

Pre-publication appraisals of *Medjugorje Revisited*

Donal Foley has done lovers of accuracy a favor and provided believers in Christ and children of the Blessed Virgin Mary a signal service with this book. Stick with the Church's approved apparitions and accept no dodgy substitutes!

—Mark P. Shea, author, *Mary, Mother of the Son*

Donal Foley is very well equipped for this task of informing readers about the events at Medjugorje in a balanced way, and from a Catholic point of view. His university formation includes Humanities and Theology. Foley gives an excellent introduction to the Medjugorje phenomenon. He explains many of its aspects which are generally unknown. The author is very careful regarding the historical foundations of his work, but also provides an exemplary theological evaluation. Whoever wants to deepen their understanding of Medjugorje will find this book a rich source of information on which to assess it.

—Prof. Dr. Manfred Hauke, Theological Faculty of Lugano, Switzerland

Medjugorje Revisited is a sober, balanced, and unremittingly charitable examination of the most popular unapproved private revelation in Church history. It's also a refreshing corrective to a relentlessly one-sided campaign by the Medjugorje Movement to dominate the print-and internet publishing world through pilgrimage packages, pro-Medjugorje books and conferences, DVDs, tracts, internet interviews with the seers and their latest goings-on.

—Patrick Coffin, Author & Radio Host, *Catholic Answers Live*

Medjugorje Revisited is a thorough and careful examination of the alleged apparitions in the former Yugoslavia, placed in their historical context. Using the traditional Catholic criteria for the assessment of visions, the author describes the many problems that arise from the testimony of the alleged visionaries. He amply shows why successive local bishops have refused to declare the claimed apparitions worthy of belief. *Medjugorje Revisited* deserves to be widely studied.

—Fr Thomas Crean, OP, author, *A Catholic Replies to Professor Dawkins*

Donal Foley's comprehensive and convincing study of Medjugorje, *Medjugorje Revisited*, provides a superb analysis of the alleged apparitions of Our Lady. It exposes what amounts to a pathological religious phenomenon that has duped millions of people seeking spiritual consolation in especially troubled times when God seemed dead and the Church torn by dissent and disobedience. May this book's discerning judgment find definitive reinforcement in the long-awaited Vatican decision on Medjugorje!

—James Likoudis, President Emeritus, *Catholics United for the Faith*

Extracts from reviews of *Understanding Medjugorje*

Foley's book on Medjugorje defends the rational basis of faith, the realm of sound common sense, and the traditional wisdom of the Church in his argument that Medjugorje has created "a misguided quest for 'signs and wonders,' " and developed into "a vast, if captivating religious illusion." Examining the entire phenomenon of the apparitions from their inception in 1981 to the present, Foley mounts compelling evidence that questions the authenticity of the visions of the seers. The most cogent aspect of his argument contrasts the approved miracles at Fatima and Lourdes with the alleged appearances of the Holy Mother at Medjugorje.

In short, this book views the events at Medjugorje from a comprehensive, historical, objective point of view that avoids the religious enthusiasm and charismatic emotionalism of its advocates. This is an arresting book that poses an impressive intellectual and religious challenge to those who have never honestly questioned the authentic nature of the events at Medjugorje.

—Dr Mitchell Kalpakian, *The Wanderer*, 20 August 2009

It has long seemed to me that a balanced and authoritative response would require a team of experts fluent in Croatian in order to untangle the complex phenomenon of Medjugorje ... I am now fairly convinced that Donal Foley has done a great deal of that necessary work in assembling, untangling and sorting out the studies already carried out by experts and then weighing and evaluating them.

—Msgr. Arthur B. Calkins, *Miles Immaculatae*, January-June 2009

British author Donal Anthony Foley, a well-known author on Marian apparitions, has written *Understanding Medjugorje: Heavenly Visions or Religious Illusion*: English-speaking readers will find it an excellent summary of the evidence for and against the authenticity of the apparitions in the village of Medjugorje in the former Yugoslavia. Foley notes that the advocates of Medjugorje have too often ignored the 17 tape recordings of the interviews with the seers that took place after the alleged visions. These recordings of June 27, 28, 29, and 30, 1981, reveal such inconsistencies, contradictions and bizarre comments in the seers' testimony, that even Fr. Zovko himself was led to initially deny the authenticity of Our Lady's appearance! These first tape recordings are, moreover, at odds with later interviews held with the seers.

—James Likoudis, President Emeritus, CUF

It is a good time to have a cool look at the claims and the truth [about Medjugorje]. This is done admirably in this book by Donal Foley—an expert on the appearances of Our Blessed Lady and, even more important, one with great devotion to her. It is well written, examines all the available evidence and is, above all, clear. A select bibliography gives sources for further study and the many references and citations are given very clearly in notes at the back but enable the general reader to carry on without interruption. This is a scholarly book but is easy to read even when it guides the reader through the Hampton Court Maze of Balkans history and Church feuds. If you only read one book on Medjugorje, then make it this one.

—Eric Hester, *Catholic Times*, UK, 25 June 2006

In one of the few books available today offering a critical look at Medjugorje, Donal Foley performs an excellent service in unraveling the many threads that comprise the genesis and history of the phenomenon. He discusses the significant role of the charismatic movement and tourism industry in propagating the visions, and shows how Medjugorje compares unfavorably to approved apparitions, especially Fatima. He presents an excellent overview of the complex historical backdrop preceding the apparitions to the six visionaries, three of whom still experience daily visions.

There is so much valuable information packed into this 310-page book that this review would have to be ten times longer to even summarize it. The book is extremely well written, employing a clear, captivating, and engaging style. It contains neither rancor nor bitter accusations, but rather presents an unrelenting examination of the vast set of problems that encompass Medjugorje. This is required reading for anyone who wants to understand the profound difference between Medjugorje and Church-approved apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

—Frank Rega, author, *St Francis of Assisi and the Conversion of the Muslims, Padre Pio and America*

From 24 June 1981 five teenagers and a younger boy from a small village in Bosnia-Herzegovina called Bijakovici near Medjugorje first began seeing apparitions on a local hill of someone they called “Gospa”—Croatian for “Our Lady”. It is this phenomenon that Foley, author of the scholarly *Marian Apparitions, the Bible, and the Modern World*, seeks to investigate. The question he addresses is: are these visions from heaven or are they a religious illusion? Referring to the subject of the apparitions diplomatically as “the Vision”, he has conducted a painstaking and thorough investigation of every aspect of the case and, in an area fraught with strong, even aggressive opinions his tone is moderate and charitable throughout.

—Jack Carrigan, *Catholic Herald*, UK, 14 May 2006

Donal Foley takes the reader on a journey of discovery through the formidable information maze that surrounds Medjugorje. His tenacity in not losing the narrow path to the truth about the Balkan prodigy among many false trails and dead alleys would make Hercule Poirot jealous. Foley unearths little known Croatian sources and calls upon Catholic scholars to shed light on the enigma of Medjugorje. He delivers what he promises and takes his readers to the heart of the matter. *Understanding Medjugorje* is excellent!

—John Hauf, Editor Emeritus, *SOUL magazine*, USA

Complete versions of these reviews, and others, can be seen at:

www.theotokos.org.uk/pages/books/medjbook/medjcomm.html

Medjugorje Revisited:
30 Years of Visions
or Religious Fraud?

... for even Satan disguises himself
as an angel of light. (2 Cor 11:14)

“Oftentimes, to win us to our harm
the instruments of darkness tell us truths;
Win us with honest trifles, to betray us
In deepest consequence.”

Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 3

By the same author

Marian Apparitions, the Bible, and the Modern World,
(Gracewing, Leominster, 2002)

Italian translation:

Il libro delle Apparizioni Mariane, (Gribaudi, Milan, 2004)

Apparitions of Mary: Their Meaning in History,
(Catholic Truth Society, London, 2000)

*Understanding Medjugorje:
Heavenly Visions or Religious Illusion?*
(Theotokos Books, Nottingham, 2006)

Christian Living: The Spirituality of the Foyers of Charity
(Theotokos Books, Nottingham, 2006)

More details at: www.theotokos.org.uk

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www.theotokos.org.uk/pages/books/medjbook/medjbook.html

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Cover photo details clockwise from top left: 1. Rotunda and pilgrims at rear of St James's church, Medjugorje; 2. Medjugorje visionary Marija Pavlovic; 3. Pilgrims on Mt. Krizevac 4. Croatian Nationalist items on sale in front of St James's church, Medjugorje. (The cassette tapes are a representation of the original tapes).

Medjugorje Revisited

30 Years of Visions
or Religious Fraud?

*An updated, revised and expanded
version of Understanding Medjugorje*

Donal Anthony Foley

Theotokos Books

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Details of various websites and blogs associated with some of the people mentioned above, which have information about Medjugorje and associated matters can be seen in the section on recommended Medjugorje resources at the end of this book. There are some recommended Fatima resources there too.

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Foreword

Many people will celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the extraordinary events which started at Medjugorje in June 2011, believing them to be authentic Marian apparitions. But the last official declaration of the Church, from the Yugoslavian bishops in 1991, does not support this enthusiasm and indicates that no supernatural origin can be affirmed for the alleged visions (“non constat de supernaturalitate”).

In March 2010, a Vatican commission under Cardinal Camillo Ruini began to study the phenomenon of Medjugorje; the report of these studies will be transmitted to the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith for further evaluation. The fact of this critical investigation and the non-acceptance of the alleged “apparitions” by the local bishop, are a clear sign to the faithful to be prudent about the Medjugorje phenomenon. But coming to a balanced judgment about Medjugorje is difficult, because the information in the mass media is dominated by presentations which give enthusiastic support to the “apparitions” of the “Gospa”. Sometimes we even find devotees who consider critical voices as manifestations of the devil.

Given this situation, it is an urgent necessity to offer all interested readers a balanced treatment of the Medjugorje phenomenon, one based on an intensive study of the sources. At the same time it requires a Catholic sense of faith which is ready to accept genuine supernatural manifestations of Mary, the Mother of God, in history, without succumbing to credulity.

Donal Foley is very well equipped for this task of informing readers about the events at Medjugorje in a balanced way, and from a Catholic point of view. His university formation includes Humanities and Theology. He has written a work on Marian apparitions—*Marian Apparitions, the Bible, and the Modern World*—which takes seriously the prophetic significance of the authentic manifestations of the Virgin Mary, and which carefully explains them for contemporary readers. This standard work of reference appeared in 2002 and was translated into Italian soon after, in 2004.

In 2006, Foley published the first version of the present work, which looked at how we should understand Medjugorje, and posed the question: Are we confronted with heavenly visions or with a religious illusion? That work received a very positive response, and is now appearing here in an updated and revised form. It avoids any polemics, but also studies the problematic aspects of Medjugorje, not shrinking from the critical question: Are there elements which suggest even a diabolic influence?

The new version offers some innovative points of view, for instance the comparison of Medjugorje with Montanism in the ancient Church, a movement which presented itself as “charismatic” and “prophetic”, and which was accepted initially even by many ecclesiastical dignitaries, but which was ultimately rejected by the Church.

In sum, Foley gives an excellent introduction to the Medjugorje phenomenon. He explains many of its aspects which are generally unknown. The author is very careful regarding the historical foundations of his work, but also provides an exemplary theological evaluation. Whoever wants to deepen their understanding of Medjugorje will find this book a rich source of information on which to assess it. The study is written in a very fluent way and is accessible to a wide readership. At the same time, it offers the necessary specialist information required for an accurate theological understanding of Medjugorje, and could also be important in comprehending the future evaluation of the Holy See.

