

The Experience of Marian Apparitions and The Mary Cult

SARA HORSFALL*

Texas Wesleyan University

Since the earliest visions of Mary in the 4th century, there have been an estimated 21,000 sightings of Mary in the eastern and western Christian worlds. Centered on youth from the lower economic strata, the visions spawn a considerable following. Millions visit the well-known vision sites such as Lourdes, Fatima, and Guadalupe. Many healings were reported, a proportion of which were verified as miracles by authorities. Visions have become increasingly common in the 20th century, with reports from so many places it is hard to keep track of them all. Modern visions tend to be serial, or recurring, as well as public—witnessed by hundreds or thousands of others. Phenomenological examination reveals 16 characteristics of the Marian Apparitions spiritual life world.

Visions of Mary have been recorded since the 4th century when devotion to Mary was found among the fringes of Christianity (Miller and Samples 1992, pp. 67, 82). An 8th century story from the Eastern church about Mary's maternal influence on Christ's harsh justice increased Mary's popularity in the Western church. By the Middle Ages, Mary had become important to devotions: apparitions and other supernatural phenomena were frequently reported. The well-known rosary prayer was given during an appearance of Mary to St. Dominic in the 13th century (Fr. M. Sis, Conversation at St. Mary's Catholic Church, College Station, Texas, 1996). In Mexico in 1531, some 9 million natives converted to Catholicism after an appearance of Mary to Diego, an Aztec Indian in Guadalupe, on an important mother goddess site near Mexico City.

In the last two centuries the reports have increased. Pope Pius XII dubbed the 1800s the century of Marian predilection (Miller and Samples, 1992). Many apparitions appeared in

*Direct all correspondence to: Sara Horsfall, Sociology Department, Texas Wesleyan University, 1201 Wesleyan, Fort Worth, Texas 76105. Telephone: (817) 531-4264. E-mail: horsfals@txwes.edu

France, but two are especially well known. In 1846, Mary appeared to two cattle-herders in LaSalette, and in 1858, she appeared to a 14-year-old girl, Bernadette, at Lourdes (McBrien, 1989, p. 80). Another important appearance was at Fatima, Portugal, in 1917 when Mary appeared to three shepherd children. They had prayed for a year as instructed by an angel. Mary also told them to pray. Subsequent appearances on the 13th day of every month included apocalyptic visions and prophetic warnings. The last time Mary appeared to the children, many of the people who gathered to witness the phenomenon (including a skeptical reporter) were awed by a vision of the sun dancing in the heavens; at one point it appeared to fall from the sky. This event became known as the "Miracle of the Sun."

According to church historians, an estimated 21,000 apparition experiences have been reported throughout history (Carroll, 1983, p. 208; Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 82). More than 200 of those incidents were reported between 1928 and 1975 from places such as Ireland, Belgium, Italy, Canada, and the United States. In 1961 Mary appeared to four young girls in the small Spanish village of Garabandal, where for 5 years the faithful were urged to pray and repent to preserve the church. The visionary Mary told them of future supernatural events such as a healing miracle at Garabandal to be announced by one of the visionaries 8 days before, the conversion of Russia, and a worldwide millennial warning to be felt by everyone (Pelletier, n.d.). Some of the photos of the Garabandal apparition include the local villagers.

In 1981, in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, Mary appeared to six children aged 10 to 17. For several years, the children exhibited unusual devotion—fasting several times a week and spending 2 to 6 hours a day in prayer at the church. The apparition messages had to do with future apocalyptic events, but several were secret including a promised visible sign for atheists to be announced by a priest 10 days ahead of time. The public messages urged people to pray and fast to ward off war and urged people to be joyful as if at a wedding—taken as a reference to a meeting with Christ (Vlasic and Babaric, 1987, pp. 147, 156).

