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## CANONICAL CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING ALLEGED APPARITIONS

*Michael Smith Foster, J.C.D.\**

### Introduction

Each Christmas season brings with it the songs of the holiday. A well-known song innocently asks the question, "Do you see what I see? Do you see what I see, way up in the sky shepherd boy?" The song states that the star shining in the night would bring goodness and light. And indeed it did. The star's manifestation signaled an unparalleled event in salvation history.

However, before we are lulled too easily by the sweet sentiment of that Christmas song, we should remind ourselves that the manifestation of that celestial sign brought with it two divergent responses. As the second chapter of St. Matthew's gospel indicates, it not only brought wise men from the East to witness the divine epiphany, but it also enraged the madness of Herod and brought about the slaughter of the holy innocents. While the Spirit of God led the wise men, evil perverted the mind and actions of Herod.

Today, the signs in the sky seem to be full-to-overflowing at times. There are so many alleged apparitions occurring throughout the world. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church must in turn offer guidance for responding to these apparent wonders. As Scripture and history teach, the alleged miraculous is like a two-edged sword that can either protect and strengthen the faith community or divide and destroy it. It

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falls to legitimate ecclesial authority to exercise its responsibility in determining the authenticity of such events. Those who exercise this responsibility are called to discern the signs for the good of all.

Initially, it is important to place private revelations in their proper perspective vis-à-vis the deposit of faith. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 67) states:

Throughout the ages there have been so-called "private" revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ's definitive Revelation, but to help [people] live more fully by it in a certain period of history. Guided by the magisterium of the Church, the *sensus fidelium* knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church.<sup>1</sup>

Hence, it is clear that: (1) private revelations can and do occur; (2) the discernment of the authenticity of the revelation is the prerogative of the teaching authority of the Church; (3) if authentic, private revelation is to be welcomed, while conversely, if inauthentic, it is to be rejected.

This presentation will address the role of the diocesan bishop in coming to a determination regarding the authenticity of alleged miraculous events in the diocese. His role of "oversight" will be addressed in virtue both of his liturgical and teaching offices, as well as other pertinent episcopal responsibilities. Theologically and canonically, the bishop has been entrusted with this role of "oversight" in the particular church, that is, the diocese. The pertinent canons of the 1983 code regarding the role of "oversight" will be addressed.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1994), 33: no. 67 [emphasis added].

<sup>2</sup>The canons of the 1983 code quoted in this article are taken from *Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli Pp. II promulgatus* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983). The official text of the code remains the Latin original. However, the translation used in this study is from the English translation prepared under the auspices of the Canon Law Society of America (*Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition* [Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983]).

When applicable, references will be made to the foundations for these canons, as found in the 1917 code and the texts of Vatican Council II.

### EPISCOPAL OVERSIGHT

When an allegedly miraculous event occurs in a particular church, it is the responsibility of the local bishop to make inquiries. More often than not the inquiry will occur at the request of the faithful, and this is appropriate. Canon 212.2 states that the Christian faithful are free to make known their needs and their desires to the pastors of the Church, especially spiritual ones.<sup>3</sup> The canon explicitly mentions spiritual needs. Hence the faithful have a fundamental right to request that the bishop investigate an alleged apparition.

Based on *Lumen gentium* (no. 37), the canon makes a significant statement about the attitude with which such petitioning is to take place. Clergy and laity have the right to make their needs known to the bishop. It is to be done with the freedom and confidence that befit the children of God. This implies mutual respect and openness on both parts, rather than an adversarial position or one of mutual distrust. All parties involved have responsibility for setting the proper tone in addressing the issue at hand.<sup>4</sup>

At the outset the bishop should be fully informed about the events and circumstances of the allegedly miraculous case. If he determines that there is sufficient evidence for an investigation, he should begin a process which leads to a decision regarding the supernatural nature of the case. The bishop may

<sup>3</sup>Canon 212.2: "The Christian faithful are free to make known their needs, especially spiritual ones, and their desires to the pastors of the Church."