Prof Dr Manfred Hauke, Theological Faculty, Lugano, Switzerland

Preface

Medjugorje—with its half a dozen seers, tens of thousands of messages, sundry secrets and requests, plus a promised Great Sign—who can keep track of it all? Well, to Donal Foley go the laurels. With a craftsman’s attention to detail and a storyteller’s knack for distilling what’s important, Foley puts it all together in *Medjugorje Revisited*, an expanded upgrade of an earlier work. In these pages you will find a sober, balanced, and unremittingly charitable examination of the most popular unapproved private revelation in Church history.

Foley doesn’t simply tell the story from its inception on June 24, 1981, but sets the whole phenomenon against a broad historical and doctrinal framework, comparing it with Fatima and other approved apparitions and, more disturbingly, with some condemned apparitions. He takes the claims of the seers on their own merits, and asks the sensible but heretofore unpopular question: are these genuine appearances of the Blessed Virgin Mary or not? Even if you don’t agree with 100 percent of his conclusions, the open-minded reader will see in Foley’s research a refreshing corrective to the 30-year domination by pro-Medjugorje publications, websites, pilgrimage packages, conferences, DVDs, interviews with the purported seers and their latest goings-on. Some readers will be shocked that there’s even another side to the story.

Foley rightly acknowledges the good “fruits of Medjugorje” such as conversion to Christ, a return to the sacraments, even religious vocations, which are invariably touted as proof of its authenticity. But he has also taken the time to examine all the fruits including the bad ones (and some very bad ones). He has also compiled the authoritative ecclesiastical responses to Medjugorje from the beginning, as well as the official criteria by which the Catholic Church judges private revelations. For any truth seeker, this alone is worth the book’s price.

Peoples’ reactions to Medjugorje can be boiled down to four basic groups: a) those who support the directives of the local Ordinary, His Excellency Ratko Peric (whose negative assessment follows that of his predecessor, the late Bishop Pavao Zanic, and of

every Commission that has ever investigated Medjugorje); b) those who don't know enough to have an opinion up or down; c) those who suspect or believe that the Mother of God has been appearing in Medjugorje; and d) the fringe fanatics who equate "real" Catholicism with uncritical devotion to Medjugorje. The book you now hold will be of great interest to the first three, and odious to the fourth.

Above all, and in no way anticipating the final verdict of the Ruini Commission now studying the matter at the behest of Pope Benedict XVI, Foley shows that what's at stake in the debate transcends Medjugorje and goes to the whole question of authority and of obedience thereto. If only half of *Medjugorje Revisited* is true, it nonetheless shows vividly that the sprawling, convoluted happening that began 30 summers ago in Bosnia-Herzegovina faces—to say the least—an uphill battle for Church approval.

Patrick Coffin, Author & Radio Host, *Catholic Answers Live*

Introduction

It is now five years since the previous version of this book was published, and there have been a number of new developments in the intervening period, including the announcement, in March 2010, of the formation of an International Commission under Cardinal Ruini to investigate Medjugorje. But there have also been more disturbing developments, and particularly, in July 2009, the news about the laicization of Fr Tomislav Vlasic—who was intimately associated with Medjugorje in the early days—and his dismissal from the Franciscan Order.

There are signs, then, that the Medjugorje story is approaching a climax, but it is worrying to note that an appreciation of that fact seems to be lacking amongst many of its devotees, who still seem unwilling to face up to the serious problems associated with believing in the claims of the visionaries. And likewise, there is a lack of appreciation that Medjugorje contrasts very unfavorably with Fatima, and can actually be seen as one of the most serious obstacles to the widespread implementation of the Fatima message in the Church.

Having said all that, the basic facts about Medjugorje can be related quite quickly. Beginning on 24 June 1981, six young people from a small village in Bosnia-Herzegovina, five of them in their mid-teens, and one aged ten, began to claim that they were seeing the Blessed Virgin Mary on a nearby hillside. Four were girls, and two boys. News of this spread very rapidly—initially in the village itself and then throughout still-Communist Yugoslavia. Great crowds of pilgrims congregated as the days went on and the visionaries claimed that they were still seeing Our Lady, or the *Gospa*, as she is known in Croatian. Some of the local Franciscan priests supported these claims, and even the Bishop, Msgr Zanic, was open initially to this possibility, although over a period of time, he began to have serious doubts.

Meanwhile, increasing numbers of pilgrims from further afield came to visit during the 1980s, as Medjugorje became better known in the Catholic Church. The civil war in Yugoslavia in the early

nineties only temporarily affected its popularity, and for thirty years now, some of the visionaries have been claiming to receive daily visitations from the Blessed Mother.

Large numbers of pilgrims still journey to Medjugorje, even though the present Bishop, Msgr Peric, has declared himself opposed to the visions, and despite the fact that in 1991 the Bishops' Conference of ex-Yugoslavia came to the conclusion that it could not be affirmed that "supernatural apparitions and revelations" had taken place there. In addition, the claims of the visionaries have received no official support from the Vatican. That, very briefly, is an outline of what has taken place regarding Medjugorje, but there are other aspects related to these events which this work also focuses on.

One of these is the historical background to Medjugorje, including the local Franciscan dispute with official Church authority—and the accompanying disobedience—which has affected Bosnia-Herzegovina in recent years, and which has been an important factor as regards the growth of Medjugorje. This disobedience has been exemplified in the actions of the three priests most closely associated with the visions and the visionaries, Fr Tomislav Vlastic, Fr Jozo Zovko, and Fr Slavko Barbaric.

Another major contributory factor has been the conjunction between the Charismatic Movement and the visions. Again, without this factor of a Charismatic network already in place around the world—and supportive of the visions and the visionaries—it is doubtful if Medjugorje would have had anything like the impact it has had on the Church. Similarly, support from clerical figures, and in particular Fr René Laurentin, has been crucial in giving Medjugorje an apparent air of orthodoxy.

A crucial point is that most of the early books about Medjugorje were based on quite late interviews with the visionaries, and the primary source material—tapes made during the first week or so of the visions—has been for the most part ignored. On examination, transcripts of these tapes reveal some illuminating facts about Medjugorje, and this book is thus, amongst other things, concerned with assessing the importance of that evidence.

In particular, the tape transcripts show that the manner in which the Medjugorje "Gospa" appeared to the visionaries, and the

number of claimed visions, is at variance with what happened previously during those apparitions of the real Blessed Virgin which have been approved by the Church.

What the transcripts also reveal, is that there is a very high probability that what the visionaries saw during the first week or so of visions was not the Blessed Mother, but actually a diabolical counterfeit; and other evidence of diabolical influence in the vicinity is also studied in this book.

The medical and scientific tests done on the visionaries are examined in detail and their many deficiencies and lack of rigor demonstrated, as also the fact that, apart from the tests done under the auspices of the Yugoslav Bishops' Conference, none of them have any validity in the eyes of the Church. And the same can be said for the claims for miraculous cures at Medjugorje, many of which have involved diseases such as Multiple Sclerosis, which can go into spontaneous remission.

This book also explores many other aspects of Medjugorje, including the fact that it has led to divisions amongst the faithful, and even between members of the hierarchy. It also looks at the affluent lifestyle of the visionaries and how this contrasts with the way genuine seers of the past lived and behaved.

Similarly, the shocking violence which took place in and around Medjugorje during the civil war in the nineties is examined, including both the killings in the town itself, and those which took place in concentration camps in the vicinity. In fact, as will be seen, the perverted nationalism which some Hercegovina Franciscans indulged in was one of the contributory factors in bringing about the violence in the region.

In sum, most pilgrims to Medjugorje have been unaware of many of the less savory aspects of what has taken place there; but it is to be hoped that sensible Medjugorje supporters will look at all this evidence with an open mind, and realize that there are indeed issues regarding acceptance of Medjugorje which do need to be faced up to, so as to avoid the cult-like attitude to Medjugorje which does, regrettably, seem to have developed amongst some of its more extreme supporters.

3

The Medjugorje Tapes and the Visionaries

Questions about the Visionaries

If we look at the visionaries as individuals, and likewise at their general backgrounds, we can better understand the *milieu* in which the visions arose. It certainly seems fair to describe their family life as less than ideal: for example, Vicka Ivankovic's father was an overseas worker, while her mother may have suffered from depression; in addition, Ivanka Ivankovic's mother had just died, and according to Fr Sivric, another, Mirjana Dragicevic, may well have had emotional problems.⁴⁶

This general point is backed up in an interview, which took place on 27 February 1983, between Marinko Ivankovic, a "father figure" to the visionaries, and Fr Svetozar Kraljevic, the author of *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*. Marinko, the next-door neighbor of both Marija and Vicka in Bijakovici, was asked by the priest why he had involved himself with them, given that he was nearly forty, and a grown man with a family of his own. He responded to this by saying

the children have sometimes found themselves in difficult circumstances, especially Ivanka. She was the first in the group who saw the light and the Madonna. Her mother was dead and her father was in Germany. Practically, too, Jakov does not have a father; he lives in Bosnia but rarely visits here. Then Mirjana's family lives in Sarajevo. *In one way or another, the children did not have parental advice or the protection of parents.*⁴⁷

Mary Craig described them as follows: “They were very different in temperament, social background and mental capacity—their intelligence ranging from slightly above to way below average.”⁴⁸

These are indications that the visionaries were to a greater or lesser extent emotionally vulnerable in some way, and therefore susceptible to the risk of things going wrong in any encounter with the preternatural, to say nothing of the diabolical.

As noted above, it is also the case that the visionaries were apparently not part of Fr Zovko’s Charismatic prayer group, that is they were not particularly “religious,” and thus to some extent were outsiders.⁴⁹ Contrast the above deficiencies with the beautiful picture of family life which emerges from Sr Lucia’s second volume of her autobiography, *Fatima in Lucia’s own words II*.⁵⁰ This gives us the background to the apparitions, and shows how the three seers of Fatima, Francisco, Jacinta and Lucia, were very privileged in that they were brought up in a wonderful Catholic atmosphere, both in terms of their home life and the surrounding culture. Although they were relatively poor in economic terms, they were very rich in the blessings of the Faith, and in particular they did not come from families which were to some extent or other troubled.⁵¹

The Medjugorje Tapes

Many of the standard accounts of Medjugorje are based on interviews made by Frs Tomislav Vlasic and Svetozar Kraljevic about a year and a half after the original visions began in June 1981, or on the interviews with Vicka conducted by Fr Janko Bubalo. These were published later on, in 1985, as part of *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*—the title being a reference to Vicka’s alleged claims of daily visions since 1981. Obviously, eighteen months or more is a long time during which to retain detailed memories of the crowded first days of the alleged visits of the Blessed Virgin, and so it is legitimate to raise questions as to just how reliable those interviews really were. This is especially so since some of the information in these later interviews cannot be reconciled with what is on the transcripts of the seventeen interviews with the visionaries which were taped at Medjugorje by Fr Zovko, and Fr Cuvalo, the parochial vicar, from 27–30 June 1981. This is not the case with, for example, the Fatima seers, since Sr

Lucia's recollections have proved to be very trustworthy, to say nothing of the fact that Fatima has been fully accepted by the Church, and that Jacinta and Francisco have been beatified, while Sr Lucia is on the road to beatification.

The great value of these tapes lies in their spontaneity, in the fact that they are true-to-life dialogues between the two priests and the visionaries, in which all the essential details about what happened during the first week or so become apparent. They are a "warts and all" depiction of what really took place, and as such they are innately superior to the better-known but much later Medjugorje accounts. It is true that sections of the tapes are indistinct, but overall there is certainly enough clear information on them to justify regarding the tapes as primary source material on Medjugorje; in any case, the quality of the tapes is understandable given the circumstances under which they were made. Clearly, these contemporary interviews are far more likely to give an accurate record of what actually took place during those crucial first days, than any interviews conducted later on; but they have been ignored or downplayed by the principal Medjugorje chroniclers.

