

1978 Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith document on apparition discernment, *Normae Congregationis*

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith elaborated, from 1974-1978, some new criteria for discerning apparitions and revelations, which were expounded in a normative text, which, for a long period, was only made available to the Ordinary [local bishop] who, confronted with the fact of an apparition, addressed himself to the Sacred Congregation. These standards govern the treatment of events after 1980 (notably Medjugorje), and they also brought about the resumption of certain previous investigations (those of Bonate and Garabandal, amongst others):

Preliminary Note: Origin and character of these norms.

At the time of the Annual Plenary Congregation during November 1974, the Fathers of this Sacred Congregation studied the problems relating to apparitions and supposed revelations, and the consequences which often result from these, and they arrived at the following conclusions:

1. Today more than formerly, the news of these apparitions is spread more quickly among the faithful thanks to the means of information ("mass media"); in addition, the ease of travel supports more frequent pilgrimages. Also, the ecclesiastical authority was itself brought to reconsider this subject.
2. Similarly, because of current instruments of knowledge, the contributions of science, and the requirement of a rigorous criticism, it is more difficult, if not impossible, to arrive as speedily as previously at judgements which conclude, as formerly happened, investigations into this matter ("constat de supernaturalitate, non constat de supernaturalitate"); and because of that, it is more difficult for the Ordinary to authorize or prohibit public worship or any other form of devotion of the faithful.

For these reasons, so that the devotion stirred up among the faithful by facts of this kind can appear as a disposition in full communion with the Church, and bear fruit, and so that the Church itself is able to ultimately distinguish the true nature of the facts, the Fathers consider that it is necessary to promote the following practice in regard to this matter.

So that the ecclesiastical authority is able to acquire more certainty on such or such an apparition or revelation, it will proceed in the following way:

- a) Initially, to judge the facts according to positive and negative criteria (cf. below, n.1).
- b) Then, if this examination appears favorable, to allow certain public demonstrations of cult and devotion, while continuing to investigate the facts with extreme prudence (which is equivalent to the formula: "for the moment, nothing is opposed to it").
- c) Finally, after a certain time, and in the light of experience, (starting from a particular study of the spiritual fruits generated by the new devotion), to give a judgement on the authenticity of the supernatural character, if the case requires this.

I. Criteria of judgement, concerning the probability at least, of the character of the apparitions and supposed revelations.

A) Positive criteria:

- a) Moral certainty, or at least great probability, as to the existence of the fact, [revelation] acquired at the end of a serious investigation.
- b) Particular circumstances relating to the existence and the nature of the fact:

1. Personal qualities of the subject—in particular mental balance, honesty and rectitude of moral life, habitual sincerity and docility towards ecclesiastical authority, ability to return to the normal manner of a life of faith, etc.
2. With regard to the revelations, their conformity with theological doctrines and their spiritual veracity, their exemption from all error.
3. A healthy devotion and spiritual fruits which endure (in particular, the spirit of prayer, conversions, signs of charity, etc).

B) Negative criteria:

- a) A glaring error as to the facts.
- b) Doctrinal errors that one would attribute to God himself, or to the Blessed Virgin Mary, or the Holy Spirit in their manifestations (taking into account, however, the possibility that the subject may add something by their own activity—even if this is done unconsciously—of some purely human elements to an authentic supernatural revelation, these having nevertheless to remain free from any error in the natural order. Cf. St Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, n. 336).
- c) An obvious pursuit of monetary gain in relation with the fact.
- d) Gravely immoral acts committed by the subject, or his associates, at the time of the facts, or on the occasion of these facts.
- e) Psychic disorders or psychopathic tendencies concerning the subject, which would exert an unquestionable influence on the allegedly supernatural facts, or indeed psychosis, mass hysteria, or other factors of the same kind.

It is important to consider these criteria, whether they are positive or negative, as indicative standards and not as final arguments, and to study them in their plurality and in relation with the other criteria.