<sup>4</sup>See James H. Provost, "Part I: The Christian Faithful (cc. 204-239)," in *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary* [CLSA Commentary], ed. James A. Coriden et al. (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985), 146. For commentaries on canon 212.2, see Giuseppe Dalla Torre, in *Commento al Codice di Diritto Canonico* [Commento], ed. Pio Vito Pinto (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 1985), 118-119; Julio Manzanares, in *Código de Derecho Canonico* [Código-Salamanca], ed. Lambreto de Echeverría (Madrid: BAC, 1983), 138-139; Javier Hervada, in *Código de Derecho Canonico* [Código-Pamplona], ed. Pedro Lombardia and Juan Ignatio Arrieta (Pamplona: EUNSA, 1984), 175.

have recourse to the national conference of bishops. He may also request intervention from the Apostolic See. However, the primary principle at stake is subsidiarity. It falls to the diocesan bishop to exercise his oversight role in the individual case for the good of the particular church.

This is not to deny the universal "oversight" of the Apostolic See, which may either approve what the bishop has done or initiate a new investigation, one distinct from that of the bishop. For instance, in the case of Medjugorje, the Apostolic See suggested the phenomena should be addressed anew by the conference of bishops, after the local authority had conducted an investigation and arrived at a negative judgment.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the Apostolic See may make a judgment about an alleged apparition either through its own investigation or through that of special commission. However, as stated, the purpose and focus of this presentation is the role of the diocesan bishop.

### *In Virtue of His Liturgical Office*

The bishop's role regarding allegedly miraculous events is not explicitly addressed in the code. However, this responsibility is evidenced in the laws pertaining to his liturgical office, his regulation of the liturgy, and his oversight of the authenticity of prayers and devotions. Since alleged apparitions affect the worship life of the Church, the bishop's oversight role begins here.

#### *1. The bishop's liturgical office*

Canon 835 is entirely doctrinal in nature. Paragraphs one through three define the role of the ordained minister. These paragraphs make explicit the conciliar statement of *Lumen gentium* (no. 28): "Thus the divinely instituted ecclesiastical ministry is exercised in different orders by those who even from ancient times have been called bishops, presbyters and deacons."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>See Frederick M. Jelly, O.P., "Discerning the Miraculous: Norms for Judging Apparitions and Private Revelations," *Marian Studies* 44 (1993): 45-46.

<sup>6</sup>Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* [LG], November 21, 1964: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 57 (1965): 33-34: "28. Sic ministerium ecclesiasticum divinitus institutum diversis ordinibus exercetur ab illis qui iam ab antiquo episcopi, presbyteri, diaconi vocantur."

The wording of canon 835.1 is unambiguous.<sup>7</sup> A bishop is first and foremost the moderator, promoter and custodian of the whole liturgical life of the particular church. This responsibility is rooted in his sacramental ordination. His ordination, or consecration (the terms are interchangeable), is the source for the offices of teaching, governing and sanctifying. The diocesan bishop is the moderator of the liturgical life of the local church because the regulation of the liturgy pertains primarily to him. He is the promoter of liturgy either directly or through the commissioning of others. He is the custodian of liturgy insofar as he safeguards the integrity and authenticity of worship within the local church. Each of these canonical responsibilities is ultimately founded on his liturgical presidency.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. *The bishop's governing power over the liturgy*

Canon 838.1 states that canonical power in reference to the liturgy rests primarily with the bishop of Rome and the diocesan bishop.<sup>9</sup> The canon acknowledges that the bishop has the power over the governance of the liturgy that is required for the exercise of his pastoral office. That is, of course, unless a case is reserved to the supreme authority or other ecclesiastical authority.

The fourth paragraph of canon 838 describes further the role of the bishop over the liturgy.<sup>10</sup> It is his responsibility, within the limits of his competence, to issue liturgical norms by which all in the particular church are bound. This para-

<sup>7</sup>Canon 835.1: "First and foremost, the bishops exercise the office of sanctifying; they are high priests, principal dispensers of the mysteries of God and moderators, promoters and custodians of the whole liturgical life of the church committed to them."

<sup>8</sup>See Frederick R. McManus, "Introduction to Book IV: The Office of Sanctifying in the Church (cc. 834-1253)," in *CLSA Commentary*, 599. For commentaries on canon 835.1 see Dario Compostá, in *Commento*, 514; Manzanares, in *Código-Salamanca*, 431-432; Eloy Tejero, in *Código-Pamplona*, 520.

<sup>9</sup>Canon 838.1: "The supervision of the sacred liturgy depends solely on the authority of the Church which resides in the Apostolic See and, in accord with the law, the diocesan bishop."

