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FATIMA, LOURDES, AND MEDJUGORJE: A CHALLENGE FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS

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Marian apparitions present a challenge to religious educators. The belief that Mary appears audibly and visibly to ordinary people constitutes an essential component of faith for millions worldwide. On most summer afternoons it can be difficult to move among the crowds gathered around Marian shrines in villages such as Fatima, Lourdes, and Medjugorje. In cities and towns around the world, Blue Armies and Queen of Peace groups preserve connections with the most notable Marian shrines. At times, religious educators can be confronted with puzzled inquiries from those who have encountered the adherents of these cults or from others who have viewed the latest media coverage of an apparition in a European village. Mary Boys argues that, in circumstances like this, a religious educator

. . . needs a sense of popular religion . . . to be able to recognize how the tradition was handed on—and the theological astuteness to evaluate it. Historical consciousness is another *sine qua non*; everyone who teaches needs to be able to situate events and expressions of faith in their context.¹

Marian apparitions are one manifestation of a problem currently faced by many Christian denominations: an uncritical surge towards certitude, or proof of God's presence via sense-ible signs. This surge is particularly apparent when the times are perceived to be threatening or dangerous. This paper seeks to provide a context for understanding the complex phenomena which constitute Marian apparitions and the cults which they inspire. Simply dismissing Marian cults and apparitions as an aberration in the modern world ignores the fact that they provide insight into the psychological, emotional, and intellectual content of many peo-

¹ Mary Boys, *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 201.

ple's religious lives. Marian cults centered on apparitions are persistently popular; popularity alone commands investigation in the service of understanding.

A History of Marian Apparitions

Marian apparitions have a long history in the beliefs of common people. **Thousands of Marian apparitions have been reported, dating back to the earliest Christian centuries.** However, the number of Marian apparitions increased rapidly from the mid-nineteenth century—the beginning of the so-called “Age of Mary.” The first of the notable apparitions of this era occurred to Catherine Labouré, a twenty-four-year-old novice of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, at 140 rue de Bac in Paris. Early in the evening of 18 July 1830, Catherine swallowed a small piece of linen from a surplice once worn by St. Vincent in the hope that the saint's intervention might help her see Mary. At about 11:30 that night, Catherine was wakened by a small boy whom she later claimed was her guardian angel. He led her to the convent chapel, where Catherine saw a vision of Mary sitting in a chair near the altar. For the next two hours, Mary talked to Catherine about the Daughters of Charity and the problems which would soon befall France. The image then faded, and the boy led Catherine back to her room. At the request of Catherine's Mary, a medal was struck in 1832 which later became known as the Miraculous Medal for the numerous miracles attributed to it. Millions of medals were distributed around the world. Reports of Catherine Labouré's visions, the Miraculous Medal, and associated miracles fuelled unprecedented interest in Marian devotion.²

Dozens of appearances of Mary were reported in the following years. **Among her most prominent appearances were those to two children at LaSalette, France in 1846; to Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes, France, in 1858; to three young children at Fatima, Portugal, in 1917; and most recently, to six Croatian children daily since 1981 at Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina.** In all, many hundreds of Marian apparitions have been reported since 1830. Often these reports have been registered by children, although adults frequently have reported seeing Mary as well. Males and

² Hilda Graef, *Mary, A History of Doctrine and Devotion, Vol. 2: From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 85–87.

females in about equal numbers have reported appearances. Most often Mary appears to Catholics in regions where Catholics predominate, although exceptions such as the appearance to a largely Muslim crowd at Zeitoun in Egypt in 1968 should be noted. While Mary has appeared frequently over the past two centuries, she has been selective in her choice of locality; **Marian apparitions tend to be European phenomena, with France and Italy accounting for half of all reported Marian appearances.**³

What the seers of apparitions actually see during an appearance of Mary is an open question. Supporters argue that the trance-like state and indifference to external physical stimuli demonstrated by the seers at the time of an appearance confirm their testimony of the presence of Mary.⁴ Skeptics contend that psychological, cultural, familial, and religious factors account for individuals and groups seeing apparitions.⁵ Despite the efforts of both sides, the unique nature of apparitions ensures that reasoned and substantial inquiry is virtually impossible to undertake. Researchers in this field point to the unlikelihood of a methodology for valid study which will satisfy everyone.⁶ The attempt to prove or disprove the reality of apparitions seems destined to remain unresolved.

