

ARE MARIAN APPARITIONS REAL EVENTS?



Dear Father Kerper: While growing up in the 1950s, I used to hear a lot about Marian apparitions like Fatima, Lourdes and Guadalupe. Were they real events? If so, what was their purpose? And why does the Blessed Virgin appear in so many different ways? Please explain.

Are Marian apparitions real? Let's begin with settled Church teaching. God's free act of self-revelation definitely includes visions, speech and miracles. Sacred Scripture testifies to the reality of such things in both the Old and New Testaments. To deny the possibility of these methods of divine revelation is to deny the freedom and omnipotence of God.

However, this affirmation pertains only to "public revelation," namely the contents of sacred Scripture and the words and deeds of Christ. The Church teaches that "public revelation" ended with the death of the last apostle, the final authorized witness to Jesus "in the flesh." We believe that God has already revealed everything we need to know for our salvation.

While revelatory acts, such as miracles, can certainly occur, they lack the binding force and credibility of "public revelation." All Marian apparitions belong to "private revelation" because they happen to individuals or small groups, not to everyone. As to their reality, we need to clarify the meaning of "apparition."

If you see me with your own eyes in the

pulpit of St. Patrick Church in Nashua you are not experiencing an "apparition." Instead, your eyes, which detect physical objects, simply operate as they should: they reliably grasp the presence of my living body.

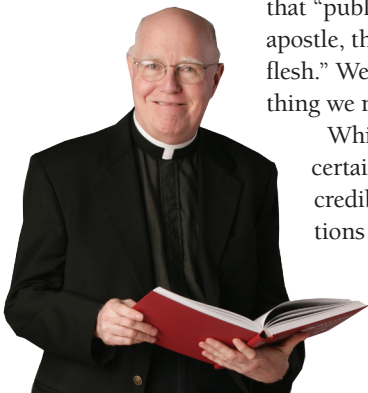
Apparitions differ from this ordinary "seeing" in that human eyes do not rest on an external physical object. Rather, genuine visions are almost always called "imaginative," which means that a person internally "sees" the Lord, the Blessed Mother or some other saint.

The fact that the apparition is internal and happens without the normal use of the eyes in no way disqualifies the vision as a real event. If we accept the "imaginative" nature of genuine apparitions, we can reasonably conclude that perhaps many people have had such experiences but never reported them. How, then, do famous apparitions differ from the much more common ones that remain hidden?

First, the Catholic Church makes judgments about apparitions, clearly dismissing most and approving a few. Approval, however, does not mean endorsement. If an apparition becomes well-known and its location becomes a place of pilgrimage, the Church will carefully investigate the situation. The Church will then determine whether natural and human causes sufficiently explain the event. If so, the vision is not considered miraculous.

If, however, the Church cannot find a natural explanation, the apparition will be considered "beyond explanation" and possibly supernatural.

However, even in those cases the Church never compels anyone to believe in their reality or to accept any



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specific proposals linked with them. These events, even when approved, remain “private revelations.”

We see the Church’s reluctance to mandate belief in any apparitions in the arrangement of the liturgical calendar. In the United States, only one apparition – Our Lady of Guadalupe – is celebrated as a mandatory feast. All the others, including Fatima and Lourdes, are “optional memorials,” which allow sincerely skeptical priests to skip the celebration.

Second, visionaries of genuine apparitions never proclaim “new revelations” that contradict sacred Scripture, impose new mandatory religious practices, make threats to unbelievers, or usurp the legitimate teaching authority of the pope and bishops. Indeed, such “counter-signs” prove that the visions are surely false.

If apparitions don’t reveal anything new, why do they even happen?

Think about punctuation marks and typographical tools like underlining, bold face type, and italics. Though we can usually grasp the meaning of a sentence without punctuation, a rare exclamation point or underlining sure can help!

Apparitions work in the same way. At various times, some elements of the Gospel need reinforcement. At Guadalupe, Mary conveyed compassionate concern for the poor and downtrodden. At Fatima, she called for repentance, atonement and deep prayer, especially through the rosary. At Lourdes, she stressed healing and the ability to bear suffering, both spiritual and physical.

This great variety of messages helps us to understand why the images of Mary linked with various apparitions differ so much. For example, the Virgin of Guadalupe does not resemble Our Lady of Fatima in clothing, skin tone or style of speech. Yet both are truly the same Virgin.

Also, the recipients of mystical Marian experiences have very different cultural, linguistic, historical and spiritual backgrounds. Moreover, visionaries, who obviously retain their humanity and its limitations, may mix truth and errors as they transmit “messages” from Our Lady.

Pope Francis, in *The Joy of the Gospel* highly praised Marian devotion, especially pilgrimages to shrines, many of which mark the sites of genuine apparitions.

The Holy Father wrote: “As a true mother, she walks at our side, she shares our struggles and she constantly surrounds us with God’s love. Through her many titles, often linked to her shrines, Mary shares the history of each people which has received the Gospel and she becomes a part of their historic identity.” (286)

As Catholics we must have a balanced appreciation of Marian visions, trusting that these mystical events can bring us hope, solace and encouragement. While we always affirm the unmatched reliability and completeness of “public revelation,” we should also treat genuine “private revelations,” especially the long-established Marian ones, with respect and even wonder. ■

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