This is rather ironic, since, as Medjugorje insider Daria Klanac relates, many pro-Medjugorje authors have used the same materials, particularly Fr Laurentin, Fr Janko Bubalo, Fr Svetozar Kraljevic and Fr Ljudevit Rupcic.⁵²

These tapes correspond with the earliest records of some of the major approved Marian apparitions, such as those at La Salette. In this case Mélanie, one of two seers, after being interviewed by the local mayor the day after seeing Our Lady, had her story taken down in writing by her employer, Baptiste Pra. He had called in two neighbors as witnesses, and while she dictated, he wrote down her words and the others checked her account and jointly signed it. Thus the most important basic text of the apparition was written only a day after the event.

Similarly, at Lourdes, Bernadette had to undergo bouts of questioning and her replies were taken down, so again we have a very full record of what happened, with the first major interview, at the hands of the local Police commissioner, Dominique Jacomet, in the presence of two other witnesses, taking place only a week after the first vision on 14 February 1858.⁵³

At Fatima, too, the children were interrogated by Dr Manuel Formigão, a seminary professor, after both the September and October 1917 apparitions, with their replies being noted in detail. Likewise at Beauraing, the five children involved were questioned separately after the later apparitions, with their replies being taken down by a lawyer, Adrien Laurent. And at Banneux too, the local priest, Fr Louis Jamin, was careful to ensure that the seer, Mariette Beco, gave him a report of what happened after each apparition.⁵⁴

So Fr Cuvalo's initiative in starting to record his conversations with the Medjugorje visionaries was extremely valuable, and has given us the best record we have of what happened right at the beginning. In fact, in some respects, they are superior to a purely written record, because in listening to recorded speech, one can quite often catch nuances of meaning through manner of expression and tone of voice.

This is what Fr Augustin Poulain, the noted spiritual writer, said on this point: "Is there an absolutely authentic text? Have ...certain expressions been corrected as inexact or obscure, or have ...certain other passages been actually suppressed?" He then goes on to say that this is inadmissible from the critical viewpoint, since it means we are "depriving ourselves of very important data." Furthermore, he says: "Instead of curtailment, have there, on the contrary been additions to the revelation ... This would be a real falsification."⁵⁵

Clearly, the tape transcripts represent the closest we are going to get to an "absolutely authentic text," and regarding his other points, concerning suppressions of, and additions to, the alleged revelation, the evidence concerning the Medjugorje messages on these points is examined further on in this book.

The Importance of the Tapes

Mary Craig details a conversation between Fr Zovko and his housekeeper immediately on his return to Medjugorje, during the first week of the visions, in which he asked her if Fr Cuvalo had spoken to the visionaries. She responded: "Yes, and he's recorded the conversations." Craig then tells us that Fr Zovko found the cassette and listened to it, and that he "began tape-recording all his conversations with the children." Further on, she even mentions the 30 June

interview between Fr Zovko and the visionaries, saying “the tape of this interview still exists.”

Similarly, Fr Michael O’Carroll, another pro-Medjugorje author, in speaking of the fifth day of the visions, Sunday 28 June, mentions that after Mass that morning “the children went through a wearying interrogation by the parish priest, Fr Jozo.”⁵⁶

Likewise, as we will see, Fr Janko Bubalo was certainly aware of these tapes, and challenged Vicka about elements from them during his interviews with her. But apart from Daria Klanac, pro-Medjugorje writers do not give us any extended details of them, and thus in their accounts we are asked to rely largely on recollections which were recorded much later.

Regarding these original tape-recorded interviews, then, although the methodology used by the priests was far from perfect, they do give essential source material about the visions. It was believed that the Communist authorities had confiscated these tapes when Fr Zovko was arrested, but Fr Sivric relates that his friend, Grgo Kozina, had managed to copy them beforehand, and was then able to pass on duplicates to him. From the evidence provided by sources such as Fr Bubalo, it is clear that other copies of these tapes must also have been in circulation. Fr Sivric then painstakingly transcribed their contents and published them in full in the lengthy appendices to his book on Medjugorje.⁵⁷ Daria Klanac, a Canadian citizen of Croatian origin, and a Medjugorje supporter—who by 2001 had organized more than sixty pilgrimages to the town, involving thousands of pilgrims—has also published transcripts of the tapes in her book *Aux Sources de Medjugorje*. She tells us that she likewise obtained her tapes from Grgo Kozina.⁵⁸

Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that when these two versions of the transcripts are compared—one by a pro-Medjugorje writer, and the other by a critic—they are found to be substantially the same.⁵⁹ However, it is rather curious that Klanac completely omits the first three tapes recorded by Fr Cuvalo, before the return of Fr Zovko. In any event, of the remaining tape transcripts, as regards the essential points, they are substantially in agreement.

Such variations as there are mainly involve differences in word order, which are understandable given that the transcriptions in Fr Sivric’s *French* edition of his book were translated from the original

language into English, and then into French, whereas Daria Klanac did her translation directly into French. Also, naturally enough, in the process of translation, since words can have more than one meaning, a particular word in the original language can be translated in more than one way—and this clearly also affects phrases and indeed whole sentences.

Reasons for Differences

The remaining differences between the transcriptions can be categorized in a number of ways. These include short sections which Fr Sivric was presumably unable to satisfactorily translate, perhaps because of the poorer quality of the tapes he had to work with, or because he was older and thus his hearing was less acute than that of Daria Klanac—always bearing in mind, of course, that at times the material on the tapes was very confused, with interruptions or voices being mixed up indiscriminately. This also led Fr Sivric to occasionally mistake one speaker for another. But equally, Klanac acknowledges the difficulties involved in transcribing the tapes, and admits that some words and phrases escaped her.⁶⁰ Another category of differences involves sections of the tapes which Klanac includes, but which are missing in Fr Sivric's text—although, in one instance, involving the tape made of the interview between Fr Zovko and Ivan, on the evening of 28 June, Fr Sivric has more material than Klanac.⁶¹

The essential point to note is that the “missing” material is not crucial to the arguments presented in this book. This mainly comes from two of the interviews with Jakov, the youngest of the visionaries. In the interview carried out on the morning of 27 June 1981, Klanac has approximately 40% more material than Fr Sivric,⁶² while in the interview on 28 June, there is a more serious discrepancy, since Klanac's has approximately 80% more material.⁶³

In her transcripts, Klanac includes material in which Jakov elaborated on his experiences, including information about the purported words of the “Gospa.” These included the Vision remarking in a number of places that the visionaries were her “angels,” that everyone, including the Franciscans, should believe as though they could see the Vision too, and that “she” had come because there were a lot of believers there. Interestingly, according to Jakov,

the Vision did explicitly claim to be the Blessed Virgin Mary, but apart from this, there is nothing to compare with what was said by the real Blessed Virgin at Lourdes and Fatima. During these interviews Jakov also indicated how the visionaries had prayed on the hillside, had asked for a sign, and he also gave the reaction of his mother.

Regarding the material on the tape of the interview with Mirjana on the morning of 28 June, Klanac has just under 50% more material, but again it is essentially a question of her describing her experiences in more detail, under questioning from Fr Zovko.⁶⁴ There are also a few other instances of this type amongst the other transcripts.

It is not clear why this material was missing on Fr Sivric's tapes, but it may well be that during the process of copying it was not thought worth preserving, or perhaps practical considerations such as fitting the interviews onto tapes of differing lengths were involved. Or the person doing the copying, Grgo Kozina, may have mistakenly failed to copy some of the interviews in their entirety. Certainly, it does not seem that any sinister motive can be imputed for these particular differences because the material involved is really quite innocuous.

The last category of differences would appear to be easier to explain, as it involves statements which might well have proved embarrassing if not dangerous for those involved, had they been widely circulated during the early eighties, when Communism was still in place. An example of this is found in the interview with Mirjana of 27 June, in which Fr Zovko asked her if she had been persecuted at school in Sarajevo because she went to church, to which she replied in the affirmative.⁶⁵ There are further examples in the transcript of the last tape, which involved five of the visionaries. One section, which mentions the Communist militia, is missing in Fr Sivric's version, while another, which mentioned that one of the young women present with the visionaries that day, Ljubica Vasilj-Gluvic, worked for the local Communist "executive committee," is also missing. There is also a missing section which speaks of the mother of Vicka—arguably the "principal" visionary—as being depressed, and which also gives personal details about her family. There is mention, too, of cassettes with Croatian hymns which were deco-

rated with forbidden nationalist symbols. A section which refers to the chief of the militia, a certain Zdravko, has also been removed, as have two further references to the executive committee, including the name of a certain Marinko Sego, who is described as its president.⁶⁶

It is important to realize, however, that the majority of the tapes, as transcribed by the two authors, are virtually the same, once allowance is made for differences in word order, and the points noted above. This also includes other minor considerations, such as short unintelligible sections which Fr Sivric conscientiously noted. The material on seven of the twelve tapes dealt with by Daria Klanac is virtually the same as that found in Fr Sivric's transcripts, and overall, if we exclude the three tapes indicated above, those involving Jakov and Mirjana, then approximately 92% of the material is common to both authors. If we include those tapes, then approximately 85% of the material is substantially the same.

The Tape Transcripts are Reliable

Clearly, these tapes are of primary importance in understanding Medjugorje, and that is why a study of their contents forms one of the central aspects of this book. The reality is that they are a severe embarrassment to the official position held by supporters of Medjugorje. The most important sections of the tapes are fully dealt with in the chapters which follow, and it is undoubtedly providential that they survived. No one of any credibility has challenged the fact of their existence and importance, but there have been attempts to question the validity of Fr Sivric's transcriptions by Fr Ljudevit Rupcic, a zealous Medjugorje supporter. He argued that because the transcriptions in Fr Sivric's *French* edition of his book have been translated from the original language into English, and then into French, that this somehow calls into question their content. But this is clearly not the case since all that matters is whether or not these translations have been accurate.⁶⁷

Louis Bélanger, the Canadian researcher who collaborated with Fr Sivric in the production of *The Hidden Side of Medjugorje*, points out that the original tapes were stored at St James's parish church in Medjugorje, with copies being held in the Mostar diocese-

san chancery archives, and, as we have seen, Grgo Kozina also made duplicates. Bélanger also tells us that:

It was important to me that the taped documents ... [Fr Sivric] had been carefully translated, tapes that were apparently identical to those given to me by the Bishop of Mostar. At my request, Father Sivric began to make a Croatian transcript and then dictated an English translation ... in July, 1986 we exchanged tapes and verified that our sources were complementary.

In 1987, Bélanger asked Bishop Zanic to confirm that the 38 transcripts of the tapes, and their French translations, which he and Fr Sivric had produced, were accurate; Bishop Zanic, who understood French, did this.⁶⁸ This is what he had to say about Fr Sivric's book: "I can say that the work is solid, professional and excellent in every regard. The cassettes were reproduced faithfully, as well as the documents."⁶⁹

First Day – Wednesday 24 June 1981

Fr Laurentin claims that Fr Jozo Zovko only arrived at St James's parish in Medjugorje shortly before the first vision, but this is incorrect. In fact, Fr Zovko had been appointed pastor nine months before, in October 1980, but he was not present when the visions began, and only learned of them on 27 June, when he returned from a retreat he had been giving at a convent in northern Croatia. Just before the first vision, Medjugorje was struck by a particularly violent thunderstorm, which raged during the early hours of the morning of Wednesday 24 June. The post office was struck by lightning, caught fire, and was half burnt down. The lightning strike put the phones out of order and thus Fr Zovko was not fully aware of what was going on in Medjugorje; on his return he was confronted by a huge crowd outside his church.

