

Modern Apparitions of the Blessed Virgin

La Salette, France, 1846 to Kibeho, Rwanda, 1981

Barry M Coldrey

Apparitions of Our Lady in the modern world: confrontation with secularisation

* Barry M Coldrey, 1939 -

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Foreword

A vision is the supernatural perception of some person not visible naturally to the one experiencing the apparition. While mystics have reported visions of events occurring at great distances or apparitions of a symbolic nature, more common are reports of visions of Jesus or Mary or one or other of the saints.

In the Bible — Old and New Testaments — angels appear without warning to people both in dreams and while awake. These apparitions were never common occurrences. However they flowed from the reality that God reveals himself to human beings in history.

In the Old Testament the Israelites experienced a growing appreciation of the transcendence of God which presumed that any revelation would be mediated through angels. The otherness of Yahweh came to be understood as making a direct vision of God impossible in this life. The Old Testament writers, as in Exodus, were ambivalent on the point, However the gradual drift is mediation of God's will via prophets, miracles, dreams, omens and visions.

In the history of Christian spirituality over two millennia, visions and revelations occur occasionally in the lives of the saints. This could lead to the mistaken idea that such extraordinary events are signs of striking sanctity, whereas the experiences fall generally into the category of charisms which are intended for the benefit of others. The saints are role models for other Christians; their encounters with the divine are meant to lead others to God.

There are fashions in devotion and spirituality as in other areas of human experience. Over recent years, and among many educated members of the faith community, devotion to Mary, Mother of God — and to the saints — has tended to wane; and interest in Mary's apparitions and her message has lessened for many Catholics, not for all.¹

The strong biblical and intense liturgical spirituality of the last two generations since Vatican II, has had little use for the extraordinary accounts of visions and other revelations. These seem to some people to be a remnant of a previous age and indicative of a credulity that does no credit to contemporary Catholics who live in

¹ This sceptical attitude among more educated Catholics is clear in these two articles: Ryan, M, 'Apparitions of the Blessed Virgin: a challenge to religious educators', *Religious Education*, Vol. 88 No 4, Autumn 1993, pp. 564 ff and Catt, M, 'Keeping up appearances', *US Catholic*, May 2002, p. 23

rich, advanced Western countries, where Catholics have moved into the mainstream of their affluent cultures.

In fact, a reasonable caution about alleged visions, revelations and apparitions is sensible and quite consistent with the tradition itself. Hoaxes, delusions and fraudulent claims have occurred; modern media sensationalism can do the rest. The responsible member of the faith community remains cool and open to the evidence because a total rejection of the possibility of such events intrudes on the fundamental idea of a loving God revealing himself to people personally in history.

The experience of many Christians in the charismatic renewal, as well as the continued world wide interest in Lourdes, Fatima and Medjugorje, is a sign that this element of Catholic devotional life — ignored by many — is still present for others of the people of God.

There are, of course, visions **and** apparitions ! Apparitions of Mary have a special place in the context of spirituality. When Mary appears it is often in isolated places — La Salette, Lourdes, Fatima — to children, teenagers, or other marginalised individuals such as women in third world countries, or the native American such as Juan Diego at Tepeyac in Mexico in 1513. These apparitions — in every case — resulted in intense outpourings of devotion, at the time and this strong devotion continues to the present day.

The Church does not affirm the reality of such appearances as being at the centre of faith; they are not. However, they are compatible with the gospel and the drift of revelation through the centuries, and can be supported and recommended. Mary's messages consistently include calls to conversion of heart, prayer and penance, coupled with an assurance of the persevering love of Mary and the boundless mercy of God.

This exploration follows the priorities of the Church where apparitions of Our Lady are concerned. Only some — La Salette, Lourdes, Fatima, Banneux, Beauraing, Pontmain, Kibeho — are supported fully as 'worthy of credence'. These are emphasised. There are others with widespread followings and some support from the teaching Church: Pellevoisin, Knock and Medjugorje. These are given some attention.

Other alleged apparitions, such as those proclaimed for Garabandel in Spain, where there are serious concerns as to authenticity, are ignored. The major apparitions are summarised in an early chapter for the benefit of both the busy, casual reader, who can gain useful insight quickly, and for the more serious, relaxed reader who can focus on the essentials at this stage.

After a quick introduction, the more accepted of Mary's apparitions over the last century or so are considered separately, and in more detail. In each case, the events,

the message and the testing process are stressed, the latter to judge the authenticity of the supernatural experience.

Mary's appearances have commonly led to exceptional outpourings of devotion and to pilgrimages to the places blessed by her presence. In this context, Pope John Paul II expressed the significance of Our Lady's appearances in his personal religious life:

It has been my custom to make pilgrimages to the shrine of Our Lady, starting with my earliest youth. I know very well that every people, every country has its holy places, places of special encounter between God and human beings; places in which Christ dwells in a special way in our midst. If these places are so often dedicated to His Mother, it reveals all the more fully to us the nature of His Church.

There is a context for this piece of writing, and for Mary's repeated call in her apparitions, for 'back to basics' service of God. It is 2005. The church in Australia — indeed the church in the English speaking world — is ravaged by clerical and fraternal infidelity to the celibacy vow. At the tip of this iceberg, sexual molestation of minors has been a constant undercurrent in the church for many years. By the end of the year 2002, in Australia some eighty Brothers and priests have been convicted of sexual offences against children and more cases are pending. Infidelity has been revealed on a widespread scale.

The reputations of the leaders of the faith community have declined seriously, and may sink further before things improve. Devout Catholics ache with a sense of innocence lost or destroyed, of the dangerous allure of evil: of criminal behaviour; vows ignored; the squalid efforts to cover-up.

The Catholic church is vast; the 'people of God' number over one billion baptised. There is always need for reform somewhere; the need at the moment is simply more open and increasingly urgent. However, at her well attested appearance at La Salette, France, in 1846, Our Lady's strictures against **some** clergy have a curiously modern ring:

The priests, ministers of my Son, the priests, by their wicked lives, by their irreverence and their impiety in the celebration of the holy mysteries, by their love of money, their love of honours and pleasures, the priests have become cesspools of impurity. Yes, the priests are asking for vengeance and vengeance is hanging over their heads. Woe to the priests and to those dedicated to God who by their unfaithfulness and their wicked lives are crucifying my Son again ! The sins of those dedicated to God cry out towards Heaven and call for vengeance, and now vengeance is at their door, for there is no one left to beg mercy and forgiveness for the people.

Someone may inquire if the writer has always had a strong devotion to Our Lady and a special interest in her apparitions over the last century or so. The answers must be: on the first question, 'not strong enough' and on the second, 'not especially'. When travelling the writer has visited the Rue de Bac in Paris, Lourdes in Southern France, Knock in Co Mayo, Ireland and Beauraing in Belgium.

It is hoped that the book — complete with a variety of pilgrimage information — will assist others to visit more of Our Lady's shrines with more spiritual advantage to themselves than the writer has acquired to date.

This is the third edition of a work which appeared a year ago. This edition is significantly larger, more comprehensive, more professionally produced and , regrettably, more expensive. The material on the alleged apparitions at Medjugorje is much more detailed; the visions of Our Lady at Kibeho in Rwanda, are mentioned for the first time.

In addition, the phenomenon of the 'weeping statue' in Perth, Western Australia, is mentioned, since this book has been produced in Australia. All of the famous apparitions of Our Lady have occurred far from Australia; this possible manifestation has occurred closer to home. It is appropriate for a mention.

Acknowledgements

There are a number of people and organisations to thank in the release of this simple publication which owes so much to modern desktop publishing.

Brother T L Griffin of Mount Sion Hostel, Parkville, Victoria has advised on this as all my other books which have a religious theme or content. I am in his debt.

I wish to thank a number of journals and their authors for the use of copyright material: the *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 307 Issue 6913, for some of the article, 'Has Lourdes seen its 66th miracle'; *The Economist* U.K. for permission to use its article, 'Miracles under the microscope', dated 22 April 2000, pp 77-79; and William Buckley, Jr., the celebrated American Catholic writer for the use of some of his 1993 article in the *National Review*, 'A visit to Lourdes to be a pilgrim'. Vol 45, Issue 15, 9 August 1993 , pp. 33-37.

The following articles were studied closely to obtain the sceptical view of apparitions: Catt, M, 'Marian sightings are on the upswing', *US Catholic*, May 2002, pp. 23-27; and Ryan, M, 'Fatima, Lourdes and Medjugorje: a challenge for religious educators', *Religious Education*, Vol. 88 No 4, Fall 1993, pp. 564-575. It happens that I

do not agree with a considerable amount of what they say, and reject the tone of their articles; nevertheless I am in their debt since they illustrate a particular view of Our Lady's appearances in spite of being members of the faith community or close to, and sympathetic to the community.

I must acknowledge too the immediate and generous response from the shrine offices and National Tourist Offices at La Salette, Lourdes, Pontmain, Pellevoisin, Knock, Fatima, Beauraing and Banneux to my requests for up-to-date brochures, flyers and public transport timetables and for permission to use these where appropriate to illustrate the text and to increase its relevance to the reader. These days there is a great deal of material on the Internet relevant to the apparitions. None of this is copyright in the sense that books, brochures, journal articles and flyers are; some has been used to effect in appropriate places.

The writer includes material on the alleged apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, aware that some church authorities are silent on the authenticity of the events and others are opposed. However, there is extraordinary interest of many millions in these alleged apparitions. Moreover, Medjugorje has gained approval from some influential church people.

To all those whose advice or work has been of assistance I am in debt. The final product, including any errors or omissions, are my responsibility.

Barry M Coldrey

Thornbury, Australia

30 June 2005

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Ten Major Apparitions

The Apparitions at La Salette, France

In this remote place, Mary appeared to two children, Maximin Giraud and Melanie Calvat, in 1846. It was a sunny afternoon and they were pasturing sheep high on the

mountain side. Our Lady called for prayer and penance, and an end to the widespread ignoring of the Sunday liturgy throughout the region.

The Apparitions at Lourdes, France

Mary appeared to Bernadette Soubirous, a young teenage girl, eighteen times in 1858 at the grotto of Massabielle, beside the river Gave just outside the town. She asked for penance and prayer for the conversion of sinners, and described herself as 'the Immaculate Conception'. Lourdes is famous for the miraculous spring associated with 60-70 cures accepted by the Church. In recent years, five million pilgrims visit the shrine annually.

The Apparition at Pontmain, France

Our Lady appeared in the sky over the small town of Pontmain in north-western France to a group of young children for about three hours in early 1871 during the Franco-Prussian war. Her message appeared on a banner under her feet, and encouraged prayer, while emphasising Jesus' love and concern for His people.

The Apparition at Knock, Ireland

Mary appeared at Knock, a small village in County Mayo in August 1879. A number of villagers of diverse ages saw the silent apparition, which lasted about three hours, outside the gable end of the local parish church.

The Apparition at Fatima, Portugal

In the middle of World War I, Our Lady appeared to three children: Lucia de Santos 10, and her two cousins, Francisco Marto, 9 and Jacinta Marto 7, six times between May and October 1917. She described herself as 'Our Lady of the Rosary' while urging prayer and especially the rosary — as well as penance — for the conversion of sinners. Mary requested the consecration of Russia — then in the throes of the Bolshevik Revolution — to her Immaculate Heart.

The Apparitions at Beauraing, Belgium

In the winter of 1932–33, Our Lady appeared thirty-three times to a group of children at Beauraing in Belgium, in a convent garden near a hawthorn tree. The vision described herself as ‘the Immaculate Virgin’ and ‘Mother of God, Queen of Heaven’, while calling for prayer for the conversion of sinners.

The Apparitions at Banneux, Belgium

In 1933, Mary appeared eight times to Mariette Beco outside the family home at Banneux, a small village in Belgium. She described herself as ‘the Virgin of the Poor’ and promised to intercede for the poor, the sick and the suffering.

The Apparitions at Medjugorje, Bosnia–Herzegovina

Medjugorje is a village in Croatia, formerly part of Yugoslavia until the republic split into its constituent parts during the early 1990s. On 24 June 1981, six Croatian youths reported a vision of the Blessed Virgin. Since then the apparitions have continued both at the original site and at the village church of St James. Medjugorje is a pilgrimage site drawing the throngs of pilgrims associated with Lourdes and Fatima. However, the church has never ruled on the authenticity of the apparitions.

The Apparition at Kibeho, Rwanda — Central Africa

Our Lady appeared to three young African women — Alphonsine Mumureke, Nathalie Mukamazimpaka and Marie Claire Mukangango — in the boarding college at Kibeho from the 28 November 1981 until June 1982. The visions took place in the presence of several witnesses. Our Lady referred to herself as ‘Nyina wa Jambo’, i.e. ‘Mother of the Word’ and ‘Umubyeyi w’Imana’, i.e. ‘Mother of God’.

When the bishop of Gikongoro, Rwanda, approved public worship at Kibeho, 15 August 1988, following the apparitions there which commenced on 28 November 1981, he said:²

A recognised appearance which reinforces the life of faith and prayer is certainly a powerful help for the pastors of hearts, However the message related to this appearance is not a new revelation; it is rather a recall of the ordinary teaching of the Church, fallen into the lapse of memory. There are more reasons to

² Rwanda became a Belgian colony after World War I — 1919 — and among the educated French is spoken widely. This is a translation from the French and while a trifle stilted makes a key point memorably: and the key point is, the apparitions can add nothing to the deposit of faith, However faith can wither and practice be abandoned. Mary in her appearances recalls us to the basics of Christian living and enthusiastic practice of our faith.

believe in the apparitions than to deny them, more on the evidence of probability than on indisputable arguments.

The Rosary, a Consistent Theme in Apparitions

The Rosary is the oldest and most popular of all private Catholic devotions, and one that has been promoted actively by the church since the fifteenth century. The origin of bead circlets as an aid to prayerful meditation is lost in ancient Eastern customs. The Chinese Kwan Yin statue wears a circle of beads. However, wherever they originated, the beads were certainly used in the early middle ages by devout Christians who counted them as they meditated, praying the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary and the Glory Be.

It was in the thirteenth century at the period when intense Marian devotion was pervasive in the Church that such a circlet was called a rosary, making it a spiritual bouquet named for Mary's flower, the rose. There was a popular **legend** that the Blessed Virgin had personally given the rosary to St Dominic during a vision; this is unlikely to be true as the rosary predates Dominic and the Religious Order he founded.³

However devotion to Our Lady and the Rosary were encouraged and promoted by the Friars Preachers and the Carthusians among others. When most Christians were illiterate and when books — including Bibles — were unavailable except in monasteries and major churches, a string of beads provided a simple means for devout people to re-create their attachment to some major events of the Gospel as they prayed the prayer that Jesus taught or repeated the words of Gabriel and Elizabeth to Mary.⁴

In 2002, Pope John Paul II added a fourth set of mysteries, the mysteries of light or 'luminous' mysteries. These focus on the life of Jesus related to the sacraments of the Church: the Baptism of Jesus, the Wedding Feast at Cana, the Proclamation of the Kingdom of God, the Transfiguration and the Institution of the Eucharist.

However, except when the Rosary is said in groups or at official functions, it remains a private devotion. The Rosary encourages meditation on some of the fundamental mysteries of the faith. Some find it difficult to both say the prayers and meditate on the mysteries.

When we pray the Rosary we connect with the Incarnation; Christ is present right here, right now, within me and without. When we connect mentally with either the

³ Martin, J, 'Contemporary Catholics on Traditional Devotions', *America*, 3 March 2003, p. 11; Vauchez, A, *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, Vol 2, James Clarke, Cambridge, 2000, p. 1261

⁴ The word, 'illiterate' had two meanings during pre modern times: one was the common meaning today and the other was 'ignorant of Latin'. While most modern Christians can read and write, their knowledge of religious matters is often basic, even after 10–12 years of Catholic education !

words of the individual prayers or the mysteries we are brought into contact with the life and message of Jesus and his followers, which is why, presumably, Our Lady in all of her apparitions, encourages the Christian people to pray the Rosary.

