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# MARIAN APPARITION CLAIMS IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

*Michael O'Neill\**

In the history of the Church, there have been over 2,500 claims of a corporeal visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and many of these miraculous events enjoy a traditional mode of ecclesiastical approval. That is, if they occurred in the era prior to the Council of Trent (1545), their approval typically consisted of and resulted from popular acclaim, enduring tradition and a strong *sensus fidelium*. It was not until the beginning of the seventeenth century that apparition claims were more rigorously explored and since that time have demonstrated only a minor fluctuation in their number from century to century. The twentieth century has exhibited a dramatic data spike that raises a new set of questions regarding the cause and common elements of apparition claims in the United States and around the world during this period.

Before examining the trends found in the data of apparitions in the twentieth century in the United States and Canada, it is important first to understand the role of apparitions in the life and history of the Church and to examine the nuances in the various types of judgments rendered in assessing private revelations and miraculous phenomena. With these tools in hand, a proper assessment of their meaning and pastoral implications can be made.

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### **Are Apparitions Important?**

The question of the role of apparitions in our life of faith is an important one and requires working towards avoiding one of two extremes: an over-emphasis and credulity regarding the miraculous on the one hand and denial of the possibility of supernatural intervention and diminishment of the role of popular devotion on the other.

Excessive, obsessive expression of belief by the faithful in miraculous phenomena is not only the reason that the Church is methodical and cautious to approve any occurrence as authentic, but also is a primary impetus for performing any investigations in the first place. The unspoken goal of such examination is to prove that nothing supernatural is occurring at these places, in order that the faithful might return to a more authentic and grounded practice of their faith. But because there is typically such a tremendous swell of support and interest surrounding a purported miraculous event, the Church by necessity *must* investigate and provide pastoral guidance on the matter. In the cases of authenticated appearances of the Virgin Mary, such as at Fatima and Lourdes, it was the great initial and enduring attraction of the faithful to these claims that enabled them to make such an important and lasting contribution to the fabric of the Catholic faith.

While seeking miracles is often an attempt to quench an authentic thirst for the spiritual and an opportunity to quell spiritual doubts, miraculous phenomena are not a substitute for absolute faith in God. The centrality of the Catholic faith can be found in the person, acts, and words of Jesus Christ. Apparitions serve as special insights of saints who received messages from the Blessed Mother. The content of such messages do not belong to the deposit of faith and, as such, belief in approved private revelations is never required by faith.

The Church is clear about the role of private revelations. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (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 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>

In his document *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Pope John Paul II had addressed concern over an over-emphasis on Marian devotion at the cost of drawing the faithful away from Christ:

Veneration of [Mary], when properly understood, can in no way take away from "the dignity and efficacy of Christ the one Mediator." Mary in fact constantly points to her Divine Son and she is proposed to all believers as the *model of faith* which is put into practice.<sup>2</sup>

When Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) was the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), the Vatican body with the final word on apparition claims, he detailed both what the role of Marian apparitions is and is not:

To all curious people, I would say I am certain that the Virgin does not engage in sensationalism; she does not act in order to instigate fear. She does not present apocalyptic visions, but guides people to her Son. And this is what is essential. The Madonna did not appear to children, to the small, to the simple, to those unknown in the world in order to create a sensation. Mary's purpose is, through these simple ones, to call the world back to simplicity, that is, to the essentials: conversion, prayer, and the sacraments.<sup>3</sup>

For all the caution that is necessary to relegate miraculous phenomena to their proper role as supports that lead the

<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II*, Eng. trans., 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice; Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1997), no. 67.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Tertio Millennio Adveniente of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Bishops, Clergy and Lay Faithful on Preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 1994), no. 43.

<sup>3</sup> "Is the Apocalypse near? Ratzinger on the 'Third Secret' of Fatima," *Inside the Vatican* 4 (Nov. 1996): 15-17.



faithful to Christ, it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of Marian apparitions in the life and history of the Church. Conversions, construction of churches, participation in pilgrimages, growth of Marian devotions, origination of various devotionals and the development of Marian societies have often been spawned by Marian apparitions.

Many conversions can be traced back to the influence of apparitions and in fact are some of the spiritual fruits that are assessed in declaring an apparition worthy of belief. Nine million baptisms in Mexico City alone in the seven or eight years following the Guadalupe events of 1531 speak to this important role.<sup>4</sup> Countless stories of conversions involving the Miraculous Medal given to St. Catherine Labouré in a vision can attest to this as well. In perhaps the most famous account (1842), Marie Alphonse Ratisbonne, an anti-Catholic Jew, befriended a baron in Rome and began wearing a Miraculous Medal as a simple test. While waiting for his friend in the church Sant'Andrea delle Fratte, Ratisbonne encountered a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He then converted to Catholicism, joined the priesthood, and began a ministry for the conversion of Jews.<sup>5</sup>

The spiritual fruits of an apparition can take a more concrete form. Some of the largest churches in the world have been built as a result of apparitions. Four of the top twelve largest church buildings in the world (by square footage) have their origins in Marian apparitions: the Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health in Vailankanni, India; the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City; Nuestra Señora de la Aparecida in Brazil; and Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.<sup>6</sup> One of the great churches of Rome, the latter was built after an apparition of

<sup>4</sup> "God intervened through Our Lady of Guadalupe to evangelize the Americas, explains Guadalupe expert," *Catholic News Agency*, August 11, 2009— [http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/god\\_intervened\\_through\\_our\\_lady\\_of\\_guadalupe\\_to\\_evangelize\\_the\\_americas\\_explains\\_guadalupe\\_expert](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/god_intervened_through_our_lady_of_guadalupe_to_evangelize_the_americas_explains_guadalupe_expert) (accessed May 1, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> "Marian Apparitions—Pilgrimages," in *Wikipedia*—[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marian\\_apparition#Pilgrimages](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marian_apparition#Pilgrimages) (accessed May 1, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> "List of largest church buildings in the world," in *Wikipedia*—[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_largest\\_church\\_buildings\\_in\\_the\\_world](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_church_buildings_in_the_world) (accessed May 1, 2012).

