

## SACRED CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

### NORMS REGARDING THE MANNER OF PROCEEDING IN THE DISCERNMENT OF PRESUMED APPARITIONS OR REVELATIONS

#### PRELIMINARY NOTE

##### Origin and character of these norms

During the annual Plenary Session in November 1974, the Fathers of this Sacred Congregation examined the problems relative to presumed apparitions and to the revelations often connected with them and reached the following conclusions:

1. Today, more than in the past, news of these apparitions is diffused rapidly among the faithful thanks to the means of information (mass media). Moreover, the ease of going from one place to another fosters frequent pilgrimages, so that Ecclesiastical Authority should discern quickly about the merits of such matters.

2. On the other hand, modern mentality and the requirements of critical scientific investigation render it more difficult, if not almost impossible, to achieve with the required speed the judgments that in the past concluded the investigation of such matters (constat de supernaturalitate, non constat de supernaturalitate) and that offered to the Ordinaries the possibility of authorizing or prohibiting public cult or other forms of devotion among the faithful.

For these reasons, in order that the devotion stirred among the faithful as a result of facts of this sort might manifest itself in full communion with the Church, and bear fruits by which the Church herself might later discern the true nature of the facts, the Fathers judged that in this matter the following procedure should be promoted.

When Ecclesiastical Authority is informed of a presumed apparition or revelation, it will be its responsibility:

a) first, to judge the fact according to positive and negative criteria (cf. infra, no. I);

b) then, if this examination results in a favorable conclusion, to permit some public manifestation of cult or of devotion, overseeing this with great prudence (equivalent to the formula, "for now, nothing stands in the way") (pro nunc nihil obstare).

c) finally, in light of time passed and of experience, with special regard to the fecundity of spiritual fruit generated from the new devotion, to express a judgment regarding the authenticity and supernatural character if the case so merits.

#### I. CRITERIA FOR JUDGING, AT LEAST WITH PROBABILITY, THE CHARACTER OF THE PRESUMED APPARITIONS OR REVELATIONS

##### A) Positive Criteria:

a) Moral certitude, or at least great probability of the existence of the fact, acquired by means of a serious investigation;

b) Particular circumstances relative to the existence and to the nature of the fact, that is to say:

1. Personal qualities of the subject or of the subjects (in particular, psychological equilibrium, honesty and rectitude of moral life, sincerity and habitual docility towards Ecclesiastical Authority, the capacity to return to a normal regimen of a life of faith, etc.);

2. As regards revelation: true theological and spiritual doctrine and immune from error;

3. Healthy devotion and abundant and constant spiritual fruit (for example, spirit of prayer, conversion, testimonies of charity, etc.).

##### B) Negative Criteria:

- a) Manifest error concerning the fact.
- b) Doctrinal errors attributed to God himself, or to the Blessed Virgin Mary, or to some saint in their manifestations, taking into account however the possibility that the subject might have added, even unconsciously, purely human elements or some error of the natural order to an authentic supernatural revelation (cf. Saint Ignatius, Exercises, no. 336).
- c) Evidence of a search for profit or gain strictly connected to the fact.
- d) Gravely immoral acts committed by the subject or his or her followers when the fact occurred or in connection with it.
- e) Psychological disorder or psychopathic tendencies in the subject, that with certainty influenced on the presumed supernatural fact, or psychosis, collective hysteria or other things of this kind.

It is to be noted that these criteria, be they positive or negative, are not peremptory but rather indicative, and they should be applied cumulatively or with some mutual convergence.

## II. INTERVENTION OF THE COMPETENT ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY

1. If, on the occasion of a presumed supernatural fact, there arises in a spontaneous way among the faithful a certain cult or some devotion, the competent Ecclesiastical Authority has the serious duty of looking into it without delay and of diligently watching over it.
2. If the faithful request it legitimately (that is, in communion with the Pastors, and not prompted by a sectarian spirit), the competent Ecclesiastical Authority can intervene to permit or promote some form of cult or devotion, if, after the application of the above criteria, nothing stands in the way. They must be careful that the faithful not interpret this practice as approval of the supernatural nature of the fact on the part of the Church (cf. Preliminary note c).
3. By reason of its doctrinal and pastoral task, the competent Authority can intervene *motu proprio* and indeed must do so in grave circumstances, for example in order to correct or prevent abuses in the exercise of cult and devotion, to condemn erroneous doctrine, to avoid the dangers of a false or unseemly mysticism, etc.
4. In doubtful cases that clearly do not put the good of the Church at risk, the competent Ecclesiastical Authority is to refrain from any judgment and from any direct action (because it can also happen that, after a certain period of time, the presumed supernatural fact falls into oblivion); it must not however cease from being vigilant by intervening if necessary, with promptness and prudence.

## III. AUTHORITIES COMPETENT TO INTERVENE

1. Above all, the duty of vigilance and intervention falls to the Ordinary of the place.
2. The regional or national Conference of Bishops can intervene:
  - a) If the Ordinary of the place, having done his part, turns to it to judge the matter with greater certainty;
  - b) If the matter pertains to the national or regional level; always, however, with the prior consent of the Ordinary of the place.
3. The Apostolic See can intervene if asked either by the Ordinary himself, by a qualified group of the faithful, or even directly by reason of the universal jurisdiction of the Supreme Pontiff (cf. *infra*, no. IV).

## IV. ON THE INTERVENTION OF THE SACRED CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

1. a) The intervention of the Sacred Congregation can be requested either by the Ordinary, after he has done his part, or by a qualified group of the faithful. In this second case, care must be taken that recourse to the Sacred Congregation not be motivated by suspect reasons (for example, in order to compel the Ordinary to modify his own legitimate decisions, to support some sectarian group, etc.).
  - b) It is up to the Sacred Congregation to intervene *motu proprio* in graver cases, especially if the matter affects the larger

part of the Church, always after having consulted the Ordinary and even, if the situation requires, the Conference of Bishops.

2. It is up to the Sacred Congregation to judge and approve the Ordinary's way of proceeding or, in so far as it be possible and fitting, to initiate a new examination of the matter, distinct from that undertaken by the Ordinary and carried out either by the Sacred Congregation itself or by a special Commission.

The Present Norms, deliberated in the Plenary Session of this Sacred Congregation, were approved by the Supreme Pontiff, Paul VI on 24 February 1978.

In Rome, from the palace of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 25 February 1978.

Francis Cardinal Šeper  
Prefect

Jérôme Hamer, O.P.  
Secretary

## APPENDIX

Father Edward Schillebeeckx OP wrote in his book *Mary, Mother of the Redemption*, that the Church only gives official permission to believe in apparitions and it is “merely an official confirmation of the fact that sufficient evidence has emerged from the investigation to enable us to be cautiously certain in our acceptance of the divine authenticity of the apparition on rational grounds...it is only a question of an authoritative opinion”.