A Possible Manifestation of Our Lady in Australia

The Weeping Statue, Perth

Australian Catholicism is not associated commonly with visions, apparitions and similar phenomena. However, in Perth — at various times throughout 2002 — a large ordinary statue of Our Lady appeared to weep a rose-smelling oil. Thousands flocked to the church where the statue was displayed and hundreds of sick Christians hoped for miraculous cures of their various ailments.⁵

The statue's owner, forty-seven-year-old Mrs Patty Powell, who lives in Rockingham, an outer seaside suburb of Perth, purchased the fibre glass statue in Thailand eight years ago for \$135. It portrays the passive countenance of the Madonna, the Virgin Mary, and, since March this year, oily, rose-scented tears have fallen from her sad eyes, run down her pale blue sash and pooled at her bare feet. At first the statue wept intermittently and Mrs Powell kept the matter to herself.

However, in May, the statue began to weep continuously. 'I came home and the house was filled with a rose-scented perfume,' she said. 'I didn't tell anyone at first. Then I thought that maybe this wasn't only for me to see.' Mrs Powell said her initial reaction to the the weeping statue had been sadness. That had evolved to a feeling of 'peace, comfort, humility and blessing'.

Small numbers of pilgrims visited her home each day since Mrs Powell told church authorities about the happenings. As numbers of visitors grew, she took the statue to her parish priest, Father Henry Walsh, who said that in almost fifty years as a priest he had never seen anything like it. Father Walsh said that word of mouth had brought hundreds of parishioners to the church on Sundays. He added: 'This is a privilege, a once in a lifetime event. Our Lady is saying something to us. However what that message is, we'll have to wait and see.'

One cancer sufferer, sixty-four year old Michael Williams, talked freely to the milling media through as word of the unusual events spread. He hoped for a cure, However

⁵ 'Weeping Mary inspires hope', Sunday Herald Sun, 9 August 2002, p. 26

either way the experience had marked a turning point in his life. Mr Williams, 64, was diagnosed with bowel cancer two years ago, However his prognosis became terminal in June. He was reported as saying:

My doctor told me in June I had three months, However after I visited the statue I had a blood test and my white blood cell count has improved. The doctor was pleased with my progress and I told him I would call him from my boat on Christmas Day. I have endured almost two years of chemotherapy and witnessing the weeping had done me the `world of good.' I am talking to Jesus through his mother -- you can't get much closer than that.

As is normal in such cases, church leaders were extremely cautious. Archbishop Barry Hickey said he would not speculate whether the weeping was natural or supernatural, However the sight of the statue of Mary weeping had already caused powerful spiritual effects by calling people back to God in his diocese and beyond. Three months later, he described the event as a `truly remarkable phenomenon,' while local priest Henry Walsh went as far as to say `it looks like a miracle'.⁶

These were early reactions. As the weeks passed, enormous crowds were flocking to the church. The pilgrims travelled from near and far. Some came thousands of kilometres to kneel before the statue and ask for a cure or a simple blessing. They touched the tears that flow down Our Lady's face and they left her presence filled with an inner peace and a belief that all will be well.

Cancer sufferers, people stricken with multiple sclerosis, arthritis, curvature of the spine — all the manifestations of human suffering — are laid before her because, if doctors and surgeons have failed to find a cure, it is time to ask for a miracle.

Most seemed impressed; some feared a hoax. The regular congregation at the small Catholic church in seaside Rockingham, thirty kilometres south of Perth, swelled from a handful to more than 3000. There were so many that crowds have spilled out into the street. On the face of things the devout seemed to be correct. It is impossible, they say, for a fibre glass statue with a painted face and gown to shed tears in the normal course of events.

Patty Powell, the statue's owner, remains an ordinary suburban person: a divorcee, who lives in a low set house in a quiet cul-de-sac, a short distance away from her church, Our Lady of Lourdes. She owns and runs the canteen at a Catholic high school, and takes an active part in her local amateur dramatic society. She has three teenage daughters, a son, and a cat and dog and modestly describes herself as `just an ordinary person', although she was once voted local *Businesswomen of the Year*.

⁶ Shears, R, 'Tears of a fibre glass madonna', *Sunday Mail* — Brisbane, Queensland —

She is a dedicated Catholic, having been brought up in the faith, and her home is filled with religious pictures. A few years ago, her family became involved in a religious exchange scheme, which saw Mrs Powell taking Thai children into her home. Her links with Thailand were strengthened when a nun, who taught her at school, started working in Bangkok. Then Mrs Powell's brother married a Thai woman. On a visit to Thailand eight years ago, Mrs Powell visited a religious shop recommended to her by a Thai priest who had stayed with her. She hoped to find a Madonna statue that could grace her home alongside a figurine of Christ, which she bought from an artisan in Rockingham. 'When I saw the Madonna, among all the other figures in the shop, her face just drew me to her,' Mrs Powell said at her home during an interview with the media.

As Mrs Powell and the journalists chatted, the tears ran slowly down the Madonna's face, two distinct rivulets of scented oil. One journalist rose from his chair occasionally to look closely for the source. However he could find nothing ... and early scientific tests, including X-rays, chemical analysis and examination under powerful microscopes, have failed to turn up conclusive evidence to show that anyone is attempting to hoodwink the faithful. A journalist wrote:

I do not know what to make of it. There seems to be no logical explanation, and I could only shake my head in wonder. When it is not on show at the local church, the statue stands in her living room in a shrine decked with red roses, daisies and irises. On one side is a plaster effigy of Christ and on the other a statue of Our Lady of Fatima, representing the Madonna as she appeared to three children at Fatima, Portugal. On the wall above Mrs Powell were numerous old family photographs, including a childhood picture of her and her identical twin sister, the two girls grinning at the camera. Somewhat incongruously, in a corner of the room with its religious aura and family memories, a pet rabbit munched lettuce in a cage.

In many interviews, Mrs Powell has stressed that there were no tears on the Madonna's face when she saw the statue in the shop, However she knew that she had to have her, She added:

The feeling was very strong. She looked so sad and I just wanted to hug her, like a mother would a child. She was too big for me to take back to Australia at the time, so my brother, who was coming later, brought her back for me as carry-on cabin luggage. I set her up beside the other statues in my lounge room and thought how nice she looked. Then, when I came home from work in March this year — it was the Feast of St Joseph — I saw something was different. There were small streams of clear liquid running down her face. 'Our Lady is crying', I thought, and went over to her for a closer look. They were

oily tears, with a faint rose water scent, However I could see no holes in the fibreglass or any other physical explanation. It made me feel very strange. The tears had stopped by the next day However ten days later, on Good Friday, they flowed again. I mentioned it to our priest, Father Walsh, who said it was a private revelation, something that happens to people of strong faith, and to accept what I saw However keep it to myself.

At first Mrs Powell did just that and she explains:

The Virgin cried from Good Friday until Easter Sunday and then the tears stopped again. She started crying again during the Feast of Corpus Christi in June, when we remember the Body of Christ. Once again, they stopped. However when I came home from work on 14 August the whole house was filled with the scent of roses; the tears had begun once more. It was the day before the Feast of the Assumption, when Our Lady was taken to heaven.

Mrs Powell thought long and hard about what was happening and eventually decided this should no longer remain a private revelation. She believed she has been chosen as a messenger. She told the editor of the local Catholic newspaper, *The Record*, about it and the word was out. News spread as fast as the tears were now flowing. It was then that crowds began to arrive to view the statue, and many sick and infirm were brought by their carers seeking a cure.

Unable to cope with the throng, Mrs Powell asked the parish priest, Father Barry Walsh, to put the Virgin on display at the church where she is certain it will attract thousands hoping for a personal miracle.

However, as believers multiplied, so did the army of sceptics. Believing her faith was stronger than the doubts of others, Mrs Powell agreed in August to have the statue, and the tears, examined by professional scientists.

A well known West Australian chemist, Doug Clarke, used infra-red radiation to examine the oil that flowed down the Madonna's face, A sample was collected by an independent source, a researcher from Perth's TV Channel 7. Clarke suggested that the tears consisted of vegetable oil and almost certainly olive oil, with rose oil added for fragrance. He commented:

I was told the statue is eight years old, However the oil is quite fresh. If it had been exposed to the air for the eight years that Mrs Powell has owned the statue, the oil would be rancid or a different colour.

The obvious explanation is that there may be a cavity or a reservoir of oil inside the statue, which would then seep out through an area which was permeable to that oil.

The question was: without smashing the statue to look inside, how could any hidden cavity be revealed? Researcher Ralph Hart, from the medical imaging department of Perth's Curtin University, had a simple solution. He used powerful X-rays to examine the statue's interior. 'There could be some kind of channel in the head, However it is not definitive and could just be part of the construction,' he said, as he and colleagues examined the negatives for the hundredth time this week. He added: 'There is absolutely nothing to suggest there is any sort of fluid inside that channel. We don't see anything there.'

However, the X-rays have revealed an area at the bottom of the figure has a sponge like appearance and that this could be a source of the tears. Hart explained: 'It appears to be a porous structure that could conceivably hold some kind of fluid, However we just haven't been able to demonstrate that it does. It could just be part of the normal construction of the statue.'

A fibre glass specialist, Brett Lindsay, pointed out that a fault with the workmanship could cause something to seep from inside over time. However, any seeping liquid would contain styrene, used to make fibre glass and the chemical analysis had already shown there was no trace of styrene in the oil. Lindsay summarised his observations in this way:

I can only reach the conclusion that the oily tears have not come through the fibre glass. If you wanted that to happen, you'd make a void, some small hole or a weak spot, through which the oil could travel, However if there's no styrene in the oil it couldn't have happened that way.

A biomedical chemist, Gary Whitaker, tested the statue another way. He placed the statue in his laboratory on a table and rested the head under a powerful microscope. Even while lying on her back, face up to the microscope, tears still welled in the eyes of the statue. Whitaker commented: 'I looked at the eyes at 40 times normal size. I scanned over the entire surface and looked carefully into the corner of each eye. I and my colleagues could see pools of liquid forming as we were looking at it However we could find no holes. No holes at all.'

The Madonna statue does have a piece of fibre glass missing from the back, apparently the result of a slight accident, However this has been given a thorough examination by the scientists. They found nothing suspicious, particularly as the material inside appeared to be a solid gel, 'like a resin of some kind,' said one.

Mrs Powell was understandably pleased. She felt vindicated against any insinuations of fraud, and commented: 'I accept it would be only natural for people to think that there is a cavity behind the eyes, which you just fill up with oil every now and again, However the chemical tests have shown that the oil does not pass through the fibreglass. I cannot be accused of smearing the oil on before anyone looks at the statue because when they were examining it under the microscope, with the statue lying on its back, the tears were still welling up against the forces of gravity.'

Moreover, she stressed that there was no financial gain in the offing. Any moneys left with her were sent to the charities in Thailand with which she was connected for some time. 'I don't know if the statue is going to cure anyone'. she said, 'It would be very wrong for me to say that it's even a possibility. However I can say that it has drawn people closer to God, and it has given others a great deal of hope.'

Among those who have made their way to Mrs Powell's home, and to the church where the statue has been on display, is 64-year-old Michael Williams, a retired financial planner — to whom reference has been made already. He is suffering from cancer, first in his bowels and later in the pancreas. He has given forthright media interviews, along the lines of the following comments:

My spirits, my life, have improved tenfold since I stood before the statue and touched some of the tear oil on to my forehead. After having cancer some time ago, my doctor said he thought he had got it all out, However then they said it had moved to my pancreas. I asked him if there was anyone who could help me and he pointed towards the heavens. Then I heard about the statue, asked for help, and I feel so much better. My blood tests are very good and my days are so much brighter. People who go to Lourdes in wheelchairs rarely don't walk away . . . However they do leave with hope. I have that hope now, thanks to that beautiful statue. I've seen the brightness in people's eyes, too.

By November 2002, the statue had been weeping the rose-scented oil on and off for most of the year. After a longer than usual period when the statue 'wept', Archbishop Hickey — after consulting Archbishop Canalini, the Apostolic Delegate in Canberra — established a Commission to explore the phenomenon. The Commission was asked to determine if the weeping could be judged safely to be of divine origin, not the result of any human intervention — an act of God or a fake religious curiosity.

The parish priest from Our Lady of Lourdes church had been inundated with requests for samples of the liquid secreted from the statue from many people around

Australia and further afield. On one Sunday in late November 3000 people visited Our Lady of Lourdes church in Rockingham to view the statue.

The investigators are Dr Thelma Koppi, a scientist and, as it happens, not a Catholic; Father Kevin Long, the Master of Thomas More College at the University of Western Australia; and a surgeon, Michael Shanahan. Archbishop Hickey advised the three to arrange whatever scientific test they considered necessary. There was one limitation only; they are not to injure or destroy the statue. In an interview with the Western Australian media, Archbishop Hickey explained his decision to appoint a Commission to report on the 'weeping statue' phenomenon:

The phenomenon has been going on for some months. The Catholic people and the community-at-large are entitled to as clear a statement as I can make, whether the tears can be explained by some natural process or human intervention, or whether they defy scientific explanation.

The committee went quickly to work arranging a computer scan — Tuesday, 3 December 2002 at Mercy hospital, Mt Lawley (a suburb of Perth) to explore the inside of the statue without doing the art piece any damage. Images from the computer tomography test — an imaging tool used to scrutinise human organs and build three-dimensional maps of the body — should answer questions where the oil originates and how it flows.

An earlier X-ray testing of the statue at Murdoch University in September failed to provide any answers to the origins of the oil, believed to be a mixture of olive and rose oil.⁷

By early February 2003, three important events had occurred in the 'weeping statue' affair: In the first instance, the statue had ceased to release the tears for which it had become famous; secondly, the members of the Commission of Enquiry had completed their task; and in the third place, the Archbishop had removed the statue from public exhibition.

Archbishop Hickey advised that he wished to study the findings of the Commission and discuss the matter with the Apostolic Delegate before releasing a statement to the public.

In addition, there were complications in the Rockingham parish which were making public display of the statue more difficult. Father Barry Walsh, the parish priest — and a firm supporter of the importance of the manifestation — faced long planned hip replacement surgery. Father Walsh — a man in his mid seventies — would be away from his duties for some months. His replacement in the parish did not want

⁷ Adolph, F, 'Medical scan for crying statue', Sunday Times, — Perth Western Australia — , 1 December 2002, p. 26

the extra responsibilities.⁸ Hence the statue was withdrawn from public view and was returned to its owner.

However, there was more to Archbishop Hickey's decision that these comments suggested at first sight. The Commission of Inquiry — while allowing that a miracle might have occurred — had four serious concerns with the statue's 'weeping'. In view of these concerns, the Commission was convinced that it was not safe to say that the 'tears' were of divine origin. They did not suggest fraud; degree of proof was the issue. If the Commission proclaimed a miracle by divine intervention no other explanation for the 'weeping' of the statue must be available, none at all. This was not the case; other explanations were possible.

The key factors which led to the commission's decision — which Archbishop Hickey accepted — were:⁹

- * The weeping stopped when the statue was dried and retained by the Commission for testing from 10–14 December 2002;

- * The weeping ceased when the statue was dried by Auxiliary Bishop, Donald Sproston, and held in isolation by the parish priest at Our Lady of Lourdes for a month after 9 January 2003;

- * Careful scientific analysis of the 'tears' showed that they were not one substance but two, which had been mixed;

- * In other circumstances, it has been possible to create the impression of weeping statues by means of the external application of oil.

Where miracles are alleged the church authorities normally exercise great care and prudence; that is what Archbishop Hickey has done in this case. Hence he has withdrawn the statue from public view.

⁸ Shine, K, 'Mary's tears don't quite wash yet', *The Australian*, 18 February 2003, p. 4

⁹ Clune, B, and Smith, N, Archbishop withdraws "weeping statue"; not safe to declare its "tears" divine', *Catholic Weekly*, Sydney, 9 March 2003, pp. 2–3.

Summary: the major Apparitions

(a) La Salette, France, 1846

The second of the nineteenth century apparitions of Our Lady occurred on a sunny afternoon, 19 September 1846, on a remote mountain side about five kilometres distant from the village of La Salette-Fallavaux, Via Corps, in the Grenoble diocese in the French Alps. La Salette had about 500 inhabitants. Two teenagers, with little or no education — half-wild and unwanted by their feckless parents — Mélanie Calvat, 15, and Maximin Giraud, 11, were minding sheep for a local farmer when they saw in a resplendent light a 'beautiful lady'.