Our Lady of the Snows in 358 according to pious tradition. Legend says that she appeared to both the Pope and a wealthy childless couple who then donated the money for its construction after seeing a floor plan of the future church outlined in snow on a hill.<sup>7</sup> A great number of the 2,500 Marian apparitions throughout history have involved the Blessed Virgin Mary requesting that a chapel, church or sanctuary be built in her honor.<sup>8</sup>

Many of these apparition-based churches play a major role in the lives of the faithful around the world. They serve as some of the most frequented destinations for pilgrimages. In Mexico City, ten million people a year come to venerate the miraculous tilma of Our Lady of Guadalupe, another five million visit Lourdes in France, and four million make the trip to Fatima, Portugal. Since 1982, over thirty million pilgrims have come to the alleged apparition site of Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>9</sup> Such numbers would indicate that apparitions continue to play an active role in the life of the Church.

Apparitions have aided the increase in Marian devotions and the spread and acceptance of specific Marian dogmas (e.g., the Immaculate Conception in the case of Lourdes). Many devotions and devotionals claim supernatural origins by virtue of referencing an originating Marian apparition. The rosary is legendarily attributed to an apparition to St. Dominic in 1208, while St. Simon Stock is said to have received the first brown scapular from Our Lady in 1251, in Aylesford, England. Other colors of scapulars have their own legendarily miraculous beginnings. The most popular Catholic medal in circulation

<sup>7</sup> "Our Lady of the Snows," in the website of The Miracle Hunter—[http://www.miraclehunter.com/marian\\_apparitions/approved\\_apparitions/rome](http://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/approved_apparitions/rome) (accessed May 1, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> "Traditionally Approved Apparitions," in the website of The Miracle Hunter—[http://www.miraclehunter.com/marian\\_apparitions/approved\\_apparitions/traditional.html](http://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/approved_apparitions/traditional.html) (accessed May 1, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> "Our Lady of the Miracle," in the website of The Miracle Hunter—[http://www.miraclehunter.com/marian\\_apparitions/approved\\_apparitions/rome1842](http://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/approved_apparitions/rome1842) (accessed May 1, 2012).

continues to be the Miraculous Medal,<sup>10</sup> a result of apparitions received by St. Catherine Labouré in Rue du Bac, France, in 1830.

The role of apparitions has extended beyond impacting the devotional life of the lay faithful. There have been a number of religious orders that have their roots in their founders' receiving a Marian apparition. These include St. Peter Nolasco (1218, Mercedarians); Seven Holy Founders (1240, Servites); St. Paul of the Cross (1720, Passionists); Alphonse Ratisbonne (1842, Sisterhood of Our Lady of Sion); and Bl. Mother Marie-Alphonsine Ghattas (1880, Sisters of the Rosary). All are examples of orders founded at the request of the Virgin.

Throughout the history of the Church, apparition stories have been woven into the fabric of Catholic Church tradition and have played a significant role in the lives of the faithful. The insights and inspirations provided in the events and messages of approved Marian apparitions have come in times of great crisis for individuals, nations and the universal Church. Understanding the history of apparition approval and the development of the rules of assessment of claims can shed some light on the pastoral implications of the rise of alleged phenomena in the twentieth century and beyond.

### **Apparition Approval**

On May 13, 2000, Cardinal Ratzinger provided a theological commentary specifically on the Third Secret of Fatima that contained some general insights on how the faithful might approach the miraculous. In quoting Thessalonians 5:19-21, he encouraged proper apparition discernment: "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything, holding fast to what is good." He continued by pastorally presenting the role of prophecy in the life of the Church:

In every age the Church has received the charism of prophecy, which must be scrutinized but not scorned. On this point, it should be kept in mind that prophecy in the biblical sense does not mean to predict the

<sup>10</sup> "Miraculous Medals," in The Mary Shop (website)—<http://www.maryshop.com/miraculous-medals> (accessed May 1, 2012).



future but to explain the Will of God for the present, and therefore show the right path to take for the future.<sup>11</sup>

The responsibility for apparition discernment falls to all the faithful to decide what emphasis, if any at all, to place on private revelation. A more significant pastoral role of investigating phenomena and guiding the faithful rests on the Vatican and local bishops. This responsibility throughout history has shifted back and forth. The revelations accorded to St. Bridget of Sweden were considered at the Council of Constance (1414-18) and Basle (1431-49) and inspired the decision that the bishops take charge of conducting investigations. The Fifth Lateran Council (1512-17) later reserved the approval of new prophecies and revelations to the Holy See. At the Council of Trent (1545-63), the bishops were again authorized to investigate and approve such phenomena before public worship could take place. The local ordinary has retained this pastoral role ever since.

Prospero Lambertini (1675-1758), who later became Benedict XIV, provided several rules for discernment of private revelations and the miracles needed for the canonization of saints in *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et de Beatorum Canonizatione* (1740). The document asserted that the events in question must present themselves to human reason as being truly extraordinary and beyond the scope of natural causes.