<sup>10</sup>Canon 838.4: "It pertains to the diocesan bishop in the church entrusted to him, within the limits of his competence, to issue liturgical norms by which all are bound."

graph enlarges the reference to the bishop in paragraph one. The bishop is to foster the liturgical life of the particular church and ensure its integrity, as regards both the sacraments and other cultic activities. To appreciate the meaning of cultic activity, reference needs to be made to canon 1261.2 of the 1917 code. It is the parallel of canon 838. Canon 1261.2 exhorted bishops to ensure (1) the avoidance of superstitious practice in the daily life of the faithful, (2) the exclusion of anything alien to the faith, (3) the termination of anything which may be out of harmony with ecclesiastical tradition, and (4) the avoidance of anything which promotes commercialization.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. *The bishop's "oversight" of prayers and devotions*

Canon 839.2 states that local ordinaries are to see to it that the prayers and other pious and sacred exercises of the Christian people are fully in harmony with the norms of the Church.<sup>12</sup> The paragraph is directly derived from *Sacrosanctum concilium* (no. 13). It is concerned with prayers and devotional exercises that are not considered liturgical in the strict sense (c. 834).

Canon 839.2 replaced canons 1259 and 1261 of the 1917 code. Canon 1259 had prohibited prayers and exercises of piety in churches or oratories without the express permission of the local ordinary. Canon 1261 had required local ordinaries to prohibit abuses in the public or private divine cult and in the daily life of the faithful. These canons clearly defined the bishop's role regarding piety.<sup>13</sup>

Canon 839.2 is worded in a more positive vein than its 1917 code parallel, canon 1259. Nonetheless, the same intention is present. Pious exercises are either communal celebrations or individual practices which lack authoritative recognition

<sup>11</sup>See McManus, in *CLSA Commentary*, 604.

<sup>12</sup>Canon 839.2: "Local ordinaries are to see to it that the prayers and other pious and sacred exercises of the Christian people are fully in harmony with the norms of the Church."

<sup>13</sup>See Stanislaus Woywod, *A Practical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (2 vols.; New York: Joseph F. Wagner, Inc., 1948), 2:67.

as liturgical, but have a more general approval or encouragement for use. Sacred exercises are officially recognized prayers and devotions utilized in the local church. It is no longer necessary for these prayers and exercises of piety to be expressly reviewed and approved by the local ordinary, as was the case with canon 1259 of the 1917 code.<sup>14</sup> However, this is not to deny the oversight role of the bishop. Should he determine these prayers and exercises violate the integrity and authenticity of worship, he is bound to prohibit their use.

### *In Virtue of Various Episcopal Responsibilities*

Canon 392.2 states that the diocesan bishop is to be watchful that abuses are precluded in certain particularly important areas, such as, the ministry of the word (cc. 756-780), the celebration of the sacraments and sacramentals (cc. 840-1172), the worship of God and the veneration of the saints (cc. 1186-1190), and the administration of church property (cc. 1254-1310). It is his responsibility to foster the good of the whole Church and to promote the common discipline of the particular church. In regard to alleged apparitions this is accomplished by his fulfillment of various responsibilities. He is responsible for the oversight of publications, the pastoral care of the faithful (including pilgrims), the coordination of the works of the apostolate, and episcopal visitation.

#### *1. Vigilance regarding publications*

Bishops have the responsibility to be vigilant that nothing is promoted that will cause harm to the faith and morals of the Christian faithful through writings or any other means of social communication. In this regard canon 823.1 proclaims three distinct and separable sets of episcopal rights and duties, yet they share a unity of purpose.<sup>15</sup> This purpose is the preservation of the "integrity of faith and morals."

<sup>14</sup>See McManus, in *CLSA Commentary*, 605.

<sup>15</sup>Canon 823.1: "In order for the integrity of the truths of the faith and morals to be preserved, the pastors of the Church have the duty and the right to be vigilant lest