To put all this in the context of the ongoing situation in Eastern Europe and further afield, the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II had taken place only the previous month, on 13 May 1981, and there was rising tension between the Solidarity movement in Poland and the Communist leadership. Thus, the visions began at a critical moment.⁷⁰

The first vision allegedly took place later that afternoon as Ivanka Ivankovic and Mirjana Dragicevic were walking along the

road near Bijakovici. Ivanka claimed that she could see the “Gospa,” although Mirjana was apparently uncertain.

Later on, having left a message for Vicka Ivankovic, the pair climbed up to Podbrdo—to collect the sheep according to Ivan Dragicevic’s testimony—and saw a vision. Ivan was close to them, having been picking apples nearby with another Ivan, Ivan Ivankovic, a twenty-year-old local man who later dissociated himself from the visionaries because he disapproved of their behavior.

In his taped interview with Fr Cuvalo, which took place on the afternoon of 27 June, Ivan Dragicevic says that he heard somebody saying: “The light is appearing up there.” Then Vicka and Ivanka called to him inviting him to go up, since they said that something, “like the Gospa” had appeared to them. He then said that they went up and had a similar experience. Fr Cuvalo asked Ivan what he saw once he had reached the girls and looked up, to which he replied: “I saw the light.” However, he was not very articulate, and could hardly find the words to describe what he had seen, but it appears that he saw a vision of a “feminine” figure bathed in light, wearing a veil, and a crown which “shone like silver,” hovering on a cloud above the stony ground.⁷¹

The Blessed Virgin – or Something Diabolical?

One of the strangest aspects of Ivan Dragicevic’s testimony on this occasion is that he tells us that the hands of the Vision were “trembling.” This is out of character with regard to the Blessed Virgin, who is by nature calm and serene. So this raises the question as to whether it might indicate a diabolical involvement. This point is emphasized by Msgr Farges, author of the celebrated study entitled *Mystical Phenomena*:

The signs of diabolical intervention are well known. The devil’s deeds always carry with them at least some ridiculous, unseemly, or coarse details; or even something opposed to faith and morals. If his vices were too obvious his influence would soon be unmasked; they are therefore always disguised under more or less inoffensive appearances, even under deceitful traits of virtue and sanctity. He transforms himself at will into an angel of light. God occasionally allows him to assume the most majestic forms, such as those of our Lord, the Blessed Virgin, or the saints. Nevertheless—for God could not otherwise permit it—the disguise, no matter how bold, is never complete, and he always

betrays himself in some particular which cannot escape an attentive and prudent observer. Furthermore, the work of the devil becomes very soon unmasked by evil results, for an evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit.⁷²

Fr Manfred Hauke, the theologian and mariologist, also comments on this point, saying: "The form of the apparition must correspond to the work of God, which is always perfect. Any physical or moral defects in appearance, attitude, or movements of the Mother of God are to be excluded."⁷³

According to Vicka's first *Diary*, as translated by Fr Sivric, which he tells us was actually written for her by one of her sisters, Ana, she returned to the apparition site at around 6:30 p.m., with Mirjana and Ivanka, and it was the latter who then first saw the "Gospa," at which point the others also saw her. In fact, Vicka was responsible for three "diaries," which were three notebooks covering the time from the start of the visions until 25 March 1982, but not in a continuous manner. She wrote the third herself, with her sisters being responsible for writing the others, based on information supplied by Vicka.

Vicka claims that the Vision was holding a baby-like object, while waving at them to come closer, but that she got frightened and ran back to the village. The visionaries told everyone that they had seen the *Gospa*, and some apparently responded that since that day was the feast of St John the Baptist, perhaps they could expect something miraculous. During the vision, Mirjana had apparently asked for a sign so that everyone would believe them, and, according to Vicka, the hour hand on a wristwatch turned right around, which she took as a sign. However, Bishop Zanic later took this particular watch to a watchmaker who confirmed that it was broken, and because of this, the dial could rotate and thus, at the least touch, modify the position of the numbers. Vicka reports that: "We kept touching her and kissing her, and she kept laughing."⁷⁴

The Smoking Visionaries

It seems that Fr Cuvalo had suspicions that Podbrdo was a place which some young people visited to smoke—this certainly seems to be the drift of some of the questions he put to Vicka, Ivanka and Marija during the first interview he tape recorded. Regarding the

people who were with them during the first vision, he asked if they had smoked.⁷⁵ They denied this, but it would be a strange question to put unless he had suspicions on the matter. Certainly, according to René Laurentin and René Lejeune, the girls *had* been smoking—they describe Mirjana’s embarrassment at Ivanka saying she was seeing the “Gospa”, because “they had been out smoking secretly.”⁷⁶

Fr Laurentin later made the position even clearer when he wrote: “The first two visionaries, Ivanka and Mirjana, held back for some time the fact that they were not only going to listen to some tapes that day, but were actually planning to go and smoke some of the tobacco which they threaded all day long with their families.” He then says that “personal details” like this should remain private,⁷⁷ but this is ridiculous: the beginning of the visions is such a crucial moment that we are entitled to know as much about it as possible.

The evidence indicates, then, that the two visionaries did indeed smoke once they arrived at Podbrdo. In other words, just prior to their supposed meeting with the Blessed Virgin, the Mother of God, the Queen of Heaven, the two visionaries had been smoking. This certainly puts the initial stages of the Medjugorje event in a new light, and makes it very difficult to accept that this was a genuine supernatural visitation.

Wayne Weible gives us even more of these “personal details,” telling us that on the first evening, “Ivanka and Mirjana, having finished evening chores, had slipped off to a secluded spot to listen to rock music while smoking cigarettes pilfered from their fathers.”

Sadly then, not only had the visionaries been smoking and listening to music, but they had also stolen the very cigarettes that they smoked. It would be interesting to know exactly what music they had been listening to, given the way that some types of rock music clearly have evil, not to say diabolical, connotations. Weible argues that: “To millions who would later journey to Medjugorje on pilgrimage, this venial act of experimentation would serve as an example that God chooses ordinary people for extraordinary missions.”⁷⁸

Or alternatively, and more accurately, one could argue that these further details make it even more unlikely that the visionaries did actually see the Blessed Virgin. And there is a curious parallel here

to what took place at Garabandal in Spain, in the 1960s. There, the four young visionaries involved had been stealing apples immediately prior to the first vision they saw, allegedly of an angel, on 18 June 1961.⁷⁹ Like Medjugorje, Garabandal has never received any official Church approval.

When Mirjana was interviewed by Fr Zovko on 28 June, she described what had happened at the local hospital at Citluk, where she had been offered a cigarette by one of the doctors, and had refused saying: "I don't smoke." He had responded by saying: "You don't smoke this kind?"—undoubtedly a reference to the possibility in his mind that she may have been smoking drugs—to which she even more emphatically responded: "No cigarettes at all!"⁸⁰ Clearly, on this occasion she had not told the truth, which certainly calls her general credibility into question.

In fact, according to Mary Craig, rumors that at least some of the girls were smoking drugs were circulating in the village within the first few days; she reports that Fr Cuvalo said to Fr Zovko on his return: "One of the girls, Mirjana Dragicevic, comes from a grammar school in Sarajevo and they're saying she brought drugs with her, maybe in cigarettes. She's started giving drugs to the children, and now they're claiming to see visions." Following intervention by the increasingly concerned authorities, on the afternoon of Saturday 27 June the visionaries had been taken to a nearby town, Citluk, for medical tests. Fr Cuvalo, though, expressed his displeasure that no blood or urine tests for drugs had been taken: "Look, we've heard that the girl from Sarajevo brought in drugs. And another thing, they say that one of the children is an epileptic and a hysteric."

However, on 27 June 1981, Mirjana said to Fr Zovko, in connection with her alleged drug use, that she would like to "see a doctor so that he can establish that I don't use drugs." But since she didn't tell the truth about her smoking, it is difficult to know how to assess this statement.⁸¹

All of this indicates that the accounts of the first day's visions were unclear. Moreover, as we will see, these accounts are totally unlike those found in cases of authentic apparitions of Mary.

The “Gospa” and the Light

As regards the actual appearance of the “Gospa,” the tapes give us the basic details. The visionaries described her as being aged between nineteen and twenty, with a white veil and gray dress. Her veil covered her black hair, her eyes were blue, and her head was crowned with stars. She was said to float above the ground. Of particular note is the fact that the visionaries saw her gradually emerge from a “light”—the importance of this point will become apparent as we proceed—and that the Vision was prone to appear and disappear.⁸² This mention of a “gray” dress being worn by the Vision is something of a problem, since gray isn’t a color normally associated with the Blessed Virgin.

Jakov’s remarks certainly seem to indicate that he really did see something. This is apparent in his taped interview with Fr Zovko, which took place on the afternoon of 27 June. In response to the priest’s question as to the appearance of the “Gospa,” when she manifested herself, he said: “It lighted up three times when I saw her. Three times, it lighted up and all of a sudden, the Gospa appeared up there.”⁸³ So once again, the theme of “light” is present, but the indications that the visionaries were able to touch and kiss the Vision, and that she was laughing, seem rather strange, and indicate that the Vision was not the Blessed Virgin. The last point in particular, that the Vision was laughing, is quite disturbing, and completely out of character with the deportment of Our Lady during her approved apparitions—she has been known to smile on occasion, but there is obviously a big difference between this and outright laughter.

More Questionable Evidence

Mirjana’s testimony, available to us in an interview taped by Fr Zovko on the afternoon of 27 June, substantially supports what was said by the other visionaries. Her response to the Vision, however, did not follow the traditional pattern. She describes how she became excited at seeing the “Gospa,” saying how the experience was “delightful” for her, and that she wasn’t afraid.⁸⁴

Msgr Farges, however, has this to say on the difference between divine and diabolical visions:

The divine vision produces at first a feeling of fear and astonishment in the soul that is conscious of its unworthiness, but it ends by bringing peacefulness and heavenly joy. The diabolical vision, on the contrary, begins by bringing joy, a sense of safety and sweetness, and ends in anxiety, sadness, fear, and disgust. The first develops the virtues, especially humility, in the soul of the seer, who will seek to hide such great favours in silence and secrecy. The second, on the contrary, develops feelings of vanity, vainglory, and a wish to parade the visions. The public effects should also be noticed. Divine visions never produce scandal, disorder, or trouble in the Church, while the others inevitably engender these evils.⁸⁵

Regarding Mirjana's experiences, it is clear, in the light of the above points from Msgr Farges, that what she was describing does not seem to bear the characteristic of the divine. Ideally, Fr Zovko should have asked her about how she had felt later on, but he neglected to do this, and so all that can be said with certainty is that her initial reaction followed the negative pattern outlined above by Msgr Farges.

Regarding his second point, on the way the vision ends, that is with feelings of "anxiety, sadness, fear, and disgust," the following testimony from Marija, as taped on 27 June, is very interesting. She told Fr Cuvalo that on returning home on the second evening, she had to repeatedly explain to her parents what had happened. They then prepared supper for her and placed it before her on the table, but she reacted as follows: "I was scared, I wasn't able to eat, my hands were completely white; when I saw her for the first time my hands were cold like ice."⁸⁶

In the interview with three of the visionaries taped by Fr Cuvalo on 27 June 1981, it emerges that the visionaries saw the "Gospa" holding something on the first evening. Ivanka testified that: "We saw something like a baby ... then she covered it up ..." They were apparently not close enough during this first vision to see any more, and it does not seem as though the Vision said anything on this occasion, although she did nod her head when Vicka asked if she was going to come the next day.⁸⁷

It is hard to imagine why the Vision would have wanted to cover up the Baby Jesus, if it really was the Blessed Virgin, so this is not a good sign.

