

# The Enigma of Medjugorje

by Laura Peterson and Stephen Schwartz  
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The road to Medjugorje begins in Mostar, a town well known for its ethnic divisions: Muslims live astride the Neretva river, which bisects the town, and are linked to Sarajevo and the rest of Bosnia; the Bosnian Croats stay further on the western side, rooted in Western Herzegovina and looking to their Croatian "motherland."

The road winds up through the Herzegovinan hills into an almost lunar landscape of bleached boulders and bedrock. Our driver, a young woman who returned to her hometown of Citluk, near Medjugorje, after spending the war in Canada, plans on staying.

"Leave Croatia? Never. Why?" she wonders, adjusting the rosaries hanging from her rear-view mirror, seemingly oblivious to the fact that she lives in Bosnia-Herzegovina, not in Croatia.

Medjugorje is but one of a cluster of once-impooverished villages that were home to the six teenage visionaries who believe they saw the Virgin Mary on an overlooking hillside beginning in 1981. It was Medjugorje that inherited the title of pilgrimage destination and its accompanying wealth. About two kilometers outside town, the pensions -- the Croatian spelling of pensione or bed-and-breakfasts -- begin to appear. These are new, nearly identical structures hung with neon signs advertising rooms, and are built on the savings of families accommodating the busloads of pilgrims that descend on the town daily.

Upon entering the town, symbols of Western affluence and commerce spring to the eye: a gas station with a mini-mart, discotheques with pool tables, sports-equipment shops with Nike emblems in the windows.

The main thoroughfare leads visitors past boutiques, jewelry shops and pizza joints before ending in front of St. James Cathedral, Medjugorje's principal house of worship. Near the cathedral, the souvenir shops reach critical mass: racks of plastic rosaries line the sidewalks, luring visitors in to finger everything from elaborate plaster Mary sculptures to Virgin refrigerator magnets and Medjugorje baseball caps.

But the shops also sell Croatian maps, guidebooks and gadgets, and prominently display the sahovnica, the checkerboard emblem of Croatia. Businesses deal in kuna, the Croatian currency, and will accept Deutsche marks or dollars before the convertible mark, the Bosnian currency introduced last year. Masses are held and leaflets printed in the "Croatian" language.

The latter practice cannot be criticized, for it reflects a pastoral decision exempt from political supervision. But the aggressive display of Croatian nationalist emblems and insistence on payment in kuna both express defiance of the post-1995 Bosnian peace agreement, the former in spirit, the second by letter. Bosnia-Herzegovina is supposed to possess unitary political symbols and a single currency.

**Foreign pilgrims innocently wander through the shops and restaurants, blind to the subtext of ethnic prejudice and nationalism bubbling around, which belie the message of love and tolerance they have traveled so far to hear.**

"It's the peace," said Amy, a 60-ish Canadian celebrating her 25th trip to Medjugorje, when asked what repeatedly drew her across the Atlantic. "There's nothing like this in the West. If I didn't have a family, I'd sell my home and move here. (The West) just doesn't have the strength of faith they have here."

Her feelings are apparently shared by the thousands, and even, allegedly, millions who come to the town each year, many with tour companies operating between the U.S. and heavily Catholic European countries such as Ireland and Italy. In St. James Cathedral, pilgrims wear plastic tags engraved with their names and tour companies as if at a convention.

St. James, built in 1981, has the same prefabricated, beige-plaster appearance of many of the pensions, like a housing subdevelopment hurriedly built to accommodate a sudden flood of immigrants. Masses are held six times a day in Croatian, English, Spanish, French, German, and Korean, and pilgrims generally try to hit as many as they can, many standing mutely and passively at services held in a tongue other than their own.

Though the faces in St. James are mostly Caucasian and female, there is a surprising mixture of classes and cultures: crisply turned-out Europeans stand alongside local peasant women with their heads covered by bright scarves, and next to middle-aged Midwesterners in baseball caps and sensible shoes. There is also a notable youth presence, with plenty of teenagers in backpacks and Levis who look as if they would be more comfortable cruising a shopping mall than sobbing as a priest places communion in their mouths.

But the main attraction in Medjugorje is Apparition Hill, the rocky ascent where the visionaries say they received their original messages from the Virgin. Pilgrims follow a path winding past vineyards, farmhouses and elderly women selling figs and handmade lace to Bijakovici, the village at the base of the hill which still consists of stone huts and winding cobblestone streets.