The most recent CDF document and the current standard that lays out the guidelines for the judgment of apparition claims is the *Normae Congregationis de Modo Procendi in Diiudicandis Praesumptis Apparitionibus ac Revelationibus* (Norms of the Congregation for Proceeding in Judging Alleged Apparitions and Revelations) approved by Pope Paul VI on February 27, 1978. The document was originally only publicly produced in Latin with *sub secreto* translations released to the bishops. With these official translations having been leaked to the internet and other unofficial translations abounding

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, "The Message of Fatima—Theological Commentary," on the Vatican website, May 13, 2000—[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000626\\_message-fatima\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000626_message-fatima_en.html) (accessed May 1, 2012).

online, the Vatican formally released five translations of this document more than two decades later on May 24, 2012, admitting knowledge of the previous availability of the document in the introduction by William Cardinal Levada.<sup>12</sup>

The *Normae Congregationis* sets out the procedures to be followed in investigating the authenticity of extraordinary claims. The diocesan bishop possesses the right to initiate an investigation and, subsequently, that country's national conference of bishops can intervene at his request or that of the faithful. If necessary, the Vatican can then also intervene if the situation involves the Church at large or if discernment requires it. A classic modern example of the progression in the levels of intervening authority is the controversial Medjugorje case in which the famed phenomena, beginning in 1981, was first investigated and discouraged by the local ordinary, was later judged to be "not established as supernatural" by the 1991 Zadar Commission of the Yugoslavian bishops, and then was re-examined by a 2010 Vatican commission. [NB: At the time of the publication of this paper, the commission had not yet reached a final conclusion.]

The document clarifies the role of Church officials in investigating the authenticity of Marian apparition claims. First, Church officials are called to assess the phenomena themselves and the people who report them, looking for evidence of authenticity. Next they are to study any messages that are associated with the extraordinary reports, to ascertain whether they are orthodox in conforming with Church teaching. The third question raised by the document appraises the pastoral implications of the phenomena by studying the "fruits" of the reported apparitions. Such good fruits are considered to be miraculous physical healings, conversions and vocations.

In a statement in *The Activities of the Holy See* (1996), it was noted that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was

<sup>12</sup> "Norms Regarding the Manner of Proceeding in the Discernment of Presumed Apparitions or Revelations," on the Vatican website, May 24, 2012—[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19780225\\_norme-apparizioni\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19780225_norme-apparizioni_en.html).



studying apparition-related phenomena and that “alleged apparitions are frequently joined with claims of supernatural messages, and with weeping statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary or of saints.” The statement reiterated the responsibility of local bishops to conduct investigations and produce judgments and restated the CDF’s role of “guidance and vigilance.”<sup>13</sup>

Because of the difficulty in assessing the validity of apparition claims and the content of apparition messages not belonging to the deposit of faith, the faithful must heed the guidance and prudential judgments of the Church, and a disordered emphasis should not be placed on alleged events. Even if an apparition is declared to be worthy of belief, a proper perspective must be maintained: faith in any miracle should not be a substitute for faith in Christ. Understanding the types and meaning of judgments that the Church renders after investigating alleged phenomena can help the faithful determine the appropriate emphasis and role of the miraculous in their lives of faith.

### **Categories of Apparition Judgment**

There are three traditional categories of apparition judgments that relate most importantly to the supernatural character of the event: “Not Worthy of Belief,” “Approved,” and “Nothing Contrary to the Faith.” The negative judgment category that asserts that the event is not worthy of belief is given by the Latin formulation *constat de non supernaturalitate*, that is, “it is established that there is nothing supernatural.” The negative criteria delineated in *Normae Congregationis* are:

1. Glaring errors in facts
2. Doctrinal errors attributed to God or Mary
3. Pursuit of financial gain
4. Gravely immoral acts committed by visionary
5. Psychological disorders or tendencies in the visionary.

<sup>13</sup> “Apparitions in the News,” on the Mary Page website—[campus.udayton.edu/mary/respub/apprdoc.html](http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/respub/apprdoc.html) (accessed April 2012).

While Catholics are never obliged to believe in an apparition even if it is declared to be authentic, they are required to submit themselves to the prudential judgment of the local bishop when he declares an apparition to be false. As the bishops, from the nature of their office, are entrusted with the responsibilities of discerning and ruling on apparitions, so too are there fundamental responsibilities on the part of the members of the diocese. According to the 1983 Code of Canon Law, first, the faithful are to obey their bishops when the latter act as Christ's representatives (canon 212); that is, when they teach formally or establish binding discipline as pastors of their flock. This obedience owed to the bishops in their capacity as leaders of particular churches is intended to promote the common good. Canon 753 also speaks of the "religious assent" owed to the bishops' teaching authority, which means a special quality of respect and gratitude, along with critical awareness and good will. As a result, there should be intelligent obedience to ecclesiastical authority in the matter of ruling against alleged apparitions.

The positive judgment category that confirms that the event is worthy of belief is given by the Latin formulation *constat de supernaturalitate*, that is, "it is established that there is something supernatural." The positive criteria delineated in *Normae Congregationis* are:

1. Moral certainty/great probability of miracle
2. Positive evaluation of qualities of visionary
3. Positive evaluation of content of revelations
4. Healthy devotion and spiritual fruits.

It is not enough for the messages to be free from doctrinal error for an apparition to be declared authentic. There have been many cases of claimed apparitions where the messages are sound and are not contrary to the faith but other factors are present, such as the pursuit of financial gain, lack of obedience, or psychological conditions, that rule out the possibility of a supernatural cause. When an apparition is approved, the Blessed Virgin Mary can be venerated in a special way at

the site. Belief in a private revelation is never required and therefore individual Catholics are free to decide how much emphasis to place on approved apparitions and messages.