She wore clothing typical of the women in that part of France: a long dress with an apron, and a shawl crossed over her breast and tied around her back ... Hanging from her neck she wore a large crucifix. Beneath the arms of the cross, there were, to the left, a hammer, and on the right, pincers. The crucifix radiated brilliant light. There were garlands of roses around her head, the edge of her shawl, and around her feet. The women wept continually throughout her conversation with the children.

She spoke alternately in French and in the local patois, and gave them a message which they were 'to deliver to all her people'. She complained of the impiety of Christians — ignoring the Lord's day and blaspheming her Son when they were angry — and threatened them with dreadful punishments in case they ignored her warning and persevered in evil. She promised them God's mercy if they would repent and do the right thing. She said:¹⁰

If my people will not obey, I shall be compelled to loose my Son's arm. It is so heavy, so pressing that I can no longer restrain it. How long have I suffered for you ! If my son is not to cast you off, I am obliged to beg Him without ceasing But you take no notice of that. No matter how well you pray in the future, no matter how well you act, you will never be able to make up to me what I have endured for your sake.

In the summer, few people go to Church; all the rest work every Sunday throughout the summer. In winter, when they don't know

¹⁰

Obviously the words are translations from the local dialect and from French.

what to do with themselves, they go to Mass only to poke fun at religion. During Lent they flock to the butcher shop like dogs ... The cart drivers cannot swear without bringing in the name of my Son. These are two things which make my Son's arms so burdensome.

Each of the children was given a special secret before the Lady disappeared. The story of Mélanie and Maximin caused a sensation, first in their family, then in the village and finally in the wider world. There were several investigations and reports, some hostile, some supportive. However, within the village and its environs, there was a general reformation in people's conduct. In modern argot: 'They got the message, loud and clear!'

Mgr. Philibert de Brouillard, Bishop of Grenoble, appointed a commission to examine the extraordinary event in 1846, and after five years deliberation the commission concluded that the reality of the apparition should be admitted. Soon several miraculous cures took place on the mountain of La Salette, and regular pilgrimages to the place were begun.

However, the appearance of Our Lady at La Salette came at a time of bitter divisions in French society. The events and alleged miracles were ridiculed by anti-clerical liberals and there were also questioned among some Catholics and especially by some prominent ecclesiastics.

As a result of this hostility and the searing controversy, Mgr. de Brouillard, 16 November 1851, declared the apparition of the Blessed Virgin as certain, and authorised the cult of Our Lady of La Salette. Despite the controversy and hostility, the first stone of a great church was solemnly laid on the mountain of La Salette, 25 May, 1852, amid a large assembly of supporters. This Church — later elevated to the rank of a basilica — was served by a body of a religious called Missionaries of La Salette.

As said above, the Blessed Virgin confided to each of the two children a special secret. These two secrets, which neither Mélanie or Maximin ever made known even to each other, were sent in 1851 to Pope Pius IX on the advice of Mgr. de Brouillard. It is unknown what impressions these mysterious revelations made on the Pope.

The two deeply deprived children, were relentlessly harassed by the controversy which swirled around the apparition at La Salette. They had unsettled, and apparently unhappy lives, perhaps unable to cope with the public attention. Maximin Giraud, after a wandering life, returned to Corps, his native village, and died a holy death there, 1 March 1875. Mélanie Calvat ended a no less unsettled life in Altamura in Italy, 15 December, 1904

(b) Lourdes, France, 1858

The town of Lourdes — a quiet backwater in southern France, in the foothills of the Pyrenees mountains — was the site of the most famous apparitions of Our Lady in the last two centuries. There on 11 February 1858, a fourteen-year-old teenager from a desperately poor family, Bernadette Soubirous, was walking along the bank of the fast flowing mountain stream, the Gave, with her sister and a friend. They were gathering firewood.

Suddenly from the mouth of a small cave in the sharply rising riverbank about fifty metres away, she saw advancing towards her a golden coloured cloud enclosing a beautiful young lady. The lady beckoned Bernadette to approach and signalled with the rosary that hung on her arm for Bernadette to begin to pray. After the Rosary was completed, the lady and the cloud moved back into the grotto and disappeared.

This was the first of eighteen apparitions to Bernadette at the same place over the following weeks. In the course of the appearances the lady gave Bernadette three secrets which she was never to reveal. On one occasion she told Bernadette to scratch the surface of the soil near the grotto and as spring water began to flow, the Lady instructed the girl to drink the water and bathe in it. Of course, word of the events at the grotto spread and each time Bernadette, her sister and her friend came to the place, a larger and larger crowd of local people followed.

In a later appearance the Lady expressed a wish that a chapel to be constructed on the site and that people come in procession. Meanwhile, the cautious parish priest was pressuring Bernadette to ask the lady her name and towards the end of the apparitions she acceded to the request. Bernadette had little formal education and did not speak French; she spoke only the local patois. The lady addressed her in the local dialect, and so when she said, 'I am the Immaculate Conception', Bernadette did not understand the Lady's expression. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception — that Mary had been conceived free from Original Sin — had been proclaimed only four years previously in Rome by Pope Pius IX. This was the climax of the series of Our Lady's appearances to Bernadette; soon after the apparitions ceased.

However the fame of the town and the grotto as a place of pilgrimages was only commencing. There were miracle cures, intense devotion, widespread publicity, increasing crowds. The avalanche of pilgrims descending on Lourdes has never slackened; around ten millions make the trip annually.

Meanwhile, as soon as she was old enough Bernadette Soubirous entered the convent at Nevers. The long years of childhood deprivation took their toll, however, and after a devoted religious life, Bernadette died from T.B. and asthma at the early age of thirty five. She was canonised in 1933.

(c) Pontmain, France

Pontmain is a small town about three hundred kilometres west of Paris, and in 1871 Our Lady appeared to a twelve-year-old boy, Eugene Barbedette, towards the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian war.

On the evening of 17 January, as Eugene was finishing some work near the family's barn in the early winter darkness, he noticed the image of a lady in the sky. He looked away, then looked back, and saw a woman wearing a black veil, a blue gown decorated with golden stars and a crown of gold.

Joseph, Eugene's younger brother, emerged from the barn and also saw the lady. Their noisy excitement drew their parents and other children to the spot. However, the adults saw nothing. Two village children, Francois Richer and Jeanne- Marie Lebosse, arrived. They saw the lady and their description matched that of the Barbedette youngsters. During the apparition, a two-year baby pointed to the distant sky and said: 'Jesus, Jesus !'

Someone called the cure from the presbytery. After his arrival, the four children reported that a small red cross began to appear on Our Lady's dress. When the priest heard this, he began to lead the people in praying the rosary. The apparition acknowledged the prayers of the small crowd.

The words recalled are those of the children, as reported at the time and in subsequent exhaustive investigations. The whole apparition lasted some two hours, However neither the cure nor the other adults present saw Our Lady.

As they finished the Rosary, the children watched as the Lady unrolled a white banner which read: 'Pray, my children. God will answer you in a short while. My Son will let Himself be moved.' There was elation in the small crowd

Time passed and suddenly, a large red crucifix appeared in front of Our Lady with the words 'Jesus Christ' written above. The Lady appeared sad. After a few moments the crucifix disappeared and Our Lady stretched out her arms towards the children and smiled. It was the end of the apparition: an affirmation of faith, a call to prayer and a promise filled with hope in a time of hostilities.

It was war time and the people's priority was for peace and security. Their prayers were answered with the French surrender a fortnight later. As with all alleged apparitions, the church authorities conducted an exhaustive investigation and a year later the Bishop of Laval acknowledged the vision as authentic.

(d) Pellevoisin, France

The fourth authenticated apparition of Our Lady during the nineteenth century was to Estelle Faguet at Pellevoisin in the Archdiocese of Bourges in central France in 1876. The village had a population of around a thousand people and the major cities of the region were Tours, Blois and Bourges.

Estelle was born in 1843 at Saint-Memmie, a small village to the east of Paris; her father was a not-very-successful businessman. After the collapse of his business, the father settled in Paris and Estelle was sent to work in a commercial laundry at age fourteen to supplement the family budget. At the age of seventeen she entered a nursing congregation of nuns, the Augustines.

After the three years of training, Estelle left the convent to care for her needy parents; and to earn a living she took service with the aristocratic Rochefoucault family. In summer, the family left Paris for their country residence — the Chateau of the Pear Trees — near Pellevoisin and this is the place where Estelle was graced with fifteen apparitions of Our Lady.

As with so many of the contemporary poor, existing on wretchedly inadequate food and living in sub-standard housing, Estelle contracted tuberculosis and was in an advanced stage of the disease when the Blessed Virgin appeared to her on 14 February 1876. Estelle was thirty-two years old.

There were to be fourteen further apparitions during the year, the first five connected with Estelle's illness and recovery; the last seven with her new ministry. In the first vision Mary said to her: 'Be patient; My Son will be moved. You will suffer for another five days, in honour of the five wounds of My Son ... If my Son restores your life, I want you to publish my glory.'

The fifth apparition was different from the previous visions. Estelle saw a slab of marble, a monogram that was decorated with a golden heart in flames with a crown of roses pierced with a sword. The marble had the inscription, 'I invoked Mary in the depths of my wretchedness. She obtained for me from her Son my complete cure.' Estelle was anxious to do all she could to spread Mary's glory and said so. Our Lady replied that she would remain with her personality as it was. However she should be careful that what they did should be closely in accord with what she said.

In this same vision Mary said: 'What afflicts me most is the lack of respect for my Son which people show at Holy Communion, contrasted with the prayerful attitude people appear to adopt.' Estelle asked if she was to reveal these words to the public and Mary agreed that she was.

The following morning Estelle was close to death, in extreme pain. The parish priest brought her Holy Communion. After receiving communion, Estelle gradually realised that she felt better. The spreading paralysis disappeared. She regained her strength. Her near instant recovery was inexplicable; to say that the local doctors

were amazed would be a gross under-statement. She resumed her duties in the chateau.

During the following apparitions in July, Our Lady appeared surrounded by roses, with 'raindrops' falling from her hands. The rich scent of the roses filled Estelle's small servant's bedroom. On 9 September 1876, the Blessed Virgin revealed the Scapular of the Sacred Heart to Estelle. The scapular showed a scarlet heart throwing off flames, and was surrounded by thorns and had a cross above. Mary said simply: 'This devotion pleases me. It is here that I shall be honoured.'

Two months passed. Estelle was an accomplished dressmaker and on 11 November when Our Lady appeared she presented the Blessed Virgin the scapular of the Sacred Heart which had made. Mary praised the work and said: 'You must make many more.'

The Blessed Virgin appeared to Estelle for the last time on 8 December 1876, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Mary wished Estelle to spread devotion to herself and her Son by way of the scapular; she promised to support Estelle in her ministry, even when Estelle felt very much isolated and alone.

Estelle who was at the point of death in 1876 before her miraculous cure, was to live another fifty years and in spite of her humble place in society the ministry of spreading devotion to Jesus and His Mother through wearing the scapular spread.

All that exceptional year, 1876, in Pellevoisin, the cure had kept the Archbishop of Bourges up-to-date on the extraordinary events occurring in his parish. Some time after the last apparition, Estelle requested an interview with the archbishop who received her willingly and they discussed the apparitions at great length. He was convinced of their authenticity and authorised the parish priest to have many copies of the scapular made. On 13 January 1877, little more than a month after the last apparition, the archbishop convened a commission of inquiry to explore the supernatural nature of the events in the Rochefoucault chateau. Fifty-six witnesses were called to give evidence.

As a result of the findings of the commission, the archbishop accepted the reality of the apparitions privately and on 28 July of the same year established a confraternity in honour of Our Lady of Pellevoisin under the title of Mother of Mercy. The Vicar General was sent to bless the chapel which had been Estelle Faguette's bedroom where the supernatural events occurred. A few months later he came to pray in the room himself. Unfortunately his Lordship died before he formally accepted the authenticity of the apparitions themselves.

There were many pilgrimages to Pellevoisin ... and claims of miracles worked and spiritual favours granted after intercession to Our Lady under the title 'Mother of Mercy'.

The years passed and in various ways Pope Leo XIII encouraged devotion to Mary under the title 'Mother of Mercy' at Pellevoisin. In 1900, he received Estelle Faguet in audience and the Congregation of Rites approved the scapular of the Sacred Heart. However, the Vatican reserved judgement on the reality of the apparitions themselves. Pope Benedict XV expressed the Church's attitude when he said: 'I believe that the origins of the devotion are good and we think and proclaim that Pellevoisin is a place especially chosen by Our Lady to spread her graces widely.'

Estelle Faguet lived to an advanced age of 86. The extraordinary events of 1876 did not change the even tenor of her ways; she spent the remainder of her working life as a servant with the Rouchefoucauld. She remained quiet, balanced and reserved, and her account of the visions never deviated from her first statements. However, the church has never accepted Pellevoisin as a Marian shrine in quite the same way as Lourdes or Fatima, nor given the apparitions any special claim to authenticity.

(e) Knock, Co Mayo, Ireland

Knock is a small hamlet in a remote part of Co Mayo in the west of the Republic of Ireland. The apparition at Knock took place eight years after Our Lady's appearance at Pontmain in 1871 and the two apparitions have a good deal in common. There was a single appearance and no words were spoken.

On the long summer evening of Thursday, 21 August 1879, two women from the village, Mary McLoughlin and Mary Beirne, were walking near the parish church when they noticed a number of luminous figures at the gable end. As they moved closer they realised there were three moving figures and that one of them appeared like the Virgin Mary.

The two young women presumed that the others were St Joseph and St John the Evangelist. Mary went to bring other family members, and, as word spread, other neighbours joined them. It was pouring rain. As the crowd gathered they could also see an altar with a young lamb on top. All was quiet.

The apparition lasted several hours and was witnessed independently, as a globe of light, by a farmer who lived about a kilometre distant.

The happenings at Knock were investigated thoroughly in 1879 and it was proved that the sights could not have been produced by a 'magic lantern' or luminous paint. The aged and formidable Archbishop of Tuam, John McHale, convened a commission of inquiry. However, although they considered the fifteen witnesses reliable, the Archbishop made no definitive statement on the apparition.

In 1936, 57 years after the original Commission of Enquiry, three witnesses of the original apparition were still alive: Mrs Mary O'Connell, (Mary Byrne), Patrick

Byrne and John Curry. Archbishop Gilmartin convened another commission to explore the issues and all three confirmed their original statements.

Over the years, the apparition at Knock gained official support from church authorities. In 1979, Pope John Paul II visited the village and prayed at the site of the apparition.

(f) Fatima, Portugal

In 1917, Europe was engulfed by the first World War. Portugal, however, was neutral. In the spring of that year three young Portuguese children were granted a series of visions which — when publicised — caught the attention of many in a world weary of the grim years of warfare. Lucia dos Santos and her cousins, Francisco and Jacinta Marto, received six apparitions of Our Lady between May and October of that year.

The story of Our Lady of Fatima commenced a year earlier with the appearance of a young man while they were pasturing sheep. The young man identified himself as 'the angel of peace'. He encouraged the children to pray and make sacrifices in reparation for sin. He then disappeared.

The months passed. The children tried to follow his advice, praying earnestly. In May 1917, while the three were minding the family's small flock near the Cova da Iria outside Fatima, they saw a lady dressed in white who shed brilliant rays of light all around her. She calmed their obvious fears.

Then she told them to return on the thirteenth of every month until October when she would tell them who she was and what she wanted. The Lady encouraged the children to say the Rosary every day.

News of the apparitions at the Cova da Iria spread locally. Some were inclined to believe the children's accounts; others pressured them to renounce their story. There were those who felt that the Blessed Virgin would not appear to children only to advise them to say the Rosary regularly.

In subsequent apparitions Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta told the Lady of the pressure they were under over her appearances. She promised a sign that would convince the sceptics, and the children continued to go to the Cova da Iria on the thirteenth of the month as requested.

