



## **DIOCESE OF FORT WAYNE – SOUTH BEND**

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### **Statement Regarding the Devotion to Our Lady of America**

April 24, 2020

The undersigned bishops issue the following statement in our capacity as the bishops of the dioceses where alleged visions, locutions and private revelations were said to have occurred in relation to the devotion to “Our Lady of America, the Immaculate Virgin.”

The devotion of “Our Lady of America” originated in a series of private revelations to Sister Mary Ephrem (baptized Mildred) Neuzil, many of which took place within the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, Ohio. Sister Neuzil was born in 1916 and was professed in 1933 into the Congregation of the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood of Jesus, whose generalate resided in Dayton, Ohio (within the Archdiocese of Cincinnati). On June 16, 1957, Sister Neuzil became part of a contemplative branch of the same congregation, which was located at Our Lady of the Nativity Convent at New Riegel, Ohio (in the Diocese of Toledo-in-America). The contemplative branch of the congregation was suppressed in 1979, at which time the sisters took up residence in Seneca County, Ohio.

Sister Neuzil reported that she started to experience mystical events in 1938 while assigned to the Chancery at Cincinnati, Ohio. These eventually led to a series of purported apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary which began on September 25, 1956 at Rome City, Indiana in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend. The following day, September 26, 1956, the Feast of the North American Martyrs, (also at Rome City, Indiana) the Immaculate Virgin reportedly first identified herself as “Our Lady of America” in grateful response to the devotion given by the Catholic faithful in America to her unique privilege as the “Immaculate Conception.” The message attributed to Our Lady was essentially to promote the sanctification of the family and purity of heart.

Sister Neuzil reported that she continued to receive apparitions of “Our Lady of America, the Immaculate Virgin” at various locations until December 20, 1959, after which time the communication between Our Lady and the visionary principally took on the nature of locutions until her death in 2000. Besides the dioceses mentions above, these other locations include the Archdiocese of Detroit, the Diocese of Phoenix, and the Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana.

Due to the number of dioceses involved and inquiries being received from various parts of the country regarding “Our Lady of America, the Immaculate Virgin” along with the

purported request of Our Lady for a procession of the bishops of the United States and placement of the statue of Our Lady of America in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., it was decided to request the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to intervene in this matter in accord with the *Norms Regarding the Manner of Proceeding in the Discernment of Presumed Apparitions or Revelations*, issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on February 25, 1978.

In November 2017, His Eminence, Daniel Cardinal DiNardo, then-USCCB President, received instructions from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that the competent ecclesiastical authority for conducting the investigation should be the local bishop of the diocese where the alleged apparitions and private revelations occurred, or another bishop who demonstrates such competence. The lead bishop who conducts the investigation was to arrive at a first conclusion. In doing so, he was instructed to call upon whatever assistance was deemed necessary, although the enlistment of one or two experts in Mariology, along with experts in the field of spiritual theology, was highly encouraged, so the authenticity of the presumed mystical phenomena could be established.

Given the supra-diocesan nature of this case, moreover, the Congregation observed that the bishop designated to lead the examination could involve the bishops of the other dioceses in whose territories the apparitions and private revelations have allegedly occurred.

In accord with these instructions, the other five diocesan bishops where the apparitions and private revelations were said to have occurred requested that Bishop Kevin Rhoades of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend serve as the lead bishop, since the purported apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary allegedly began on September 25, 1956 at Rome City, Indiana, in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, where people still gather and pray for the Blessed Mother's intercession under the title, "Our Lady of America." Bishop Rhoades agreed to the request of the other five bishops to conduct the investigation and formed a commission of theological and canonical experts to assist in evaluating the evidence, including personal interviews with witnesses who knew Sister Neuzil personally.

The key finding of the commission are as follows:

1. First, regarding Sister Neuzil herself, there is much evidence that she was honest, morally upright, psychologically balanced, devoted to religious life and without guile. Alongside these many signs of goodness, we also found signs of imperfection, but no evidence that she was the perpetrator of a hoax or the victim of delusion. What she communicated about her alleged experiences, she believed to be true, and her communication of these alleged experiences are filled with humility and forthrightness.
2. Regarding spiritual fruits, there are numerous reports of good fruits, including some conversions, spiritual refreshment, and consolations, and even some physical healings at the Rome City site of the alleged apparitions. However, upon study of these reports, we cannot conclude that any of these events are conclusive enough to warrant certification as miracles. It seems likely that in such personal contexts of faith and prayer, God's graces were received.

3. Regarding the alleged revelations themselves, much of what is expressed does not contain any doctrinal error. However, there is a claim regarding Saint Joseph which has never been expressed as Catholic doctrine and must be seen as an error, namely, that he was a “co-redeemer” with Christ for the salvation of the world.
4. Looking at the nature and quality of the experiences themselves, we find that they are more to be described as subjective inner religious experiences rather than objective external visions and revelations.
5. Thus, while it may be said that there is possibly an authenticity to Sister Neuzil’s subjective religious experience, we do not find evidence pointing to her experiences as being in the category of objective private revelation. Sister Neuzil herself describes her experience as “inner vision” (p. 143), and we find that her experiences were of a type where her own imagination and intellect were involved in the formation of the events. It seems that these were authentically graced moments, even perhaps of a spiritual quality beyond what most people experience, but subjective ones in which her own imagination and intellect were constitutively engaged, putting form to inner spiritual movements. However, we do not find evidence that these were objective visions and revelations of the type seen at Guadalupe, Fatima, and Lourdes.