The Political Content of Marian Messages

The reported messages of Marian apparitions in the modern era (that is, since 1830) represent Mary as anti-modernist, anti-communist, and opposed to Catholic Church innovations such as Vatican II and the new liturgy. The strongest image of the mil-

³ Michael Carroll, *The Cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), 115-226, presents the most comprehensive sociology of Marian apparitions. His investigations show slight variations depending on the samples of apparitions chosen by various researchers. In the case of Zeitoun, Carroll notes that Mary appeared, but did not speak, to thousands of people above the Church of the Holy Virgin, which local tradition associates with the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt to escape Herod. Also, the first appearances occurred ten months after the defeat of Egypt in the Six Day War in a period of desolation and fear of the future for the nation.

⁴ See, for example, the investigations of René Laurentin and Henri Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies on the Apparitions at Medjugorje* (Dublin: Veritas, 1987), 6-14.

⁵ See, as an example of this group, Michael Carroll, "The Virgin Mary at LaSalette and Lourdes: Whom Did the Children See?" *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 24 (1985): 56-73.

⁶ See Rodger Anderson, "How Good Is the Case for Apparitions?" *Journal of Religion and Psychical Research* 6 (1983): 130-136.

itantly anti-communist Mary belongs to Our Lady of Fatima. To establish why this might be so, Portugal at the time of her appearances must be examined. In 1917, the country was embroiled in a struggle which divided its citizens between those who supported the Republican government and those opposed. Portugal had recently entered World War I and was subjected to a series of government measures including the prohibition of religious teaching in schools, the abolition of religious orders, and the separation of Church and State. Catholic opposition was polarized by these measures, which appeared to mirror the Russian Bolshevik revolution. Marian messages given to three Portuguese children—Lucy, Jacinta, and Francisco—called for daily recitation of the rosary as the way to obtain world peace and the conversion of sinners. Later, during the Spanish Civil War, in 1936, Lucy, the sole survivor of the three seers of Fatima, wrote expanded versions of the Marian messages of 1917, which included a political stand on world communism and the Russian threat to Christianity. Lucy claimed, somewhat belatedly, that Mary had asked in 1917 for the consecration of Russia to her Immaculate Heart and for Catholics to receive Communion on the first Saturday of five consecutive months. The price of ignoring this opportunity to bring about world peace would be war, hunger, and persecution of the Church.⁷

A remarkably similar appearance of Mary in the United States served to underline Mary's conservative political views. In 1950 at Necedah, Wisconsin, Mary appeared to Mary Ann Van Hoof on the feast of the Assumption to warn her that communism was spreading to the United States—"the enemy of God is all over America"—and that the Korean War was only the beginning of the communist threat. "More than three-thirds [*sic*] of the nations is now covered with the enemy of God. And the pagan part of this America is startling."⁸ In post-World War II United States, the Cold War enthusiasms of anti-communist purgers found comfort in the messages emanating from Necedah. Kselman and Avella have suggested that these Marian messages provided Catholics

⁷ For further discussion of the historical context of the Fatima apparitions, see Thomas Kselman and Steven Avella, "Marian Piety and the Cold War," *Catholic Historical Review* 72 (1986): 403–424; Peter Hebblethwaite, "The Pope and Fatima," *New Blackfriars* 63 (1982): 422–429.

⁸ Quoted in Kselman and Avella, "Marian Piety," 404.