On 13 July 1917, Our Lady gave Lucia, Jacinta and Francesco, three Secrets which were written down (by Sister Lucia) in 1941. These are discussed in more detail in a later Chapter.

The apparitions culminated in a final revelation and the promised miracle on 13 October 1917. Mary identified herself as 'Our Lady of the Rosary'. As she vanished from the children's sight, the assembled crowd — up to 70,000 strong — experienced what came to be known as the 'Miracle of the Sun'. Eye-witnesses reported that the sun 'danced' in the heavens; and many people fell to their knees in awe. The children were granted a final ecstasy of visions of the Holy Family, the Sorrowful Mother and her Son, and the glorious Lady of Mount Carmel.

Over the thirteen years between 1917 and 1930, the reality of the apparitions was explored by the church authorities and in the latter year, the bishop of Leira authenticated them. The rise of the Soviet Union, the great depression, the coming to power of Fascist leaders in Italy and Germany and the drift towards the second World War increased interest in the church about the story of Fatima. There were rumours of prophecies, of secrets held by successive popes, of apocalyptic events in the offing and the possible end of the world.

However, the core of Our Lady's message remained basic: the call to prayer and repentance, prayer for the conversion of sinners and the special place of the Rosary in Catholic devotion.

(f) Beauraing, Belgium

In the 1930s, with the Western world mired in the great depression Our Lady appeared to a group of five children between late November 1932 and early January 1933 at Beauraing, a small town in the southern, French speaking, half of Belgium.

The five children came from the Voisin and Degeimbre families, neither of which were particularly active Catholics. On the evening of 29 November 1932, Fernande Voisin, a fifteen year old teenager, Andree Degeimbre, who was fourteen and her young sister, Gilberte, nine, were with Albert Voisin, who was eleven. They were walking to the local convent school to meet Albert's sister, Gilberte, who was in a homework club at the school. They entered the grounds and passed a small Lourdes grotto in front of the railway embankment that skirted the convent garden.

They rang the front door bell and waited. Albert turned and looked towards the embankment over the grotto and gasped: 'Look ! The Blessed Virgin, dressed in white, is walking above the bridge !' The girls looked and could see the luminous figure of a lady dressed in white walking in mid air, her feet hidden by a small cloud. A nun answered the door. She could see nothing, However, as soon as Gilberte Voisin reached the door she instantly saw the figure.

Over the next few evenings a pattern quickly developed in which the children would see Mary by a hawthorn tree near the grotto. They knelt outside the convent gate and looked through the railings. This was because the local parish priest, Father

Lambert, and the Church authorities generally, were taking a very prudent and circumspect attitude towards events at Beauraing. They refused to become involved, and the bishop requested his priests not to go near the site but await developments.

On 2 December, Albert asked the Lady if she was the Immaculate Virgin, to which she smiled and nodded her head. In answer to the query what she wanted, she said simply: 'Be good — always !'

Meanwhile word of the events at Beauraing was spreading fast through the neighbouring villages and towns; increasing crowds were flocking to Beauraing, only five kilometres from the French border. On Thursday, 8 December, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, a crowd estimated at 15,000 people assembled hoping for a spectacular miracle. However, they saw only the children in ecstasy, impervious to lighted matches held underneath their hands, pin pricks and lights shone in their eyes.

The apparitions did not occur every night, although the children arrived and said the Rosary; if Our Lady did appear they would fall to their knees in unison. The crowd prayed with them and watched them closely to see if they talked to each other. If they did not, after the apparition was over they were questioned separately. On 28 December, Our Lady warned the children that the last appearance would take place in the near future.

The 3 January 1933, was the last apparition. Mary spoke to each of the children separately. A large crowd — between 30,000 and 35,000 people — had assembled as the children commenced their Rosary. After two decades four of the five children fell to their knees, leaving Fernande, the oldest, in tears because she could see nothing. Mary spoke to Gilberte, giving her the main promise of Beauraing, 'I will convert sinners.' To Andree she said, 'I am the Mother of God, the Queen of Heaven. Pray always'. The apparition appeared over.

Fernande remained kneeling while the other children went inside for questioning, when suddenly, she and many in the vast crowd, heard a noise like thunder and saw a ball of fire on the hawthorn tree. Mary appeared and spoke to Fernande asking if she loved her Son and herself. When Fernande replied that she did, Mary replied: 'Then sacrifice yourself for me.' At this Fernande saw the vision more brilliantly as Mary extended her arms, so that the teenager could see her golden heart, before saying 'Good bye' and disappearing.

The apparitions were over but the church authorities waited two years for the excitement to subside and opposition to surface. The bishop appointed a Commission of Inquiry in 1935. Progress was glacial. In February 1943, Bishop Charue authorised public devotions to Mary at Beauraing, However it was not until July 1949, following World War II, that the shrine was recognised officially when many cures were claimed after prayer to Our Lady of Beauraing. In a letter the Bishop sent to his priests he affirmed the apparitions:

We are able in all serenity and prudence to affirm that the Queen of Heaven appeared to the children of Beauraing during the winter of 1932–1933, especially to show us in her maternal heart the anxious appeal for prayer and the promise of her powerful mediation for the conversion of sinners.

(g) Banneux, Belgium

Within two weeks of the end of the apparitions at Beauraing, Our Lady appeared to a young girl, Mariette Beco, at Banneux, a small village near Liege in southern Belgium. Although Belgium was a Catholic country, the Becos were not a particularly religious family.

On a bitterly cold, 15 January, Sunday evening, in 1933, as the family were preparing for the evening meal, one of the children, Mariette, was standing near the kitchen window, waiting for her brother to come home. As Mariette peered through the window she saw a glowing figure standing quietly near the vegetable garden a few metres from the house. The lady was dressed brilliantly in a white gown and veil, with a shining blue sash. She was holding a rosary in her right hand and smiling at the child peering through the window.

Mariette wondered if the figure was just a reflection against the window, and so she rearranged the lamp and looked again. The lady was there and closer to the house than before. Mariette began praying the rosary, and as the Lady signalled her to approach, she told her mother. However, the mother fearing that the child was imagining things — and with her mind on the evening meal — locked the door and forbade her to go out. When Mariette looked through the window, the lady had vanished.

The next day at the village primary school, Mariette told the story to her friend, Josephine Leonard, who then told the young parish priest, Louis Jamin. He dismissed the story, thinking that the child was imagining the events and had heard of other apparitions such as those at Lourdes or Fatima. However, Mariette commenced attending morning Mass and catechism class from which she had been absent and this made the priest wonder.

Three days later, on Wednesday, 18 January, Mariette saw the Virgin Mary surrounded by intense light descend from the tops of two small pine trees at 7.00 p.m. It was bitterly cold. However, Mariette walked into the garden. The apparition came to rest about thirty centimetres above the ground and a couple of metres from the small child. The white rosary once again hung from Our Lady's forearm. She beckoned and Mariette followed the apparition down the road.

Mariette's father, Julien, followed and saw his daughter praying in a state of ecstasy. He cycled to the presbytery to fetch Father Jamin, However the priest was away in Liege, and so the father returned home with a neighbour, Michael Charleseche, and his son, Louis. The three men heard Mariette praying. However, they saw nothing.

Suddenly, Mariette dropped to her knees in the snow beside a ditch. 'Put your hands in the water', the Blessed Virgin said. 'This stream is reserved for me.' Then Our Lady disappeared. The apparition had lasted about an hour.

When he returned home later that same evening, Father Louis was told of the extraordinary events in his parish. He went to the Becos to see Mariette. However she was asleep. As he was leaving, Julien Beco requested an appointment to return to the sacraments. This jolted the priest because earlier that day he had been praying for a sign — the conversion of Mariette's father — that the apparitions were authentic.

It was proving an eventful week in a very sleepy village. At 7 p.m. on Thursday, 19 January, Mariette and her father were in the family's small garden with a dozen or so local people. Mariette knelt in the snow and began to pray. After reciting several decades of the rosary, she saw the apparition. 'Who are you ' Mariette asked the Lady. 'I am the Virgin of the Poor', she replied. Mariette returned to the spring, and Our Lady said: 'This spring is reserved to the nations — to relieve the sick.' This appearance was much shorter, a few minutes only. Mariette returned home with her father and the neighbours. As they questioned her it was clear that she did not know the meaning of the word 'nations'.

Mariette saw the Blessed Virgin again in the front garden on Friday, 20 January. 'What do you want ' Mariette asked. 'A small chapel', Mary replied. The Lady blessed Mariette with the sign of the cross and she fainted. The Becos summoned the local physician, Dr Chaumont, who examined the girl and found everything normal.

Each evening Mariette went to the garden to pray, However the apparitions had ceased. The days passed. In the village primary school there were jokes and petty jealousies. The Blessed Virgin did not appear for three weeks, until Mariette saw her again on Saturday evening, 11 February, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. 'I come to relieve suffering', Mary said.

There were three more apparitions, all similarly restrained, the last occurring on the first Thursday in March. The rain soaked Mariette as she recited the rosary, However stopped as she saw Our Lady approaching. 'I am the Mother of the Saviour, Mother of God. Pray always', she said. She blessed Mariette and indicated that this was the last time she would appear using the departure greeting 'Adieu' rather than 'Au revoir'. She disappeared over the pine trees. Only about twenty villagers were present for the last apparition.

In due course, the apparitions at Banneux were recognised by the church as 'worthy of belief', the last apparitions to be so accepted by the church to date. However, while many people come to Banneux on pilgrimage, the numbers are small compared to the vast numbers who visit Lourdes or Fatima each year.

On 21 May 1983, the Golden Jubilee year of the apparitions at Banneux, Pope John Paul II was one of those pilgrims, and said:

The Virgin of the Poor has invited us to come here; being conscious that her motherly regard rests on us, we will spiritually renew ourselves by discovering again the deep sense of the messianic message, implied in the eight Beatitudes of Christ.

Meanwhile, the visionary herself, Mariette, continued her hidden rural upbringing in the 1930s and in due course married and raised a family. She avoided all public life, merely accepting that at one short period of her life she was an instrument of Our Lady to pass a message.

(h) Medjugorje, Bosnia–Herzegovina, 1981

Medjugorje in Herzegovina is one of the principal Marian pilgrimage sites of the last twenty years, rivalling Lourdes and Fatima in the numbers of pilgrims who flock to the area of the apparitions which commenced in 1981 and, allegedly, continue to the present day.

However, in spite of the popularity of the pilgrimages, the church has never accepted the authenticity of the visions. There are reasons for this: during the 1980s, reports of the apparitions in Yugoslavia complicated relations with the communist government of Marshall Tito until the collapse of Marxist state in 1991. Civil war engulfed the nation in the years that followed. If those factors were not enough, the apparitions created deep divisions within the Church in Bosnia–Herzegovina. The pilgrimage site is in a region staffed traditionally by Franciscan friars. They supported the authenticity of the supernatural events and encourage the visionaries. However, two successive bishops of Mostar are opposed, dismissing the apparitions as 'collective hallucination', or worse, and accusing the Franciscans of exploiting the situation for self interest.

In 1999, in a bid to ease tensions in the province, the Franciscan fathers withdrew from the parishes, including Medjugorje, which they formerly managed. The bishop of Mostar has appointed diocesan priests in their place. These changes have not led to any lessening in the tide of pilgrims who flock to the town.

In the midst of political considerations and dissension in the Catholic church in Bosnia–Herzegovina, the Vatican has given only muted support to the spiritual

dynamism emanating from the area. However, in 1986, Pope John Paul II approved travel to Medjugorje for prayer, fasting and personal conversion.

(i) Kibeho, Rwanda, 1981–2

Rwanda is a landlocked nation in the Great Lakes area of central Africa. During the colonial era in Africa, Rwanda was controlled by Belgium. Its people, traditionally, were, and are bitterly divided between the majority Hutu tribe and the minority Tutsis.

The first apparition took place at 12.35 p.m. on 28 November 1981, in the dining room of the boarding school in Kibeho. The school was managed by the Sisters of a local Congregation. Alphonsine Mumureke, a sixteen year old student heard a voice calling her: 'My daughter.'

Mumureke went to the corridor and saw a beautiful dark woman: 'She wore a seamless white dress and a white veil on her head. Her hands were clasped together on her breast, and her fingers pointed to the sky.' Mumureke asked her: 'Who are you ' to which the lady replied: 'Ndi Nyina Wa Jambo' which is, 'I am the Mother of the Word'. She added: 'I have come to calm you because I have heard your prayers. I would like your friends to deepen their faith, because they do not believe strongly enough.' Mumureke's last apparition was on 28 November 1989, exactly seven years after the first.

However, to return to the first apparitions: Over the following days in November and December 1981, each evening, after 9 p.m. Our Lady appeared to her several times and towards the end of an apparition asked the girl 'to water and revive the dying flowers'. In the context, Our Lady was suggesting that with a new life of prayer and mortification, the effects of sin would be dissipated and faith strengthened and revived.' Each apparition lasted around three to four hours and at the end Mumureke often fainted with exhaustion.

Other students — not vast crowds at these early apparitions — saw Mumureke in ecstasy and gradually church authorities became involved as word spread of the unusual events occurring at the college. At the end of January 1982, Abbe Ignace Mboneyabo, later Chancellor of the new diocese of Gikongoro, requested Mumureke to ask the vision her name and for whom her messages were intended: 'For Kibeho ..., for Rwanda ..., for Africa ... or for the entire world ? ' The answers to these questions have been mentioned already.

The Abbe further requested, through Mumureke, that Our Lady express her message more precisely and to appear at an earlier time in the day and in a more open place so that many people could watch Mumureke in ecstasy. At the next

apparition, Our Lady appeared to the teenager in the college courtyard close to where the first appearance had occurred and at around three o'clock in the afternoon ... **and her message was for conversion, for a life of prayer and a return to the Sacraments, especially Confession;** ... for a new life re-animated by close attention to the Word of God and works of justice and charity.

In January 1982, twenty-year-old, Nathalie Mukamazimpaka saw the Blessed Virgin and these visions continued until 3 December 1983. On 2 March 1982, Marie Claire Mukangango received her first of many apparitions over the next six months. Marie Claire was 21 years old. Over time, more visions were reported, However the church has never accepted these as authentic; only the first three teenagers' visions have been accepted as genuine.

Our Lady of Guadalupe

On 31 July 2002, on his seventeenth trip to the Americas, Pope John Paul II canonised a sixteenth century Catholic neophyte, Juan Diego

Cuauhtlatoatzin, an Aztec Indian, who was favoured with four apparitions of the Blessed Virgin in 1531, soon after the Spanish conquest of central America. In the modern vast basilica dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe, eleven dancers in national Aztec costume danced their way down a runway approaching the papal stand, while conch shells and rattles could be heard throughout the basilica. In the wake of the canonisation ceremony, the Pope said:¹¹

With deep joy I have come on pilgrimage to this Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Marian heart of Mexico, to proclaim the holiness of Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, the humble Indian who contemplated the sweet and serene face of Our Lady of Tepeyac, so dear to the people of Mexico ... It is moving to read the accounts of Guadalupe, sensitively written and steeped in tenderness. In them the Virgin Mary, the handmaid 'who glorified the Lord' reveals herself to Juan Diego as the Mother of the true God. As a sign she gives him precious roses, and as he shows them to the Bishop, he discovers the blessed image of Our Lady imprinted on his tilma (poncho) ... This was the beginning of evangelisation with a vitality that surpassed all expectations.¹²

The devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe is not well known among Anglo-Irish Catholics. However, in Latin America or in a city such as Los Angeles — *El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora La Reina de los Angeles* — with a large Latino minority, no one goes far without encountering Our Lady of Guadalupe. The distinctive picture gazes tranquilly from the stucco walls of houses and of shops flaring in the blazing sun; it stares from the black dashboards of thousands of cars, from the gold medallions of the well-to-do and from the tattoos of working men. She is a proud symbol for a people who have often been oppressed in the past.

