

BASICS ON APPARITIONS



APPARITIONS are a widespread Marian phenomenon. Wholeheartedly hailed and embraced by some, apparitions are out-rightly rejected by others. Emotions and irrational behavior play an important role in both instances. A cautious and balanced approach would seem necessary and appropriate.



— *We propose the following guidelines in dealing with apparitions* —

HOW TO DEAL WITH APPARITIONS

Receptiveness and caution

Be cautious believing in apparitions, in general and by principle.

- This means: A *critical* assessment of *particular* events is needed
- We should gratefully recognize God's freedom to speak and manifest Himself as He pleases, how and when He pleases.

We should never forget that Christianity is based on

- Epiphany (manifestation of God): the partial and visual disclosure of the Trinity in Jesus Christ, the Spirit and the Church
- God's own *initiative*: Apparitions can be an expression of God's free and loving decision to make Himself visible to us in a mediated way, as for example in Mary.

Freedom to believe and spiritual riches

We do not have to believe in apparitions. They do not have a binding character, not even those recognized by the Church. Why is that so?

- Apparitions are not a part of God's self-revelation to the whole people of God as we find it in Jesus Christ or in Sacred Scripture.
- Apparitions are *private* revelations: a personal message, received and communicated in a personal way.

Apparitions recognized by the Church, especially, offer support and encouragement for our spiritual life. We need all the *friends (of God)* we can get: Why not take advantage of the *spiritual capital* contained in messages, signs, and examples of prayer and personal conversion?

WHAT ARE IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF AN APPARITION?

Let us examine the common characteristics of a known and recognized apparition, that of Guadalupe (Mexico) which took place from December 9-12, 1531. Guadalupe is considered the first apparition of modern times. It is also one of the first Marian apparitions which occasioned the foundation of a sanctuary of permanent influence, national and worldwide.

Read the following short description of the event and note the italicized expressions.

On Saturday, December 9, 1531, according to the received tradition, the *Virgin Mary* appeared to *Juan Diego*, a recently

On Saturday, December 9, 1531, according to the received tradition, the *Virgin Mary* appeared to *Juan Diego*, a recently converted Indian, on the hill of *Tepeyac*, where the Indians venerated the goddess *Tonantzin*. *Mary spoke the Nahatl language* (as she later spoke the Patois dialect of Bernadette); she sent *Juan Diego* to ask the bishop of Mexico to erect a sanctuary at the foot of this hill. The Indian went to *Topetlac*, the colonizing city where the bishop and the government of the *Conquistadores* were located. *Juan de Zumarraga*, the founder of the diocese, a Franciscan, named but not yet consecrated, avoided the request of the little man whom even the servants disdained. However, after the fourth apparition, on December 15, the Virgin gave signs. After the cure of the uncle of the visionary, she sent the Indian to carry to the bishop a bouquet of flowers from this barren site of *Tepeyac*. He carried them in his *tilma* (a mantle woven from the fibers of maguey) and placed them before the prelate. At this point, according to the tradition, there appeared in the interior of the mantle the image of the Virgin miraculously produced, the same that is venerated today in the sanctuary.

The following aspects are important:

The historical context

- Time of Spanish colonization (opposition: Indians-Spaniards; church part of colonizing power)
- Hill of *Tepeyac* (formerly devoted to goddess *Tonantzin*)

The apparition (Mary) identifies

- Virgin Mary calls herself as mother of the true God from whom all life comes
- Speaks *Nahatl* (local dialect)
- Gives a message
- Gives signs
- Reproduction of the Virgin's image on the *tilma*

The seer/visionary

- Recently converted Indian (fifty - seven years old)
- Little man, whom the servants disdain
- Confrontation with Spanish authority (Church)
- Carries a message and tangible proof

The message

- Reference to the true God: God of Life
- To erect a sanctuary at the foot of this hill

The signs

- Cure of the uncle of the visionary
- Roses from the barren site of *Tepeyac*
- *Tilma* bears the image of Mary

The number of apparitions

December 9-12, 1531 (five apparitions)

The reactions

- Initial opposition, subsequent controversy, and finally recognition
- Foundation of sanctuary of permanent influence

General characteristics

- Importance of the historical and sociological context:

There often exists a certain correlation between Marian apparitions and specific historical situations (1870, 1917, 1932-33) or special human needs (material and/or religious).

The "*apparition*" (meaning Mary) is perceived in categories of *beauty* (light, ethereal qualities, splendor), difficult to describe. Little by little the typical image of a given apparition is developed by painters—thanks to the description of the visionaries.

Frequently, Mary gives a description or self-definition of herself:

- *Guadalupe*: Mother of the true God from whom all life comes.
- *Lourdes*: Immaculate Conception
- *La Salette*: Our Lady of Sorrows

– Fatima: Our Lady of the Rosary

WHY DOES MARY APPEAR?

Mary is the "ultimate facilitator" in the service of the one mediator. This is illustrated in her apparition to Gregory the Wonderworker (270/275) as reported by Gregory of Nyssa (PG 10, 984-988). Mary is teacher of the Church: she expounds the mystery of faith.

The visionaries of the so-called classical apparitions (1830-1933) are mostly young and poor:

- Miraculous Medal: Catherine Labouré, 24
- La Salette: Maximin Giraud, 11 and Mélanie Calvet, 15
- Lourdes: Bernadette Soubirous, 14
- Pontmain: Joseph Barbedette, 10, Eugène Barbedette, 12, Françoise Richer, 11 and Jeanne-Marie Lebossé, 9

The profile of visionaries in more recent apparitions is more diversified. Varying from case to case, the visionaries are children, adolescents and adults, men and women, single and married. It is a scriptural fact that God speaks with preference to the little and poor, meaning those who readily accept his word and do not oppose it. A visionary is not infallible. His/her perception may be limited or partially erroneous.