. . . with reassurance about their ability to master the current crisis. Fear of Communist Russia and internal subversion were the most prominent themes addressed by Mary; her opinions on those problems resembled those expressed in the Catholic press and leading Catholic organizations, and by Senator McCarthy of Wisconsin.⁹

A caveat on the conservatism of Mary is required. This conservatism is specifically a European and North American affair. In Latin America the situation is markedly different. The shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe commemorating the reported appearance of Mary to Juan Diego at Tepeyac (Mexico City) in 1531 stands as a symbol of liberation. Virgil Elizondo illustrates the Latin American perspective in this way:

No major move for independence or justice in Mexico or Latin America has started that was not under the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe. . . . There is not greater power than the power of the symbol that pulls people together and gives them the power to work and struggle together for a common cause.¹⁰

While the image of Mary as warrior is still strong in this account, now she is enlisted on the side of the forces of liberation and subversion. The Latin American vision of power, liberation and reform contrast with the conservative and traditionalist forms of European Marian messages. The European apparitions invite the restoration of elements of a fondly recalled past in an ideal future. In Latin America, the past is repudiated as corrupt and the ideal future will be instigated in accordance with the divine plan.

Whatever the country of origin, such messages disclose the visionaries' own world view and perceptions of society. Consistent reports in European Marian messages describe a corrupt and evil world. Daily, Mary tells the seers of Medjugorje that "you must know that Satan exists and has asked God to allow him to test the Church for a certain period. . . . He is breaking up marriages, causing quarrels among priests, obsessing people, even killing them."¹¹ The way to defeat Satan is to invoke (predominantly Catholic) tradition: "renew the use of holy water, wear blessed objects . . . regular Mass, monthly confession, and ded-

⁹ Ibid., 418.

¹⁰ Virgil Elizondo, "Mary and Evangelization of the Americas," in *Mary, Woman of Nazareth: Biblical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Doris Donnelly (New York: Paulist Press), 158.

¹¹ *Medjugorje Sentinel*, November 1990, 11.

ication to the Sacred Heart and Immaculate Heart of Mary.”¹² A nostalgic retreat to a version of the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church is the strategy which is offered to defeat the collective works of Satan. In this way, Marian cults assist their adherents to adjust to the fear of the future by offering them hope of the removal of a corrupt order and the institution of an ideal world. In times of rapid social change of political upheaval, Marian apparitions provide stability, reassurance and a plan of action to cope with perceived crises.

The conclusions which can be drawn from this brief political and historical overview of Marian apparitions are necessarily tentative. Each reported apparition has its own distinctive character, yet patterns emerge which are reproduced with each new report. Sociologist Gerald Arbuckle sees in the Marian cults a Catholic form of millenarianism which he characterizes as a group's belief in the imminent and miraculous transformation of this world by supernatural means. Millenarian groups typically arise in times of profound social and political disorientation. Commonly, pressure is exerted on individuals to accept the whole millenarian message or else perish with the repudiated past.¹³ Arbuckle suggests that “the contemporary enthusiasm for this or that latest ‘revelation’ of the Mother of God, in which the imminent destruction of the world is ‘foretold’, or the ‘sins of Vatican II’ are denounced, surely reflect this ever-present tendency for people to run after millenarian dreams.”¹⁴

Many critics see Marian cults as the preserve of the “simple faithful” and a trap for the gullible. A brief review of the historical development and political ideas of the cults suggests otherwise. Marian cults of the apparitions contain a vision of a changed world and an agenda for change (even if the divine means of achieving this are necessarily vague and imprecise). The cults appeal to individuals across the social spectrum and presume at least a rudimentary understanding of the tradition in which people currently stand; appreciation of the revolutionary ideals of the movements would be implausible otherwise. Participation in the movement can involve large amounts of time, money, and leisure to join pilgrimages and other group activities. For the

¹² Ibid., 11 and 2.

¹³ Gerald Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel: An Inculturation Handbook for Pastoral Workers* (Homebush: St. Paul Publications, 1990), 115–118.