Actually, *Guadalupe* is the name of a shrine in Spain. It was due to misunderstandings in the 1530s, and the ambiguities of the Aztec and Spanish languages that the name was applied to the shrine at Tepeyac. It

¹¹ Allen, J, 'Pope endorses political work, traditions of indigenous people', *National Catholic Reporter*, 16 August 2002, p. 1

¹² 'The tilma remains in the Basilica visited by millions of pilgrims each year. Scientific investigations have attested to the authenticity of the cloth and to the inexplicable nature of the painting ...' Mc. Brien, R P, *The Harper Collins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, San Francisco, 1995, p. 595.

defines the shrine; it occasions the devotion. The picture of Our Lady represents the Immaculate Conception, being the lone figure of the woman, with the sun, moon and stars of the great apocalyptic sign and with a supporting angel under the crescent.

The tradition surrounding the picture is strong and unwavering in both written and oral sources in Mexico, and in Spanish and Indian evidence. On Saturday, 9 December 1513, Our Lady appeared to a fifty-seven year old Aztec widower, a Mexican Christian, Juan Diego Cuauhtlatotzin ('talking eagle') who was hurrying up Tepeyac hill towards the end of his twenty kilometre trek to hear Mass in Mexico city.¹³

Juan was born in 1474, eighteen years before Christopher Columbus landed in the 'New World' of the Americas while searching for a sea route to China. Juan came from a peasant family living in the village of Cuautitlan about thirty kilometres north-east of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital (Mexico City). He married and lived in his village farming, weaving mats out of reeds and making simple furniture. Over time, he owned a house and a small plot of land.¹⁴

The Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire in 1519-20 is not our concern. However, in the wake of the conquest, Franciscan and Dominican missionaries established missions, churches, schools and monasteries and began to evangelise the Indian population. Juan and his wife were among the first wave of Christian converts and were received into the church in 1525, baptised by one of the first Franciscan missionaries, Father Peter da Gand.

Thereafter, on Sundays and major feasts, Juan and his wife would walk to Mexico City to attend Mass, receive the sacraments and gain further instruction in the faith. They would rise long before dawn to commence the journey on foot over the undulating hills to the capital. While they

¹³ At the time the site was outside Mexico city - some five kilometres distant from the centre of the city. These days, the shrine is in the suburbs of the vast urban sprawl of modern Mexico city. Indeed, all the places mentioned relative to Juan Diego are now within the suburban sprawl. At that time, 9 December was the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

¹⁴ 'The truth of the appearances of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac has been, from the dawn of evangelisation to the present, a constant tradition ... founded on documents at the time, verified with people who had coexisted with those who were witnesses and protagonists of the construction of the shrine, and subjected to rigorous official investigations.' Mexican Bishops Conference, declaration, 12 October 2001, cited in Allen, J, 'Maybe he isn't real, but he's almost a saint', *National Catholic Reporter*, 25 January 2002, p. 3

were accustomed to such long treks since childhood, as the years passed the trek became harder.

On arriving at the Franciscan monastery in Tlaltelolco, Juan would sit on the hard ground beside his wife, in company with hundreds of other Mexicans, and listen while the friars instructed them in the new faith. The contrast between the horrors of paganism and the love, joy and hope of Christianity could not have been clearer.

Life for Juan passed smoothly and uneventfully, until suddenly in 1529, his wife died. The shock was severe. He was left childless and lonely in an empty house. After some indecision, Juan decided to leave his home village of Cuautitlan and live near his aged uncle in Tolpetlac where he owned a small plot of land. This place had the additional advantage that it was only fifteen kilometres from the church in Tolpetlac. He and his uncle were close friends and Juan took care of him while managing the farm that supported them both.

Juan continued his regular journeys over the hills to Mass, though by 1531, when he had reached the age of 57, he was beginning to tire more easily. On the morning of Saturday, 9 December, he rose early to go to Mass on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

As he climbed Tepeyac hill — site of the former temple of Tonantzin, the mother goddess of the Aztecs — Juan heard music and someone calling his name in a polite, friendly way. He stopped and then clambered up the boulder-strewn slope and on reaching the small summit he found himself face-to-face with a Lady of overpowering brilliance and beauty. She appeared as a young Indian woman, dark as he was, wearing traditional Aztec clothing, including the black sash around her waist indicating that she was pregnant. She told him she was Mary and she wanted a church built there, where she would be close to, and identify with the sufferings of her people.

Her appearance dazzled the surrounding rocks, mezquite bushes, prickly pear and stunted growth on the arid hillside. She said:¹⁵

¹⁵ The words Our Lady spoke (rendered in English) are translations of translations, and can appear stilted in English. Mary spoke in the Aztec language, otherwise Juan Diego would have been none the wiser.

Please understand that I am the perfect and perpetual Virgin Mary, Mother of the True God, through whom everything lives, the Lord of all things, who is the Master of Heaven and Earth. I very much want a temple to be built here for me where I will show and offer my love, my compassion, my help and my protection to the people. I am your merciful Mother, the Mother of all who live united in this land ... Here I will hear their weeping and their sorrows, and I will alleviate their sufferings and misfortunes. Therefore, in order to realise my intentions, go to the house of the Bishop in Mexico City and tell him that I had sent you and that it is my wish to have a *teocalli* ('temple', 'church') built here. Tell him all that you have seen and heard.

Juan agreed to do what the Lady asked and hurried down the hill on the last stage of his journey to Mass. The winter sun had barely risen in the chill blue sky when Juan crossed the main causeway over Lake Texcoco and passed through the northern gate of the city. He headed for the Bishop's palace, uncertain of his welcome.¹⁶ His clothing was so poor; his status was so low and his story was so improbable. Juan feared being embarrassed, dismissed, ridiculed or manhandled by the bishop's servants.

Juan knocked at the door of the palace and asked to see the bishop. The servants were suspicious, but admitted him and asked him to wait in the patio. It was winter. Mexico City is at 2000 metres above sea level and the morning was icy. Juan shivered as he waited. Eventually he was admitted to Bishop Zumarraga's office where an interpreter was waiting to convey any message.¹⁷

¹⁶ The Mexican sources stress the reserve of the bishop and his slowness to accept the Aztec peasant's story. However, imagine in 2005, if a poor workman tried to gain instant access to (say) the Archbishop of Melbourne (Australia) with a story that he had seen a vision of the Blessed Virgin and she wished for so-and-so to be done. The workman might indeed have an uncertain welcome; and would be unlikely to gain instant access. These days the (Arch)bishop would be at a meeting or buried in paperwork.

¹⁷ Juan de Zumarraga, first Bishop of Mexico, was born in Durango on the Bay of Biscay in 1468, and died in Mexico city in 1548. He entered the Franciscan Order at Aranzazu, and was superior of several monasteries until Emperor, Charles V, appointed him Inquisitor of Biscay. In 1527, when he was approaching sixty years old, he was named first bishop of New Spain. In 1528, he sailed for Mexico and was also Visitor of his Order and Protector of the Indian peoples. He was immediately faced with problems caused by the vicious leadership of the civil government in Mexico under the first Audiencia of Nuiso de Guzman. In 1531, at the time of the apparition, Bishop Zumarraga had been largely instrumental in persuading the Spanish government to dismiss the first Audiencia. After 1534, and during the mass conversion of the Indian peoples to Christianity, Bishop Zumarraga commenced the construction of the first Cathedral, founded the hospitals of Amor de Dios in Mexico City and Vera Cruz, and established another hospital for Franciscan monks. In 1538, he assembled the first Council of the Mexican Church and in 1545, Pope Paul III appointed him Archbishop of New Spain.

The Bishop welcomed him kindly and Juan knelt respectfully, recounting his extraordinary experience. He delivered the Lady's message exactly as he could recall. Bishop Zumarraga was perplexed; he scanned the Aztec peasant's face for clues as to his sincerity and truthfulness. He asked Juan about his village, his occupation, his knowledge of the gospels and his practice of his religion. The Franciscan was impressed, but as for Juan Diego's story ... he hesitated.

He asked for time to consider the situation, and promised to discuss Juan's story with him at a future time. Then he indicated that the interview was over. Juan was crestfallen; he had failed in his mission. He was escorted from the palace by servants who treated Juan like the village idiot ... and he had the long walk home.

Yet as he walked, and approached the rocky Tepeyac hill, Juan felt instinctively that the Lady was waiting for him and she was, bathed in the same supernatural radiance that he had seen earlier. He told of his meeting with the Bishop Zumarraga, everything that he had said, and his evasive reply. Juan begged Our Lady to select a more important person than he — one with more standing — to approach the bishop with authority. However, Mary replied that she had selected him to carry out her mission, no one else.

Mary spoke in the Nahuatl language; she called herself *Tequantlaxopeuh* — 'she who crushes the serpent's head' — and she told Juan to return to the bishop. In fact, one of the reasons why Bishop Zumarraga was suspicious of any talk of an apparition was that he doubted Mary would speak in the 'pagan' Nahuatl language.

When Juan Diego told the bishop the term Our Lady used, the Spaniard assumed that he meant 'de Guadalupe', referring to a shrine in Spain. Bishop Zumarraga presumed that Our Lady was European; he heard what he expected to hear. He was not unusual in that; it is a common human failing. However, it is also common that God's word is entirely unexpected and its messenger even more unlikely. In this story, the bishop is the slow learner; the conquered Aztec peasant carries the message of compassion.

On arriving home, Juan cooked a meal and went straight to bed. He anticipated another long walk on the next morning, which was Sunday. He went to early Mass at the Franciscan monastery and then walked further into Mexico City, praying for courage for he feared another sharp rebuff from Bishop Zumarraga or his servants. At the Bishop's house, the staff's attitude was what he feared; he was not welcome; the bishop was busy. Juan persisted, and was eventually admitted. There was a long wait in the cold patio. Then he was admitted. Now it was Bishop Zumarraga's turn to be surprised that Juan Diego had returned so soon. He repeated his story and told of his second meeting with the Lady and her message. The Franciscan questioned him closely again, and was impressed.

However, he balked at building a temple at such a remote place simply on the basis of one Indian's unproven testimony. How could he be sure that the man — no matter how sincere — was suffering some form of delusion or hallucination? He requested Juan to ask the Lady for a sign that she was from Heaven, and that Juan was her messenger in this request. Juan felt a surge of hope ... even though the interview was soon over.

Immediately he was gone, Bishop Zumarraga sent two of his servants to follow Juan Diego and observe discretely where he went and to whom he spoke. It was an easy assignment; Juan headed straight back towards his home via Tepeyac. However, as he reached the hill he disappeared from the servants' sight. They searched high and low all over the hill and surrounds but there was no sign of Juan Diego. By this time, thoroughly irritated, the servants returned to Bishop Zumarraga's palace in a mean mood.

While the search for Juan was going on, he had climbed the rocky slope of Tepayac and found himself once more before the radiant presence of Our Lady. The brilliant aura surrounding her enveloped him like a luminous mist, and concealed his whereabouts from the frustrated servants. Meanwhile, he was overcome with embarrassment at his failed mission; no one had believed him. He had done his best and failed. In his misery, Juan remembered to request the sign for which the Bishop had asked, and Our Lady told him to return on the following day and she would give him a sign to convince the Bishop he was telling the truth.

However, back home Juan Diego's problems multiplied. His uncle, Juan Bernardino, was seriously ill with a fever, probably malaria, which often claimed the lives of its victims. The village physician, and his herbal remedies, were of little avail. Juan Bernardino continued to deteriorate. All night and throughout the following day, Juan Diego cared for his uncle. He hoped the Lady would understand his absence from Tepeyac. In the middle of the night, Juan Bernardino was close to death, and begged his nephew to bring a priest from the Franciscan monastery at Tlaltelolco to give him the last rites.

Before daybreak on Tuesday, 12 December 1531, Juan ran to Saint James's monastery to bring a priest to give the last rites. He wanted to avoid meeting the Lady and went by a different route around Tepeyac hill; but he found Our Lady there to meet him. They spoke. Juan told of his uncle's illness and his mission; she reassured him, she told Juan Diego that Bernardino was already cured.¹⁸

However, Juan — in spite of the swift change of events — remembered to ask for the sign, and Mary told him to turn aside to a rocky area nearby and collect roses. Juan knew that it was neither the time nor the place to pick roses; the ground frozen; the soil rocky; but he went and found them where the vision said they would be. He gathered many of the roses into his poncho or tilma and returned to where the Lady was standing. She rearranged the roses, and told him to keep them wrapped in the tilma until he was able to meet Bishop Zumarraga.

At first, the obvious happened. No sooner had Juan arrived at the Bishop's palace than the servants rushed angrily to drive him away. He stood there, imploring them to take him to the Bishop just once more, insisting that this time His Excellency would believe his story. They refused and pushed him outside the metal gates which clanged in his face. However, Juan refused to go away; he stood outside the gates and waited.

An hour or so later, one of the bishop's staff noticed Juan holding the tilma as if he was concealing something; and several members of the household opened the gates and crowded around, demanding to see

¹⁸ All the material on Our Lady of Guadalupe is a translation from the Spanish which may be a translation from the Aztec tongue, and may have a slightly stilted tone in English.

what he had concealed. Juan reluctantly showed them the roses; they snatched at the flowers, but were unable to grasp them. One was sent to tell Bishop Zumarraga

In due course, Juan was ushered in to the bishop and some other dignitaries who were visiting him, including the new Spanish Governor of Mexico. He recounted the events of the past two days and his meeting with the Lady. He presented his cloak and the roses, which tumbled out on the floor. Everybody looked down at the roses, stunned. Then their eyes travelled upwards ... to the tilma, where the image of the Blessed Virgin appeared glowing, just as Juan had described her, imprinted on the garment.

Juan was startled to see the bishop and his attendants kneeling in front of him. Then he gazed down at the image on his poncho.¹⁹

The picture was venerated, guarded in the bishop's private chapel for a time, and soon after carried in procession to a simple shrine built hastily where Our Lady had appeared. Over nearly five hundred years, successive churches and buildings around the shrine have replaced one another. The tilma remains on view.²⁰

The coarsely woven material which bears the picture is as thin and open — with the wastage of the centuries — as poor sacking. It is made of vegetable fibre. It consists of two strips, about seventy inches long by eighteen wide, held together by weak stitching. The seam is visible up the middle of the figure. The image remains clear, in spite of the passage of time.

¹⁹ At this point, in a Spanish-speaking church, on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, 12 December, the Congregation is likely to clap and cheer. The Aztec peasant has confounded the power-figure from Europe.

²⁰ During the sixteenth century, there were commissions of inquiry exploring the traditional account of the miraculous origin and influence of the picture. There were wills connected with Juan Diego and his contemporaries to place them as real people in a distant time. Bishop Zumarraga's letter to his Franciscan brethren in Spain explaining the apparitions was available. There were references in a sermon of 1556, where the new Bishop criticises the people for crowding to the new shrine. Around the same time, the eye-witness historian of the Spanish conquest, Bernal Diaz del Castillo — a companion of Cortes — refers incidentally to Guadalupe and the miracles associated with worship at the shrine. In the modern Basilica, the tilma is preserved, behind bullet-proof glass above the high altar.

There were some differences between the apparition on Tepeyac hill and some later visions of Our Lady. Mary did not threaten calamity for the explosive sins of God's people; she did not highlight a new development in doctrine; she did not call for repentance ... she offered only companionship, compassion and consolation. She identified with the poor and oppressed.

It is for this reason that participants in all manner of political, social and ecological protest movements and demonstrations in Latin America carry banners of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Our Lady can find banners in her honour travelling in rather strange company, with banners of Marxist and revolutionary 'saints' and leaders, side-by-side.

... and what of Juan Diego ? Over the next seventeen years until his death in 1548, he was given a small dwelling near the shrine, where he was caretaker and a guide for the many pilgrims who commenced coming to the shrine to pray and seek favours.

The Miraculous Medal

Zoe Laboure was born, 2 May 1806, at Fain-les-Moutiers in France. Her mother and father were devout peasant stock, blessed with a large family of seven sons and three daughters.

One of her older sisters was a nun in the Community of the Daughters of Charity, founded by St Vincent de Paul. Zoe appears to have been surrounded with supernatural phenomena from an early age.

