

ON PRIVATE REVELATION

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"If any man shall say to you: Lo, here is Christ... do not believe him.
Behold, I have told you beforehand"

By Carey Winters

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"The faithful repair in vast crowds to places where visions and wonders are supposed to have taken place... People who are ignorant of the first words of the Creed set themselves up as ardent apostles of religious belief and practice." Such was Cardinal Ottaviani's view of the situation in 1951; since then, it has steadily worsened. While God has always favored a few individuals with His direct communication, pseudo-mystics abound in our day. Many Catholics, often ignorant of Magisterial teaching on the subject, subscribe uncritically to their 'messages.' As a consequence, the elect are, as Our Lord warned, in grave danger of being deceived.

Public Revelation: The Deposit of Faith

"Public revelation concerns the Church and reveals to all men that which is necessary for salvation," wrote Fr. Jean Violette. "Public revelation is also called 'The Deposit of Faith,' and it contains both Holy Scripture and Tradition, which have been entrusted to the Catholic Church for interpretation. This is the Catholic Faith which must be believed by all men to be saved.

"Christ entrusted His revelation to His Apostles who had the duty to reveal it to the rest of humanity and interpret it. And so with the death of St. John, the last of the Apostles, the public revelation ceased, ended, closed. All that is necessary for salvation has been revealed and there is nothing else to be added" (cited in *Private Revelation: A Critical Analysis*, by Peter Valde-Magnus). Therefore, as Cardinal Ottaviani noted, "even the most accredited visions can ... furnish us with new motives for fervor but not with new elements of life or doctrine" ("*Signs and Wonders: A Warning*," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 14 Feb. 1951).

Private Revelation

Fr. William T. Welsh's article "Traditional Teaching on Apparitions" appeared in the April 1986 issue of *Catholic*, and it is quote at length by Valde-Magnus. "All Catholic theologians concur that private revelations, visions, and locations must be approached with great caution, always keeping in mind the strong possibility of human illusion, self-deception, diabolical influence, and even outright fraud," notes Fr. Welsh. "For 350 years, since the decree of Pope Urban VIII in 1625, the Church has severely forbidden any publication of the accounts of private revelation and visions without special ecclesiastical approbation... Thus, the Christian people were protected from the dangers inherent in 'apparition enthusiasm,' dangers of attachment, curiosity, delusion, etc. Above all these laws enshrine the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church on exercising judicious reserve with respect to all reports of private revelation" (p. 22).

* What Church approval means

Pope Benedict XIV explained that when the Church approves private revelation, she "simply permits them to be published for the instruction and edification of the faithful. The assent to be given to them is not therefore an act of Catholic Faith but of human faith, based on the fact that these revelations are probable and worthy of credence" As Fr. Augustin Poulain, S.J., further qualifies: "When the Church approves private revelations, she declares only that there is nothing in them contrary faith or good morals, and that they may be read without danger or even with profit; no obligation is thereby imposed on the faithful to believe them. Speaking of such revelations as (e.g.) Those of St. Hildegard (approved in part by Eugenius III), St. Bridget (by Boniface IX), and St. Catherine of Siena (by Gregory XI) Benedict XIV says: 'It is not obligatory nor even possible to give them the assent of Catholic faith, but only of human faith, in conformity with the dictates of prudence, which presents them to us as probable and worthy of pious believe' (De canon., III, liii, xxii, II)" ("*Private Revelations*," *The 1913 Catholic Encyclopedia*).

"Everyone knows that we are fully at liberty to believe or not in private revelations, even those most worthy of credence," noted Cardinal Pitra. "Even when the Church approves them, they are merely received as probable and not as indubitable. They are not to be used as deciding questions of history, natural philosophy, philosophy, or theology which are matters of controversy between the Doctors...." (Cited in Benedict Groeshel's *A Still Small Voice*, p. 32)

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Church approval therefore does not mandate belief on the part of the faithful – and the belief that it permits in no way equates to the assent that must be given to public revelation.