Second Day - Thursday 25 June 1981

Ivan Dragicevic was absent on this occasion, having decided to spend the evening picking tobacco. According to the interview taped by Fr Cuvalo on the morning of 27 June, Vicka said that other people could see something on the hill, and she tells us that a woman told them to go up since they were being invited. It is apparent, too, that the visionaries were receiving directions from onlookers, and that when they reached Podbrdo, they “spotted her,” and that “the light” was all around them.⁸⁸

The mention of other people seeing “something” is very interesting, and certainly goes a long way towards explaining why the visionaries’ stories were taken seriously by some villagers right from the beginning—although it seems that by the end of the first week the general mood had grown less supportive. Certainly, Vicka’s testimony here seems convincing, since, given that she was speaking only a few days after the event, it would have been very easy for Fr Cuvalo to have checked up on this point regarding other witnesses. It is hard to believe that he would not have already spoken to local people, and thus have instantly contradicted Vicka if he had thought she was not telling the truth. Ivanka also made similar claims of other people seeing “the light” on Podbrdo, including her sister, and some other women.

We also have this testimony from Marinko Ivankovic, who claimed that about three weeks into the visions, one evening at about 11 p.m., he was on Podbrdo with a group of people, including the visionaries. He looked up and could see a very bright light coming towards them. Marinko was the local man, who, as has been noted above, initially acted as the unofficial “protector” of the visionaries.

Generally speaking, then, the information on their contact with the “Gospa” given in the taped interviews by the visionaries certainly does have the ring of truth about it. They speak of coming very close to her, and even touching her, although Vicka makes the quite extraordinary comment that, “when you touch her ... the fingers bounce off as if they were of steel.” Once again, though, the “Gospa” said nothing on this, the second day.⁸⁹

In assessing these visions of the first couple of days, then, what surely strikes the impartial observer is firstly, the absence of factors that are normally observed in apparitions which have been subsequently accepted by the Church, and secondly the presence of other factors which raise serious doubts as to their authenticity. Whether it is the fact that the Vision's hands were trembling, or that at one moment the Vision was laughing—while in general she said nothing—all of this is very strange. None of this accords with the serene, calm presence of the Blessed Virgin, speaking words of reassurance to those who have been favored with her presence that one finds in her recent recognized apparitions. But conversely, it does seem that some people did see strange lights, and so we do not seem to be dealing with hallucinations. It appeared that something was happening up there on Podbrdo, but the exact nature of that “something” still had to be determined. However, the initial signs were hardly encouraging.

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The Vatican and Medjugorje

Pope Benedict and Bishop Peric

In February 2006, Bishop Peric made his *ad limina* visitation to Pope Benedict XVI, and discussed the state of affairs in his diocese with the Pontiff. He was able to note that there had been some progress as regards the Franciscan problem, although there were still a number of examples of disobedience. He also discussed Medjugorje with the Pope, who intimated that for some time now, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had been skeptical as regards the claims of daily visions made by some of the visionaries. Bishop Peric confirmed that nothing had happened in the intervening period to affect the findings of the Bishops' conference of ex-Yugoslavia, the Zadar declaration, made in 1991. He then reiterated his own position as regards the non-supernaturality of the visions, before continuing:

The numerous absurd messages, insincerities, falsehoods and disobedience associated with the events and "apparitions" of Medjugorje from the very outset, all disprove any claims of authenticity. Much pressure through appeals has been made to force the recognition of the authenticity of private revelations, yet not through convincing arguments based upon the truth, but through the self-praise of personal conversions and by statements such as one "feels good". How can this ever be taken as proof of the authenticity of apparitions?

At the conclusion of the meeting, Pope Benedict said the feeling at the Congregation had been that priests should be available to deal

with the sacramental needs of pilgrims, but that this was to leave aside “the question of the authenticity of the apparitions”.⁶¹⁵

The CDF and False Visionaries

However, previous to this, in July 2005, there was an important indication that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, under Cardinal William Levada, was going to take a firmer stance regarding alleged visionaries. It was announced that various prohibitions were being put in place against Fr Luigi Burrelli, better known as Brother Gino, including his being forbidden to hear confessions, to give spiritual direction, to preach, to celebrate the sacraments in public, or to grant any form of interview.

Until 1992, Fr Burrelli, was a member of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary, and had a reputation as a mystic and spiritual director, as well as allegedly being a stigmatic and a visionary. The decree from the CDF cites abuses in Confession and spiritual direction as the reason for this action, but, according to Sandro Magister, in addition, Vatican sources confirmed that Fr Burrelli had also been accused of sexual abuse by men who were part of his movement during the 1970s and 1980s. This was the first decree to be issued by the Congregation during Pope Benedict XVI’s pontificate, who personally approved it on 27 May 2005.⁶¹⁶

This action was followed, in September 2007, by the publication of a document from the Congregation concerning the excommunication, for schism and heresy, of members of the community of Our Lady of All Nations, better known as the “Army of Mary,” a sect founded by one Marie-Paule Giguère in Canada, in 1971. Giguère claimed to be a reincarnation of the Blessed Virgin who had received visions and messages from God, to the effect that Mary was fully divine, and thus that Giguère herself was divine.⁶¹⁷

Pope Benedict and Fatima

In May 2006, Pope Benedict XVI commemorated the 25th anniversary of the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II, on 13 May 1981, remarking to the thousands of pilgrims gathered in St Peter’s Square, that the previous Pope had felt he had miraculously escaped death due to the intervention of a “maternal hand.” In the presence of the statue of Our Lady, which had been brought to Rome from

Fatima for the occasion, Pope Benedict went on to link the message of Fatima with that of Lourdes, describing it as “an intense call to prayer and conversion.” He also said that Fatima was a “truly prophetic” announcement, in the light of the destruction caused by wars, totalitarian regimes, and persecutions against the Church, during the twentieth century. He further noted that despite “reasons for apprehension about the future of humanity,” what the Blessed Virgin promised at Fatima, that in the end, her Immaculate Heart would triumph, was very consoling. Cardinal Camillo Ruini later presided over Mass in St Peter’s Basilica, at the end of which he read out a message from the Pope in which the Holy Father expressed the hope that “the message of Fatima be increasingly accepted, understood and lived in every community.”⁶¹⁸

Bishop Peric preaches at Medjugorje

Not long after this, during a Confirmation Mass homily at St James’s Church in Medjugorje, on 15 June 2006, Bishop Peric said that the Church “has not accepted, neither as supernatural nor as Marian, any of the apparitions” alleged by the Medjugorje visionaries. He then called on them, and “those persons behind the ‘messages,’ to demonstrate ecclesiastical obedience and to cease with these public manifestations and messages in this parish.” He further stated that: “In this fashion they shall show their necessary adherence to the Church, by neither placing private apparitions nor private sayings before the official position of the Church.”

Bishop Peric said that his position, which echoed that of Bishop Zanic his predecessor, had papal support, and he thanked Popes Benedict and John Paul II, because they “have always respected the judgments of the bishops of Mostar-Duvno, ... regarding the so-called ‘apparitions’ and ‘messages’ of Medjugorje, ... [while he recognized] the Holy Father’s right to give a final decision on these events.”⁶¹⁹

It’s worth noting that the Bishops of Tuscany in Italy issued a press release following their *ad limina* visit to the Pope from 16-20 April 2007. In this, they made it known that they had also had a meeting with the Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Archbishop Angelo Amato, who, while speaking to them about Medjugorje, invited them to publicize the above mentioned

homily of Bishop Peric. The Bishops particularly emphasized that they were asking their priests to “read it carefully and to draw the necessary consequences for the correct enlightenment of our faithful.”⁶²⁰

Cardinal Bertone on Medjugorje

Meanwhile, in February 2005, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican Secretary of State, had been interviewed on Radio Maria, an Italian radio station, and expressed skepticism about Medjugorje. The response from many of the listeners was quite aggressive, leading the Cardinal to speak later of the “[u]nseemly and offensive reactions of faithful and priests who describe themselves as ‘Medjugorjean.’ ” The Cardinal went on to deplore the “excesses of fanaticism, such as the events in various churches, in which they promise the possibility of being present at an apparition of the Madonna ... at a scheduled time”.⁶²¹

Following this, early in 2007, the Italian edition of a book-length interview with Cardinal Bertone was published, and this was translated into English and published, in 2008, as *The Last Secret of Fatima*. In this book there is a short chapter dealing with Medjugorje, in which the Cardinal makes the following statement about the alleged visions. It is significant because it points to the way a very senior Vatican official was now thinking of Medjugorje. When specifically asked whether Our Lady had appeared there or not, this was the response:

The opinion of Tarcisio Bertone is that [Medjugorje] is a very big question mark. Medjugorje is to some extent an anomaly that doesn't completely square with other apparitions. It doesn't entirely follow the *traditio*, or tradition, of apparitions. Between 1981 and the present, Mary is supposed to have appeared tens of thousands of times. The volume of Our Lady's alleged messages does not reflect the usual pattern of Marian apparitions, which, like meteors from heaven, tend to have a clear beginning and a clear end. The counterargument, of course, is that the extraordinary times we're living in demand this kind of extraordinary response from Mary. When I say “the counterargument is,” I'm speaking in a roundabout way in order to highlight a certain disagreement I have with this position, which is put forward by [those] who want the Church to go in a certain direction.⁶²²

What is perhaps equally significant, is that the book contains a foreword from Pope Benedict XVI, in which he imparted his apostolic blessing on Cardinal Bertone, a sign surely that the Pope was in agreement with the content of the book. And although Cardinal Bertone was not specifically referring to Medjugorje in the following quote, his remarks are relevant to the subject:

The eclipse of the sacred has led to a do-it-yourself approach to the holy, a kind of supermarket of religious faiths. And, unfortunately, a lot of Catholics are in danger of completely losing their grip on the historical, physical aspect of religion. They'd rather gawk at a weeping Madonna than read a page of the Gospel. ... This is Christianity à la carte—you order off the menu in the restaurant of religious experience. A lot of Christians are spiritually naïve, and this makes them vulnerable to the influence of superficial ideas and disinformation.⁶²³

More Medjugorje Controversy

In June 2007, there was further controversy concerning Medjugorje when Fr Raniero Cantalamessa, the Capuchin preacher of the papal household, withdrew from a planned engagement to deliver a series of lectures at Medjugorje. This followed the decision of Bishop Peric to deny him permission to speak there. He was to have been the keynote speaker at the 12th International Seminar for Priests, from 3-5 July, an event at which Fr Jozo Zovko had also been billed to appear, even though Bishop Peric had revoked his priestly faculties in 2004. Fr Cantalamessa, who has been the papal preacher since 1980, is a high-profile figure at the Vatican, responsible for delivering weekly meditations during Advent and Lent to the pope, cardinals, bishops and other religious figures, so this was a significant prohibition.⁶²⁴ And we should note that he acknowledged the authority of the local bishop, unlike many of those most involved in promoting Medjugorje.