She remembered a dream ... it seemed to her she was in the Parish church when an old priest appeared to say Mass. She was impressed by the devout way in which he offered the Holy Sacrifice. After Mass, he beckoned Catherine to come to him. Instead she fled from the church. On the way home, in the dream, she visited a sick friend. The same old priest appeared there. She sought escape. He spoke to her:

My daughter, it is a good thing to care for the sick; you fly from me now, but a day will come when you will be happy to come to me. God has chosen you especially; do not forget that.

At last she escaped and fled home. Then she awoke. Catherine told her dream to the parish priest who gave as his opinion that the 'old priest' of the dream was St Vincent, and he advised her to be a Sister of Charity. However, it is easy to telescope events. It was not until 1830 that Zoe was able to enter the Sisters of Charity, taking the name of Sister Catherine. She was 23.

At that time in the Mother House of the Sisters of Charity in the Rue de Bac, in Paris, was the priest destined to become famous in assisting Sister Catherine in promoting the Miraculous Medal, Father Aladel, C.M. who was the spiritual director to the Sisters and novices.

The apparitions commenced while Catherine was still a novice. On the night of 18 July 1830, at about 11.30 p.m. she was asleep in her cubicle in the novices dormitory when she was awakened by a voice calling her name. She saw a child standing at her bedside in brilliant light. He called her to follow him to the Chapel where Our Lady was waiting to meet her. Catherine was afraid, and murmured that she would be discovered wandering around the noviciate in the middle of the night. 'The child', answering her thoughts, tried to calm her fears, reminding her that there was no-one around and that he would accompany her. Catherine dressed quickly and followed 'the child' who walked at her left. The lights came on as he approached, and the doors en route to the chapel opened at his touch. The Altar was bathed in light, as if for a midnight Mass at Easter or Christmas. Catherine waited at the altar rails and around midnight, 'the child' exclaimed; 'The Blessed Virgin is here to see you. Look !' Catherine heard a slight sound coming from the right side of the altar, like the rustling of a silk dress.

At that moment a Lady of dazzling beauty appeared in the sanctuary, and seated herself in the chair that the Spiritual Director used when speaking to novice Sisters. The Lady was dressed in a white robe with a golden tinge and a blue veil.

Catherine entered the sanctuary and knelt at the feet of the Blessed Virgin, and placed her hands on Our Lady's lap. The apparition was to last about two hours, during which Mary referred to Sister Catherine's **mission and coming events** in France:

'My child, I am going to confide to you a mission; you will suffer many trials, but you will overcome them, knowing that you endure them for the glory of God. You will be contradicted, but you will be given grace. Do not be afraid. Tell Father Aladel with simplicity and confidence all that passes within you. You will see certain things; you will receive inspirations. Explain these things to him.

My child, the times are very evil. Misfortunes are about to fall on France.²¹ The Throne will be overturned; the entire world will be afflicted by misery of every kind. However, come to the foot of the altar and here graces will be bestowed upon all who ask with confidence and fervour. These graces will be given to rich and poor alike. At a certain time the danger will be great indeed; it will seem that all is lost, but do not fear, I shall be with you; you will acknowledge my visit, the protection of God and of St Vincent upon the two communities; have confidence; do not be discouraged; you are in my special keeping.

There will be victims in other communities — the Blessed Virgin shed tears when she said this — and among the clergy in Paris there will be many victims. The Archbishop will die. My child, the Cross will be despised; blood will flow in the streets ... the whole world will be in tribulation.

After a long time talking ... Mary disappeared. The chair was empty. 'The child' escorted Catherine back to her cell. After she got back into bed, she heard a nearby clock strike two. Catherine passed a sleepless night.

The months passed. Life in the noviciate proceeded along familiar lines. Then on 27 November 1830, the eve of the first Sunday of Advent, at 5.30 in the afternoon, whilst the novices were making their meditation in profound silence, Catherine heard the rustling of a silk dress on the right hand side of the sanctuary and glancing in that direction, she saw Mary standing near a picture of St Joseph. Catherine was called to describe the scene many times:

²¹ The deep divisions unleashed in France by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars (1789 – 1815) persisted throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. There were revolutions in 1830, 1848 and 1871. Three successive Archbishops of Paris died violently during the mid-century. The events, to which Our Lady, appeared to refer especially, were those which occurred during 'the Commune' in Paris in 1871 where the revolutionary government was violently anti-clerical. Sister Catherine lived through these times, but as the main text mentions: while there were many priests and Religious murdered during the Commune, no Vincentian Fathers or Sisters of Charity were among them.

Mary was standing, clothed in a robe the colour of blue light, the style that is usually called 'a la vierge', that is, high neck and plain sleeves. Her head was covered with a white veil, which descended on each side of her feet. Her hair was smooth on the forehead, and above was a coif ornamented with a little lace and fitting close to the head ... Her hands were raised about as high as her waist, and she held in a graceful attitude another globe, a figure of the earth. Her eyes were lifted to heaven, and her face was radiant as she offered the globe to Our Lord.

... While I was busy contemplating this vision, the Blessed Virgin cast her eyes towards me, and in a voice said in the depths of my heart: 'The globe that you see represents the entire world, and particularly France, and each particular person.'

At this moment I was not myself. I was in ecstasy. There now formed around the Blessed Virgin a frame, slightly oval, upon which in golden letters, these words: *O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee !*

Then I heard a voice which said: 'Have a medal struck like this. Persons who wear it indulgenced, will receive great graces, especially if they wear it around the neck; graces will be given in abundance to those who have confidence.'

Then Catherine saw the picture turn, revealing the reverse side of the medal. She saw, within the oval frame, the letter 'M' in the centre of the frame. There was a bar on top of the 'M' and a cross resting upon the bar. Beneath the 'M' were two Hearts, the first encircled with a crown of thorns, and the other pierced with a sword.²²

Over the days and weeks that followed, Sister Catherine related these events to her Spiritual Director, Father Aladel. He was understandably cautious and did not accept readily an account of visions from a young, barely literate novice in her first year of Religious life. He awaited more certain signs. He advised Catherine to return to her prayers and the rhythm of noviciate life and await developments. He wondered if Catherine was subject to delusions or hallucinations.

²² This Apparition occurred at the right side of the High Altar in the Mother House of the Sisters of Charity, 140 Rue de Bac on 27 November 1830. The author has visited the Chapel during a trip to Paris a few years ago. Catherine died in 1876, and her body, incorrupt, is in a casket within the altar of the Chapel.

On the other hand, Catherine told Father Aladel that Mary had said to her definitely that she would not appear again; Catherine might have a sense of her voice during prayer, but that was all.

Catherine felt torn between the requests of Our Lady in two apparitions she believed to be genuine, and the suspicious, cautious attitude of Father Aladel. Two years passed. Over that time, Father Aladel gradually became convinced of the heavenly character of the apparitions and finally sought an interview with the Archbishop of Paris, Mgr de Quelen, who, as it happened, gave his approval readily to have the medal struck and the devotion spread. The Archbishop reasoned:

There is nothing in this contrary to the approved practice of the Church. The medal will spread devotion to Mary; it will strengthen belief in her Immaculate Conception. Go ahead with it, since only good can come from this devotion.

The first 1500 medals were released in June 1832, and the associated devotion to Our Lady spread rapidly in Catholic France, as the Medal of the Immaculate Conception. By 1836, two million medals had been produced and distributed. In the wake of many stories of cures, wonders and deathbed conversions, attributed to devotions centred on the medal and Our Lady's promises, it gradually became known as the Miraculous medal.

Sister Catherine's special role was largely complete. Moreover, she had kept her silence within the community regarding the apparitions. The other Sisters knew that one of their number had been favoured with an apparition; they did not know which one. After her training, Sister Catherine was sent to minister in a Nursing Home for the aged poor for at Enghien outside Paris. There she worked for 46 years, caring for the elderly and in charge of the fowl yard. She died in 1876.

When Catherine was in her sixties, the political turmoil of 1870–71 fulfilled Our Lady's prophecy of forty years previously. The high politics which led to a catastrophe for France were not Sister Catherine's concern; the apocalyptic events were there for all to see.

The French Emperor, Napoleon III's attempt to prevent German unification was a ghastly failure; his defeat in the Franco-Prussian war led to revolution in Paris, and the advent to power of violently anti-clerical elements within the political elite, called 'the Commune'. The church faced persecution in the capital.

However, the revolution in Paris was out-of-harmony with politics in France as a whole. As the French army advanced on the capital from the West it camped around Chartres about 80 kilometres distant. Here news filtered through that the revolutionaries had murdered the Archbishop and many priests in the city. Fury gripped the regulars. Many of the officers were Catholic aristocrats; most of the rank-and-file were recruited in the 'Catholic' provinces west of the river Loire.

Before the advance to Paris, the officers crowded into the Cathedral for Mass and the Bishop of Chartres, evoking the mediaeval crusaders — who had built the Cathedral — called on the army to destroy the infidels who had seized the ancient capital of Christendom. That was 15 June 1871. Three days later, the army was battering its way into Paris, using artillery to blast their way through the narrow streets. In an orgy of violence around 10,000 citizens died; twice that number were wounded, and thousands more transported to French penal settlements abroad ... and so, blood ran in the streets as the Blessed Virgin had foretold in 1830.

By this time, Sister Catherine's ministry of spiritual renewal with a new Marian devotion had matured. In summary: at her second apparition, 27 November 1830 — Mary gave Sister Catherine a twofold mission:

- (a) a medal was to be struck in her honour and Catholics requested to wear the medal with devotion; and
- (b) to promote youth groups whose members would wear the medal and serve the poor.

With the release of the medal, Catherine's own side of the mission was largely complete.

The **front** of the *Miraculous Medal* shows Mary alone with her foot crushing the head of a snake. She is the victorious Woman of Genesis

3:15, where Yahweh says to the serpent: 'I will put enmities between you and the woman'. In Catholic art, Mary is depicted frequently crushing the head of the snake who represents Satan. In this way, Mary as the most exalted among human beings, is shown triumphing over evil. The date, 1830, at the base of the medal heralds the advent of the Marian age when apparitions of the Blessed Virgin intensify and become more frequent.

Mary is standing on the globe of the world, which resonates with her title as Queen of Heaven and Earth. Brilliant rays of light — graces showed on the world — fall to earth from Mary's hand. The words around the frame of the medal: 'O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee' is meant to be a key aspiration of those who wear the medal with devotion.

The imagery on the back of the medal is equally symbolic. There is a cross on the back with a bar through its base. This symbolises the foot of the Cross. This bar runs through the letter *M*, which stands for both Mary and Mother. Mary stood at the foot of the Cross while Jesus endured his Crucifixion. Beneath the *M* are two hearts, one penetrated with thorns, and the other pierced with a sword. The two hearts evoke traditional devotions, the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

One of the *Seven Sorrows* of Mary predicted by Simeon in the Temple (Luke 2: 34 – 35) refers to 'the Mother pierced with a sword of sorrow beneath the cross so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.' Since Mary endured the devastation of watching her only Son die a humiliating and tortuous death on the cross, many of the living on earth look to her for comfort in their own troubles.

Around the cross, the *M* and the two hearts, are twelve are twelve stars. They evoke the *great sign* of the Apocalypse (Revelation) and its reference to

Every age sees new nuances in Marian doctrine which has developed over the centuries with striking new emphases in different ages. In St John's Gospel, Mary is 'the mother of Jesus'. In the early centuries, Christians, reflecting on the Old Testament, saw her as the 'new Eve'. When the Roman Empire was Christianised in the fourth and fifth

centuries, desperate Christological heresies rent the Church. In the Council of Ephesus, 431 A.D. Mary was proclaimed 'Mother of God'. Time passed. In later times, Mary was identified as *Queen of Heaven*, the *Immaculate Conception* and *Mother of the Church*.

In the wealthy, developed countries of the post-industrial world, many religious Congregations are renewing their commitment to the poor, the marginalised, and those left outside the mainstream of successful consumer societies. Mary is now seen as *Mother of the Poor*.

The devotion surrounding the *Miraculous Medal* and the revelations made to St Catherine Laboure — nearly two centuries old — is often viewed in the light of this renewed commitment to the marginalised. However, those whose religious formation is in the Anglo-Irish cultures of countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia should recall that popular Marian devotion occupies an enormous place in the lives of many committed Catholics who flock to these countries from Latin America, the Philippines, Vietnam and other places.

The most obvious challenge of the medal is to emulate Mary, the first disciple and by devoted wearing of the medal draw closer to Christ in prayer. In this context, Father R. P. Maloney, in an article in the Jesuit weekly, *America*, suggested that in emulating Mary the wearer of the *Miraculous Medal* is challenged in three ways:

(a) To listen to the word of God faithfully. The New Testament presents Mary as the model for all believers. Beyond all others, she knew how to 'listen to the word of God and act likewise.' (Luke 8:21) The wearer of the medal tries to listen attentively each day to what God is saying to me, calling to me to do, shaping my response.

(b) To pray with faith and confidence: We live in a busy world, and we live in a world where secular values have permeated most aspects of our lives. In this atmosphere, quiet prayer is essential for the faithful disciple who tries to balance Christian principles and values with the pervasive secular influence. The message surrounding the medal confronts neo-pagan values, and says that those who ask in

prayer will receive, those who seek, will find and those who knock will have the door opened to them — as Jesus asserted to his apostles.²³

(c) To identify with the destitute. Mary identified with the marginalised; she was of the poor and God chose her to show that in His coming He was turning worldly values upside down. In 1830, Catherine Laboure — who worked all her long religious life among the aged and destitute — called young people to stand in solidarity with the poorest in society. This message is as relevant today when the church proclaims Mary as the *Mother of the Poor*.²⁴

St Catherine Laboure's visions inspired a medal that gave strong support to the dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception which was to be proclaimed by Pope Pius IX in 1854, twenty years after the devotion of the Miraculous Medal was launched.

The Miraculous Medal is a physical symbol of the gift of Grace which flows from the Virgin Mary. It is Mary's token reminder that she is always ready to offer assistance.

Lourdes, the most famous pilgrimage site

²³ Maloney, R. P, 'The Miraculous Medal', in Martin, J, (ed.) *Contemporary Catholics on Traditional Devotions, America*, 17 March 2003, pp. 9–12

²⁴ At her apparitions at Beauraing and Banneux in Belgium, 1932 – 33, Our Lady identified herself as the *Virgin of the Poor*.

On 6 November 1993, the *British Medical Journal* emphasised the significance of Lourdes for many Catholics when its editor wrote:

Over 400 physicians from the French Catholic doctors' association and from the International Medical Association of Lourdes met in that city last month to discuss unexplained and miraculous cures including the most recent case, of a 58 year old man, Jean Salaun. He has been suffering from multiple sclerosis since 1977 and was treated regularly at the Saltpetriere Hospital in Paris. He could not walk or lead an independent life. After a pilgrimage to Lourdes the symptoms disappeared and he now appears to be disease free, riding a bicycle in the streets of Chartres where he lives.

An unexplained cure is not necessarily miraculous, and it could take five to ten years before it is pronounced to be so. Salaun's case is being examined by national and international medical committees, and only if he remains free of the disease for several years may they conclude that the cure is permanent and total. The medical file is then sent to the Bishop of Chartres.

More than 6000 people claim to have been cured after a pilgrimage to Lourdes, and doctors both Catholic and non Catholic have reviewed some 2000 cases since a medical bureau was established in 1882 to consider claims. Records are reviewed and patients are first examined by the bureau's doctors, who must decide by a two thirds majority that the cure is certain.

The case is sent to a medical commission in the patient's diocese and then to an international medical committee consisting of Catholic and non Catholic doctors from sixteen countries. If they agree that the cure is complete, permanent, and still unexplained the file is forwarded to the church authorities in the patient's home area. It is then the decision of the bishop to decide whether the cure is miraculous.

Nineteenth Century Lourdes

Lourdes in the nineteenth century was one of the main towns in the district with more than 4,000 inhabitants. Mills were plentiful; many

were dotted around outside the town, along one of the streams that flowed into the Gave or the Lappaca. Bernadette Soubirous was born in one of these, the Boly Mill, on 7 January 1844.

She lived there for ten years with her parents, François Soubirous and Louise Castérot. They were millers and lived in comfortable circumstances. She called this place the 'mill of good fortune' because it was there that she discovered something very important in the life of every person: human love. She also said: 'mother and father love each other'. This experience turned her into a well balanced young girl especially in time of difficulty, poverty and illness.