The third apparition category is the one of uncertainty constituting a “wait and see” stance. This judgment is given in the form of the Latin phrase *non constat de supernaturalitate*, in other words “it is NOT established that there is something supernatural.” The vast majority of investigated apparitions receive this assessment. An apparition with such a designation might or might not be of supernatural origin. While there is no proof of the phenomenon originating from anything but natural causes, none of the negative criteria are fulfilled and the supernatural cause is not ruled out. The local bishop will assess pastorally the best path forward and sometimes will give encouragement to the cult that has arisen around the alleged phenomenon (not to be confused with approval of the supernatural character). The associated messages may be approved for publication or pilgrimages allowed at this stage. In some cases, the local ordinary might deem it appropriate to consider the events worthy of faith expression. Many *non constat* cases result in the devotion being limited rather than encouraged.

Knowing the criteria that the Church uses in assessing claims of private revelation and understanding the various categories of judgment that it renders are essential tools for examining the trends in apparition claims in the twentieth century.

### **Trends in Marian Apparition Claims**

Since the Council of Trent, after which apparitions and other miraculous claims first began to be thoroughly investigated, the number of apparition claims has been fairly consistent throughout the centuries. According to the internet site [MiracleHunter.com](http://MiracleHunter.com), 123 claims were made in the sixteenth century followed by 143 in the seventeenth century, 47 in the eighteenth century and 128 in the nineteenth century, respec-



tively. In the twentieth century, there was a veritable explosion of activity, as 579 alleged visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary were claimed.<sup>14</sup>

**1. Apparition claims since the Council of Trent (1545-1563)** [See Figure 1.]

To put these numbers in perspective, it is important to consider how very few apparitions in the twentieth century enjoy any sort of approval. The Vatican (subsequent to the investigation and approval of the local ordinary) has given its approbation in some form to four apparitions: Our Lady of the Rosary (Fatima, Portugal, 1917); The Virgin with the Golden Heart (Beauraing, Belgium, 1932); The Virgin of the Poor (Banneux, Belgium, 1933); and Mother of the Word (Kibeho, Africa, 1981). Five additional apparitions have been investigated and approved by the local ordinary: Our Lady of All Nations (Amsterdam, Holland, 1945); Our Lady of Akita (Akita, Japan, 1973); Our Lady Reconciler of Peoples & Nations (Betania, Venezuela, 1976); Our Lady of Cuapa (Cuapa, Nicaragua, 1980); and Our Lady of the Rosary (San Nicolas, Argentina, 1983). The Coptic Church, which follows an approval process very different from that of the Roman Catholic Church, has recognized four apparition events, all without messages given at their sites. An additional ten apparitions enjoy an initial encouragement of faith expression from the local bishop, but their supernaturality has never been verified.

The United States and Canada have experienced many alleged apparitions throughout history, starting with a legend involving George Washington, but only the 1859 apparitions to Adele Brise in Robinsonville, Wisconsin, have ever been approved as worthy of belief by ecclesiastical authorities. Of the more than 100 claims of apparitions in the twentieth century, only the Our Lady of America apparitions

<sup>14</sup> "Unapproved Marian Apparition Claims of the 20th Century," on the website of The Miracle Hunter—[http://www.miraclehunter.com/marian\\_apparitions/unapproved\\_apparitions](http://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/unapproved_apparitions) (accessed May 1, 2012).

in Ohio in the 1950s have received even an approval of faith expression. Between 1900 and 1980, there were 323 Marian apparition claims throughout the world. During this period, there were only 21 reports (6.5%) coming from the United States and Canada.

## **2. Apparition Claims by Decade in USA & Canada 1900-2000** [See Figure 2.]

There have been several alleged apparition events that are particularly noteworthy from this span of years:

- Cora Evans was a Mormon convert who in 1910 in Utah at age six began experiencing visions of Jesus, Mary and saints. She developed a devotion to the Mystical Humanity of Christ and her beatification cause has now been opened.<sup>15</sup>
- Claude Newman was imprisoned for shooting and killing a citizen of Mississippi where he lived. While incarcerated, he saw a Miraculous Medal worn by another prisoner and asked to wear it. He allegedly received a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary who counseled him to seek a Catholic priest. After doing so, he learned the Catholic faith, converted and influenced several other prisoners before his execution in 1944.<sup>16</sup>
- Mary Ann Van Hoof began her claims of seeing the Virgin Mary in Necedah, Wisconsin, in 1949. Her visions, which became apocalyptic in tone and contained predictions of an UFO arrival, were condemned in 1955. A shrine was completed in 1975 and is still currently staffed by the Old Catholic offshoot sect.<sup>17</sup>
- Veronica Leuken (Bayside, New York, 1970) created a stir with her claims of visions of Our Lady and saints. Her ecstasies lent credence to the belief that a supernatural event was indeed occurring. The messages she relayed made controversial assertions including the allegation of the presence of an imposter Pope in Rome and resulted in her receiving a negative judgment in 1986. A shrine still exists in New York that commemorates these occurrences.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> "The Cause for Cora Evans," under The Mystical Humanity of Christ, on the website <http://www.parishretreat.org/index.php?id=story> (accessed May 1, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> "The Miraculous Story of Claude Newman," on the Mystics of the Church (website)—<http://www.mysticsofthechurch.com/2011/12/miraculous-story-of-claude-newmanhis.html> (accessed May 1, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, "Religious Experience and Public Cult: The Case of Mary Ann Van Hoof," *Journal of Religion and Health* 28 (1989): 36-7.