**Based on these findings, Bishop Rhoades came to the conclusion that “the visions and revelations themselves cannot be said to be of supernatural origin in the sense of objective occurrences (*non constat de supernaturalitate*); thus further, I cannot approve or support public devotion or cult.” The bishops of the other five dioceses have read and also accept these findings and conclusions.**

At the same time, it should be noted that Sister Neuzil’s spiritual director of many years, the late Monsignor Paul F. Leibold, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, who later became the Bishop of Evansville and then Archbishop of Cincinnati, had a medal struck with the image of Our Lady of America. The contents of the purported private revelation received by Sister Neuzil were published in a booklet, first in 1960 and again in 1971. Both of these editions were published with the approval of Archbishop Leibold.

As Archbishop of Cincinnati, Archbishop Leibold commissioned a wooden plaque with the image of Our Lady of America, which he gave to the cloister at New Riegel, where it was displayed for many years in a public area. He had the wooden plaque created for the specific purpose of its use in processions at the New Riegel convent. Archbishop Leibold also authorized the Weberding Woodcarving Shop at Batesville, Indiana, to carve a statue of Our Lady of America. The statue was carved for Our Lady of the Nativity Convent at New Riegel, Ohio, at which public devotions to Our Lady of America were regularly celebrated.

Other bishops have permitted the public display of a statue of Our Lady of America for devotion. For instance, the late Bishop William G. Connare of Greensburg permitted a statue to

be displayed at the Carmel of the Assumption at Latrobe, Pennsylvania. Also, a statue of Our Lady of America was carried in procession in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., on several occasions by the *Apostolatus Uniti* and other groups. On May 31, 2006, a statue of Our Lady of America was enthroned at the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady of the Angels Monastery in Hanceville, Alabama, by the Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate. The statue which was enthroned at Hanceville is the same statue which Bishop Connare authorized for public devotion at Latrobe.

In 1963, the prayer attached to the devotion also received the *imprimatur* of then-Monsignor Leibold when he was Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. This *imprimatur* was granted after receiving the *nihil obstat* from the *ensor librorum*, then-Assistant Chancellor Father Daniel E. Pilarczyk, who later became Archbishop of Cincinnati. Years later, on July 28, 2005, responding to an inquiry about the devotion to Our Lady of America, Archbishop Pilarczyk wrote, “While I am not able to find anything that would indicate that Archbishop Leibold granted approval to the apparitions, he remained Sister’s spiritual director until his death in 1972. He also arranged for a striking of a medal, the carving of some relief plaques, and the design of a statue of Our Lady of America. He was obviously very supportive of Sister and her message until the time of his death in 1972. In your letter, you ask if devotion to Our Lady of America is being fostered in the Archdiocese [of Cincinnati]. I do not know of any campaign to promote it.”

It should be noted that Archbishop Leibold himself wrote to the Director of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. on June 17, 1970. In that letter written two years before his death, Archbishop Leibold stated that he was unable to make a judgment on the supernatural nature of the visions or apparitions reported by Sister Neuzil. He did, however, attest to Sister Neuzil’s holiness and to the solid doctrinal content of her writings. He noted that he “helped her with some private printing of some material and also in having a medal struck, all strictly as a private devotion.” Archbishop Leibold wrote: “I have never taken any action to promote her devotion publicly and of course never followed through on the Shrine request.” (N.B. The “Shrine request” refers to the alleged request of Our Lady of America that her statue be placed in the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception).

Given this history of prayers and religious articles being given approval by competent ecclesiastical authority, the use of such prayers religious articles may continue as a matter of private devotion, but not as a public devotion of the Church. Indeed, such private devotion would be consistent with the history of the United States of America being dedicated to Our Lady.

In his first pastoral letter of May 28, 1792, America’s first bishop, Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore, dedicated the United States to the Mother of Jesus and our Spiritual Mother. On May 5, 1846, the Sixth Provincial Council of the Church in America passed a resolution choosing Mary Immaculate as the Patroness of the United States of America and making December 8<sup>th</sup> the national patronal feast. Subsequently, in 1847, the Sacred Congregation, *Propaganda Fide*, announced that “our Holy Father Pius IX most willingly confirmed the wishes of the Council that has selected the Blessed Virgin, conceived without sin, as the patroness of the Church in the United States of America.” On November 20, 1959, the occasion of the dedication of the National Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, the Bishops of the United States consecrated

our nation to Mary Immaculate, in a renewal of the national Marian entrustments of Bishop Carroll (1792) and the Sixth Provincial Council (1846).

While Our Lady of Guadalupe is recognized as the Patroness of North, Central, and South America, Our Lady is the specific Patroness of the United States of America under her title as the Immaculate Virgin. As such, the faithful may indeed pray to Our Lady, the Immaculate Virgin, as the Patroness of America. At the same time, such private devotion should in no way imply approval or acceptance of purported revelations, visions, or locutions to attributed to Sister Mary Ephrem (Mildred) Neuzil other than as her own subjective inner religious experiences.

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