

## A PRIEST DEBUNKS MEDJUGORJE APPARITION CLAIMS

Fr. Hauke responds to criticism from Medjugorje supporters (updated)

Apparitions and Mystical Phenomena

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(UPDATE 2/25: See the end of this article for an update on Thomas Müller's remarks.)< Theologian Fr. Manfred Hauke's recent interview with the Tagespost Catholic newspaper has drawn a lot of attention since it was published on January 15.

The interview on the subject of Marian apparitions and the Medjugorje affair was picked up by news sites in Germany, Austria, the U.S., and Argentina. Recognizing the value of Fr. Hauke's contribution in moving the debate forward, Dutch- and Spanish-speaking sites translated all or part of the interview.

Outrage from offended followers of the Medjugorje visions was swift too: here in America, a Yale graduate student titled his rant "Theologian Manfred Hauke flunks Medjugorje 101". That text was copied to other websites and offered through the Google news service. Since then, the author seems to have felt some shame at his insult and changed the title of the commentary.

Christian Stelzer, a member of the "Oasis of Peace" community which illicitly operates in Medjugorje, countered the interview with a set of rather pat denials [in German] about some of Fr. Hauke's points. He pointed vigorously at the medical studies of the seers, as if they could produce a theological proof, but he did not even address the most critical argument against the messages: that some contain false doctrine.

From Germany, where the interview first appeared, a transitional deacon by the name of Thomas Müller attacked the professor on the news site kath.net, which promotes the alleged apparitions, accusing him of "spreading lies and half-truths" and of unscrupulously considering "any means correct". Müller writes:

It is frightening how lightly Prof. Hauke calls for the "love of truth", but spreads complete lies and half-truths himself in this interview, and silences known facts. Through it all, he sets about to mix with Medjugorje negative incidents which have nothing to do with it.

The high point, then, is the indirect conclusion that the fruitfulness of Medjugorje, which has been unique in the world in relation to conversions, vocations, the revival of the sacrament of penance, the rosary, and love for the Eucharist, comes from the work of the Devil and that the messages represent a spiritualistic phenomenon. This is an insult to God, since Hauke is thereby saying that the Devil, in order to deceive the Church, is more fruitful than the Holy Spirit.

[my translation –RC]

Clearly this is a man in high dudgeon, and not above putting words in other people's mouths.

(Here is a machine-generated translation of Müller's denunciation, for those who cannot read the original.)

But, as St. Paul teaches, all things work together for good, for those who love God. These overwrought and reckless offerings have done a service for the Church, by revealing the depth of illusion, of denial, even sometimes prelest, if I may say so, generated by the false mysticism of Medjugorje.

Professor Hauke, in turn, has replied to this criticism with a statement that backs up his assertions. In the face of outrage, he is calling for more objectivity and scholarly prudence. The German original of his response is on kath.net, and an English translation follows here:

An Appeal for Objectivity

A response by Prof. Manfred Hauke to Thomas Müller's critique of his interview on Medjugorje

For years there has been a contentious debate about the so-called "Marian apparitions" of the seers who originated from Medjugorje. The current official position of the Church is still the 1991 declaration of the Yugoslav Bishops Conference, which emphasizes: "non constat de supernaturalitate", i.e. it cannot be affirmed that these matters concern supernatural

apparitions or revelation. The local Bishop Ratko Perić goes beyond this affirmation and has emphasized his conviction, according to which it has been established that the pertinent phenomena are not of supernatural origin. Among Catholic Christians, it should be possible to discuss the questions connected with this matter objectively. My interview in the *Tagespost*, which has been propagated in various languages since then, was a contribution to this very necessary discussion. If it should happen that I have, in the process, repeated any false information, I am ready and willing to correct these errors. Thus far I do not see any reason for corrections.

In any case, I am shocked over the unobjective reactions of certain followers of the Medjugorje movement, who ascribe bad intentions and “lies” to me. To “lie” means to consciously state a falsehood. In my scholarly career of nearly thirty years now I have fought out many battles and have had to bear many criticisms, for example the polemics of a “woman priest” ordained somewhere on the Danube between Linz and Passau, in the magazine *Publik-Forum*. But even in these circles no one has ascribed a “lie” to me so far, or a presumption “that the end justifies the means”. Such reactions are character assassinations. Among these, sadly, is the contribution of Deacon Thomas Müller, which appeared in *kath.net* (18 Feb.). Deacon Müller, who has published a master’s thesis (“Diplom” in German) on Medjugorje, asserts that I have spread “complete lies and half-truths” in my interview and that I “set about” “to mix with Medjugorje negative incidents that have nothing to do with it.” He speaks of “untruths and distortions”. Because I, on the basis of the facts presented to me, consider the possibility that the visions come from the workings of the evil one, I am even accused of an “insult to God”. These accusations are very grave.