In March 2008, Cardinal Vinko Puljic was interviewed by *Vecernji list*, a large circulation Croatian daily paper. It was put to him that a recently published interview with Cardinal Bertone had raised the question of a re-examination of the case of Medjugorje. He was then asked if the Bosnia-Herzegovina Bishops' Conference had discussed the matter, and whether Medjugorje would be officially examined. Cardinal Puljic responded by saying that the bishops had not discussed it, because "the phenomenon of Medjugorje

does not come within our competence.” He went on to say that when the “Holy See takes the decision and gives a task, we shall think about what to do.”⁶²⁵

So by this time, it seemed that the decision had been made that an investigation of Medjugorje at Vatican level would be forthcoming, but there was still no definite announcement.

Meanwhile, in early June 2008, it was reported that Bishop Andrea Gemma, a retired exorcist, had said that it was his belief that the Medjugorje phenomenon was a “scandal” and a “diabolical deceit”. He also stated that he believed that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith would not ultimately rule in favor of the claims of the visionaries. *Petrus*, the online Italian Catholic journal, reported his remarks as follows: “You’ll see that soon the Vatican will intervene with something explosive to unmask once and for all who is behind this deceit.”

He further stated that it was:

a phenomenon which is absolutely diabolical, around which revolve many underground interests. Holy Mother Church, the only one able to pronounce, through the mouth of the Bishop of Mostar, has already said publicly, and officially, that the Madonna has never appeared at Medjugorje and that this whole sham is the work of the demon.

The Bishop also contended that:

In Medjugorje everything happens in function of money: pilgrimages, lodging houses, sale of trinkets. So much so that abusing the good faith of those poor souls who go there thinking to encounter the Madonna, the false seers have organised themselves financially, have enriched themselves and live a rather comfortable life. ... These don’t seem to me to be disinterested persons. Thus, together with those who shore up this noisy deception, they patently have every interest in convincing people that they see and speak with the Virgin Mary.⁶²⁶

Fr Tomislav Vlasic is Investigated

It wasn’t necessary to wait long for the “explosive” intervention from the Vatican which Bishop Gemma had predicted, which would “unmask once and for all who is behind this deceit.” On 31 August 2008, Bishop Peric published—at the explicit request of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—a letter he had received from the secretary of the CDF, Archbishop Angelo Amato.

This letter, dated 30 May 2008, informed the Bishop of the Congregation's findings regarding Fr Tomislav Vlasic—the former spiritual director of the Medjugorje visionaries—and asked him to make public the canonical status of the Fr Vlasic, whose actions had led to him being reported to the Congregation “for the diffusion of dubious doctrine, manipulation of consciences, suspected mysticism, disobedience toward legitimately issued orders,” and charges “*contra sextum*,” that is in connection with the Sixth Commandment, and thus relating to sexual matters. And just to make it clear that there was a definite Medjugorje link here—which some of its supporters denied—the letter also stated that it was: “Within the context of the phenomenon [of] Medjugorje, [that] this Dicastery is studying the case of Father Tomislav Vlasic OFM.”

It seems that Fr Vlasic was disciplined after refusing to cooperate with the inquiry initiated by the Congregation, and had instead sought to justify himself by referring to his religious activities around Medjugorje. And it also emerged that a decree concerning Fr Vlasic had been jointly signed earlier in the year by Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and the Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor, Fr José Rodríguez Carballo.

This decree stipulated that Fr Vlasic should be confined to an Italian Franciscan friary, and not allowed contact with the “Queen of Peace” community which he had founded without prior permission from his religious superior. It also banned him from public preaching and from hearing confessions, as well as requiring that he take a mandatory course of theological-spiritual formation, and make a solemn profession of the Catholic faith. He was warned that he would be excommunicated if he violated any of the prohibitions, a point which surely indicates the extremely serious nature of the charges against him.

Bishop Peric finally noted that:

Father Vlasic is forewarned that, in the case of stubbornness, a juridical penal process will begin with the aim of still harsher sanctions, not excluding dismissal, having in mind the suspicion of heresy and schism, as well as scandalous acts *contra sextum* [against the Sixth Commandment] aggravated by mystical motivations.⁶²⁷

It's worth pointing out here that the fact that the Congregation asked Bishop Peric to publish this letter about Fr Vlasic, which specifically linked him with Medjugorje, negates the idea that he was no longer associated with the Medjugorje dossier.

Previous to this development, though, it was reported¹⁶²⁸ that Fr Laurentin had responded to Bishop Gemma's remarks as follows:

Usually, to be true, I don't like to speak about Medjugorje because I prefer to follow the line of silence chosen by the Church, but in this precise case I cannot be in agreement with Monsignor Gemma. The number of the apparitions of Our Lady is probably excessive, but I do not think that one can speak about a satanic deceit. On the other hand, we note in Medjugorje the most elevated number of conversions to the catholic faith: what would Satan gain in bringing back so many souls to God? Look, in this kind of situation prudence is an obligation, but I am convinced that Medjugorje is a fruit of the Good and not of the Evil.

Fr Laurentin's remark that he doesn't "like to speak about Medjugorje" is surely unbelievable in the light of his involvement in promoting it now for over twenty-five years. Indeed, for seventeen years, up until 1998, he published an annual report with constantly updated information about Medjugorje, his famous *Dernières Nouvelles* ("Latest News"), with the final edition running to 238 pages. This report only ceased publication at the express request of Bishop Peric. And this is to say nothing of Fr Laurentin's other publications on the subject.

But we should at least be grateful for his candor in admitting that the number of alleged visions is "probably excessive." Does that mean the "Gospa" doesn't know what she doing? Or perhaps the fault lies with the visionaries or the Franciscans? Whatever the explanation for this phrase, it certainly sounded as though Fr Laurentin was becoming more cautious about Medjugorje.

The Devil's Battle Plan

And as to what Satan might gain by promoting false visions, apart from undermining Fatima and other genuine apparitions, what about the danger of Medjugorje devotees leaving the Church if it should be finally condemned? That would be a significant victory for the devil surely? The way some Medjugorje supporters talk, you

would think the devil was a complete novice in spiritual matters, someone who would never dream of using a series of false visions to undermine the Church. The reality is Satan's intelligence far surpasses that of mankind, and it is only by a total reliance on God's grace that we can possibly hope to defeat his wiles and temptations.

In fact, it is precisely in the area of alleged revelations that he can do the most damage. Regarding Catholic dogmas, these are regarded by all loyal Catholics as non-negotiable, and thus it's hard for the devil to cause much mischief there. But regarding alleged visions, since a process of discernment is required by the Church, it is the ideal territory for him to cause trouble; it takes some time for the Church to come to a decision, so he has a period in which to engage in "guerrilla warfare" against it. And that is actually his whole battle plan. He knows he has lost the war against God—sentence has been passed against him and his rebellious followers and they will spend all eternity in hell. But he still has a chance to obstruct the Church in its own march towards eternity, to win some battles, whether regarding individual souls or movements such as the one which has grown up around Medjugorje.

And when we also consider Fatima, with its definite promise of the triumph of Mary's Immaculate Heart and a period of peace for the world, then we can see that this is a struggle with huge consequences. If the devil can subvert or delay the acceptance and implementation of the program outlined by Our Lady at Fatima, then that is a victory for him. And what better way of doing that than by initiating and then encouraging a rival Marian apparition site at Medjugorje? Given the enormous official Church support Fatima has received, he cannot achieve this by a frontal assault, but has to do his work more subtly. And if he can get good Catholics hooked on false visions then that is a prize certainly worth working for.

This is what St Teresa of Avila said about the cold-blooded determination of the devil to do everything he can to bring humanity down to his level: "The wiles of the devil are terrible; he will run a thousand times round hell if by so doing he can make us believe that we have a single virtue which we have not."⁶²⁹ And if the devil is prepared to do that just to prevent a single believer advancing in genuine virtue, what malice will he not display in attempting to subvert Our Lady's role in the salvation of mankind? And since

Fatima is one of the principal means by which that cause will be advanced in our times, then promoting a place like Medjugorje only makes sound satanic sense.

What does it really matter to Satan if there are some conversions, if people start to say the rosary and so on, if the Church as the whole continues to battle against the “culture of death,” without properly employing the spiritual means we were given at Fatima, and particularly the Five First Saturdays devotion? And we should also remember that the Medjugorje “good fruits” have to be balanced against the chronic disobedience, the scandals, and all the other “evil fruits” which have arisen from it.

Fr Laurentin Backpedals on Medjugorje

In October 2008, the Italian web site *Petrus* published a further interview with Fr Laurentin, which provided more evidence that the French priest was apparently backpedaling with regard to his previously fulsome support for Medjugorje—but perhaps this wasn’t such an unexpected development after all, given the revelations about Fr Vlasic.

In response to a question from the interviewer, in which he described Fr Laurentin as a “supporter of the apparitions of Medjugorje,” he asked him why the Vatican did not “appear to be convinced of the authenticity of the Medjugorje apparitions.” His response was: “I am only an expert and I have no magisterium. And I never allow myself to give an opinion on the apparitions which I study. I only examine the facts, the reasons in favor and those against. I discern them, I explain them as clearly as possible, but I don’t give any judgment.”

This was news to the interviewer, who responded by saying: “Father Laurentin, what you are saying seems to be a step backward: you have written books upholding the thesis of the authenticity of the apparitions of Medjugorje...” But Fr Laurentin again insisted that he had not done this, a statement which is extremely difficult to reconcile with the large number of articles and books he has written supportive of Medjugorje.⁶³⁰ This is clear, to give just one example, from his book published in 1984, *Is the Virgin Mary Appearing at Medjugorje?*, in which Fr Laurentin stated: “While reserving judgment to the Episcopal authority responsible in this mat-

ter, and simply in my capacity as an expert, well aware of my limits, *I would say that my analysis leads me to a positive evaluation of the apparitions.*"⁶³¹

Fr Tomislav Vlasic is Laicized

There was a further development in the case of Fr Tomislav Vlasic in July 2009, when the news broke that he had been laicized by Pope Benedict XVI, who had "granted him the favor of reduction to the lay state (*amissio status clericalis*) and of dismissal from the Order." In addition, Pope Benedict had also "motu proprio" [that is, on his own initiative], granted him "the remission of the censure incurred as well as the favor of dispensation from religious vows and from all the responsibilities connected with sacred ordination, including celibacy."

All this became clear when a letter dated 10 March was made public on 24 July 2009. In this letter, the Franciscan Minister General, Fr José Rodríguez Carballo, informed Franciscan provincials in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Italy, that Fr Vlasic had himself requested laicization. In the letter, Fr Rodríguez said Fr Vlasic was "responsible for conduct harmful to ecclesial communion both in the spheres of doctrine and discipline."

The letter further stated that Pope Benedict had "under pain of excommunication" imposed conditions on "Mr. Tomislav Vlasic," including an "absolute prohibition from exercising any form of apostolate," and an "absolute prohibition from releasing declarations on religious matters, especially regarding 'the phenomenon of Medjugorje.'" ⁶³²

Some Medjugorje supporters tried to claim that this was not as serious as it all seemed, and to distance the now ex-Fr Vlasic from the overall movement, but even if he had been laicized at his own request, this definitely looked like someone who had "jumped before he was pushed." And it is impossible to deny Fr Vlasic's crucial role in the early days at Medjugorje. Fr Bubalo has a picture in his book showing Fr Vlasic leading the visionaries in prayer at some point during this period, with the caption underneath telling us that: "From August 1981 until the end of 1984, he was the spiritual advisor of the seers." And this type of statement is found in a number of other early books on the apparitions by Medjugorje support-

ers. In addition, Fr Vlastic was responsible for the *Kronika ukazanja*, the *Chronicle of the apparitions* during this period.⁶³³

And what are we to make of alleged statements from the “Gospa” in the early 1980s supportive of Fr Vlastic? Knowing that he would be a source of scandal is it likely that the Blessed Virgin would have said on 28 February 1982: “Thank Tomislav very much, *for he is guiding you very well.*” Or what about this response on 3 June 1983, after Fr Vlastic had founded a prayer group, and the visionaries had asked: “What do you expect of Fr. Tomislav? Has he begun well?” to which they received the reply: “Yes, it is good. *Have him continue.*”⁶³⁴

Surely the content of these alleged messages, given what has subsequently happened to Fr Vlastic, demonstrates beyond any doubt that they could not possibly have originated with the real Blessed Virgin?

