sacred Heart of Jesus, *Haurietis aquas*, Pope Pius XII said that his intention was to remind the Church of “the inner nature of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ and the end-

less riches which flow from it, as they have been made known by private revelation, as in a primary source" (no. 108). Further along, he declared:

This devotion has never been entirely unknown to Christian piety. In more recent times, however, this devotion has become better known and wondrously spread throughout the Church, particularly after the Lord Himself privately revealed this divine secret to some of His children, richly endowed with an abundance of heavenly gifts, and chose them as messengers and heralds of this devotion. (no. 111)

The devotion to the Sacred Heart in recent times stems from the private revelation given to St. Margaret Mary, and it is based on a revelation given in the Gospels—namely, God's love manifested to us in Jesus Christ. The practices and artistic representations which have developed around this devotion have led the Church to a greater awareness of this love. If those who practice this devotion—for example, in the nine First Fridays—do not penetrate more deeply into the meaning of the Incarnation and the redemptive love of God in Jesus Christ, efficaciously symbolized by the Sacred Heart, then their devotion is superficial, no matter how well-intentioned it might be.

Marian apparitions have as purpose to deepen our faith in the Gospel. Apparitions call us to a life of prayer, to the practice of penance, to the reception of the sacraments. In her apparitions, Mary calls us to renewed faith in the Gospels and the apostolic deposit of faith; she calls us to hear and ponder the Word of God in our hearts. Although private devotions need not be embraced by all, they are based on the solid tradition of faith. Devotion to the Sacred Heart leads us to a deeper consciousness of God's love; devotion to the Immaculate Heart demonstrates for us the beauty and efficacy of God's grace present within the Virgin Mary.