I have been to Medjugorje myself and, in the mid-’80s, believed in the authenticity of the “Marian apparitions” there. Because of a great number of indicators, which have increased with the passage of the years, I have reached the conviction that the visionary experiences of the seers in Medjugorje cannot be due to the working of God. This conviction has been shared in the meantime by numerous Christians who have followed a similar path. In the meantime there is an extensive international literature on the subject pointing in the same direction. This literature, which I was not able to thoroughly cite in my interview, has mostly appeared in the English and French languages. In contrast Müller’s thesis, with which I am acquainted, limits itself to the narrow horizon of titles then available in the German language. For example, it omits the important work of the Franciscan Father Ivo Sivrić, born in Medjugorje, who cites a great quantity of sources (over 200 pages), among which are tape-recording transcripts of the seers’ statements from the first days of the “apparitions” (*La face cachée de Medjugorje, Saint-François-du Lac (Canada), 1988*; in English: *The Hidden Side of Medjugorje, Saint-François-du Lac (Canada), 1989*). How can someone write a scholarly work on Medjugorje without reaching back to these critically edited sources? In the face of such facts, the accusation by a master’s-level theologian against a theology professor with a post-doctoral habilitation, that he was not working in a scholarly manner, leaves me astonished. I can document all my assertions sufficiently, but to demand a full scholarly apparatus from a newspaper interview is to confuse the literary genre of the newspaper with a journal article in which there is room for footnotes.

Before I go into the individual accusations, I would like to establish that Müller does not address the central problem points I mentioned at all. Among these are the seers’ statements preserved in the tape-recording transcripts. Prominently, on June 30, 1981, the last appearance of the “Gospa” was announced to be on July 3 (cf. Sivrić 1989, pp. 346ff., 381; see also the critical discussion in Donal A. Foley, *Understanding Medjugorje*, Nottingham, 2006, pp. 70-84; Joachim Bouflet, *Ces dix jours qui ont fait Medjugorje*, Tours, 2007, pp. 147-175). At the sixth “apparition”, on June 29, 1981, the “Gospa” announced the healing of four-year-old Daniel Setka, which, however, never happened in fact (cf. Ivan Zeljko, *Marienerscheinungen ...*, Hamburg, 2004, pp. 69, 155, 310; Bouflet, 2007, pp. 135-138). Müller also does not go into the theological problems of many “messages”, and just as little into the differences from Lourdes, Fatima, and Guadalupe, where obvious miracles, recognized by the Church, confirmed the Marian apparitions. If false prophecies and erroneous teachings can be found in the statements attributed to the “Gospa” by the visionaries, those messages cannot come from God. If in the messages just one “horse’s foot” is found, which can be traced back unequivocally to an external reality which is provoking the visions, and not to the seers’ subjectivity, then those errors stem from the evil one. It is, at basis, similar to a filename in a computer: a single error in typing the filename makes it impossible to access the file. Thomas Müller does not seem to have understood this problem. Furthermore, the fruits of grace connected with pilgrimages cannot in any case neutralize the “rat poison” that is contained in deceptive messages. The fruits of grace experienced in Medjugorje are certainly not to be ascribed to the Devil, but to the goodness of God, who hears the trusting prayers of human beings. These good fruits (next to which there are also negative effects in Medjugorje) cannot by themselves alone prove the supernatural origin of a visionary phenomenon.

Müller’s reference to the *sensus fidei* of the People of God does not bring any solution for judging Medjugorje, because Marian apparitions, according to the declaration of Pope Benedict XIV, do not constitute an object of the divine virtue of Faith. In regard to the position of Pope John Paul II, let it be recalled that he consciously avoided taking a public stand on the matter (cf. Foley, 2006, pp. 175ff.). The remarks mentioned in the work of Slawomir Oder are of a private nature and do not claim the authority of the Petrine office.

In seven points Müller claims to set right my “greatest untruths and distortions”.