¹⁴ Ibid., 117.

most popular shrines and cults, leadership and dissemination of information is exercised in a sophisticated manner by individuals who have attained high levels of skill in organization and communication in other spheres of endeavor. **Despite the rhetoric of these groups, the effective worldwide spread of Marian messages owes less to divine providence than it does to efficient and costly structures of dissemination.**

Healings, Signs, Secrets, and Wonders

Perhaps the most sensational aspect of Marian appearances is the associated reports of miracle healings at Lourdes and other Marian shrines. Although the apparition reported by Bernadette Soubirous made no mention of healings, invalids from the region bathed in the waters of the Lourdes Grotto and claimed resultant **miraculous cures.** From the thousands of reported cures at Lourdes since 1858, the Lourdes Medical Bureau claims only sixty-four as worthy of investigation. Dr. Théodore Mangiapan, head of the Bureau, explains that a major reason for rejecting so many claims stems from the inadequate nineteenth-century definition of a miracle as "an extraordinary event accomplished by God's Almightyness and not attributable to the laws of nature."¹⁵ In other words, for a nineteenth century cure to be considered miraculous, it needed to violate the laws of nature. Mangiapan suggests that such an approach "represented, unequivocally, an expression of the nature/supernature dualism . . . and provided a recognized basis of appreciation at the time. Once medical science had failed to explain those healings by means defined as 'natural,' they were ascribed to God and the supernatural."¹⁶ Advances in scientific knowledge tended to shrink this area of God's domain.

A nineteenth-century understanding of the miraculous healings at Lourdes and elsewhere has restricted divine actions to the inexplicable and the unnatural. Dorothee Sölle has suggested that such dualistic theologizing when applied to the problem of human suffering reflects the peculiar biases of those who create such a theology. She resists an image of God as the ruler of history and each person's life. She describes as "wrong thinking"

¹⁵ Théodore Mangiapan, "The Problem of the Lourdes Miracles," *Lumen Vitae* 42 (1987): 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the image of God as "the one who knows everything, who is really responsible: the one who can, at least, step in and end human torment, assuming God wants to."¹⁷ She argues for a changed image of God distinct from "the purely masculine one. This God is our mother, who weeps over the things we do to each other and to our sisters and brothers, the animals and plants. God comforts us like a mother: God cannot make the pain go away by magic (although that occasionally happens too!) but she holds us in her lap until we stand up again with renewed strength."¹⁸ All who suffer are in God's presence, and "magical" healings can and do occur, according to this view.

A changed image of God who suffers along with all creation moves beyond dualisms which ascribe miracle status to certain cures at Marian shrines. It suggests that all creation is God's domain, that divine action can be evidenced in the natural, and that events have been reported at Lourdes and other places which demand close, intelligent investigation.

Along with reports of miraculous healings, apparitions of the modern era typically have included extraordinary accounts of rosary beads turning golden, piercing lights, spinning or dancing suns, mists and clouds rising and falling, and paradisiacal music and singing. The function of such signs and wonders is to lend credibility to the events being described, to maintain adherents in a constant state of alert, and to appeal to the hopes of new adherents.

Proponents of the cults claim the strange phenomena surrounding the apparitions are proof of their validity. These phenomena appeal to the popular imagination to detrimental effects. A sense of personal unworthiness and dread is enhanced by fears of doom and destruction.¹⁹ Witness this advertisement in a metropolitan daily newspaper under the headline, "End Times Are Here. Last Chance Mankind," which cautioned that "you don't have much time to get back in favour with your maker . . . Are you a fool? Why not decide for yourself? She makes it all very

¹⁷ Dorothee Sölle, "God's Pain and Our Pain," in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutierrez*, ed. Marc Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 326.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Mary Malone, "Judging by appearances: Marian devotion and the question of Medjugorje," *Eureka Street* 1 (May 1991): 18-19, discusses the theme of apocalyptic imagery in Marian cults.