***Errors in authentic revelations**

"For centuries," notes Groeschel, "it has been clear papal teaching that even a canonized saint who has reported a private revelation which has been approved by the Church for acceptance by the faithful may have introduced some personal element that is subject to error or distortion" (A Still Small Voice, p. 27). Poulain cited five reasons for such errors within authentic revelations. There may have been faulty interpretation by the recipient or others; a symbolic revelation may be incorrectly interpreted as historical; the visionary will tend to mix subjective expectations and preconceived ideas with the action of divine grace; there may have been subsequent alteration or amplification; and there may be errors made in good faith by those who record the revelation (cited in A Still Small Voice, p. 51).

Poulain explains therefore that "the revelation can be regarded as Divine in its broad outlines, but doubtful in minor details. Concerning the revelations of Marie de Agreda and Anne Catherine Emmerich, for example, contradictory opinions have been expressed; some believe unhesitatingly everything they contain, and are annoyed when anyone does not share their confidence; others give the revelations no credence whatsoever (generally on a priori grounds); finally there are many who are sympathetic, but do not know what to reply when asked what degree of credibility is to be attributed to the writings of these two ecstasies. The truth seems to be between the two extreme opinions indicated first. If there is question of a particular fact related in these books and not mentioned elsewhere, we cannot be certain that it is true, especially in minor details. In particular instances, these visionaries have been mistaken: thus Marie de Agreda teaches, like her contemporaries, the existence of crystal heavens, and declares that one must believe everything she says, although such an obligation exists only in the case of the Holy Scriptures. In 1771 Clement XIV forbade the continuation of her process of beatification 'on account of the book'.

"Catherine Emmerich has likewise given expression to false or unlikely opinions: she regards the writings of the pseudo-Dionysius as due to the Areopagite, and says strange things about the terrestrial Paradise, which, according to her, exists on an inaccessible Mountain towards Tibet. If there be question of the general statement of facts given in these works, we can admit with probability that many of them are true. For these two visionaries led lives that were regarded as very holy. Competent authorities have judged their ecstasies as divine. It is therefore prudent to admit that they received a special assistance from God, preserving them not absolutely, but in the main, from error" (ibid). Fr. Groeschel notes, as further example, the time given for Our Lady's death by various mystics. Catherine Emmerich maintained that Mary died 13 years after our Lord, St. Bridget said 14 years, and Marie de Agreda 21.

Errors of interpretation are also common. St. Joan of Arc, while imprisoned, asked her 'voices' whether she would be burned. They told her not to fear because of her martyrdom, and that she would have a 'great victory.' She interpreted this to mean she would not die; in fact, her 'great victory' rested in the posthumously reversed court decision and the sainthood bestowed upon her. Similarly, St. Francis of Assisi, told by Our Lord to "rebuild My Church," began by repairing the dilapidated stone structure in which the vision had taken place. Only later did he understand that his mission was to fortify the Church Militant.

***Fraud**

Fr. John O'Connor describes the apparently supernatural events surrounding an Irishman earlier this century. The man in question would enter churches with his large metal Rosary, and the feet of the crucifix would begin to bleed. The gentleman was unmasked when the blood was analyzed – and found to be contaminated with saliva. The man was simply able to spit very accurately.

***Satanic Mimicry**

Fr. Groeschel cites the case of the Franciscan nun, Magdalena of the Cross, who had been "three times abbess of her monastery at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Complete with self-inflicted stigmata and the ability to levitate above the earth, with ecstasies and the gift of prophesy, she even convinced others that she had lived without food. She enjoyed a reputation for extraordinary holiness for several decades. Bishops, clergy, great nobles, and even inquisitors flocked to her. She succeeded in deluding a large number of Spanish theologians who prided themselves on not being easily taken in. However, in danger of death, she confessed that the whole thing was a fabrication and that in fact she inflicted the stigmata on herself. By her own admission she had sold her soul to Satan in return for all of these deceptive gifts, and she actually had to be subjected to exorcism" (A Still Small Voice, pp. 45-46). Rallying from her illness, the nun attempted to stage a "come-back," and spent her remaining years in the care of the Inquisition.