The descent into destitution

From 1854, events were to disrupt the life of Bernadette's family: An accident at work handicapped François Soubirous: a flying chip from a millstone blinded him in one eye. Later, he was falsely accused by the baker of Lourdes of having stolen two sacks of flour and for this he was imprisoned for eight days. Then there was a two-year drought which cut the wheat harvest and work for the millers. On top of all that there was — during this period of the industrial revolution — the introduction of steam mills. The water were unable to compete. A number of millers, among whom was François Soubirous, were ruined.

At the same time, cholera infected many people in Lourdes. Thirty-eight died and hundreds were effected by this terrible fever, Bernadette was one of them. Throughout the rest of her life she was to suffer the consequences.

This family was reduced to extreme poverty. They no longer had accommodation, food, work or money. A relation, André Sajous, found them, the Cachot, a disused prison which the authorities had abandoned as unsuitable for prisoners . They moved there during the winter of 1857, the whole family with a few miserable belongings.

Feelings of exclusion

Ill health and destitution ruined Bernadette's education. Unfortunately too, there were many into victim-blaming in the small town, where everybody knew everybody else. There were fingers pointed at those who live in 'the Cachot'. Each Sunday she went to Mass. However, unlike her friends, she was not allowed to receive Holy Communion since she had not been able to attend Catechism class. Bernadette at fourteen was unable to speak French. She spoke only the dialect of Lourdes. The Catechism was taught in French.

In November 1857, the Soubirous accepted the suggestion of a friend, Marie Laguès, that their eldest daughter should go to Bartrès, the little village close to Lourdes, to work on the farm. Her father agreed 'that will be one less mouth to feed'. It was her desire to make her First Communion that caused Bernadette to return to the 'Cachot' in January 1858, a few weeks before the first Apparition.

The Apparitions

On 11 February 1858, Bernadette was walking along the bank of the fast flowing mountain stream, the Gave, with her sister and a friend to gather firewood. The place was outside the small town.

Suddenly from the mouth of a small cave in the sharply rising river bank about fifty metres away, she saw advancing towards her a golden coloured cloud enclosing a beautiful young lady. The lady beckoned Bernadette to approach and signalled with the rosary that hung on her arm for Bernadette to begin to pray. After the rosary was completed, the lady and the cloud moved back into the grotto and disappeared.

This was the first of eighteen apparitions to Bernadette at the same place over the following weeks. In the course of the appearances the lady gave Bernadette three secrets which she was never to reveal. On one occasion she told Bernadette to scratch the surface of the soil near the grotto and a spring of water began to flow. The Lady instructed the girl to drink the water and bathe there. Of course, word of the events at the grotto began to spread and each time Bernadette, her sister and friend came to the place, a larger and larger crowd of local people followed.

In a later appearance, the Lady expressed a wish for a chapel to be constructed on the site and the people to come in procession. Meanwhile, the cautious parish priest was pressuring Bernadette to ask the Lady her name and towards the end she acceded to the request. The lady addressed her in the local dialect, and so when she said, 'I am the Immaculate Conception', Bernadette did not understand the lady's expression. The doctrine of the *Immaculate Conception* — that Mary had been conceived free from Original Sin — had been proclaimed only four years previously.

This was the climax of the series of Our Lady's appearances to Bernadette; soon after the apparitions ceased. However the fame of the town and the grotto as a place of pilgrimage was only commencing. There were miracle cures, intense devotion, widespread publicity, increasing crowds.

After the initial excitement died, Bernadette was enrolled as a boarder at the convent school of the Sisters of Nevers, and when she was old enough she entered their congregation. The long years of childhood deprivation took their toll, however, and after a devoted religious life, Bernadette died from T.B. and asthma at the early age of thirty five. She was canonised in 1933.

The Church recognises the apparitions

The apparitions at Lourdes were examined exhaustively by the church authorities before they were accepted as 'worthy of credence'. The solemn declaration by the Bishop of Tarbes, 18 January 1862, can be read at the present time, on a marble slab on the right hand side after entering the Upper Basilica:

We judge : that Mary Immaculate, the Mother of God, really did appear to Bernadette Soubirous, on eighteen occasions from 11th. February 1858 at the Grotto of Massabielle, near the town of Lourdes ; that these Apparitions bear the characteristics of truth ; that the faithful can believe them as true. We humbly submit our judgement to the judgement of the Sovereign Pontiff, who is responsible for governing the Universal Church.

The Bishop had been prompt in exploring the provenance of the apparitions. They took place from 11 February to 16 July 1858 and on 28 July 1858 he appointed a commission of enquiry 'to gather and to set down the facts about what happened or what could happen again in the Grotto of Lourdes ; to inform us of these, to make us aware of their nature, and to furnish us, as well, with all the important elements involved in order to arrive at a solution...'

The Commission of Inquiry

The Commission had to examine the cures caused by using the water of the Grotto. Is the water natural or supernatural? Are the visions of Bernadette true? If 'yes'; are they of divine character? Did the object that appeared make demands of the child? What were these demands? Did the spring in the Grotto exist before the vision which Bernadette claimed to have had? He directed: 'The Commission must neglect nothing in order to tie up all loose ends and arrive at the truth, whatever it may be.'

Over four years the Commission explored the issues, during which its members questioned Bernadette and many other witnesses at exhaustive length. At the conclusion of this process the Bishop felt he could give a positive answer to the supernatural nature of Bernadette's experience.

A well argued document

After recalling the description of the Apparitions, the Bishop explained the reason for the lack of haste which the church has in examining supernatural things: she demands definite proof, before admitting to them and to proclaiming them as divine, because the devil can lead people astray by taking on the form of an angel of light:

We are inspired by the Commission comprised of wise, holy, learned and experienced priests who questioned the child, studied the facts, examined everything and weighed all the evidence. We have also called on science, and we remain convinced that the Apparitions are supernatural and divine, and that by consequence, what Bernadette saw was the Most Blessed Virgin. Our convictions

are based on the testimony of Bernadette, However above all on the things that have happened, things which can be nothing other than divine intervention.

Bernadette's personal testimony

The first argument of the Bishop was that Bernadette did not wish to deceive: she was sincere and her testimony gives all the guarantees that we could wish for. 'Who could not admire, on meeting her, the simplicity, the openness, and the modesty of this child? She only spoke when she was spoken to. She spoke without exaggeration and with a touching naivety. To the many questions asked of her, she gave clear and precise answers always to the point, without hesitation and stamped with a strong conviction.' The Bishop underlined that Bernadette was not shaken by threats or tempted by generous offers by saying:

Always in control of herself, she has, in the many different interrogations to which she was submitted, constantly maintained what she said, with nothing added, nothing retracted. The sincerity of Bernadette is, thus, unquestionable.' However the Bishop goes further in his argument: sincere, Bernadette is not mistaken : 'However if Bernadette does not want to deceive, was she not deceived herself? How could she believe to see and hear what she did not see and hear? Was she not the victim of hallucinations? How could we believe her? The wisdom of her answers reveals in this child a spirit of goodness, a quiet imagination, good sense beyond her years. Religious feelings never showed in her a spirit of exhalation; nobody could prove in the young girl neither intellectual disorder, nor change of mind nor unusual personality nor morbid feelings which would allow her to give way to a creative imagination.

Bishop Lawrence added that Bernadette saw not once but eighteen times, suddenly, when nothing was prepared there and that there were other times when she waited and saw nothing. He notes that her expression changed during the Apparitions and that she heard in a language (French) that she did not always understand. In spite of this she had a clear memory for what had transpired.

These circumstances put together do not allow us to believe in a hallucination, the young girl has truly seen and heard a being calling herself the Immaculate Conception. And this phenomenon cannot be explained naturally, we have good reason to believe that the Apparition is supernatural.

The Marvels of Grace

In addition to the testimony of Bernadette, there were 'the marvellous things that have been happening since the first event. If one judges the tree by its fruits, we can say that the Apparition as seen by the young girl is supernatural and divine, because Our Lady has produced supernatural and divine results.

Bishop Lawrence affirmed:

The crowds grew and gathered during the Apparitions and afterwards when the Apparitions had ended : 'pilgrims came from faraway districts and neighbouring countries hurrying to the Grotto ... to pray and ask favours from the Immaculate Virgin Mary. Souls already Christian are strengthened in virtue, people frozen into indifference have been brought back to the practice of their religion, obstinate pilgrims are reconciled with God after having Our Lady of Lourdes invoked in their favour. These wonders of grace, which have a universal and lasting character, can only have God as their author, do they not come, as a result, to confirm the truth of the Apparitions?

The stone tablet situated near the water taps of Lourdes recalls the original Apparitions. After the wonderful things that happened 'for the good of souls', there were the physical cures, illustrating God's blessing on Lourdes as a place of pilgrimage.

These extraordinary cures have had an immense effect ... Sick people of all countries request the water of Massabielle ... we cannot list here all the favours granted, However what we want to say is that it is the water of Massabielle which has cured those who were sick and who were abandoned or declared incurable. These cures have been obtained by using a water which in itself has no special curative qualities, according to those skilled in chemistry who have carried out rigorous tests. These cures are thus the work of God.

The cures are linked directly to the Apparition which is the point of departure and inspiration of the confidence of the sick.

The Bishop's Judgement

In view of all this, the Bishop said that 'There is thus a direct link between the cures and the Apparitions, the Apparitions are of divine origin, since the cures carry a divine stamp ... the Apparition, calling herself the *Immaculate Conception*, whom Bernadette saw and heard, is the Most Holy Virgin Mary! The finger of God is here.' The Bishop making reference to the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception by Pope Pius IX at the end of 1854 states : 'Then about three years afterwards, the Virgin Mary appeared to a child telling her: 'I am the Immaculate Conception' want a church built here in my honour'. Does this not appear that she wants to confirm, by a monument, the infallible word of the successor of St. Peter?'

The apparitions in the life of the church

This judgement of the Church is essential because the Apparitions add nothing to the Creed or the Gospel; they are a reminder for an age that had a tendency to forget them, they are a prophetic Visitation to our world. God does not want us focusing on the wonderful or the extraordinary; however, through the Apparitions he gives us a sign that we should return to the Gospel which is the Word of his Son, the Word of Life. Faithfulness to the message of the Gospel, the authenticity of our life of witness, the results of holiness which flow out from it for the people of God are the criteria of an authentic Apparition in the Church. At Lourdes they are verified. Five million pilgrims annually are testimony to this at the commencement of the third millennium.

We saw an Angel
with a flaming sword in his left hand
flashing, it gave out flames
that looked as though they would
set the world on fire
but they died out in contact
with the splendour that Our
Lady

radiated towards him from
her right hand;
pointing to the earth with
his right hand,
the Angel cried out in a
loud voice:
'Penance, Penance, Penance
!'

(Third Part of the "Secret" of Fatima)
Our Lady of Fatima

As with many old Catholic countries facing massive economic and social change as a result of the industrial revolution, Portugal experienced vicious social tensions and deep divisions between a traditional Catholic people and bitterly anti-clerical elites. The revolution of 1910 had brought the anti-clericals to power. A savage persecution of the church followed in its wake.

The new government decreed a sharp separation of Church and state. Much church property was confiscated and religious congregations were dissolved. The intelligentsia and ruling classes were anti-religious and anti-clerical. Many were contemptuous of traditional religious beliefs. describing these as mere superstitions in the newspapers and journals they ran. Even rural areas normally immune to the intellectual fads of the cities and large towns were affected by the closing of some churches and a cautious wariness about any outward expression of

religious belief. Despite this, a strong religious faith still existed in the simple peasants of the rural countryside. In this environment, a series of apparitions by the Blessed Virgin occurred to three small children from the rural village of Fatima over a six month period starting in May of 1917.

The tone of the apparitions of Our Lady at Fatima was quite different from her appearances at Lourdes, Knock or Pellevoisin. At Fatima the message was louder, more urgent, more emphatic, even more public — in these ways:

- (a) the visions had an apocalyptic side;
- (b) the visions occurred during World War I, to which reference was made;
- (c) the *three secrets* confided to the children on 13 July 1917 presented stark choices to a world mired in sin and evil;
- (d) the sign of God's power and presence, via the Blessed Virgin, at the 'dancing of the sun' at the 13 October apparition was more spectacular.
- (e) there was a renewed emphasis on prayer and penance for the salvation of sinners.
- (f) Mary advised the children — and via them the Church — that God wished for devotion to herself under the title of the *Immaculate Heart of Mary*.

The apparitions had their roots in a series of mystical events that began in 1915. Three young children, Lucia dos Santos, aged nine, and her two younger cousins, Francisco and Jacinta Marto, were tending a flock of sheep in the fields outside Fatima when Lucia thought she saw a translucent cloud that seemed to be shaped in the form of a human body. It moved across a clear sky and finally hovered above a pine grove.

A year later, in the summer of 1916, the children were guiding their flocks of sheep to a meadow called Couza Velha when they were caught in a sudden rainstorm. They ran into the shelter of a nearby cave, they decided to eat their lunch and wait until the rain stopped before collecting their herd. After completing an abbreviated Rosary, the rain

stopped suddenly and, within moments of leaving the cave, they were greeted by a strong wind blowing across the pines. When they turned to discover what might be causing such a wind, they saw again the translucent cloud that Lucia had seen the previous year.

This time the cloud moved toward them and finally became distinguishable as a transparent 'young man' about fourteen years of age. The young man identified himself to the astonished children, 'Don't be afraid. I am the Angel of Peace. Pray with me.' He then knelt on the ground, bending forward until his forehead touched it, and prayed: 'My God, I believe, I adore, and I love You! I beg pardon of You for those who do not believe, do not adore, do not hope and do not love You!' He said this prayer three times. When he stood he then said to the children: 'Pray thus. The hearts of Jesus and Mary are attentive to the voice of your supplications.' Saying that, he vanished from sight. The children were overwhelmed and in a state of ecstasy. They repeated this prayer for a long time as the angel had done ... on their knees.

The children decided not to tell anyone of their experiences fearing ridicule and censure by their parents and friends. Several weeks later, the angel appeared again and requested that they pray a great deal, offer sacrifices to the Most High and accept whatever sufferings which the Lord sent to them. In his third and final appearance in October, the angel brought with him a Chalice and suspended above it, a Host. Before offering the Host to Lucia, the only one who had received First Communion, he prostrated himself on the ground and said:

Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, I adore You profoundly and offer You the most Precious Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, present in all the tabernacles of the earth, in reparation for the outrages, sacrileges, and indifference with which He himself is offended. And through the infinite merits of His Most Sacred Heart and of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I beg of You the conversion of poor sinners.

He repeated this prayer three times and then rising up, lifted the Host before his eyes and said: 'Take and drink the Body and the Blood of Jesus Christ, horribly insulted by ungrateful men. Make reparation for

their crimes and console your God.' With this, he gave the Host to Lucia and let the other children drink from the Chalice.

As all this was occurring in Portugal, World War I was raging across Europe. In the autumn of 1914, Pope Benedict XV pleaded with the leaders of Europe to stop the bloodshed ... to no avail. After a number of such pleas, on May 5, 1917, the Pope directed that the invocation Queen of Peace, pray for us be permanently included in the Church's litany of prayer to Mary. He also noted:

To Mary, then, who is the Mother of Mercy and omnipotent by grace, let loving and devout appeal go up from every corner of the earth - from noble temples and tiniest chapels, from royal palaces and mansions of the rich as from the poorest hut - from every place where a faithful soul finds shelter - from blood drenched plains and seas. Let it bear to her the anguished cry of mothers and wives, the wailing of innocent little ones, the sighs of every generous heart; that her most tender and benign solicitude may be moved and the peace we ask for be obtained for our agitated world.

In Fatima, the children continued to pray and offer whatever sacrifices they could as the angel had requested. On 13 May — eight days after the Pope directly asked for heaven's intervention — the little shepherds were moving their flocks to the meadows of the Cova da Iria when they were startled by a very bright flash. Thinking it was lightning, they ran for the nearest cover they could find near a large oak tree. A second bright flash once again frightened them and they ran from the tree toward the east seeking better shelter. They were startled to see a bright globe of light hovering over a small evergreen that stood directly in their path. At the centre of the light stood a Lady dressed in brilliant white, holding her hands against her breast in a prayerful repose; in her right hand she held a Rosary. The Lady spoke to them in a soft, melodious voice,

'Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you!'