clear what God expects you to do."²⁰ The potential for manipulation in such circumstances is obviously high. Reports of wondrous signs maintain devotees in a state of excitement. Secrets given by Mary to the seers concerning the end time increase curiosity and interest. Yet, whether such wonders lead beyond increased piety (as a means of warding off disaster) to genuine faith is unclear. As a committee investigating reported Marian apparitions in Lubbock, Texas, noted, God's grace "does not require miraculous events and indeed is mostly present to us and active within us in the midst of the ordinary occurrences of divine providence which do not circumvent the laws of nature."²¹

In accordance with other millenarian movements, Marian cults portray time as linear, leading to a fullness of time and an end of days which will bring about a consummation of all history. In the fullness of time, humans will be liberated from all pain and despair and become at once perfectly good and perfectly happy.²² The signs and wonders which attend the appearances serve to underline the imminence of this complete and irrevocable transformation. A dualistic attitude towards time is embedded in this notion. The present is perceived as sinful and corrupt. A new future soon will be born out of the present calamities and wickedness in which elements of a treasured past will be restored in this ideal future. The promise of imminent salvation promotes enthusiastic hopes and an urgency which lures large numbers of followers into the movement.

Attitudes of Catholic Church Authorities

The attitude of Catholic Church authorities to Marian apparitions is ambiguous, despite their popularity among millions of Catholics.²³ From the hundreds of reported Marian apparitions, only a dozen or so have received recognition by the Congrega-

²⁰ *Brisbane Courier-Mail*, 1 February 1991.

²¹ Michael Sheehan, "Statement on 'Rosary Messages' in Lubbock," *Origins* 18 (3 November 1988): 335.

²² For further discussion of millenarian movements, see Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (New York: Schocken, 1969); John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

²³ The most popular of all Marian shrines is dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe at Tepeyac in Mexico City. It is visited by fifteen million people annually. Marian shrines at Fatima, Lourdes, and Medjugorje are said to attract around two million visitors each per year.

tion for the Faith, and none at all have been officially recognized since 1933.²⁴ Official recognition by the teaching authority of the Catholic Church admits not that the appearances are historical realities, but rather that the reports are without fraud, manipulation, intent to deceive, attention seeking, psychological imbalance, or demonic intent.²⁵ As such, they are worthy of pious devotion but do not form part of the Church's official belief.

The ambiguity in the Catholic Church's response stems in part from its teaching on private revelation. Private revelations attest to the fact that God's self-disclosure continues in the lives of holy people, historical events, natural phenomena, and prophetic figures.²⁶ As the committee investigating the Lubbock rosary messages explained, private revelations which have "occurred in and have been approved by the post-apostolic church never add anything substantially new to public revelation."²⁷ The potential for ambiguity in this articulation of revelation is evident when dealing with Marian apparitions. A common criticism is voiced by Peter Hebblethwaite:

If the message of Fatima is merely a distant echo of the Gospel message, then it is redundant. If, on the other hand, it creates difficulties which the Gospel message does not set up, then it is a blind alley as well. Moreover, the claim that Fatima expresses the 'truth and call of the Gospel' is acceptable only if one holds a very simplified version of them.²⁸

Claims of redundancy and an overly facile treatment of the Gospel texts have been at the base of official reluctance to approve the vast majority of claims. Other commentators draw attention to the influence of critical scripture study and the increased sensitivity to ecumenical concerns as reasons for a shift away from official approbation for apparitions.²⁹ This shift in official attitudes to Marian devotion was reflected in the Second Vatican Council's exhortation to "let the faithful remember that

²⁴ The most recent apparitions to gain Catholic Church approval occurred at Banneux and Beauraing, Belgium, in 1933.

²⁵ Malone, "Judging by appearances," 18.

²⁶ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 238.

²⁷ Sheehan, "Statement on 'Rosary Messages'," 335.