First, the bishop is to exhibit pastoral watchfulness over books and the media so that the faithful are not misled. This solicitude is two-sided. He should encourage and promote good books, periodicals and programs. He should also criticize and even discourage those presentations that are detrimental. Second, writings that deal with faith and morals should be submitted for his evaluation. This is a general claim to the right of prior censorship. However, this is to be seen in the context of and limited by the fundamental freedom of inquiry and expression that all the Christian faithful are accorded in canon 218. Finally, he has the right to disapprove of someone's work, offer a critique and point out errors or inaccuracies.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding private revelations, much is made in some circles over Paul VI's abrogation of canon 1399 of the 1917 code. The canon consisted of twelve paragraphs and enumerated the classes of books which were forbidden by law. Included in the canon was the regulation of all books or pamphlets which spoke about new apparitions, revelations, visions, prophecies, miracles, or which introduced new devotions. Though the force of the ecclesiastical law was revoked, the force of the moral law remained. Therefore, the watchful solicitude of the diocesan bishop was retained. He retained the responsibility of seeing that there be no publication which would endanger the faith and good morals of the faithful.<sup>17</sup>

harm be done to the faith or morals of the Christian faithful through writings or the use of the instruments of social communication; they likewise have the duty and the right to demand that writings to be published by the Christian faithful which touch upon faith or morals be submitted to their judgment; they also have the duty and right to denounce writings which harm correct faith or good morals."

<sup>16</sup>See James A. Coriden, "Book III: The Teaching Office of the Church (cc. 747-833)," in *CLSA Commentary*, 579-580. For commentaries on canon 823.1, see Piero Monni, in *Commento*, 503; Lamberto de Echeverría, in *Código-Salamanca*, 422-423; José M. González del Valle, in *Código-Pamplona*, 510-511.

<sup>17</sup>See *Canon Law Digest [CLD]* 6:814-818. See also the decree, *Ecclesiae pastorum*, March 19, 1975 (*CLD* 8:991-996), in which it is stated that books containing prayers for private devotions are not to be published without the permission of the local ordinary.

Furthermore, canon 826.3 of the present code states that for the *publication* of prayer books that contain pious and sacred exercises the permission of the local ordinary is required. It refers to non-liturgical, devotional prayer books and pamphlets (and is in keeping with canon 1385.1, 3° of the 1917 code). Admittedly, many of these books and pamphlets are based on allegedly miraculous events.

## *2. Pastoral care for all, especially pilgrims*

The bishop's pastoral care extends to all in the diocese, even pilgrims. Canon 383.1 is an exhortatory canon and new in the 1983 code.<sup>18</sup> It expresses the comprehensive scope of the bishop's pastoral solicitude and highlights certain groups of people that might not ordinarily be thought of as being within the scope of his pastoral care. When news of an apparition is heard, hundreds, even thousands, of the faithful may come to the site. It is the responsibility of the diocesan bishop to offer care for these pilgrims. The most fundamental care is to address the nature of the alleged apparition for the spiritual well-being of all those placed under his responsibility.

As recently as September of 1994, Bishop Pio Bello of Los Teques, Venezuela, issued a statement of pastoral solicitude for pilgrims coming to his diocese. His statement was in keeping with the intention of canon 383.1. He wrote the bishops of the United States stating that pilgrims were welcome to his diocese to pray before and adore a sacramental Host which bled miraculously. His intention in writing was to authenticate that as bishop of that particular church, he had conducted the appropriate investigations and concluded the phenomenon was miraculous. Conversely, if after an investigation the bishop concludes that alleged apparitions are inauthentic, he should so inform the faithful.

<sup>18</sup>Canon 383.1: "In the exercise of his pastoral office a diocesan bishop is to show that he is concerned with all the Christian faithful who are committed to his care regardless of age, condition or nationality, both those who live within his territory and who are staying in it temporarily; he is to extend his apostolic spirit to those who cannot sufficiently make use of ordinary pastoral care due to their condition in life and to those who no longer practice their religion."

### 3. *Fostering the apostolate*

Canon 394.1 stipulates that the bishop's oversight role extends to all the various works of the apostolate in his diocese.<sup>19</sup> The canon does not specify what these works encompass. However, it is based on *Christus Dominus* (no. 17), which specifies the areas of concern. These concerns include catechetical, missionary, charitable, social, family, educational and other pastoral undertakings. Elements of worship would also fall into these concerns. As the key figure in actualizing the mission of the particular church, the bishop has the principal responsibility in this area.

At times, those experiencing alleged apparitions promote apostolic work or particular forms of piety. It falls to the bishop to ascertain if such works and prayers are in keeping with the apostolate of the local church in all its dimensions.