In the United States the visions have occurred in such diverse places as Denver, Colorado; Kettle River, Minnesota; Marlboro, New Jersey; Oxnard, California; northeastern Ohio; Royal Oak, Michigan; Houston, Texas; Lubbock, Texas; and in nearby Louisiana (Crumm, 1993; Zimdars-Swartz, 1991, pp. 17–18). In 1973 a New York housewife, Veronica Lueken, began receiving apocalyptic messages from Mary. The apparition condemned television, rock music, test-tube babies, abortion, homosexuality, and witchcraft. These messages have earned Lueken an ardent group of several thousand followers.

In 1988 Mary appeared at the predominantly Hispanic St. John Neumann Catholic Church of Lubbock, Texas. The crowds of several thousand return every August 15th to witness the "miracle." "You could see her clear as ever in the sky," explained one Texas woman who visited Lubbock in 1990. "Of course you can't see her face, hands and feet. Then everything turned to gold, and the sun started pulsating" (L. Scamardo, Personal interview, College Station, Texas, 1996). In 1990 Mary appeared to a Georgia woman, Nancy Fowler, and returned regularly every month for some time.

The number of people who visit sites where Mary once appeared, such as Fatima, Lourdes, and Guadalupe, continues to rise every year. For instance, in 1950 an estimated 1.5 million people visited Lourdes, whereas by 1970 the number had increased to 3.25 million (Turner and Turner, 1982, p. 171). Among the pilgrims is none other than Pope

John Paul, II, a devotee who credits Mary with assassination recovery and the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe (Miller and Samples 1992, p. 14).

Apparition sites are known as a source of healing. Many sites, such as Lourdes and LaSalette, have springs that are said to be curative (McBrien, 1989, p. 80). Newspapers now run ads for small vials of the healing water. Out of 5,000 of the claimed cures at Lourdes, 64 were investigated and proclaimed miraculous or medically inexplicable by church authorities (Marnham, 1981, p. viii).

Much of the popularity of Mary in this century came as a result of the messages from Fatima made public in the 1940s. The children referred to them as “the secrets.” Two of the visionaries had died, so Lucia, now a Carmelite nun, gave the message to the Bishops. It predicted World War II, the conversion of Russia, and peace for the world as well as a vision of the world being punished by war, famine, and persecution of the Church and the Pope. There was also a request to consecrate Russia to Mary (Pelletier, 1983, p. 195). Almost immediately a “Blue Army” (in opposition to the Communist Red Army) formed to spread the Fatima message and encourage monthly prayer services (Sockey, 1995, p. 2). Today there are some 25 million members in 140 different countries (Carroll, 1985, p. 56; Pisoni, 1994, p. 14).

Not all Marian apparitions are officially recognized as a legitimate. An apparition is considered authentic if there is no personal or political agenda, no commercial gain, if it does not lead to a celebrity status for the individuals involved, and if it fits in with the traditional beliefs (Fr. M. Sis, Conversation at St. Mary’s Catholic Church, College Station, Texas, 1996). Further it must not cause division among the Church, should renew the community life, lead to conversion of hearts, promote the reawakening and stimulation of faith (Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 85). In each instance, a local bishop investigates or appoints a commission to study the situation. Apparitions at Guadalupe, Lourdes, LaSallette, Fatima, and Medjugorje have been neither denied nor confirmed by the Church. Bennadeux and Banneux have been positively recognized as authentic. The vision at Bayside has been denied by church authorities. The Lubbock apparition has not yet been authenticated, nor have visions in other places in the United States.

The Church does not necessarily act on the messages of the apparitions. Despite the popular interest in the Fatima message, the Church did not consecrate Russia to Mary for 40 years. Finally in 1982 Pope John Paul, II, included Russia in his consecration of the world (Pelletier, 1983, p. 121), and the Blue Army was satisfied. The third part of the message remains even more contentious. Sealed in an envelope, it was to be revealed to the world at Lucia’s death, or in 1960, whichever came first. In 1960, Pope John XXIII opened it and then sent it to the archives. No Pope since then has made the message public. Even traditional church sources concede that “the secret has been entrusted from pope to pope, and that each has made a decision. . . not to reveal it to the world” (McBrien, 1989, p. 81). (Since this was written the Vatican has published the text. On June 26, 2000 it was revealed that the “third secret” was a vision of a pope struck by bullets but spared death because of prayer. Some have concluded that it is a reference to the attempt on Pope John Paul’s life in 1981. Others point to a larger symbolic meaning since the first secret had to do with WWI, and the second secret had to do with WWII.)

