

## THE ARGUMENT THAT THE VISIONARIES AT MEDJUGORJE RESPONDED TO THE VISION SIMULTANEOUSLY INDICATING THAT THEY ARE SEEING SOMETHING

Has the Virgin Mary, under the title of Our Lady, Queen of Peace been appearing in Medjugorje in the former Yugoslavia since 1981? Six young people have reported these visions and have been subjected to tests. Let us present what Hector Avalos says on the subject.

From *Mary at Medjugorje: A Critical Inquiry* by Hector Avalos.

Is Group Simultaneity Always Evidence of an Objective Experience?

Aside from the supposed lack of pathology in the visionaries, Laurentin and Joyeux cite the simultaneity of their key movements during the supposed apparitions as evidence for the objectivity of their experiences. For example, they point to the convergence of their gaze as confirmed by video recording made face-on to the visionaries during the ecstasy and the simultaneous raising of their eyes and heads as the apparition disappears upwards.

I have studied Joyeux's report and have looked at the videotape of two separate events that show such alleged simultaneous behavior. My examination reveals nothing so extraordinary as to demand a supernatural explanation.

Joyeux and other writers often make statements that may mislead the reader into thinking that the whole group exhibits simultaneous behavior that, at most, occurs in only part of the group. For example, they report administering an electro-oculogram to Ivan and Marija on December 28, 1984. The movement of the eyeballs of both youngsters reportedly showed simultaneity to the second in the cessation of movement at the beginning of the ecstasy and again, simultaneity to the second in the return of movement at the end of the ecstasy. But in a *Paris Match* interview, Joyeux generalizes this result to the visionaries as a whole ("des voyants"). In his translation of this interview Father M. O'Carroll makes the generalization even more emphatic by saying that "all the visionaries" had such simultaneity.

Likewise, sometimes the ecstasy that is taken to be evidence of a real apparition experience is not as uniform as might first appear. For example, regarding the youngsters' supposed disconnection from the world during their ecstasy, Joyeux says that "disconnection is not total; rather it is partial and variable."

More important, the supposed vision experiences have a regular schedule and duration that may result, with or without sinister collusion, in simultaneous behavior. Laurentin and Joyeux themselves note the regularity of the behavior, for they divide the experiences into three phases: contemplation or conversation; prayer with the apparition; and contemplation or conversation.

Insofar as duration is concerned, Laurentin and Joyeux themselves note that "no apparition has lasted for more than one or two minutes since the end of 1983." This is important because they made their measurements of simultaneity in 1984, when the duration of each event was quite short and predictable. In fact, they report recording the precise duration of only five ecstasies, with each one lasting sixty-five to eighty-five seconds.

The schedule for the start of the ecstasy is certainly familiar to Laurentin and Joyeux, who themselves say: "Since the end of 1983, ecstasy begins before they have finished the first Our Father." They also note, following an earlier study of Dr. Lucia Capello, that: Their voices become audible at the same time, on the third word of the Our Father, the apparition having recited the first two. This phenomenon militates against the theory of a prior agreement and cannot be put down to natural causes. Even without a sinister conspiracy, the regular schedule noted by Laurentin and Joyeux clearly is sufficient to produce the type of simultaneity they find so unnatural. Indeed, beginning to pray audibly with the third word of the Our Father is as good a cue as beginning to pray audibly with the first word. It is, of course, poor science to represent as a verifiable fact the belief that the apparition recites the first two words.

Likewise, the convergence of the gaze is usually toward the front of the room when the visions take place within a church. Even Laurentin and Joyeux observe: "The visionaries' gaze converges on the same well-located spot." Again, gazing at a well-known location is something that may be learned and conditioned naturally, thus producing the simultaneity reported.

In one videotape recording the experience of visionaries Jacob and Marija, I observed that after assembling at the front of the room to begin the supposed encounter with Mary, Jacob began to gaze upward as he crossed himself. About one second later Marija did the same. Aside from the fact that the supposed apparition takes place at the same time in the schedule,

both children had peripheral vision and could observe each other gaze upward.

The kneeling, which even Joyeux admits is not perfectly synchronized, occurs at the end of the recitation of the Our Father, which in turn is usually recited after the initial crossing. Another videotape shows that the near simultaneous kneeling by five of the visionaries also occurs at the end of the initial Our Father. A visual cue to kneel is not even necessary here because the end of the audible prayer could be a sufficient cue. Such simultaneity in kneeling can even be achieved without visual cues in multiple locations if the worshippers are all listening to the recitation of the Our Father on a radio.

Although near-simultaneous behavior is considered an indication of an "objective" experience for Joyeux, non-simultaneous behavior does not appear to be evidence for a "subjective" experience. Laurentin and Joyeux report, "The visionaries had independent conversations and even had different conversations simultaneously at times." They use an unverifiable phenomenon to explain the variable conversations--namely the possible use of different channels of supernatural communication by the Virgin. However, each informant may be constructing his or her own imaginary dialogue. Furthermore, the type of coherence that they cite in the apparition reports can also derive from the common imagery and forms of speech that are stereotypical in the Marian subculture.

Joyeux wasted a unique opportunity to design experiments that would have provided more of a challenge to skeptics on the issue of simultaneity. Indeed, his experimental design was quite careless. For example, since even Joyeux repeatedly claims that normal vision or hearing is not necessary to perceive the apparitions, each of the visionaries could have been blindfolded before they assembled at the front of the room. Earphones that render any external sound inaudible could have been placed upon them. Yet, there were no reported attempts to cover their ears or eyes throughout an event.

Partitions could have been placed between the visionaries to exclude the possibility of cues from air disturbances produced by body movements (e.g., kneeling). A more rigorous experimenter might have spun all the visionaries around and pointed them in different directions within the partitions. If those visionaries truly had a special ability that was not based on normal hearing or seeing, then we would expect them to have all heard the apparition calling them from the same spot at the same time. We would expect that each of the children initially pointed in different directions would turn simultaneously toward the same direction even if blindfolded. If a recorded version of the Our Father were recited to each visionary at different times through the earphones, we would still expect them to ignore the voice on the earphones and kneel in synchrony with the supposed actions of the apparition.

Insofar as experimental design is concerned, the exaggerated claims of Joyeux are most apparent in the "screening test" he discusses. What Joyeux describes as a "screening test" and a "screen" actually refers to the brief placement of a postcard-size object in front of Marija and Ivanka. It does not block out peripheral vision. Note how Joyeux interprets the brief visual screening test: a screen which is held up does not block out the perception of the apparition. Again Joyeux assumes a priori the existence of the supernatural object that the youngsters claim to perceive. What Joyeux actually observed is that the gaze of two visionaries remained fixed when a postcard-size card was placed in front of them. Such a fixed gaze does not constitute proof for the existence of an object at the point in space where the visionaries are looking because one can observe that during prayer many worshippers in Christian and non-Christian religions gaze upward at what they believe to be heaven even when temple walls or other screening objects are interposed.

However, even if rigorous visual and auditory blocking procedures were used, they could not eliminate the possibility of a learned simultaneity after 1983 when the whole schedule became very regular and lasted one to two minutes. In sum, the simultaneity cited by Laurentin and Joyeux, even if genuine, is not extraordinary, and it does not constitute evidence for the objectivity of the experience at all, especially in light of poor experimental design.