Recently, in the Archdiocese of Boston a particular group of faithful requested that the Archbishop investigate allegedly miraculous occurrences on a property site owned by their group. Members of this group had been very active in various apostolates of the archdiocese. They had sponsored retreats, workshops, prayer crusades and other activities. Their membership is listed in the thousands. It behooved the archbishop to begin an investigation of the alleged events, as those seeking a response were very active in the apostolates of the particular church.

### 4. *Episcopal visitation*

Finally, in accord with canon 397.1, the bishop has not only the right, but also the responsibility to visit certain persons, institutions, sacred places and things within the diocese.<sup>20</sup> The value of such visitation is to safeguard the faith as it is lived out in the entire particular church. In regard to claims of

<sup>19</sup>Canon 394.1: "The bishop is to foster the various aspects of the apostolate within his diocese and see to it that within the entire diocese or within its individual districts all the works of the apostolate are coordinated under his direction, with due regard for their distinctive character."

<sup>20</sup>Canon 397.1: "Persons, institutions, and sacred things and places are subject to the ordinary episcopal visitation if they are located within the area of the diocese."

apparitions at a place or to a person, the bishop may visit the site or person himself or send a representative.

### ROLE OF THE FAITHFUL IN ADHERING TO THE AUTHORITY OF THE BISHOP

Having addressed the oversight role of the bishop in the particular church, our attention now turns to the role of the rest of the Christian faithful in respecting his authority. This authority extends over all the Christian faithful in the particular church, clergy and laity.

#### *Obedience*

The fundamental canon concerning obedience to one's bishop is canon 212.<sup>21</sup> Based on *Lumen gentium* (no. 37), the canon stipulates that the Christian faithful are to obey their bishops when these latter act as Christ's representatives. The bishops act as Christ's representatives when they teach formally or they establish binding discipline as pastors of the particular church. In addressing the scope of the canon there are three basic qualifiers to the object of Christian obedience.<sup>22</sup> First, the teaching involved is to come from the "sacred pastors"; second, it is in regard to what they declare as teachers of the faith; and third, it concerns what they determine as leaders of the church.

By the term "sacred pastors," the canon is referring specifically to bishops. Obedience is owed to a bishop in those matters designated as binding in virtue of his role as a representative of Christ; in this instance the bishop is acting with the full responsibility of his office (cc. 375, 381 & 391). When bishops act with the authority of teachers of the faith,

<sup>21</sup>Canon 212: "The Christian faithful, conscious of their own responsibility, are bound by Christian obedience to follow what the sacred pastors, as representatives of Christ, declare as teachers of the faith or determine as leaders of the Church."

<sup>22</sup>It should be noted that, technically, obedience is the response to the exercise of governing authority, and assent (c. 753) is the response to the exercise of teaching authority.

the obedience owed them relates to the kind of teaching authority dealt with in canons 750-754, and not to their personal opinions and particular theories that are not included in magisterial teaching. The obedience which stands in relation to their role as leaders of the Church is intended to promote the common good (c. 223.1). It follows that obedience in disciplinary matters is required for the good of the Church as a whole.<sup>23</sup>

### *Religious Assent*

Book III of the 1983 code addresses the teaching office of the Church. Canon 753 of this book addresses the "religious assent" that the Christian faithful owe to the bishop's teaching authority.<sup>24</sup> The canon is derived from *Lumen gentium* (no. 25), and outlines the ordinary teaching authority of bishops and the appropriate attitude of the faithful toward it.<sup>25</sup> When teaching the faithful entrusted to their care, as individuals or as groups, bishops are not infallible but they are authentic teachers. For this reason the faithful are to give religious assent to their teachings. This attitude on the part of the faithful can be defined as:

... the appropriate attitude of mind and will which a believer should bring to a teaching authority established and empowered by Christ and assisted by the Holy Spirit but for which, in this particular teaching, infallibility is not promised ... the believer should respond to such teaching with due respect that corresponds to the way in which the

<sup>23</sup>See Provost, in *CLSA Commentary*, 144-147. For commentaries on canon 212, see n. 4 *supra*.

<sup>24</sup>Canon 753: "Although they do not enjoy infallible teaching authority, the bishops in communion with the head and members of the college, whether as individuals or gathered in conferences of bishops or in particular councils, are authentic teachers and instructors of the faith for the faithful entrusted to their care; the faithful must adhere to the authentic teaching of their own bishops with a *religious respect*." (The Latin text of canon 753 uses the term *religioso animi obsequio* which is more accurately translated "religious assent of the soul.")