<sup>18</sup> "History of the Bayside Apparitions," under Apparitions of Our Lady to Veronica Leuken—[http://www.rosesfromheaven.com/bayside\\_history.html](http://www.rosesfromheaven.com/bayside_history.html) (accessed May 1, 2012).



Since 1980, the number of claims throughout the world has not only almost doubled (from an average of four per year to almost eight per year), but the reports in the United States and Canada have also both dramatically increased in frequency (from .26 per year to 3 per year) and in percentage of the total number of claims worldwide (from 6.5% to 33%). The choice of 1980 as the dividing point is not arbitrary: the number of apparition claims in the 1980s alone in the United States and Canada (23) exceeded the total from the previous eight decades combined (21) with no previous decade having more than six claims.

### ***3. USA and Canadian Percentage of Total Worldwide Claims in 20th Century*** [See Figure 3.]

With the proliferation of apparition reports at the end of the twentieth century, the Church reacted with concern about the effects of the focus on such phenomena. The U.S. Bishops addressed this issue in a 1996 Special Assembly for America of the Synod of Bishops (*Encounter with the Living Jesus Christ: Way to Conversion, Communion and Solidarity in America*):

Within the Church community, the multiplication of supposed “apparitions” or “visions” is sowing confusion and reveals a certain lack of a solid basis to the faith and Christian life among Her members. On the other hand, these negative aspects, in their own way, reveal a certain thirst for spiritual things which, if properly channeled, can be the point of departure for a conversion to faith in Christ (33).<sup>19</sup>

The Reverend René Laurentin, the world’s foremost Mariologist, acknowledged the change in apparition trends by labeling the rise “an explosion of the supernatural” and expressed concern that reports of apparitions had become frequent, “numerous and even disturbing.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for America, *Encounter with the Living Jesus Christ: The Way to Conversion, Communion and Solidarity in America* (August 8, 1996), no. 33. (Text is accessible on the Vatican website).

<sup>20</sup> René Laurentin, “East and West: Convergences and Differences on the Virgin Mary” (paper presented at the 12th International Mariological Congress, Czestochowa, Poland, August 18-23, 1996).

### Explanation of Trends

The increase in apparition claims at the end of the twentieth century and the particular growth in the United States could be reflective of many factors. One basic explanation of the dramatic change in the frequency of reports centers around the question of whether the world truly needed the intercession of Mother of God at this time in human history in a special way. Is it simply the case that the Virgin Mary has been appearing more often? It may not be possible to assess the state of the modern world as compared to other eras in history and its resulting need for divine intervention, but the legitimacy of the claims can be examined. In order to discern the reality of these apparition claims, the only objective criteria on which to rely are the investigations and prudential judgments of the Church. Of the eighty-three alleged apparition claims of the last two decades of the twentieth century in the United States and Canada, all eighty-three were declared either *not supernatural*, *not established as supernatural* (most without any approval of the messages or of faith expression) or went uninvestigated, which implies such a lack of solid basis for supernaturality in the first place that they did not even merit the Church's attention. In five of the North American cases declared *not established as supernatural*, a local ordinary released a statement with some "wait and see" remarks or allowed the publication of the messages as not contrary to faith and morals. These cases were Mariamante (USA, 1987, Apostolate of Holy Motherhood); Carol Nole and Barbara Matthias (Santa Maria, CA, 1988); Joseph Januszkiewicz (Malboro, NJ, 1989); Nancy Fowler (Conyers, GA, 1990); and Dory Tan (Marmora, Ontario, Canada, 1990).

It must be acknowledged that the Church is extremely slow in rendering positive judgments and will typically not give approbation to an ongoing apparition. For example, in the case of the 1664 apparitions to Benedicta Rencurel, a shepherdess in Laus, France, the Holy See did not release an official approval until 2008. Such a slow discernment process could certainly keep several of these apparitions from the 1980s and 1990s under consideration for some time, but with modern

communication technologies, more advanced record keeping, and a wider geographical impact of apparition claims resulting in larger pastoral concerns, the Church has moved more swiftly in recent times. It should additionally be noted that there have been only two phenomena in the twentieth century to receive non-positive judgment from an initial episcopal investigation that have later been upgraded to a *constat* judgment. The locution case of Our Lady of Akita originally received a *non constat* judgment, and the controversial 1945 Amsterdam apparitions received by Ida Peerdeman experienced a reversal by Bishop Jozef Marianus Punt of Haarlem of a previous "established as not supernatural" judgment that had been acknowledged by the CDF. Both, coincidentally, featured the Virgin under the title "Our Lady of All Nations."

Improvement in awareness through more media coverage with the advent of modern communication technologies has enabled more reports of visions, messages, signs and healings to be widely discussed by the increasingly miraculous-minded Catholic faithful. In the 1980s alone, hundreds of books and periodicals were published, video documentaries and audiotapes were produced, and results of investigations were disseminated. This greater exposure may represent a heightened interest in these happenings but does not, however, explain such a dramatic increase in alleged phenomena themselves, other than to suggest that it inspired some charlatans, the mentally unstable, attention seekers or other pious frauds to be swept up in the fanaticism.