Lucia asked the Lady where she came from, to which she replied,

'I am from heaven.'

Hearing this, Lucia asked the Lady what she wanted of her. The Lady replied,

I come to ask you to come here for six months in succession, on the thirteenth day this same hour. Then I will tell you who I am, and what I want. And afterwards I will return here a seventh time.

Lucia then asked if she would go to heaven, and the Lady responded, 'Yes, you will.' She then asked if Jacinta and Francisco would go to heaven also. The Lady responded, 'Also. However, Francisco will have to say many Rosaries!' After Lucia asked about the state of two girls who had died recently, the Lady spoke again,

Do you wish to offer yourselves to God, to endure all the suffering that He may please to send you, as an act of reparation for the sins by which He is offended, and to ask for the conversion of sinners?'

The children replied, 'Yes, we do.' The Lady then told them that they would have much to suffer, However, that God's grace would be their comfort.

Jacinta, the youngest of the children, was struck by the gentleness and beauty of the Lady. When the apparition ended she kept on repeating, 'Oh, such a pretty Lady'. Even though they had agreed not to talk to anyone about her appearance at the Cova, Jacinta could not resist telling her mother about the 'pretty Lady' she had seen. Her mother was at first sceptical of her story However her father's response, after hearing both his children describe the events at the Cova, was succinct, 'Well, if the youngsters did see a lady dressed in white, who could it be but Our Lady?' The following morning, Lucia met one of her sisters, Maria, who greeted her, 'Oh Lucia, I hear you have seen Our Lady at Cova da Iria! Is it true?' Lucia could only respond, 'Who told you?' Maria didn't believe the story nor did the rest of Lucia's family. Her mother, Maria Rosa, was particularly hard on Lucia thinking the young girl was lying about the whole affair.

As promised, Mary appeared to the children on the 13th day of each month for six months. The children did have much to suffer. In her July apparition, the Blessed Mother promised to perform a miracle in

October so that all those coming to the Cova da Iria would believe that she was present there. She also asked them to pray:

Sacrifice yourselves for sinners, and repeat often, especially whenever you make a sacrifice for them: 'O Jesus, it is for love of You, for the conversion of sinners and in reparation for the sins committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary

In her appearances at Fatima, Mary told the children to ask people to pray, convert their lives to God and honour her appearances there. During the July apparition, Mary gave the children *three Secrets* which were not to be revealed until she authorised their disclosure. She also promised a miracle at the end of her appearance in October that would assist everyone in believing in her visits to Fatima. After giving them the *Secrets*, she said:

When you pray the Rosary, say after each mystery: 'O my Jesus, forgive us, save us from the fire of Hell. Lead all souls to Heaven, especially those who are most in need.

The apparitions were beginning to draw unwelcome attention to this quiet rural part of Portugal which the mayor did not like. He was afraid of the anti-clerical government in Lisbon. In August, just before the next scheduled apparition, he arrested the children, interrogated them, had them thrown in the local jail and threatened them with execution. All this in response to their refusal to change their story about the beautiful Lady in white they had seen and their refusal to reveal the *Secrets* entrusted to them by her several weeks earlier.

The local townsfolk who had gone to the Cova unaware that the children had been kidnapped reported that at noon they heard a clap of thunder which appeared to come from underground, saw the sun lose its brilliance, witnessed the atmosphere become hazy and observed a small white cloud form around the trunk of the tree where the apparitions had occurred. Once this happened, they saw the clouds near the sun turn crimson in colour and then rapidly change through all the colours of the rainbow. After several minutes of witnessing this, everything in the Cova returned to normal.

During the last apparition, on 13 October 1917, the Lady of light revealed herself to be *Our Lady of the Rosary*. The 70,000 rain soaked pilgrims who came to witness Mary's final appearance saw the sun spin out of its orbit, emitting a rainbow of colour as it gyrated; finally, when this display ceased, the sun was seen plunging toward the earth causing the pilgrims to scream in terror. When the sun eventually resumed its normal behaviour about twelve minutes after it began this inexplicable display, many of these rain soaked people found their clothing completely dry. Further, a number of pilgrims who came with medical problems found their ailments either completely healed or significantly alleviated. In addition, the more than ten thousand people in the surrounding villages who chose not to go to the apparition site also saw the sun dance in the sky.

One of the principal anti-clerical publications of the day was *O Dia*, a major Lisbon newspaper. On 17 October, *O Dia*, reported the following:

At one o'clock in the afternoon, midday by the sun, the rain stopped. The sky, pearly grey in colour, illuminated the vast arid landscape with a strange light. The sun had a transparent gauzy veil so that eyes could easily be fixed upon it. The grey mother-of-pearl tone turned into a sheet of silver which broke up as the clouds were torn apart and the silver sun, enveloped in the same gauzy grey light, was seen to whirl and turn in the circle of broken clouds. A cry went up from every mouth and people fell on their knees on the muddy ground. The light turned a beautiful blue as if it had come through the stained-glass windows of a cathedral and spread itself over the people who knelt with outstretched hands. The blue faded slowly and then the light seemed to pass through yellow glass. Yellow stains fell against white handkerchiefs, against the dark skirts of women. They were reported on the trees, on the stones and on the serra. People wept and prayed with uncovered heads in the presence of the miracle they had awaited.

The other major Lisbon newspaper, *O Seculo*, sent its editor, Avelino de Almeida, to the scene. He had been quite dismissive of the entire story of Fatima and its predicted miracle in an article he wrote on the morning of the 13th. However, now as a witness to the events of Fatima, he noted the following:

From the road, where the vehicles were parked and where hundred of people who had not dared to brave the mud were congregated, one could see the immense multitude turn toward the sun, which appeared free from clouds and in its zenith. It looked like a plaque of dull silver and it was possible to look at it without the least discomfort. It might have been an eclipse which was taking place. However at that moment a great shout went up and one could hear the spectators nearest at hand shouting: 'A miracle! A miracle!' Before the astonished eyes of the crowd, whose aspect was Biblical as they stood bareheaded, eagerly searching the sky, the sun trembled, made sudden incredible movements outside any cosmic laws - the sun 'danced' according to the typical expression of the people.

Another observer who witnessed these events was Joseph Garrett, a natural sciences professor at Coimbra University. Dr. Garrett described the events in a similar manner:

This was not the sparkling of a heavenly body, for it spun round on itself in a mad whirl, when suddenly a clamour was heard from all the people. The sun, whirling, seemed to loosen itself from the firmament and advance threateningly upon the earth as if to crush us with its huge fiery weight. The sensation during these moments was terrible.

A condensed version of the events at Fatima was reported in a number of newspapers around the world despite the fact that astronomers reported nothing unusual had happened to the sun.

After 13 October 1917, the apparitions ceased. Within two years, the two youngest children, Francesco and Jacinta, had died in the great influenza epidemic of 1919–20 which followed the conclusion of World War I. Meanwhile, the Bishop of Leira, in whose diocese Fatima lay, convened a Commission of Inquiry to examine if the apparition at the Cova da Iria were of Divine origin.

After nearly **thirteen years** of examination by a commission comprised of clergy, physicians and scientists, the Catholic Church pronounced the Fatima apparitions as worthy of belief on 13 October 1930 with the declaration by the Bishop of Leira:

We deem well: 1: to declare worthy of credence the visions of the shepherds at the Cova da Iria, in the parish of Fatima of this diocese, on the thirteenth day of the months from May to October 1917; 2: to give official permission for the cult of Our Lady of Fatima.

In accepting that the Apparitions were of Divine origin the Bishop referred *inter alia* to the solar phenomena of 13 October 1917:²⁵

The children had announced previously the day and the hour when it would occur. The news spread rapidly around Portugal, and despite the day being stormy with heavy, persistent rain, tens of thousands assembled at the hour of the final Apparition ... This phenomena, which no observatory registered, and which was therefore, not a natural one, was observed by persons of all social ranks and classes, believers and unbelievers, journalists of the principal Portuguese dailies, and even by persons kilometres away, all of which destroys the idea that it was a collective illusion.

The Secrets and the Message of Fatima

Within the practising Catholic community, the six apparitions of the Blessed Virgin to three Portuguese children in 1917 are among the best known of all Mary's apparitions. The death of the last of the three visionaries, Sister Lucia de Jesus dos Santos, at the advanced age of 97 on 13 February 2005, was reported widely and the late, Pope John Paul II, released the so-called *Third Secret of Fatima* in 2002. The visions at Fatima are worth considering in detail.

There was no new or revived teaching offered in these apparitions, on the contrary, three key areas of Catholic theology and devotion were re-emphasised: Our Lady requested:

- (a) Penance: which in the Gospel sense means moral reform and reparation for sin;
- (b) devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary — that the Father's plan of salvation for us is, to Jesus through Mary; and

²⁵ da Silva, J.C. Bishop of Leira, Pastoral Letter, The Approval of Fatima, 13 October 1930

- (c) a renewed emphasis on the devotion of the Rosary, which consists mostly of lines from the Gospel, plus a short prayer composed by the church.

The message of the Blessed Virgin at Fatima in the depths of World War I was accompanied by 'signs and wonders', an apocalyptic vision of hell and prophecies of impending disasters if God's call for reform was not heeded. The call for prayer, moral reform and penance was basic; the prophecies and visions were uncommon. There were:

- (a) the 'signs and wonders' at the final apparition on 13 October 1917;
- (b) the dire warning in the vision of Hell given to the children on 13 July;
- (c) the prophecies of wars and persecutions of the Church if Our Lady's message was not heeded widely;
- (d) the 'Third Secret', which as revealed in 2002, summarises briefly and in symbolic form the struggles and persecutions of the church across the twentieth century with atheistic totalitarian governments: Fascism, Nazism and especially Communism.

At the apparition, 13 July 1917, the three children were given a terrifying vision of Hell — after being assured that each of them would be saved.²⁶

Our Lady showed us a great sea of fire which seemed to be under the earth. Plunged in this fire were demons and souls in human form, like transparent burning embers, all blackened or burnished bronze, floating about in the conflagration, now raised into the air by the flames that issued from within themselves together with great clouds of smoke, now falling back on every side like sparks in a huge fire, without weight or equilibrium, and amid shrieks and groans of pain and despair, which horrified us and made us tremble with fear. The demons could be distinguished by their terrifying and repulsive likeness to frightful and unknown animals, all black and transparent.

²⁶ Ratzinger, J, 'Theological commentary on the so-called third part of the "Secret" of Fatima, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28 June 2000, pp. 7 – 15. On 19 April 2005, in the wake Pope John Paul II's death, Cardinal John Ratzinger was elected Pope Benedict XVI

In the second 'Secret', the Blessed Virgin predicted a time of wars and persecutions if the world did not heed the call for a turning back to God:²⁷

The present war will end soon, but if men do not cease to offend God, a new and more terrible war will break out during the pontificate of Pope Pius XI. *When you see a night illumined by an unknown light, know that this is the great sign given you by God that he is about to punish the world for its crimes, by means of war, famine and persecutions of the Church and of the Holy Father.* To prevent this, I shall come to ask for the consecration of Russia to my Immaculate Heart, and the communion of reparation on the First Saturdays. If my requests are heeded, Russia will be converted, and there will be peace, if not, she will spread her errors throughout the world, causing wars and persecutions of the Church. The good will be martyred; the Holy Father will have much to suffer; various nations will be annihilated. In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph. The Holy Father will consecrate Russia to me, and she shall be converted, and a period of peace will be granted to the world.

On the night of 25-26 January 1938, the northern hemisphere skies were illuminated by a brilliant display of the *aurora borealis*, a natural phenomenon, but perhaps the one to which reference was made in the second secret.

World War I ended one year after the last of the Fatima apparitions. Some historians would agree that World War II actually began in 1938, the last year in the reign of Pius XI, with the German annexation of Austria. Two months prior to this event an unusual auroral display, an eerie light show in the northern sky occasionally visible at night in high latitudes, was seen all over Europe and reported widely by the press since it was observed as far south as Rome. Astonished observers reported forest fires and building fires apparently associated with these strange lights.

Shortly after the apparitions started, the Bolshevik revolution erupted which lead Russia down the path toward communism. More than 35 million peasants were killed by Stalin alone either in the Gulag or by the firing squad. Russia absorbed a number of its neighbouring countries

²⁷ 'The Secret of Fatima' presented by Sister Lucia in the 'Third Memoir' of 31 August 1941, for the Bishop of Leira-Fatima. *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28 June 2000

into the USSR and communism became the dogma that replaced fascism as the major global threat to personal freedom and human dignity.

The *Third Secret* was not published, and occasionally there was speculation in some Catholic circles that its contents were more draconian than either of the others. Perhaps it foretold the end of the world and the Second Coming. Each Pope was aware of its contents but it did not resonate with any — ‘it did not seem to be relevant to my time’, Pope John XXIII is said to have remarked.

With the election of John Paul II, a Polish cardinal, who had lived through the Nazi occupation of his country, the Holocaust and the communist persecution of the church, interest was revived. Then on 31 May 1981, there was the attempted assassination attempt on Pope John Paul’s life in St Peter’s Square. As he recuperated in the Gemelli hospital, he sent for the letter containing the ‘Third Secret’ and, inevitably ... and not unreasonably, he saw reference to himself clearly and definitely.

Pope John Paul II finally completed the dedication of the world, including Russia, to Mary’s Immaculate Heart in 1984 and shortly thereafter, the USSR collapsed and Soviet communism faded as the major ideology of eastern Europe and the former USSR countries. Unfortunately, communism still exists as a viable political force in Russia and as the dominant state ideology in China, North Korea, Vietnam and Cuba.

Nevertheless, he waited until the new millennium before he released the *Secret*, since the *Secret* appeared to refer to the whole twentieth century in retrospect. The *Secret* read:²⁸

At the left of Our Lady and a little above, we saw an Angel with a flaming sword in his left hand; flashing, it gave out flames that looked as though they would set the world on fire; but they died out in contact with the splendour that Our Lady radiated towards him with her right hand: pointing to the earth with his right hand, the Angel cried out in a loud voice: Penance, Penance, Penance !’ (And we saw in an immense light that is God: ‘something similar to how

people appear in a mirror when they pass in front of it' a **Bishop dress in White** 'we had the impression that it was the Holy Father.'

(I saw) Other Bishops, Priests, men and women Religious (were) going up a steep mountain, at the top of which there was a big Cross of rough-hewn trunks as of a cork-tree with the bark; before reaching there the Holy Father passed through a big city half in ruins and half trembling with halting step, afflicted with pain and sorrow, he prayed for the souls of the corpses he met on the way; having reached the top of the mountain, **on his knees at the foot of the big Cross he was killed by a group of soldiers who fired bullets and arrows at him**, and in the same way there died the other Bishops, Priests, men and women Religious and various lay people of different ranks and positions. Beneath the two arms of the Cross there were two Angels each with a crystal aspersion in his hand, in which they gathered up the blood of the Martyrs and with it sprinkled the souls that were making their way to God.

The Third *Secret* of Fatima was quite unlike what had been predicted. It concerns above all, the war waged by atheistic systems against the Church and Christians, and it describes the immense suffering endured by the witnesses of the faith in the last century of the second millennium. It was an interminable *Way of the Cross* led by the Popes of the twentieth century.

There was no vast international return to service of God in the world-at-large in the wake of the Apparitions at Fatima. However, among committed Catholics — and some others — devotion to Our Lady of Fatima spread widely ... gradually throughout the world. Private revelations often lead to explosions of devotion; this is what happened with the Blessed Virgin's appearances at Fatima.

Mary's message of repentance, prayer and conversion to the ways of her Son, transmitted at Fatima, seemed to lose its immediacy in the early 1960's when the third Secret was not revealed. In more recent years there have been many claims of apparitions of Our Lady — none since those at Banneux and Beauraing in the early 1930s has received official approbation of the church authorities.