<sup>25</sup>See Coriden, in *CLSA Commentary*, 548-549. For commentaries on canon 753, see Composta, in *Commento*, 474; de Echeverría, in *Código-Salamanca*, 395; Tejero, in *Código-Pamplona*, 475.

given doctrine is meant to be binding . . . the faithful should receive this doctrine with welcoming gratitude and genuine openness to agree with the teaching—along with the keen alertness of a critical mind and good will needed to understand and promote the Church's faith.<sup>26</sup>

Hence, there should be intelligent obedience to ecclesiastical authority regarding alleged apparitions. If there is disobedience, there may arise the scandal of ecclesial division. One need only turn to the situation in Bayside, New York. On November 4, 1986, Bishop Mugavero issued another declaration concerning the purported apparitions of Our Lady to Veronica Lueken. He did so because members of the "Bayside Movement" had continued to sow dissension within the particular church. The bishop believed the faith of the Christian faithful was endangered by the movement's propaganda and that its messages and teachings were contrary to the faith of the Catholic Church.

Out of concern for the spiritual welfare of the faithful, he directed that Catholics refrain from participating in the vigils and from disseminating any Bayside literature. Anyone promoting the material was acting against the determination made by the bishop, who is the legitimate authority in the particular church. The declaration then referenced canon 212.1 and Christian obedience.

In light of canons 212 and 753 the faithful have the obligation to both obey and respect the decision of the bishop regarding a private revelation. This form of Christian obedience respects the legitimate teaching authority of the local bishop and promotes the common good of the particular church.

### *Sacred Times and Places*

Book IV of the code deals with "the office of sanctifying in the Church." Title V of the book concerns itself with the veneration of saints, sacred images and relics (cc. 1186-1190). The code recommends that all the Christian faithful venerate the Mother of God. It also promotes true and authentic devo-

<sup>26</sup>Lucy Blyskal, C.S.J., "Obsequium: A Case Study," *The Jurist* 48 (1988): 585.

tion to the other saints. This is stated in canon 1186.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, the canon is lengthier and more comprehensive than its 1917 code counterparts, canons 1255 and 1276. Its emphasis on devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary echoes *Lumen gentium* (no. 66) and *Sacrosanctum concilium* (no. 103).

Furthermore, from a devotional perspective, canon 1188 states the use of sacred images in designated sacred places is to be suitable, lest they bewilder the Christian people and give opportunity for "questionable" devotion.<sup>28</sup> As this canon was being drafted for the code, an original second paragraph explicitly indicated the right and duty of the local ordinary to ensure the authenticity of images presented for public veneration. However, as the drafting documents indicate, this paragraph was dropped in view of the reference to the diocesan bishop's responsibility of "oversight" of the liturgy as found in canon 838.4. This points to the primacy of the diocesan bishop regarding the life of worship of the particular church.

Canons 1186 and 1189, taken together, undergird the responsibility of the bishop to foster appropriate devotion to Mary and the saints. They are to be vigilant so that questionable devotions do not emerge and multiply. Recently, in Venezuela, the bishop of the diocese of Maracay formally forbade pilgrims from attending the unapproved shrine of Turmero in his diocese. A family maintained that there an icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help was exuding oil. The bishop attempted to conduct an investigation. However, the family did not accept the rules of the investigation and rebelled against him. They built a shrine with money collected from pilgrims and had an orthodox schismatic priest bless it. In response, for

<sup>27</sup>Canon 1186: "To foster the sanctification of the people of God the Church recommends to the particular and filial veneration of the Christian faithful the Blessed Mary ever Virgin, the Mother of God, whom Christ established as the Mother of the human race; it also promotes true and authentic devotion to the other saints by whose example the Christian faithful are edified and through whose intercession they are sustained."

<sup>28</sup>Canon 1188: "The practice of displaying sacred images in the churches for the veneration of the faithful is to remain in force; nevertheless they are to be exhibited in moderate number and in suitable order lest they bewilder the Christian people and give opportunity for questionable devotion."

the welfare of the Christian faithful, the bishop declared the shrine not in communion with the Church and applied to it the canonical censure of interdict.