Bishop Peric on Medjugorje Irregularities

In early June 2009, Bishop Peric spoke at a Confirmation Mass at Medjugorje, saying that while in Rome earlier in the year, he had talked to “top officials” at the Vatican Secretariat of State and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and that they had confirmed that they were informing anyone who asked them that the Church has never recognized the alleged visions as authentic.

During his homily Bishop Peric likewise urged his listeners not to accept that the alleged visions reported in the parish were real, while after the Mass, he made a pastoral visitation of the parish, following which he sent letters to Fr Petar Vlastic, the current parish priest, and Fr Danko Perutina, one of the parochial vicars, both of whom are Franciscans.

In his letter to Fr Vlastic, which amongst other things concerned liturgical matters and the curtailing of the activities of the visionaries within the parish, the Bishop reaffirmed that priests from abroad should not give conferences or retreats without his permission, and that “neither foreign nor domestic priests can promote alleged ‘messages’ or ‘apparitions’ which have not been proclaimed authentic in that church or on church property.” He also said that the “parish of Medjugorje cannot be called a shrine, neither privately, nor pub-

licly, not officially, because it is not recognized as such by any level of competent ecclesial authority.”

Fr Vlasic was likewise asked to ensure that Fr Perutina did not give any more commentaries on the alleged monthly messages from Marija Pavlovic, which was the thrust of the Bishop’s letter to Fr Perutina himself. These documents were published on the Mostar-Duvno diocesan website on 26 September.⁶³⁵

Later in the year, in a Reuters interview, dated 7 October 2009, Cardinal Vinko Puljic apparently said that he expected the Vatican to issue more explicit guidance to Catholics “soon” on the question of Medjugorje. The Cardinal reportedly said: “We are now awaiting a new directive on this issue. I don’t think we must wait for a long time, I think it will be this year, but that is not clear... I am going to Rome in November and we must discuss this.”⁶³⁶

Cardinal Schönborn and Medjugorje

Further controversy was aroused in mid November 2009, by the news that Cardinal Christoph Schönborn intended to visit Medjugorje over the Christmas period. However, Fr. Johannes Fürnkranz, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Vienna, said that the trip was private and should not be taken as implying that the Cardinal accepted the truth of the visions.

Perhaps the most interesting point to emerge from this development was the reaction of an official at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who told a Catholic News Agency reporter that the Congregation remained supportive of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Bishops, and that specifically: “The local bishops have the ultimate authority on this matter, and their arguments against the alleged apparitions are doctrinally solid.” When further questioned, to the effect that should not Medjugorje be judged by its fruits of “conversions and vocations to the Church,” the official responded: “It is not the duty of this Dicastery to make a pastoral assessment, but a doctrinal one. But regarding the argument, it can equally be argued that God can write straight with crooked lines, just as it has been proven in several previous occasions with patently false apparitions.”⁶³⁷

This very revealing statement was a clear indication of the way the Congregation actually regarded Medjugorje, and is a classic re-

sponse to those who claim that because Medjugorje has given rise to vocations, then it must be genuine. Given the present crisis in the Church, many young people will have had their first real exposure to a more intense Catholic atmosphere through a pilgrimage to Medjugorje, and may then pursue a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. But that doesn't prove Medjugorje is genuine.

We have the sad example of the Legionaries of Christ. Consider how many vocations arose through the activities of the founder, Fr Marcial Maciel Degollado, who has now been exposed as a sexual deviant and fraud. Although Pope John Paul II gave him his support, Pope Benedict removed him from active ministry on becoming pontiff, and ordered that he lead a life of prayer and penitence. He even described Maciel as a "false prophet." How do we explain all of these vocations and conversions of heart if Maciel was a "false prophet"? The answer lies in St Paul's teaching in Romans 5:20, "... where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." The situation is no different with Medjugorje: conversions and vocations can take place because God's grace will always triumph, even in a place where the visions in question are not supernatural.⁶³⁸

Sadly, too, the fact that Pope John Paul II was deceived by Maciel indicates that his private judgment on Medjugorje cannot be regarded as sacrosanct.

On 20 November, Cardinal Vinko Puljic, while at the Vatican to attend the plenary session of a meeting of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, denied press reports which claimed that a commission concerned with the alleged visions at Medjugorje was being created by the Holy See. In an apparent reference to the 1991 Zadar declaration, he said: "The doctrinal issue of the Medjugorje phenomenon is resolved, but its pastoral significance must still be taken into account." He further stated that "for the moment, everything is under the jurisdiction of the local bishops, ... Still, at any given moment, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith could establish an International Commission in order to study the case of Medjugorje."⁶³⁹

Meanwhile, the New Year brought fresh controversy, as the fallout from Cardinal Christoph Schönborn's highly-publicized visit to Medjugorje became apparent. Bishop Peric pointed out that this visit had taken place without him being consulted. And he was also

no doubt concerned about the very positive comments made about Medjugorje by the Cardinal while he was there, and particularly those made during his homily in St James's parish church, at the Vigil Mass celebrating the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God, on 31 December.

Once he had returned to Vienna, the Cardinal explained his reasons for visiting Medjugorje: "One has to ask what the tree that bears so many good fruits looks like." He also said he wanted to "take the drama out of [entdramatisieren] the Medjugorje phenomenon" and integrate it more pastorally into the work of the Church. While acknowledging that the Vatican had still not ruled definitively on the visions, he claimed that the fact that "millions came there every year to pray" made Medjugorje "a school of normal Christian life." The Cardinal also wanted Catholics to focus on Medjugorje "in the light of the Second Vatican Council," arguing that the *sensus fidelium* ("sense of the faithful") on Medjugorje should be an important guide, rather than, it would seem, the step-by-step approach favored in *Normae Congregationis*.⁶⁴⁰ The problem, though, with an over reliance on the *sensus fidelium* is that the faithful, as a body, are not infallible, and thus can fall into error, particularly regarding claims of private revelations.

Bishop Peric and Cardinal Schönborn

Bishop Peric, in a statement published on the Mostar-Duvno diocesan website in early February, said that

the public appearance of Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna in Medjugorje, [has] given some believers the erroneous impression that the Cardinal's presence acknowledged the authenticity of the Medjugorje 'apparitions.' I believe that it is my duty as the diocesan bishop, to provide some information to the faithful on the matter, with the observation that I have already sent to the Cardinal a personal letter with similar content.

Amongst other things, Bishop Peric noted that on 15 September 2009, in the Cathedral of St Stephen in Vienna, Cardinal Schönborn had appeared with Marija Pavlovic-Lunetti, who was presented as a daily visionary. And far from his visit to Medjugorje being private, it had been very public: apart from Mass in St James's church, he had also climbed "apparition hill" with Pavlovic-

Lunetti, and given a talk in the parish church flanked by various Franciscan friars.

The Bishop then itemized a whole list of problems involving the local Franciscans, including the fact that the diocese now had nine former Franciscans who had been expelled from the Order by the Superior General, with the Holy See having confirmed these expulsions. Although these individuals had been suspended *a divinis*, that is they were not supposed to celebrate the sacraments, they continued to act as priests in parishes which had been usurped. Bishop Peric also noted that two Franciscan priests “went to a bishop of the Old Catholic Church in Switzerland with a request to be ordained bishops, in an effort to create a formal schism from Mostar and Rome. The bishop of the Old Catholic Church declined their request.”

Describing Fr Tomislav Vlastic and Fr Jozo Zovko as the “architects” of the “Medjugorje phenomenon,” he particularly noted that Fr Zovko had been “denied priestly faculties in this diocese since 2004, [and] according to newspaper reports, has been withdrawn by his religious superiors from the territory of Herzegovina and is prohibited from any contact with Medjugorje.”⁶⁴¹

Previously, in April 2007, Bishop Peric had likewise noted that despite being forbidden from exercising his priestly ministry in the diocese, Fr Zovko had been invited to lead the Way of the Cross in Medjugorje, and to hear confessions. And in February 2009, Fr Zovko left Siroki Brijeg, and moved into a partially ruined convent on the uninhabited Croatian islet of Badija. He issued a statement which was faxed to his supporters, in which it was claimed that he had asked his superiors for permission to reside outside the province. But according to the 24 February 2009 edition of the Croatian magazine *Nacional*, he had actually been exiled from the Franciscan Province of Herzegovina after nearly 20 years of disobedience. Moreover, he was isolated and forbidden any contacts, either personally or by letter with the faithful, and was not to spread any further information about Medjugorje. According to another report, he was moved again, in November 2009, to Frohnleiten in Austria, by a decision of the Franciscan Provincial of Herzegovina.⁶⁴²

Bishop Peric concluded his statement by saying:

As the diocesan bishop, with this statement I want to inform the faithful that the visit of Cardinal Christoph Schönborn does not imply any recognition of the authenticity of the ‘apparitions’ related to Medjugorje. I regret that the Cardinal, with his visit, appearance, and statements, has added new sufferings to those already present of this local Church which do not contribute to its much needed peace and unity.⁶⁴³

The upshot of all this was that it was reported on 18 January that Cardinal Schönborn had faxed a handwritten letter of apology to Bishop Peric, following a private audience with Pope Benedict at the Vatican on 15 January. The letter began thus: “Your Excellency, Dear Brother in Christ. I have received your letter from January 2 of this year. I regret if you have the impression that my pilgrimage to Medjugorje did a disservice to peace. You can be sure that this was not my intention.” The contents of the middle part of the letter were withheld, but it concluded as follows: “The Mother of God and her divine Son will certainly lead all things towards that which is good. In this trust, I greet you fraternally united in the Lord and remain, Yours, + Christoph Card. Schönborn O.P.”⁶⁴⁴

The Cardinal came in for more criticism later in the year, in September, when he again invited some of the Medjugorje visionaries for a public appearance at his Cathedral in Vienna.⁶⁴⁵

The Importance of Episcopal Collegiality

The basic problem with this type of thing is that it is a radical departure from what used to happen in the Church. When priests, bishops, and now even cardinals, permit alleged visionaries to have “apparitions” in their churches, or cathedrals, we are very much in uncharted waters. Before Medjugorje, bishops didn’t do this because it would have implied a clear lack of collegiality, that is, it would have been a violation of the principle that the world’s bishops have a joint and collective responsibility for the governance and pastoral care of the Church. This obviously includes not encouraging movements in favor of suspect visions within their own diocese, nor within the diocese where the alleged visions are taking place.

But it seems that with the best of intentions, some bishops have allowed themselves to be swayed by the wave of enthusiasm over Medjugorje, to the extent that this has now caused divisions in the

Church, with bishops holding differing views on the subject. This disharmony amongst the members of the hierarchy is unfortunately another of the bad “fruits” resulting from Medjugorje, and has also led to discord amongst the faithful who have become confused at this lack of concord amongst their spiritual leaders.