Another theory for the spike in activity relates to the end of the millennium. The fear of the end times being upon the world inspired many apocalyptic claims, predictions, and new concerns. With uncertainty abounding and many fearing calamity or expecting the return of Christ, prophecy was prevalent. Mark Garvey, author of *Searching for Mary: An Exploration of Marian Apparitions across the U.S.* (1998), assessed these phenomena:

I think [the alleged apparitions'] popularity in the 90s had a lot to do with the approaching end of the millennium. People in general, and



particularly those who believed in signs and portents, saw the coming year 2000 as a significant watershed moment, a moment ripe for something historically, and religiously, significant to happen.<sup>21</sup>

The data seems to back this view of the increase in claimed messages of the Virgin Mary. In the first decade of this twenty-first century, there were only twenty-five known claims made worldwide, less than half of the previous decade.

One very possible explanation for the explosion of miraculous claims could be found in the confusion about the changes in the Church's restriction on the publication of messages associated with alleged apparitions. The Code of Canon Law of 1917 (1399 #5) had forbidden publication of anything about "new apparitions, revelations, visions, prophecies, and miracles" without the local bishop's approbation. The removal of canons 1399 and 2318 from the Code of Canon Law of 1917 was approved by Paul VI on October 14th, 1966, by *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (AAS) 58, and promulgated on November 15th of that year, resulting in the abolition of the *Index of Forbidden Books*. This decision may have opened the floodgates for people to perceive a newfound license to publish anything without restriction regarding alleged phenomena. With the typical lag time that Church decisions have in being disseminated to the faithful, the explosion in the reports of such phenomena beginning in the 1980s could well be attributed to the fact that such phenomena could now apparently be freely written about. What appears to be a dramatic increase in claims could be in reality just more reports coming to light simply because more material was published than ever before.

The fact that the new Code of Canon Law (1983) also addressed this issue and reaffirmed the requirement that bishops must approve apparition-related writings seems to corroborate the aforementioned explanation. Canon 823 §1 states:

In order to preserve the integrity of the truths of faith and morals, the pastors of the Church have the duty and right to be watchful so that no

<sup>21</sup> Matt C. Abbot, "The U.S. Marian apparition burnout," on the Renew America website—<http://www.renewamerica.com/columns/abbot/070721>, citing thoughts of Mark Garvey (accessed in April 2012).

harm is done to the faith or morals of the Christian faithful through writings or the use of instruments of social communication. They also have the duty and right to demand that writings to be published by the Christian faithful which touch upon faith or morals be submitted to their judgment and have the duty and right to condemn writings which harm correct faith or good morals.<sup>22</sup>

With the *Index* abolished, this Canon's restriction on the free circulation of unapproved writings apparently had little effect, because the dramatic rise in apparition reports was already in full swing for more than a decade by the time the Church addressed this growing concern. In a document released to specifically censure Vassula Ryden, an alleged seer from Switzerland, the CDF included language and a general instruction that reasserted the moral obligation of not circulating or reading writings regarding alleged phenomena:

II. Regarding the circulation of texts of alleged private revelations, the Congregation states:

1) The interpretation given by some individuals to a Decision approved by Paul VI on 14 October 1966 and promulgated on 15 November of that year, in virtue of which writings and messages resulting from alleged revelations could be freely circulated in the Church, is absolutely groundless. This decision actually referred to the "Abolition of the Index of Forbidden Books," and determined that—after the relevant censures were lifted—the moral obligation still remained of not circulating or reading those writings which endanger faith and morals.

2) It should be recalled however that with regard to the circulation of texts of alleged private revelations, canon 823 §1 of the current Code remains in force: "the Pastors of the Church have the . . . right to demand that writings to be published by the Christian faithful which touch upon faith or morals be submitted to their judgement."

3) Alleged supernatural revelations and writings concerning them are submitted in first instance to the judgement of the diocesan Bishop, and, in particular cases, to the judgement of the Episcopal Conference and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Code of Canon Law (1983), Canon 823 §1, on the Vatican website—[http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_INDEX.HTM) (accessed May 1, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 88, no. 12 (Dec. 5, 1996): 956-957, has the original CDF text. The citation here is from a clarification of the original notification on Vassula



The timing of this statement coincides with the peak of apparition activity across the world and in the United States specifically.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for the cause of the data trend comes in assessing the coinciding of the famed 1981 Medjugorje apparitions and the beginning of the marked spike in worldwide apparition claims of that time period. Beginning on June 24, 1981, Our Lady of Medjugorje (also called "Queen of Peace" and "Gospa" which is Croatian for "Lady") allegedly began appearing to six Herzegovinian Croat children in Medjugorje, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since then it has become one of the most popular sites for Catholic pilgrimages. Many of the alleged visionaries of the United States and Canada during the end of the last century, including many of the most widely followed seers, before claiming their own visions, had first visited Medjugorje on a pilgrimage.

Such popular seers with Medjugorje ties included:

- Joseph Januszkiewicz (Yardville, NJ, 1989)—A quiet man dedicated to his family, Joseph had a serious accident in 1987 that left him in a wheelchair. Although he was skeptical about the events taking place in Medjugorje, he made a pilgrimage in 1988 and received a physical healing. Joseph's first apparition occurred on March 17, 1989, while he was praying in his backyard. The last message for the people was given on December 4, 1994.<sup>24</sup>
- Fr. Jack Spaulding and prayer group (Scottsdale, AZ, 1988)—The Scottsdale apparitions began at St. Maria Goretti Parish in Scottsdale, Arizona, a suburb of Phoenix, in the late summer of 1988. Nine young people (Gianna Talone-Sullivan, Mary Cook, Susan Evans, Steve and Wendy Nelson, James Pauley, Jim Kupanoff, Annie Ross Fitch, Stefanie Staab) who had been to Medjugorje on pilgrimage approached their pastor, Fr. Spaulding, separately and told him they were hearing voices.<sup>25</sup>
- Estella Ruiz (Phoenix, AZ, 1988)—A wife and mother of seven from Phoenix, Arizona, Estella claimed to receive apparitions and

Ryden that the CDF released to the press: *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 4 December 1996, 12.