Picking out a path among the jagged stones on the ground, pilgrims climb the hill with rosaries wrapped around their clasped hands, murmuring repetitive Hail Marys and dropping to their knees for impromptu prayers, usually before a large cross made from steel girders near the base of the hill or one of the five bronze reliefs placed along the path depicting Mary's life. A Mass is held on the hill every Friday, and on June 25th thousands of pilgrims crowd up the hill to commemorate the anniversary of the visionaries' first apparition.

**But the questionable aspects of Medjugorje remain obvious. From a time very soon after the Medjugorje apparitions were first announced, Catholic authorities who examined and analyzed the phenomenon expressed serious reservations about the Medjugorje message. This caution conformed to traditional Catholic strictures aimed at protecting the church against the abuse of "personal revelations."**

**Why, some Church officials ask, has the alleged presence of the Queen of Peace in Western Herzegovina not led to less, rather than more conflict, between Catholics and their Orthodox and Muslim neighbors? "The lack of reconciliation and division in Herzegovina contraindicate the presence of the Queen of peace and the apparitions," says Father Ivo Sivric, a Franciscan scholar born in Medjugorje.**

**Sivric has advanced other pertinent questions about the apparitions and the message delivered to the visionaries. Why, he asks, is the message of the Queen of Peace at Medjugorje apocalyptic, menacing, and punitive? The Catholic church does not propagate "end-times" alarmism and does not claim that the millennium will bring the end of the world. Yet the Medjugorje messages are filled with cataclysmic warnings of immanent destruction.**

Preaching and printed matter emanating from Medjugorje also focus on the Virgin in a manner that seems to elevate her to a position of equality with God himself. Some literature for sale at the site promotes Medjugorje with little mention of the original teaching of the Church, the lives of Jesus and his apostles, the life of St. Francis, or other basic elements of Catholic civilization.

The Croatian-language Masses held in the cathedral include extensive supplemental prayers to the Virgin, that virtually constitute a separate and new liturgy. Croatian peasants from the area, perturbed at the obsessive fixation of all activities in Medjugorje on the Virgin, have taken to asking, "What happened to the Virgin's Son? Doesn't he have a place in Catholic worship?"

In addition, the messages allegedly delivered by the Virgin at Medjugorje have included propaganda against the late Bishop of Mostar, Monsignor Pavao Zanic, who, after much soul-searching, concluded that he could not approve of the apparitions. Would the authentic Queen of Peace express herself in such a hostile manner? The heretical agitation included personal reproaches delivered by the visionaries, peasant children of limited education, against the authority of secular priests in the Diocese of Mostar and Duvno. If it is absurd to imagine these rural youths developing credible opinions on internal church matters, it is even more ridiculous to imagine the Virgin interfering in them.

The Medjugorje phenomenon continues to develop against a background of schismatic rebellion on the part of a small faction of Franciscans in the remote Herzegovinan towns of Capljina, Siroki Brijeg, and Jablanica, all of them hotbeds of Croatian nationalism, all of them in open opposition to Church authority.

Attempts to replace the schismatic priests have been met by warnings that the new clerics will be beaten up if they come into the towns. Rebel churches are now closed to outsiders, with local residents mounting guard during "outlaw" masses. Ex-father Bozo Rados, one of the main rebels, held Mass in Capljina on February 28 and baptized two infants.

Two weeks later, Rados again heard Mass in Capljina, this time with reporters from the Croatian and Bosnian media barred from the church.

"Basing themselves on 'an old and positive Christian tradition,' inhabitants of Crnaca, near Siroki Brijeg, forcibly prevented journalists from entering the church," a newspaper from Split, Croatia, reported. The same paper printed a photograph of

the crowded church at Grude where prayers were heard without the presence of priests."

**Meanwhile, the rebels are circulating libels against the church hierarchy in Bosnia. Monsignor Ratko Peric, the successor to Zanic as bishop of Mostar, has been accused of financial and other crimes. Zanic himself was widely defamed as an alleged agent of the former Yugoslav secret police.**

Why has this "Herzegovinan heresy" emerged so forcefully now? Scholars describe a festering split, for generations, between the Franciscans in Herzegovina and those in central Bosnia. Other observers warn of a charismatic conspiracy operating against the Catholic church from within, promoting fears of an imminent apocalypse and indulging personal mysticism in a way more reminiscent of primitive Protestant sects than of Catholic civilization.

But canny local observers see another issue: Medjugorje as a financial resource, perhaps the greatest such "asset" in the world today. With thousands, if not millions of credulous foreigners flocking to the site, how can the local promoters of Medjugorje be expected to surrender their authority, in the name of an abstract religious truth, and in the interest of the authentic Virgin and her authentic message?

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