II. Intervention of the competent local Authority

1. As, at the time of a presumed supernatural fact, worship or an ordinary form of devotion is born in a quasi spontaneous way among the faithful, the competent ecclesiastical Authority has the serious obligation to inform itself without delay and to carry out a diligent investigation.
2. At the legitimate request of the faithful (when they are in communion with their pastors and are not driven by a sectarian spirit), the competent ecclesiastical Authority can intervene to authorize and promote various forms of worship and devotion if, assuming the criteria given above having been applied, nothing is opposed to it. But there must be vigilance nevertheless, to ensure that the faithful do not regard this way of acting as an approval by the Church of the supernatural character of the event in question (cf. above, Preliminary Note, c).
3. By virtue of his doctrinal and pastoral duty, the competent ecclesiastical Authority can intervene immediately of his own authority, and he must do so in serious circumstances, for example, when it is a question of correcting or of preventing abuses in the exercise of worship or devotion, to condemn erroneous doctrines, to avoid the dangers of a false mysticism etc.
4. In doubtful cases, which do not involve the welfare of the Church, the competent ecclesiastical Authority may refrain from any judgement and any direct action (more especially as it can happen that, at the end of a certain time, the supposedly supernatural event can lapse from memory); but he should not remain less vigilant about the event, in such a way as to be in a position to intervene with swiftness and prudence, if that is necessary.

III. Other Authorities entitled to intervene

1. The foremost authority to inquire and to intervene belongs to the local Ordinary.
2. But the regional or national episcopal Conference may intervene:
 - a) If the local Ordinary, after having fulfilled the obligations which fall to him, resorts to them for a study of the event in its entirety.
 - b) If the event assumes national or regional importance.
3. The Apostolic See can intervene, either at the request of Ordinary himself, or at the request of a qualified group of the faithful, or directly by virtue of the immediate right of universal jurisdiction of the Sovereign Pontiff (cf. above, IV).

IV. Intervention of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

1. a) The intervention of the Sacred Congregation can be agreed to be necessary either by the Ordinary, after he has fulfilled the obligations falling to him, or by a qualified group of the faithful. In this second case, vigilance is necessary so that the recourse to the Sacred Congregation is not motivated by suspect reasons (for example to force, in one way or another, the Ordinary to modify his legitimate decisions, or to confirm the sectarian drift of a group, etc.)

b) It belongs to the Sacred Congregation to discern and approve the way of acting of the Ordinary, or, if it proves to be necessary, to carry out a new examination of the facts distinct from that which the Ordinary carried out; this new examination of the facts will be done either by the Sacred Congregation itself, or by a commission especially established for this purpose.

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The present norms, defined in the plenary Congregation of this Sacred Congregation, were approved by the Sovereign Pontiff, Pope Paul VI, on February 24 1978.

At Rome, the Palace of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, February 27, 1978.

Francis, Cardinal Seper, Prefect, Fr. Jerome Hamer, O.P., Secretary.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,

November 1996

II. Regarding the circulation of texts of alleged private revelations, the Congregation states:

1. The Interpretation given by some individuals to a Decision approved by Paul VI on 14 October 1966 and promulgated on 15 November of that year, in virtue of which writings and messages resulting from alleged revelations could be freely circulated in the Church, is absolutely groundless. This decision actually referred to the "abolition of the Index of Forbidden Books" and determined that --- after the relevant censures were lifted --- the moral obligation still remained of not circulating or reading those writings which endanger faith and morals.
2. It should be recalled however that with regard to the circulation of texts of alleged private revelations, canon 623 #1 of the current Code remains in force: "the Pastors of the Church have the ... right to demand that writings to be published by the Christian faithful which touch upon faith or morals be submitted to their judgment".
3. Alleged supernatural revelations and writings concerning them are submitted in first instance to the judgment of the diocesan Bishop, and, in particular cases, to the judgment of the Episcopal Conference and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.