(1) The first point addresses the so-called “little war” in Medjugorje, according to which there are said to have been 140

dead and 600 refugees during conflicts among three family clans in Medjugorje in 1991 and 1992. This information rests not only on press reports, but finds its confirmation in the study by Mart Bax, now emeritus professor of political anthropology at Amsterdam, *Medjugorje: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Rural Bosnia* (Anthropological Studies, Vol 16), Amsterdam, 1995 (cf. also his "Warlords, Priests and the Politics of Ethnic Cleansing: a Case-Study from Rural Bosnia", in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, 1/2000, pp. 16-36). For his studies, Mart Bax spent several weeks each year in Medjugorje for many years and counts, if I see things aright, as a serious scholar. By itself, that doesn't settle the correctness of every detail in his studies, but for me it seems hard to imagine that the great amount of information on the "little war" which he has presented should be mere invention. Müller's assertion is not correct: "In 2008, this untrue story was deleted from the Wikipedia article because, by the measures indicated, it lacks any veracity." Leaving aside the point that Wikipedia articles do not fulfill the requirements of strict scholarship, the German Wikipedia article before me states something different: "The credibility of this passage of his [Mart Bax's] book was called into question in August 2008 in the Croatian and German press, and the conjecture was expressed that this report was an invention or was based on false information."

([http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mart\\_Bax](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mart_Bax), retrieved on Feb. 18, 2010). Here Müller makes a "conjecture" by journalists into a historical fact. Besides that, it seems quite naïve to me to deduce the non-existence of a crime from an inquiry of village residents: with that kind of search for truth, one will be able to conclude, for many villages in Sicily, that there has never been a Mafia crime there. Müller says to the contrary, "All the contemporary witnesses testify unanimously that it [the 'little war'] never existed." Does Müller know "all the contemporary witnesses"? If Bax's historical study really can be disproved, I'm ready and willing to accept such a disproof. Besides, for a positive or negative evaluation of the Medjugorje phenomenon the existence of the "little war" is only an incidental factor.

(2) Müller accuses me of two "false statements" about Fr. Jozo Zovko (to be precise, there are three). 1. According to Müller, it is not true that Zovko was "forbidden any contact with Medjugorje by his superiors." Against this stands the fact of a whole row of decrees by the Bishop of Mostar. The last decree is from June 26, 2004. It contains a long list of preceding sanctions and emphasizes that Zovko may not conduct any pastoral activities in the Diocese of Mostar. In November 2009, the Provincialate of the Franciscans of Bosnia-Herzegovina ordered the transfer of Fr. Zovko to Austria. The entire proceeding can be read on the website of the diocese ([www.cbismo.com](http://www.cbismo.com)), and in Italian translation with numerous additional details on twelve pages of the website of the Medjugorje specialist Marco Corvaglia (<http://marcocorvaglia.blog.lastampa.it/mcor/la-ver.html>, cf. the published book Marco Corvaglia, *Medjugorje: è tutto falso*, Torino, 2007). 2. According to Müller, my reference to "grave moral accusations" against Zovko is "nothing but a evil, slanderous rumor." In the Bishop's document of June 26, 2004, it is stated: "You are not authorized to conduct priestly activity in any form in the territory of the dioceses of Mostar-Duvno and Trebinje-Mrkan; in particular, you do not have the faculty of hearing the confessions of the faithful. As diocesan bishop, I invite you once again, to bring your priestly status into order.... Upon your written request, I can show you here in Mostar the entire documentation at hand which is available in the bishop's office, even in connection with your moral life." [!] 3. Müller additionally writes: "Also, the claim that Fr. Jozo was a spiritual advisor to the seers for years is, on closer examination, not tenable", because he has not been in Medjugorje since 1981. Against this is the fact that the above-cited documents of the bishop refer, for example, to the pastoral activity of Zovko in the parish of Siroki Brijeg, which is located in the diocese of Mostar, about thirty kilometers from Medjugorje. Zovko maintained contact with the seers very well through the intervening years, for example, at the annual meetings in the Mazda Palace in Milan up to the year 2008. For this reason, Fr. Zovko is regularly presented in the Italian-speaking area as the "padre spirituale" (spiritual father) of the seers.

(3) In relation to Fr. Tomislav Vlasić, Müller also accuses me of "half-truths and slander". He states that Vlasić did not work in Medjugorje until 1988, but only until 1984. Against this I would point out that Vlasić only lived in Medjugorje from August 1981 to September 1984, but he stayed there often in the following years, until he transferred his residence to Italy. Evidence for this is available, among other places, at <http://marcocorvaglia.blog.lastampa.it/mcor/tomislav-vlasic-era-il-padre-spirituale-dei-veggenti-le-prove.html>. Anyway, Müller himself admits that Vlasić then set on "a strange and lamentable path." About the "mystical marriage" with Agnes Heupel, he says: "but to connect [it] with the Mother of God or the seer Marija Pavlović, is shameless and borders on character assassination, since the seer has repeatedly made clear in response to queries, that she had nothing to do with it." Against this I would point out: Marija Pavlović issued a declaration in the Croatian and Italian languages on July 11, 1988, according to which she retracted her statements of April 21, 1988. She said that her first statement did not correspond to the truth. "I never asked the holy Virgin for her blessing for the undertaking begun by Fr. Tomislav V. and Agnes Heupel. I personally did not have approval to issue any kind of written statement. But Fr. Tomislav V. suggested to me again and again and pressured me again and again, that I as a 'seer' should write the declaration that the world was waiting for." (E.M. Jones, *The Medjugorje Deception*, South Bend, 1988, p. 144.) In other words, the "seer" is publicly admitting to having lied in the name of the Mother of God.