Because the apparitions seem to appear to socially disadvantaged persons, particularly those who are young or poor, some Freudian scholars conclude that the visions are hallucinations intended to gratify unconscious childhood desires (Carroll, 1983, p. 62).

The Freudian explanation is not entirely satisfactory, however, because it does not explain the extreme devotional behavior of children, such as the 10-year-olds at Medjugorje and Fatima who would normally choose play over long hours of prayer. As might be expected, Catholics routinely reject the Freudian interpretation by pointing to the difference between hallucinations and visions. For Catholics, the former have no objective reality, whereas the latter have a reality independent of the visionary: they are "objective interventions of a higher power" (Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 81). This is a second interpretation.

Another interpretation looks to periods of cultural crises. Apparitions regularly coincide with times of war or other troubles (Mestrovic, 1991, p. 136). Such an interpretation would explain the apocalyptic apparitions, but not the strictly conversionist ones, such as the apparition at Guadalupe. A fourth interpretation is that of religious leaders who point to the spiritual hunger among many people today, and the accompanying dismay at world conditions (Fr. M. Sis, Conversation at St. Mary's Catholic Church, College Station, Texas, 1996). Others have concluded that the apparition phenomenon addresses a missing feminine aspect of spirituality within the church (Mestrovic, 1991, p. 136; Miller and Samples 1992, p. 74; Fr. M. Sis, Conversation at St. Mary's Catholic Church, College Station, Texas, 1996). A variation of the last interpretation is that Marian apparitions fill a spiritual void left by churches that are increasingly worldly. According to this interpretation, the experience happens to youths because they are less influenced by worldly affairs and more open to the possibility of a spiritual experience.

This study presents the characteristics of Marian apparitions found in existing accounts of the experience. There is a brief discussion of the phenomenological approach, then the common characteristics of the "Marian apparition life world" are identified.

THE STUDY

This study looked at the subjective experiences of Marian apparitions. Sources include scholarly works (where they could be found), popular writings, and confirmatory personal interviews. (The numerous accounts of well known Marian apparitions tend to be more popular than are the scholarly.) It was beyond the scope here to interview the many living visionaries worldwide, so published accounts of their experiences were used. Furthermore, many of the visionaries lived in different centuries, so it is impossible to interview them personally. I was forced to rely on written accounts produced by the seer or by others writing about the phenomenon. Enough of the personal experience has been included that, despite the inevitable errors, it is possible to extract the predominant characteristics. Authoritative accounts were used whenever there was a question. Consistency of the accounts across visionary experiences lends credence to the adequacy of the material used at this point. It is for future studies to confirm or deny these exploratory characteristics.

The experiences were taken at "face value," phenomenologically. No preconceived explanations were used to examine the experiences. Whatever the visionaries claimed to see or hear was accepted with no judgment as to its reality or validity. The usual sociological explanations, such as the cultural source theory (experiences stem from the culture), subjective creation theories (an individual experiences what he or she "needs" or "expects" to see), or biological theories (hallucinations are caused by chemical imbalances), were not used. All such explanations were "bracketed" so that the experience itself can be examined to the fullest. It is the contention here that to approach the study with any

of the above perspectives would skew the observations to the extent that they would represent my views more than those of the visionaries. Some consider Marian apparitions to be subjective behavior, but it must be remembered that it is an experience that happens to many people, which makes it harder to rule out objective aspects. The fact that there have been an estimated 21,000 Marian apparitions reported itself points to the commonness of the experience. (Three Catholic sources are Geisler 1992, Warner 1960, and Weible 1993).