<sup>24</sup> "Joseph Januszkiewicz, Marlboro, New Jersey, U.S.A., 1989-1994 (The Yellow Rose of Peace)," in *The Catholic Prophets Encyclopaedia*—<http://www.catholicfocus.com/marlboro.htm> (accessed May 1, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Peter Heintz, *A Guide to Apparitions of Our Blessed Virgin Mary* (Sacramento, CA: Gabriel Press, 1995), 632-633.

messages since December 3, 1988. Mary allegedly appeared as "Our Lady of the Americas" and gave messages read to the crowds of people that come to Estella's home. Estella claimed that Our Lady appeared almost daily in 1989, and all of her seven grown children were converted.<sup>26</sup>

- Theresa Lopez (Denver, CO, 1990)—Theresa escaped from a life of drugs, alcohol and financial problems. This transformation followed a pilgrimage she made to Medjugorje, after which she had her first locutions of the Blessed Virgin Mary and began traveling around the country as a promoter of the Medjugorje phenomenon. Among her public apparitions was one event attended by 6,000 pilgrims who had come to see the Blessed Virgin at Lookout Mountain.<sup>27</sup>
- Nancy Fowler (Conyers, GA, 1990)—In Conyers, Georgia, for a period of eight years: October 13, 1990 to October 13, 1998, many thousands of people went to see the "Visionary of Conyers" as she reported that Jesus sent His own Mother Mary to communicate heavenly messages calling all of humanity, but especially the United States, to conversion. Nancy traveled around the country and abroad, bearing witness to these revelations. Many of her alleged mystical experiences were written down. Her visions began after a pilgrimage to Medjugorje.<sup>28</sup>
- Joseph Reinholz (Hillside, IL, 1990)—A retired railroad worker and widower, Joseph suffered from blurred vision and occasional blindness. He visited Medjugorje and, upon returning home, his sight gradually returned to normal. After returning home from a second pilgrimage, as foretold by one of the seers, Joseph found a crucifix at Queen of Heaven cemetery and prayed at the site for two years. On August 15th, 1990, the Blessed Virgin Mary allegedly began appearing to him there.<sup>29</sup>
- John Leary (Rochester, NY, 1993)—A retired Kodak chemist and devout Catholic, John lives near Rochester, New York. He claims to have received over thirteen volumes of messages from Jesus and Mary since his 1993 trip to Medjugorje.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Kristy Nabhan-Warren, *The Virgin of El Barrio: Marian Apparitions, Catholic Evangelizing, and Mexican American Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> Heintz, *A Guide to Apparitions*, 666-667.

<sup>28</sup> Conyers—Our Loving Mother: Official Website of Nancy Fowler—<http://www.ourlovingmother.org/> (accessed May 1, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Heintz, *A Guide to Apparitions*, 653-663.

<sup>30</sup> "About John Leary:" on the Official John Leary website—<http://www.johnleary.com/index.php/about/> (accessed May 1, 2012).

- Gianna Tallone Sullivan (Emmitsburg, MD, 1994)—An alleged visionary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, Gianna Talone Sullivan claims to receive messages from the Blessed Mother. She was one of the original nine seers in Fr. Jack Spaulding's Thursday Night Prayer Group based in Scottsdale, Arizona. Gianna and her husband relocated from Scottsdale, Arizona, to Emmitsburg in November 1993, at the reported request of the Blessed Mother. Allegedly, Our Lady first spoke to Gianna on June 4, 1988, in Medjugorje, and eventually began to appear to her, beginning December 19, 1989, during the Thursday Night prayer meetings in the Maria Goretti Church.<sup>31</sup>
- Maureen Sweeney-Kyle (Elyria, OH, 1996)—Maureen Sweeney Kyle is a housewife and grandmother who grew up and still resides in the Cleveland, Ohio area. Following her pilgrimage to Medjugorje, Jesus and Blessed Mother have allegedly been appearing to Maureen on an almost daily basis for the last sixteen years. The Holy Love movement and shrine were established around her alleged apparitions.<sup>32</sup>

This data does not, of course, suggest that on this basis the apparitions at Medjugorje should be considered false or looked upon with suspicion. Many investigated and approved apparitions have been the object of aping that occurs locally or nationally. In Belgium, for example, following the two back-to-back approved apparitions at Beauraing and Banneux in 1932 and 1933, respectively, there was a marked spike in claims in the following year as thirteen of the fifteen worldwide supposed visions of the Virgin Mary occurred in Belgium.<sup>33</sup> Lourdes is perhaps more famous for many other impostor children coming forward who wanted to emulate St. Bernadette Soubirous. Fr. Leonard Cros, S.J., an early chronicler of the apparitions, identified over thirty cases of local mimicry.<sup>34</sup> Similar increases in claims surrounded the apparitions at

<sup>31</sup> Heintz, *A Guide to Apparitions*, 636-638.

<sup>32</sup> "About the Visionary," on the Holy Love Ministry website—[http://www.holylove.org/about\\_visionary.php](http://www.holylove.org/about_visionary.php) (accessed May 1, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> "Unapproved Apparition Claims," on the website of The Miracle Hunter—[http://www.miraclehunter.com/marian\\_apparitions/unapproved\\_apparitions](http://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/unapproved_apparitions) (accessed May 1, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Odile De Montfort and John O'Meara, *Ordeal at Lourdes: The New Discoveries* (London: Campion Press, 1959).