### *Practical Considerations*

In accord with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 67), private revelations through miraculous intervention are not confirmations of the Gospels and the deposit of faith. Rather, the authenticity of the revelation is confirmed or rejected in light of the Gospels and the deposit of faith. When exercising his role of oversight in the judgment of alleged apparitions, the bishop is aided by norms of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

In 1978, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a document on the "Procedures and Norms for Judging Apparitions."<sup>29</sup> The process begins with the diocesan bishop. The bishop has the serious responsibility to investigate an alleged heavenly communication—from Our Lord, the Virgin Mary or a saint. He is to appoint an investigative committee of knowledgeable individuals to review and study the matter. From the beginning of the process, the bishop should be mindful of three issues. First, given the particular circumstances, what are the questions he wishes the commission to investigate? Second, what are the possible responses of the investigative commission? Third, what type of response should he make to the faithful when the investigation is complete?

First, what questions should the bishop ask a team of appointed investigators about an allegedly miraculous happening? The questions should be concise:

1. Are there, or are there not, miracles taking place at this particular site? Are the phenomena truly beyond human explanation?
2. Are the messages of an alleged apparition doctrinally sound?
3. Should permission be given for the promotion of devotions which may have emerged?

<sup>29</sup>For an overview of the procedures and norms, see Jelly, "Discerning the Miraculous," 45–48.



4. What prudent steps should be taken in the future regarding devotions which may have emerged?

The commission follows the norms of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in regard to the negative and positive criteria required by the process. At its conclusion, the team submits to the bishop their verdict or conjectural judgment. One of three verdicts or conjectural judgments may be submitted to the bishop: *constat de supernaturalitate* (the alleged apparition shows all the signs of being an authentic or 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). This third possibility keeps the case open, implying that it could be many years before a final judgment may be made, or the case is dropped.<sup>30</sup>

Once the investigative commission has submitted its report, it would be appropriate for the bishop to make a statement or declaration for the spiritual welfare of the faithful. Given the unique circumstances of each case, the bishop may wish to respond in a number of ways to the judgment of the investigative commission. In his statement or declaration he may: (1) wish to be emphatic regarding a negative response regarding the apparition; (2) wish to avoid making a precipitous negative judgment; (3) indicate the possible miraculous character of the apparition pending further investigation; or, (4) wish to be emphatic regarding a positive response, and thus promote the miraculous intervention.

An example of an instance in which the bishop issued a positive response to an investigation (*constat de supernaturalitate*) can be found in Venezuela. On November 21, 1987, Bishop Pio Bello of Los Teques, Venezuela, issued a statement which authenticated alleged apparitions of the Blessed Virgin. He stated: "After studying with determination the apparitions of our Blessed Virgin Mary in Finca Betania and after assiduously asking Our Lord for spiritual discernment, I declare that

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 48.

by my judgment these apparitions are authentic and of supernatural character.”<sup>31</sup> He then approved the place as a sacred shrine, a site for pilgrimages, where liturgical acts could be celebrated, especially the celebration of Mass and the administration of Reconciliation and Communion. An example of a negative judgment (*constat de non supernaturalitate*) is the 1986 judgment of Bishop Zanic, the Bishop of Mostar, regarding the events at Medjugorje. Remarkably, the matter was subsequently placed in the hands of the Yugoslavian Episcopal Conference. In April of 1991, the conference declared it is not evident whether or not the matter is authentic (*non constat de supernaturalitate*).

### Conclusion

The diocesan bishop exercises legitimate authority in the particular church when discerning the authenticity of allegedly miraculous events. His authority is rooted in both his liturgical and teaching offices and in virtue of various episcopal responsibilities. Though they are free to make their spiritual needs known to him, the Christian faithful are bound by the bishop's determinations in Christian obedience and religious assent. This form of Christian obedience respects the legitimate teaching authority of the local bishop and promotes the common good of the particular church.

“Do you see what I see, way up in the sky, shepherd boy?” As the second chapter of St. Matthew's gospel indicates, it was the Spirit of God that led the wise men. These wise men did not believe simply because of the star, but because they sought the truth. It is only when they saw the Child that they believed. In exercising their episcopal oversight, bishops must be as diligent in their search for truth. As legitimate ecclesiastical authorities, the bishop's responsibility toward the people is to discern the presence of the miraculous and to reject what is inauthentic or false. May the Spirit of God guide them for the good of all.

<sup>31</sup>Letter, Bishop Pio Bello, Bishop of Los Teques, to Rev. Robert Lynch, U.S. General Secretary, NCCB, dated September 6, 1994; protocol no. 5.684/94.