Schutz (1970) "life world" and the Weberian ideal were used as a framework to identify common characteristics. Schutz' term means the world that "asserts itself as the paramount reality of his life" (p. 320). The Weberian ideal is a generalized description of a group of people, no one of whom fits the description exactly. Thus the Marian apparition life world refers to the reality that asserts itself during the visionary experiences. The visionary experience is not continuous, but is an intermittent and alternative reality. All characteristics of the Marian apparition life world will not necessarily be found in every experience. Part of this is due to lack of record—a characteristic may have occurred, but was not written down—either because it was not considered important, or it was considered private. Even if the characteristic did not occur in a particular experience, that does not eliminate it from the generalization. The characteristics, taken together, describe the visionary experience.

RESULTS—THE MARIAN APPARITION LIFE WORLD

Unlike early visions, which were private revelations, since the 19th century, Marian apparitions have become serial: repeated appearances tend to be at regular intervals, such as a particular date of the month or particular time of day. They are also public: people surround the seer during the vision creating events "of sometimes immense proportions" (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991, p. 5). For instance, within days after Mary appeared to six young people in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, 15,000 people gathered in the street, despite police attempts to suppress the event and the imprisonment of the local priest (Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 104). Interestingly, the apparition always speaks to the visionaries in their own local language. The visionaries typically go into a trance state during which they do not react to sight, sound, or touch (Burnham, 1990, p. 48). Examination of the different experiences revealed the following 16 characteristics:

1. The Marian Apparition Life World Includes First and Second Class Experiences

This visionary experiences both other beings and elements of the environment during a vision. (First class experience is social, a second class experience involves the environment.) The visionaries encounter Mary, a being who converses with them. Many of the visionaries, and those who witness the visions, experience the environment as well. A frequent report is the smell of flowers or roses. At Guadalupe, Diego filled his cloak with roses, which then turned into a permanent imprint of Mary. In Medjugorje, three flashes of light accompanied the coming of the apparition (Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 105). The children at Fatima took foliage home with them after their vision, which their aunt recognized as having a "strange, delicious, unearthly fragrance" that pervaded their home (Cappa, 1947, p. 78). At Fatima, there was the "miracle of the sun," which was repeated in Lubbock and other places.

2. The Marian Apparition Life World Is as Real as the Physical World

During the apparition experience, visionaries do things that would otherwise be considered inappropriate. Bernadette (who later became a nun), aged 14 years, walked on her knees, ate grass, and drank from a spring at the request of the Mary vision (Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 91). All accounts of Medjugorje include the children's descriptions of Mary as a "real, external person, occupying three-dimensional space" (Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 105). She spoke to them in their native language, and the children could hear and touch her. The reality of the vision was also seen in the later actions of the visionaries. Children were willing to forgo the pleasures of youth to become uncharacteristically religious. In Medjugorje, the children withstood interrogation by the police, as well as other social and political threats by people wanting them to recant. The children at Fatima were interrogated by the police and threatened with death if they did not reveal the secret they were told by the vision (Cappa, 1947, p. 80). Nonvisionaries, too, regard the phenomenon as real, as seen in the activities of the Blue Army and faith in the healing power of the apparitions.

3. The Marian Apparition Life World Has a Force or Authority of Its Own

The vision takes center stage in the lives of the visionary, at least temporarily. The children at Fatima, Medjugorje, and Lourdes devoted a major portion of their time to the visionary experience and the fulfillment of the vision's requests. At Medjugorje the vision could not be stopped by the Yugoslavian police. Pope Pius XII could not stop the phenomenon, nor could the Second Vatican Council in 1962–1965 (Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 13). At Guadalupe, the roses Diego took to the bishop that made a picture on his cloak had the authority to convince the bishop (Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 89).

4. The Marian Apparition Life World Has Different Realms or Orders

Some of the visions (Fatima and Medjugorje) included a view of hell, purgatory, and heaven. (Miller and Samples, 1992, pp. 96, 105).