(4) Additionally, Müller accuses me of "dishonest conflation", on the ground that the suspension of nine Franciscans in the Mostar diocese had nothing to do with Medjugorje. To the contrary, the disobedience toward the Bishop presents a continuation of the disobedience of two Franciscans from 1981 and 1982, who appealed to the repeated statements of the "Gospa" reported to them by Vicka, according to which it was not necessary to carry out the Bishop's directives (cf. the

(5) What Müller means with the accusation of “mixing up mysticism and charismaticism” is not clear to me. I did not treat the two realities (mystics and charismas) as identical.

(6) Müller asserts that I called for “psychological” investigation of the seers, in order to investigate their mental condition. These investigations have already taken place, he says. To the contrary, my interview expresses no doubts about the psychological health of the seers and also does not call for any corresponding investigation. The reference to psychological health relates to the question from the *Tagespost* about the criteria for Marian apparitions in general. Müller then mentions the medical investigations of the seers during ecstasies and gives the opinion: “These scientific results are flatly ignored by Hauke.” It is correct that my interview does not name the works he mentions, which are very well known to me (cf. my contribution on Medjugorje in *Sedes Sapientiae. Mariologisches Jahrbuch* 9, 1/2005, pp. 159-174, in particular 166ff.), but they do not suffice for the evaluation of the Medjugorje phenomenon. Those investigations can at best ascertain that the visions are dependent on an extra-mental factor: this factor can be the Mother of God, or also a deceptive spiritual being. For example, there are ecstasies and visions in spiritualism. Besides the extra-mental explanation, the relevant literature on the subject also includes indications of a psychogenic dimension of the ecstasies (cf. the discussion of the works of Joyeux et al., in Foley, *Understanding Medjugorje*, 145-155; Corvaglia, 2007).

(7) Lastly, Müller complains that I had ignored the miracles that have happened in Medjugorje, especially the healing in 1984 of the Italian woman Diana Basile, who suffered from multiple sclerosis. I must also reject this accusation. Dr. Mangiapan, director of the International Medical Bureau at Lourdes (1972-1990), expressed his view as follows: since multiple sclerosis can spontaneously disappear, it is very difficult to verify whether a medically inexplicable healing really has taken place (cf. Foley, *Understanding Medjugorje*, 169). Müller then gives the opinion that it is possible to speak of a “miracle of the sun” if people can look at the sun for a quarter-hour without problems. I am personally convinced of the miracle of the sun in Fatima, which has been proved by a critical historical investigation, and which even led a journalist of a masonic newspaper to write about the “miracle”. Before anyone describes the phenomena of light in Medjugorje as “supernatural”, one should first study the natural possibilities, which can be very extensive (cf. in this regard the references to literature in various languages in <http://marcocorvaglia.blog.lastampa.it/mcor/lho-visto-con-i-miei-occhi-quindi-e-falso-parte-1.html>).

Müller reproaches me for false statements and insufficient information. I think this accusation is a boomerang. The debate about Medjugorje is not served by slander and character assassination, but only by an objective discussion of all the pertinent elements in the light of the Catholic faith. I would truly wish that Deacon Thomas Müller, who is preparing for his priestly ordination in Cologne, avoid the mistakes which he wrongfully criticizes in my interview.

[This commentary appeared on <http://www.kath.net/detail.php?id=25688>, Feb. 20, 2010; a few typographical errors have been corrected; the translation has been reviewed and corrected by the author, but any remaining errors are solely my responsibility. Thanks to Prof. Hauke for his permission to publish the statement here. –RC]

UPDATE 2/25: In a constructive step, Deacon Thomas Müller has retracted the offensive expressions and apologized:

I can wholeheartedly support the wish for an objective discussion of the facts regarding the Medjugorje phenomenon and everything that pertains to it or is connected with it. For my part, in order to contribute to objectivity and decrease the tension of the heated atmosphere, I retract the expressions “insult to God” and “lie”, which I used rashly in my commentary on Prof. Hauke’s interview with the *Tagespost*, and ask for forgiveness.

Deacon Müller went on to say he did not intend to accuse Prof. Hauke of any intent to deceive, but only of repeating untruths from the writings of Mart Bax and I. Zeljko; and Müller recommended Stelzer’s commentary as a rebuttal.