Acting in such a way is thus an affront to Episcopal collegiality, and it also gives credibility, or the appearance of Church approval, to the alleged visions, ahead of a definitive judgment from the Church. Regarding Medjugorje, the visionaries are not permitted to have visions on Church property in any diocese in Bosnia-Herzegovina or Croatia. Yet, there are frequent announcements that the “Gospa” will be appearing at a set time in parishes and cathedrals all over the world? How can such behavior be justified?⁶⁴⁶

In addition, as already indicated, we have Cardinal Bertone’s complaint regarding Medjugorje, about the “excesses of fanaticism, such as the events in various churches, in which they promise the possibility of being present at an apparition of the Madonna ... at a scheduled time.” So here we have a highly placed cardinal expressing concern over such activities.

Meanwhile, another important figure, the Portuguese Cardinal, José Saraiva Martins, had been interviewed by *Petrus*, and was asked if the alleged visions at Medjugorje should be considered true or false. He responded by saying that, “the apparitions will not be considered authentic, as long as they have not been officially approved by the Church in the person of the Holy Father.” He further stated that he didn’t know

if these apparitions were invented or if they have economic interests; ... in cases of this sort, the devil’s paw may be here. But God is so great that he knows how to make even the evil one serve for the good of humanity: in this way, it is possible to explain the benefits which many people maintain they received at Medjugorje.

In response to a question about the assertion of the Medjugorje visionaries that it was a sequel to the Fatima apparitions, the Cardinal was quite forthright:

I don’t believe that they are. I see too many differences. As I said before, the little shepherds of Fatima made themselves humble and chose silence; at Medjugorje, I don’t know if that is going to happen; ... No, I see nothing in common between Fatima and Medjugorje.⁶⁴⁷

The International Commission on Medjugorje

On 6 March 2010, it was reported in the Italian weekly magazine *Panorama* that Pope Benedict XVI had authorized an official inquiry, led by Cardinal Camillo Ruini, into the Medjugorje visions. The Cardinal has collaborated with the Pope on various projects previously, and is an ex-president of the Italian Bishops' Conference, as well as a former cardinal vicar of Rome. However, at this stage, there was no corroboration of this report from the Vatican.⁶⁴⁸

This came on 17 March, when a statement confirming the formation of a commission to investigate the “phenomenon” of Medjugorje was released by the Vatican. This read as follows:

Under the auspices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, under the presidency of Cardinal Camillo Ruini, an international commission of investigation on Medjugorje has been constituted. Said Commission, composed of cardinals, bishops and experts will work in a reserved manner, subjecting the results of their studies to the authority of the Dicastery.

Fr Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, confirmed the role of Cardinal Ruini as president, and indicated that the Commission would have approximately twenty members. Fr Lombardi explained that although Medjugorje began as a diocesan phenomenon, when it was seen to have passed beyond that level, it came under the aegis of the Bishops' Conference of the former Yugoslavia, which now no longer existed. The Bishops of Bosnia-Herzegovina had then ultimately asked the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to take over the investigation because previous commissions had not come to a definitive conclusion on the supernaturality or otherwise of Medjugorje. Fr Lombardi said that he expected that the investigation would take “a good while” to be completed, and that the results would then be submitted to the CDF. Thus the Commission is an advisory body, whose role is to offer its findings to the Congregation, which will “make decisions on the case.”⁶⁴⁹

Less than a week later, in the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale*, Vatican reporter Andrea Tornielli wrote that a new diocese could be created from territory currently within the dioceses of Dubrovnik, Mostar and Split—thus including Medjugorje—supposedly to “permit a better administration of the flow of pilgrims.” This would have had the effect of making Medjugorje independent of Bishop

Ratko Peric of Mostar-Duvno. Moreover, Tornielli claimed that the decision to create the new diocese was put off the previous September partly due to the opposition of Bishop Peric. However, when Fr Lombardi was questioned about this, he said that he was unaware of this speculation and believed it was “baseless” that such a proposal would be included in the Commission’s findings. Given that the three cities named by Tornielli, Dubrovnik, Mostar and Split, are within two different Bishops’ Conferences and indeed two different countries, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, this proposal seems unlikely.

The Italian journalist also wrote that he understood that the Commission’s deliberations would not be concerned with the “supernatural” aspects of Medjugorje, but rather focus on the Zadar declaration made by the Bishops of ex-Yugoslavia in April 1991. However, this seems improbable given that there would be little point in having a Commission at such a high level unless it can give a definitive judgment, and such a judgment must deal with whether or not Medjugorje is supernatural.

Tornielli claimed that the Vatican has never pronounced a judgment on a case of apparitions that are still in progress,⁶⁵⁰ but this is factually incorrect: as already indicated the Holy See *has* condemned false visions in the past even while it was claimed they were still going on, as was the case regarding Heroldsbach in Germany in 1951.

Cardinal Ruini and the Commission

On 13 April 2010, a report came from the Vatican that the Commission to investigate Medjugorje had held its first meeting on 26 March. At the same time, the names of the members of the Commission were announced. These included Cardinal Camillo Ruini as president, as well as several cardinals and archbishops, many of whom served on Pontifical Councils or Vatican congregations. Specifically, these commission members were: Cardinal Jozef Tomko; Cardinal Vinko Puljic; Cardinal Josip Bozanic; Cardinal Julian Herranz, and Archbishop Angelo Amato.

The commission also included various specialists, namely Msgr Tony Anatrella, a French psychoanalyst; Msgr Pierangelo Sequeri, an Italian theology professor; Fr David Maria Jaeger, OFM; Fr

Zdzislaw Jozef Kijas, OFM Conv; and Fr Salvatore Perrella, OSM, a Mariology lecturer. Fr Achim Schutz, a theological anthropology professor was included as secretary, with Msgr Krzysztof Nykiel, a CDF official, serving as an additional secretary. Other members were Fr Franjo Topic, a theology professor from Sarajevo; Fr Mijo Nikic, SJ, a professor of Psychology and Psychology of Religion from Zagreb; Fr Mihaly Szentmartoni, SJ, a professor of Spirituality, and Sr Veronica Nela Gaspar, a theology professor.⁶⁵¹

The members of the committee were chosen to provide a body with the necessary authority and expertise. Cardinals Puljic and Bozanic, archbishops of Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Zagreb in Croatia, respectively, both formerly in Yugoslavia, have the necessary local knowledge and experience. Cardinal Jozef Tomko is a retired Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, while Cardinal Julian Herranz is the retired President of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, and a priest of Opus Dei. Archbishop Angelo Amato was responsible for signing the canonical sanctions against the then Fr Tomislav Vlasic when he was the Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and so is familiar with Medjugorje.

Of the other members of the Commission, three of them, Fr Franjo Topic, Fr Mijo Nikic, SJ, and Sr Veronica Nela Gaspar, are based in countries from the former Yugoslavia and thus have the necessary linguistic, and theological, skills, while the others are drawn from a variety of countries, and have different areas of expertise. The Commission has two Franciscan members, Fr David Jaeger and Fr Zdzislaw Jozef Kijas, a sign that a proper evaluation of Medjugorje is connected to the stance of the local Franciscans in relation to the Church in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In particular, Fr Jaeger, a canon lawyer, specializes in Church-State relations.

And since this is a new examination of the event, distinct from previous Episcopal commissions, and given the highly contentious nature of Medjugorje, it only made sense that Bishop Peric was not a part of the special Commission. To have included him would only have invited charges from Medjugorje partisans that the Commission was “unbalanced” or “biased,” although, as we have seen, *Normae Congregationis* clearly stipulates that the local Ordinary is always to be consulted regarding the investigation of alleged revela-

tions. In fact, the Bishop contacted the Catholic News Service in February 2011, to say that he would “no longer comment about what is happening in Medjugorje out of respect for the Vatican commission”. And it also needs to be pointed out that none of the local Franciscans were invited to join the Commission either.

An interesting point about Cardinal Ruini’s role as the president of the Commission is that he has had previous experience of dealing with a Medjugorje-related incident. This concerned a small Marian statue from Medjugorje, which allegedly began to weep blood, beginning on 2 February 1995, in Civitavecchia, a city on the Italian coast about 70km to the north-west of Rome. A diocesan commission of inquiry, comprising eleven members, met to look into the case for the first time on 19 April of that year, and had completed its work by 22 November 1996. Seven members of the commission expressed themselves in favor of the belief that the weepings from the statue were of a supernatural nature, with three opposed and one abstaining. But this position was rejected by the Vatican, most probably on the grounds that tests showed that the blood on the statue was male in origin, in addition to which all the male members of the family involved had refused to agree to a blood test.

In the year 2000, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as its Prefect, established a new commission under Cardinal Ruini, and this concluded that a more cautious verdict of *non constat de supernaturalitate* (“the supernaturality has not been proven”), was more appropriate. News of this decision, however, was only made public on 17 February 2005, by Cardinal Bertone, the then secretary of the CDF, who explained that the diocesan commission had been set up hastily by the bishop.⁶⁵²

The Papal Nuncio on Medjugorje

Three days after the International Commission on Medjugorje was announced, Archbishop D’Errico, the Papal Nuncio to Bosnia-Herzegovina, was interviewed, and the question of Medjugorje was raised; the text of the resulting interview was placed on the website of the Bishops’ Conference of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Archbishop D’Errico said that:

From personal experience, every time I met the Holy Father he had great interest in the question of Medjugorje, a question to which he was directed ... [since] he became prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It deals with a question for which he feels responsible as the supreme head of the Church to pronounce a clear message. The Holy Father personally knows it very well and he has told me that several times—he is well acquainted with the whole phenomenon. He knows about the great good that is being done in this region by the priests, the Franciscan friars, and the laity. And on the other hand he asks himself how ... [is there] such opposition to this phenomenon. For that reason he wanted to establish this commission which is on an especially high level to obtain a complete picture of it by persons who are highly qualified. So from different parts of the world he has invited cardinals, bishops, experts and expert witnesses to be part of this commission.⁶⁵³

Thus this interview revealed the personal interest the Pope has taken in the “question” of Medjugorje, and how he feels the need for a “clear message” to be pronounced by the Church—a further indication that we should expect some definite decision to come out of the work of the Commission.

However, according to one of the Commission members, Fr Salvatore Perrella, speaking in January 2011, since the Pope wants a “decisive conclusion made,” it is likely that the Commission’s work will take quite some time. He further stated that the case of Medjugorje “is a serious thing”, that it is “very complex” but capable of resolution.

It was disquieting, though, to read that he also said that the extended length of the alleged visions at Medjugorje is not something that “generates suspicion” any longer. In saying this, he pointed to the recognition of “precedents” such as the apparitions of Our Lady of Laus, which spanned a period of 54 years and were recognized by the local bishop in 2008. However, as indicated previously, the seer of Le Laus, Benoîte Rencurel, only saw daily apparitions of the Blessed Virgin for four months, and from then on only had intermittent apparitions until 1718. So this is a quite different situation to that at Medjugorje, where some of the visionaries allege daily visions now for thirty years.

In any event, to further emphasize the importance of the role of the local Ordinary, he also stated that at each step of the investiga-

tion, “the person in charge of everything is the bishop,”⁶⁵⁴ which once again shows that the Bishop of Mostar has not been sidelined by the Commission, but that this new development is the culmination of a logical process.

The crucial point in all this, and the one which will surely be the most significant for the Ruini Commission, is that up to now, official Church pronouncements about Medjugorje have either been explicitly or implicitly negative—explicitly in the case of the local bishops, and, as has been argued previously, implicitly as regards the Zadar declaration. Other statements concerning, for example, pilgrimages, have essentially been of a pastoral nature, and designed to ensure that the genuine needs of pilgrims were taken care of. Some extraordinary supernatural facts about Medjugorje are going to have to suddenly emerge if the Commission is to overturn the previously established ecclesial positions, and it is very difficult to see this happening.

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