5. Within, the Marian Apparition Life World Is Not Static, but Includes a Process of Growth

At Fatima, the central message was a call to peace, to avoid Russia spreading its error throughout the world and causing wars and persecution of the church. This implies a passage of time and the possibility of change and growth from one situation into another. The secret messages the children were given also imply a passage of time and a growth process: three secrets were to be revealed at three different times, implying that something was to occur in the interim. There is also a feeling of growth when the children at Fatima were told to pray for a year prior to the Marian apparition. Other apparitions similarly sought prayer, which implied change.

6. Some People Have Some Control Over the Marian Apparition Life World

The apparitions appear to some and not others. Visionaries control the apparitions to the extent that they can create the right conditions for the apparitions to come. Many of the visionaries felt compelled to pray and fulfill other religious behavior to ensure that the apparition would appear again. They cannot make the apparition do their bidding, but in Medjugorje, the apparitions appeared inside the church after the children requested it (the police did not allow religious services outside; Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 104).

7. The Logic and Order of the Marian Apparition Life World Is Not the Same as the Physical World

A vision is seeing something that has no physical reality, so by its very definition, it contradicts the known physical order of things. At the Fatima Miracle of the Sun, the sun appeared to “dance” and “fall,” things it cannot do in the physical world (Cappa, 1947, p. 82). Mary is often described as floating, something a physical body could not do (Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 105). Similarly, she often disappears into the air or slowly fades away “like a feather in the breeze, without ever moving her feet” (Cappa, 1947, p. 42; Zimdars-Swartz, 1991, p. 31).

At La Salette, the apparition knew or remembered things that the children did not. She reminded Maximin of an experience with his father when he saw spoiled wheat. The apparition identified herself to Bernadette as the “Immaculate Conception,” a term that meant nothing to the 14 year old girl, but had great meaning to the parish cure (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991, pp. 31, 55).

Predictions of world events and other events are likewise not representative of the physical order of things because it implies knowledge of something before it happens. The healing so often associated with the Marian apparitions, especially that which cannot be explained medically, is another example of a nonphysical order.

8. It Is Hard to Express the Experience in Materialistic Language

The trance state itself is hard to explain in materialistic language.

Bernadette was stiff and unmoving during her ecstasies, her eyes open and fixed on a spot just above the grotto. Her lips sometimes moved as if to speak, and she sometimes leaned forward as if to salute her vision: sometimes she smiles, and sometimes her eyes were moist (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991, pp. 49–50).

Descriptions of the experience use adjectives and phrases such as “heavenly” or “unearthly” (Cappa, 1947, p. 78); “beautiful beyond anything they had ever seen or imagined” (Cappa, 1947, p. 39); “unearthly light” (Cappa, 1947, p. 39); “a light more dazzling than the sun” (Cappa, 1947, p. 39); “radiant as the sun,” “gleaming like precious jewels” (Campbell, 1982, p. 6); “brilliant vision” and “radiant woman” (Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 89); “more brilliant than the sun” (Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 94).

Finally, the fact that the third part of the Fatima message was not made public for so many years indicates the phenomenon is hard to believe.

9. People Are Drawn to the Experience and to Those Who Have Experienced the Marian Apparition Life World

There are numerous accounts of the willingness with which the visionaries participate in the visions. Some such as Lucia, at Fatima, who indicated her feelings to others. Lucia described the vision as being “accompanied by a feeling of great joy and peace of soul” (Cappa, 1947, p. 21).

The attraction the experience has for others is phenomenal. Millions visit the apparition sites each year. Even more astounding is how quickly an apparition attracts inquisitors. At Medjugorje, by the 4th or 5th day, a crowd of 15,000 had gathered (Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 104). At Mount Melleray, Ireland, in August 1985, thousands gathered to witness the apparition experiences of two boys, who were aided by a public address system brought in on the second night (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991, p. 17). In Lubbock, Texas, just the possibility of an appearance of Mary brought a crowd of thousands. At Lourdes, the crowd that gathered to accompany Bernadette to the apparition site each morning for two weeks grew daily (Zimdars-Swartz 1991, p. 49) to as many as 8,000 people (Marnham 1981)

10. The Individual Experiences Dichotomies and Conflict in the Marian Apparition Life World

The visions are not an escape into an idealistic world without strife. Conflict is seen in the exhortation of the Marian apparition to prayer to avert disasters in the world. The Fatima messages, for instance, inspired the formation of the Blue Army, ready to do (spiritual) battle with the Communist Red Army. The Reparation Service, requested by the Marian apparition at Fatima, is another indication of the good and evil dichotomy: a religious observance requested to “repair” the evils of the world. Many of the apparition messages also point to the concept of suffering as punishment.

