

APPARITIONS

A spirit glided past my face; the hair of my flesh stood up. It stood still, but I could not discern its appearance. A form was before my eyes; there was silence, then I heard a voice. ~ Job 4:15-16

MANY PEOPLE WHO CONSIDER JOINING the Catholic Church look with wonder and apprehension at the phenomenon of apparitions, that is, visions of Heavenly beings

to humans. These Heavenly beings can be seen, heard, and sometimes touched, and they communicate directly with the person or persons receiving the vision, who are conscious, not asleep. These apparitions are quite varied over the history of the Church, and include aspects of God himself (including the infant or child Jesus), angels, and saints. By far the most frequent person to appear is Mary, the Mother of God.

The Church is exceedingly slow to recognize or approve claims of apparitions. The Church has never required the faithful to believe in any apparition, except those described in Scripture, such as an angel to Mary at the Annunciation (see Lk 1:26-38), since apparitions cannot add anything to the saving truths given in Scripture and guarded in the Church's Tradition. Belief in even creditable apparitions, such as those of the Mother of God at Guadalupe in 1531, Lourdes in 1858, and Fatima in 1917, is not necessary for salvation. A faithful Catholic can accept them or not. Yet apparitions have value, since they can prompt us to greater devotion, increase our awareness of specific beliefs or practices, and encourage repentance, conversion of hearts, and growth in holiness.

When the Church does undertake to study and examine an apparition, it does so in minute detail. Its first concern is a detailed analysis of the message given to the visionary, to determine whether it contains anything contrary to a doctrine of the faith. Every

facet of the event (or series of events) is scrutinized, often with the help of experts in various scientific disciplines, including physicians and psychologists, and of known skeptics, even atheists. Not only is the apparition intensely reviewed but the visionaries themselves are also subject to detailed, even excruciating, questioning and evaluation, for many reported apparitions and visions are not authentic and may even be deliberate hoaxes. Very often, the Church, through the bishop of the diocese where the event occurred, asks for a sign to help prove the truth of an appearance, such as the bishop's request to St. Juan Diego at Guadalupe in Mexico, to whom the Blessed Mother gave Spanish roses in December and a miraculous life-size image of herself on St. Juan Diego's cloak, an image undimmed over four



The Dream of St. Joseph, by Antonio Cisneri, 1821-1891

hundred fifty years later. The sign at Fatima was an exceedingly remarkable natural wonder, when the sun danced in the sky, throwing off all the colors of the rainbow, then fell toward the earth before returning to its normal place. This sign was witnessed by many thousands of people.

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Each of these places, as well as the sites of many other approved apparitions, have become places of pilgrimage where great churches have been erected to the glory of God, souls are continually attracted to repentance and conversion of heart, great manifestations of personal faith occur, and frequent miracles of healing and salvation take place.

For the most part, the Church is reluctant to approve these miraculous phenomena and other mystical experiences. But these phenomena continue to occur.



Apparition of the Virgin to St. Bernard, by Wilhelm Bernatzik, 1855-1906

***“Jesus and his Mother are aware of us and care for us
in a most visible manner.”***

They are events and circumstances that truly matter in the life of the Church and its faithful members. From experience, we know that there have been significant consequences, most of them good, resulting from these phenomena. In less than a decade, the apparition of Guadalupe resulted in the conversion of over eight million Mexicans to Catholicism. The spring uncovered at the grotto at Lourdes has remained famous for its miraculous healing powers, attested to by the most credible physicians. The prophecies of Fatima, especially with respect to Russia and to the advent of World War II, were borne out by subsequent events and led to the consecration of the entire world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The dissolution of evil cultures has been attributed to Our Lady of Guadalupe (the Aztec empire, which engaged in massive human sacrifice) and Our Lady of Fatima (the fall of the

Communist empire of Soviet Russia). Such phenomenal outcomes are not necessarily attributable to the apparitions themselves, but to their effect upon people who turned to God in conversion, in renewed lives of prayer, and in the practice of a life of devotion that would otherwise never have occurred.

Few if any of us may be favored with a vision, but the events that have taken place, and others that God may see fit to allow to happen in the future, can have an impact on our spiritual lives. We can use the stories, messages, places of worship, and opportunities for pilgrimages that dot the world as sources of grace and spiritual renewal. We do this firm in the knowledge that Jesus and, in these days, especially his Mother are aware of us and care for us and our needs in a most visible manner.

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