At about the same time, Michael de Notredame, a Jewish physician in France, emerged onto the world stage. An astrologer, Nostradamus made a number of very accurate prophesies. He predicted that a humble Franciscan would become Pope – and Sixtus V did. In a letter to King Henry II in 1558 he foretold the 1792 French Revolution, complete with its date and anti-clericalism. He foresaw the World Wars, Hitler's death in his Berlin bunker, the collapse of the Maginot Line, the 1956 Hungarian revolution, and an English king who would lose his throne over a divorcee.

Nostradamus attributed his uncannily accurate prophesies to "God the Creator," who he said used him as a spokesman. Although he was able to quote the Bible in his own defense, "his nocturnal methods of divination were based largely on an ancient book called *De Mysteriis Egyptorum* [whose author] stressed the importance of dressing in robes and using a wand and a three-legged stool" (Angus Hall & Francis King, *Mysteries of Prediction*, p. 110). The work of Nostradamus was not officially condemned by the Church until it was put on the Index of Forbidden Books in 1781; by then he had a considerable following among both clerics and the Catholic laity.

Nostradamus' rhymed "Quatrains" predicted the rise of three antiChrists. The first two, Napoleon and Hitler, are easily identifiable from his writings. The third, a Moslem, would be defeated, he said, when the two world powers laid aside their differences and joined together against their common enemy. His highly accurate predictions (he misspelled 'Hitler' by one letter) prepared those who believed to accept the Luciferian one-world plan. Fr. John O'Connor has pointed out that such is often Satan's method; he is perfectly willing to make 99% of his story orthodox, if it allows him to introduce 1% error into the thinking of those he dupes. (*Is It Mary Who IS Speaking?* Audiotape).

Thus it becomes very obvious that not only can authentic private revelations contain errors, but Satanic prophecy can be startlingly accurate. An archangelic intelligence is quite capable of accurate prediction – and, for that matter, of stage-managing those who do his bidding.

"This power of the evil spirit reaches very far," cautioned St. John of the Cross "He can foretell pestilence, earthquakes, divine punishments, death, all with at least a high degree of probability. From the fact that sometimes the predictions are actually fulfilled, however, we must not hold that their divine origin is thereby proved. Often such are nothing but diabolical divination" (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book 2, Ch. 21). It is precisely because of such possibilities that the Church has insisted upon ecclesiastical approbation before private revelations can be disseminated to the faithful.

*Where Rome Stands

As Fr. Welsh pointed out, since 1625 the Church has severely forbidden any publication of the accounts of private revelation and visions without special ecclesiastical approbation. Although such technically remains the case today, the waters were considerably muddied by Paul VI's decision to abolish the Index of Forbidden Books in 1966. Alleged seers and their publishers now cite his decision as their permission to publish, without ecclesiastical approval, accounts of what they maintain are private revelations. The congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has been attempting to stamp out some of the ensuing brushfires. A CDF statement regarding 'seer' Vassula Ryden, (excerpted, right) restates the Church's position.

Furthermore, Rick Salbato notes that "Canon 823 applies to all private revelation. The Catholic Encyclopedia states that even though the Index has been abolished there are still eight categories of books that require an Imprimatur. Category Six is private revelation" (*The Marian Movement of Priests*, p. 26).

Fr. Welsh notes: "Wherever a change in disciplinary law causes danger to faith or morals, Catholics should recognize this as an abuse of authority, and retain the old practices, holding fast to tradition. Catholics who truly understand what it means to uphold Catholic Tradition in every aspect of life will never publish, read, or pass on any accounts of alleged visions or supernatural messages. He... will prefer to follow the good and saintly Popes for the last 350 years rather than any recent liberal one who has passed laws contrary to Tradition" (*Private Revelation*, p. 22).

*What should our attitude be?

Our attitude toward private revelation must be that of the traditional Church: extreme caution. We have, in the first place, a grave responsibility to avoid false worship, which is a violation of the first Commandment. To that sin, rash Catholics who follow private revelation without sufficient forethought may add imprudence and presumption. It is, Our Lord said, a wicked and adulterous generation that seeks a sign.