Another dichotomy is revealed to the extent that the apparitions represent the feminine side of the religious experience. Devotion to Mary is characterized by mercy and forgiveness, healing and comfort, in contrast to the judgment often felt as the more masculine quality of the religious experience.

11. The Marian Apparition Life World Is an Isomorphic Parallel of the Outer World

This is seen most dramatically in the predictions and messages. Knowledge of future physical events is a kind of invisible parallel of the physical world. Other ways in which the vision seems to parallel the physical world is the importance of light and other physical artifacts, such as the cloak used by Diego at Guadalupe.

12. Lives Are Changed

The message of the apparition is change pray that the world might be changed, that the direction things are moving might be altered. Without question the lives of the visionaries are changed. Many devote their lives to religious work. Bernadette, who died in a convent in Nevers, was described as

remarkable for her independence of spirit, absolute honesty and courage. [She] stood by her visions and her convictions despite threats of prison and insane asylums,

persecutions, and humiliations of all sorts. The transformation of her life and character... from an ignorant, underdeveloped little girl into a woman of extraordinary strength and reserve, is one of the amazing facets of this altogether amazing story. (Cranston, 1955, p. 10)

The lives of the visionaries are not the only ones changed. During the Miracle of the Sun at Fatima, a skeptical journalist had a change of heart, and many who initially heard the stories of the visions and accompanied the children altered their lives to accommodate the phenomenon and the directions of the apparition. Formation of various groups to carry out the wishes of the apparition, and indeed, the whole of the Mary Cult itself, speaks of the changes wrought by the experiences.

13. Increased Knowledge

The visionaries received messages and were taught things, both for their private understanding and for the public use. Both public and private messages are increased knowledge about individual situations or the state of affairs in the world.

14. Universalism

There is an element of universalism in the experience of the Marian apparition life world, despite the fact that the apparitions occur in different countries. Until recently it could be argued that the visionaries had little or no knowledge of other visions. The fact that visionaries are frequently humble and young implies greater universality than if they were educated and upper class.

15. Union

The trance experiences are experiences of union; all other distractions are blocked out, including the distraction of the physical body. Many of the visionaries' descriptions of their feelings toward Mary during the apparition are very similar to descriptions used by the mystics.

16. Community

The most obvious communal aspect of the Marian apparitions is the public, serial experiences, where hundreds and thousands of persons come to witness the vision. The experience is also communal in that it creates a community of devotees, ready and willing to go to meet, to pray, to explain the phenomenon to others. The visions were

social in nature, in the sense that particular communities became very interested in them, investigated and found collaborating evidence for the visionaries' claims [sometimes in the claims of other visionaries], and were very concerned for some time with what they understood as the Virgin's requests. In some cases, the Virgin reportedly appeared to seers more than once, for example to remind a community that they were not heeding her initial requests. (Zimdars-Swartz 1991, p. 6)

CONCLUSION

By comparing the experiences reported by the visionaries I identified 16 characteristics of the Marian apparition life world. Despite the observation by Catholic writers that Mary

separates Catholics from Protestants (Miller and Samples, 1992, p. 15), the experience of Marian apparitions are similar to spiritual experiences of non-Catholics. Fourteen of the characteristics of the Marian apparition spiritual life world are the same characteristics found in the spiritual life world of a variety of other experiences (see Horsfall, 1996). The popularity of this other-worldly experience is likely to arise from the instability of our age and from a desire to experience life and find meaning beyond the common material and social structures. In short, Marian apparitions appear to be the Catholic equivalent of New Age spirituality.

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