Knock, Ireland, and Fatima, Portugal. In Kibeho, Rwanda, the visionaries who saw the "Mother of the Word" were all from the same school and inspired additional school children there to make similar claims.

While in the past, examples of mimicry might be limited to those areas geographically surrounding the region of the apparition in that country, in modern times the same psychological phenomena of emulation might be in play for those who frequent apparition sites on pilgrimage, even from a great distance. Medjugorje has uniquely enjoyed an unprecedented flood of international interest and special attention from the faithful in the United States. Since the events began in 1981, over thirty million pilgrims, including many Americans, have made their way to the now developed small village in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The fame of the alleged apparitions can be owed in part to their consistent, long running, widely translated and well-distributed messages, that have been examined in several investigations including that of the 1991 Zadar Conference of Yugoslavian Bishops. The 1991 decision declared the apparitions *non constat de supernaturalitate* (not established as supernatural) rather than condemning them outright with a *constat de non* (established as not supernatural) judgment, thereby insinuating that the messages contained nothing contrary to faith and morals.

Pilgrimages were likewise approved if conducted privately and did not operate on the assumption that Our Lady was certainly appearing. With a booming economy in the United States, curious pilgrims came in droves to see what they could see or to attain a miracle. Likewise modern communication technology made the dissemination of messages easier. The United States has been a specially targeted place of outreach for the Medjugorje message as Caritas, a spiritual center in Birmingham, Alabama, has been established around the frequent and consistent visits of one of the seers, Marija Lunetti (Pavlović).<sup>35</sup> Another of the visionary children, Ivan Dragicevic, has sought to spread the Medjugorje message specifically

<sup>35</sup> "Prayer Gatherings at Caritas of Birmingham," on the website of Caritas of Birmingham—<http://www.caritasofbirmingham.com/caritas-prayer-gatherings.html> (accessed May 1, 2012).

to the United States by visiting parishes from October through February.<sup>36</sup> The services he facilitates typically consist of his testimony, prayer, and an onsite apparition. Additionally, MIR Centers popped up throughout the United States in the 1980s and 1990s to help spread the messages of Our Lady at Medjugorje.

### **Conclusion**

There are several possible explanations for the dramatic data spike in Marian apparition claims at the end of the twentieth century. The greater media exposure to the miraculous, the rise of millennial end-times fanaticism, and the confusion over Church restrictions on the publication of alleged apparition-related material all merit consideration as possible causes for the rise in the reports of alleged miraculous phenomena at the end of the twentieth century. The concurrency of the Medjugorje apparitions with the meteoric rise in worldwide apparition claims, the ties to and previous Medjugorje pilgrimage experiences of many alleged American seers, and the established promotion mechanisms of the Medjugorje message in the United States all illustrate the influence of the famed long-running visions and provide evidence for being a major factor in the dramatic increase.

Even considering the important role of apparitions in the history of the Church, the data spike in alleged miraculous phenomena at the end of the last century provides a good backdrop for re-emphasizing the importance of both following the prudential judgment of the competent ecclesiastical authorities and the reaffirmation of the proper role of the miraculous. While apparitions may bolster the faithful and provide special insights and aid at crucial moments in human history, they must always point the faithful towards Christ.

<sup>36</sup> "Ivan Dragicevic's Speaking Schedule," on the Medjugorje website—<http://www.medjugorje.org/ivanse.htm> (accessed May 1, 2012).



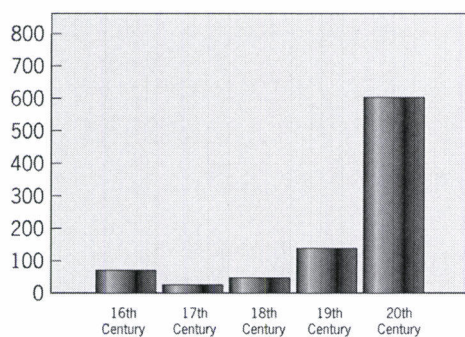


Figure 1. Apparition claims since the Council of Trent (1545-1563)

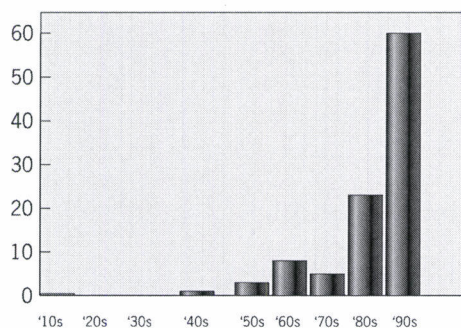


Figure 2. Apparition Claims by Decade in USA & Canada 1900-2000

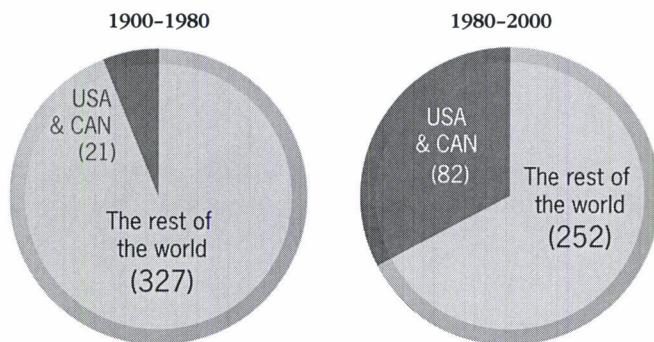


Figure 3. USA and Canadian Percent of Total Worldwide Claims in 20th Century