²⁸ Hebblethwaite, "The Pope and Fatima," 427.

²⁹ Anthony Tambasco, *What Are They Saying about Mary?* (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984), 71.

true devotion consists neither in fruitless and passing emotion, nor in a certain credulity."³⁰ Vatican II presented a more moderate integration of Mariology which worked against the enthusiasms of proponents of Marian apparitions seeking to gain official acceptance of their claims.

Michael Carroll has observed that while the largest proportion of apparitions since 1830 has occurred in Italy, almost all Catholic-Church-approved apparitions have been in France and Belgium.³¹ Carroll speculates that "promoting devotion to a local apparition, then, is one way that the bishops in a particular country can assert, however symbolically, a certain independence from a Catholic Church that has always been dominated by Italian clergy."³² While this view requires further substantiation, it lends support to the ambiguity which surrounds official Catholic attitudes to Marian apparitions. Given their revolutionary potential and uncompromising agenda of complete and radical transformation, it should come as no surprise that Marian cults typically conflict with established religious and political authorities who find it difficult to identify with the entirety of their message.

Educational Responses to Marian Apparitions

Those involved in religious education, especially with young people, will know the inquisitiveness shown towards Marian apparitions and other related paranormal phenomena.³³ Media reports and the activities of Marian cults tend to keep Marian apparitions at the forefront of public attention. However, religious educators who uncritically embrace Marian cults and apparitions will ultimately find them unhelpful. Mary's reported messages too often border on the trite and banal, revealing the religious pieties and priorities of those who experience the apparitions and those who champion their cause. The simplified solutions proffered by the apparitions mask the complexity of social and cultural relations and the response in justice to the major issues of the world. Uncertainties occasioned by change and

³⁰ "Devotion to the Blessed Virgin in the Church," *Lumen Gentium* n. 67 in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter Abbott (New York: America Press, 1966), 95.

³¹ Carroll, "The Virgin Mary at LaSalette," 56-73.

³² *Ibid.*, 73.

³³ For a discussion of educational responses to young people's interests in these areas, see Jean-Claude Brootcorne, "Paranormal Phenomena: Questions Asked by Pupils and Suggested Criteria," *Lumen Vitae* 62 (1987): 7-18.

conflict give rise to interest in Marian apparitions. Yet the fear and excitement engendered by the miraculous signs and wonders are poor grounds for fostering faith. The hope that is embedded in Marian cults is a cheap hope which distracts religious educators from their task.

Religious educators are faced with a dilemma when responding to interest in apparitions: whether to incorporate teaching on apparitions in the curriculum, or to respond only when questions are raised. If religious educators opt to teach material concerning the apparitions, this teaching ought to explore the social, political, and religious contexts of those who claim to see apparitions. An intelligent inquiry of the phenomena will reveal a need to examine the meaning of belonging to Marian cults of the apparitions, the function of apocalyptic signs and imagery, and the ambiguities associated with miraculous signs and cures. Many religious educators will judge that time devoted to teaching the apparitions is not warranted. At the very least, these religious educators ought to be sufficiently prepared to respond to students' inquiries in a manner which affords an understanding of the context and meaning of the apparitions.

Conclusion

Marian cults and apparitions are a complex set of phenomena which have attracted the scholarly interest or theorists in a variety of disciplines—psychology, history and politics, religion, sociology, and anthropology. For religious educators, the response of people to the reports of Marian apparitions permits some understanding of the emotional, psychological, and intellectual content of people's experience of religion. Simply ignoring them will not make the cults of Mary any less popular. As one commentator has remarked, "What the theologians ignore, ordinary people will provide."³⁴ Understanding Marian apparitions—their nature and incidence, the conditions which give rise to them, and the functions which they perform for people—can assist religious educators in their work.

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³⁴ John Shinnars, "Mary and the People: The Cult of Mary and Popular Belief," in Donnelly, ed., *Mary, Woman of Nazareth*, 181.