In general, messages have a dual function:

- *The permanent function:* The permanent function is to reawaken faith and to bring about a return to God, to prayer and to fasting. It is a return to the introductory chapters of the gospel, to the preaching of John the Baptist for conversion and the baptism of repentance. These messages are repetitive. There are those who have criticized their banality; but this is normal—they have an educational function and education always requires repetition.
- *The prophetic impact:* Other messages are marked in varying degrees by their prophetic impact. In 1531 Our Lady of Guadalupe reminded the conquering Spaniards that in the eyes of God an Indian is equal to a Spaniard and can take messages from heaven to the bishop. Rue du Bac reminded a desolate world of the closeness of heaven; it was a world which the French Revolution had dechristianized. There are *new aspects* in today's messages. The prophetic impact of the messages associated with recent apparitions is new when compared to Rue du Bac, La Salette, Lourdes, etc. They underline evangelization (most explicitly at Cuapa, Kibeho, and Damascus) and ecumenism (Zeitoun, Egypt) and remind us of the

Frequently, apparitions are accompanied by signs:

- the rose miracle of Guadalupe
- the wellspring at Lourdes
- the miracle of the sun in Fatima

Signs are not an integral part of the apparition, and thus not indispensable. They are not included in the potential recognition of an apparition. Concerning the miracle of the sun at Fatima: No observatory knew anything about it, and the canonical judgement of the bishop was silent on this point. Signs, however, have a corroborating function. Healings and/or extraordinary natural phenomena help to overcome skepticism and hesitation. Signs should not obstruct the understanding of the deeper meaning of apparitions.

The number of apparitions within the same event (for example, Lourdes) can vary greatly, ranging from a single apparition at the Rue du bac (1830) to daily apparitions for fourteen years in Medjugorje.

Some examples:

- Pontmain, 1
- Fatima, 6
- Beauraing, 33
- Banneux, 8

The reactions to an alleged apparitions must be assessed on two levels;

- The level of *devotional expression*: the reaction of the faithful, their curiosity and piety, makes an apparition known. It is very often the spontaneous occasion for devotional expression (prayer, conversion, healing), and may lead to an official recognition of this devotional expression.
- The *recognition of the event* is much slower to come and lies in the hands of the ecclesiastical authority.

MEANING OF APPROVAL OF

MEANING OF APPROVAL OR RECOGNITION OF APPARITIONS

Two phases:

- recognition of devotional expression, habitually at the site of the apparitions
- recognition of the event (with alleged supernatural character)

Careful and negative wording taking into account the following methodology:

- Absence of elements opposing or contradicting faith and/or morals
- Absence of elements which could prevent the publication of events and the authorization of a public cult
- Determining whether there are sufficient arguments of natural/rational order (as for any other historical event), so that the possibility/probability of a supernatural causality (meaning supernatural intervention or manifestation) can be reasonably assumed and accepted in faith.

Important distinctions:

- Approval of devotion does not include the recognition of the apparition as such.
- Even in its approval of the apparition, the Church does not intend to give an infallible guarantee as to the supernatural origin of the apparition.

CRITERIA TO ASSESS AUTHENTICITY

- Sufficiency of information (for example, Grouchero, Ukraine)
- Orthodoxy (conformity with faith and morals)
- Transparency (do apparitions lead us to God, Jesus Christ, the gospel, to the service of God and humanity, and to the promotion of faith?)
- Serious reasons for believing in the presence of the hand of God manifested by cures, conversions and other miracles
- Expert opinion (various disciplines, especially doctors and psychiatrists)
- Do these apparitions bear good fruit?
- Is the Church authority favorable or unfavorable?

THE DEEPER MEANING OF APPARITIONS FOR OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

Apparitions are neither the classical ways to God's self-communication nor even remotely the most important ones. Any sacrament of the Church is an infinitely safer conductor of the supernatural than apparitions. Nonetheless, apparitions remind us that Christianity is a religious tradition based on *mediation* always. God is not immediately present, but He gives himself to be shared. He entrusts Himself or His message to Mary, who in turn entrusts this same message to the visionary who passes it on to a multitude of people, mostly pilgrims. These again share the message with others. This is the very *anatomy of revelation*, not just the ephemeral strategy of an apparition. The following conclusions can be drawn:

Through apparitions God challenges us immediately, in a direct and head-on way, not through a book passed down through the centuries or in and through liturgical routine. God remains the visible and invisible God, entrusting Himself to Mary and the visionaries. His message is thus confided to fragile carriers: Its communication is based on receiving, assimilating, passing on and remains a gift to the community of His believers and friends.

Incarnation and eschatology, meaning that we live in the presence of the eternal but with both our feet on the ground, looks and sounds like "mission impossible." Again, apparitions can help to achieve a living synthesis between the incarnational and the eschatological dimensions of our life. Visionaries are such living syntheses. Not so much by virtue of their personal spiritual merits, but because they are embodying – simultaneously *this* child or housewife or factory worker *and this* privileged human being touched visibly by an extraordinary grace of God. That is the reason why—where incarnation and eschatology come together—apparitions can and should teach us a deeper understanding of *mystery*, that is to say the intimate relation between the visible and the invisible, the natural and the supernatural, God's presence and transcendence; especially and essentially mystery means the experience of his *ever greater* love for us.

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