Fr. O'Connor further noted that some alleged seers are simply mediums – and Leviticus prescribed the death penalty for both mediums and those who consult with them. Such behavior is, we are told in Deut. 18, "an abomination before the Lord."

"Christianity is not diffused in the world by means of apparitions, visions and other similar supernatural phenomena. Men receive the message of salvation, not through a direct and miraculous intervention of God, who presents it to them from on high, but through an indirect attestation of witnesses who guarantee the truth that they preach..." (Fr. Jean Galot, SJ, quoted in "Medjugorje: The Untold Story I," Fidelity, Sept. 1988).

*A form of neoGnosticism

E. Michael Jones explains that "Private revelation, by its very nature, always threatens to preempt the authority of the Church. Living by faith is difficult even in the best of times. The danger is that those who are bewildered by confusion in the Church or world at large will... go off seeking solace in signs and wonders, which by definition are always more tangible" ("Untold Story I," p. 29).

According to Laurent Valkon, "Seeking after visions and revelations and especially being attached to them and building one's spiritual life upon them is also a form of neo-gnosticism because it is seeking salvation in the knowledge gained in ways essentially outside the order of divine public revelation, of the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity, especially Faith" (Revelations and the Church, quoted in Peter Valde-Magnus' Private Revelation, p. 12). Valde-Magnus explains that all the guidance we need is "contained in Faith, in Scripture, in the Church's Teachings and in our own properly enlightened reason... Therefore to place one's confidence and joy in visions and revelations is to depart from the narrow way of Faith, and those who follow apparitions instead of reason and the Catholic Faith, dogmatically defined by previous Popes and Councils, are falling into the Gnostic temptation of seeking knowledge outside the Will of God" (p. 13).

Those who succumb to such a temptation often find themselves "under the spell of a captivating personality who favors himself a mystic with inside information, and with a 'hotline to heaven,'" wrote Marlene Moloney, in her Battle for the Mystical Mind. "The blind devotee gives allegiance to a master who he feels has special illumination... and puts him above all other authorities" (quoted in Private Revelation, p. 24).

Fr. Welsh cites Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange's statement that the desire for revelations is at least a venial sin, even when the soul has a good end in view. Eagerness to hear 'what Our Lady said' has turned some apparitions sites into oracles, and "people are frequenting them and turning to them as the surest source on earth for knowing God's Will. Such pagan practice is unheard of in the history of Christianity. Jesus Christ established a visible Church... Catholics must remain attached, not to oracles as in pagan Romans and Greeks, but to Catholic Rome – the 200 years of teaching under the Infallible Magisterium established by Jesus Christ. We can never go back to the darkness of Delphi" (Private Revelation, p. 23).

Satan, of course, advances the opposite argument. Valde-Magnus' book contains a lengthy quote from a traditional priest on private revelation that effectively sums up the situation.

"Satan," he notes, "can use so-called 'apparitions' to seduce pious people who carry in their soul the latent virus of pride... The hidden thought in their souls tells them that Public Revelation is truly for everybody; but they are not just everybody – they are special, chosen souls entitled to special treatment by God...."

"Satan's greatest success in our days in the subversion of the Catholic Church, and bringing forth the 'Conciliar' church. He achieved this unbelievable victory by entrapping both the intellectual and the simple Catholic with new ideas! He induced the intellectuals to accept science as the source of Faith rather than Revelation. Thus the way was paved for the Modernist heresy... The desire of simple Catholic people was satisfied with the proliferation of new apparitions, new devotions. Both classes of people have detached themselves from the Rock, from the Cornerstone, (Luke 20:18) from the Sacred Tradition of the Church; thus they give an opening to the allurements of Satan" (Private Revelation, p. 17).

Jones concurs: "If [Satan] can get certain people to ascribe to their favorite private revelation the authority which belongs to; the Church, then he will have succeeded admirably. The devil could care less if people say the Rosary, as long as they are willing to do so in devotion to their own para-church" ("Untold Story I," p. 30).

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