

Local pilgrims describe signs and wonders of Medjugorje

By Teresa A. Parsons

On June 24, 1981, two teenaged girls claimed that the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to them on a rocky hillside outside a remote Yugoslavian village.

It sounded at first like just another crackpot news item — except that thousands of people have since traveled from all over the world to the village, known as Medjugorje, "the place between the mountains."

Last week, on the sixth anniversary of that first apparition, more than 200 people gathered on the other side of the world at St. Theodore's Church in Gates, to hear the story of what has drawn people to Medjugorje.

More than a dozen pilgrims from the Rochester area have traveled to Medjugorje at least once. Father Anthony Mugavero, an assistant at St. Theodore's who made his second visit this past Easter, was among the organizers of the informational presentation on Wednesday, June 24.

"Some people have felt we should do this to at least spread the word of what we've experienced," he explained.

As illustrated by a videotape shot in Medjugorje, the events of the past six years center around half-a-dozen teenagers — two boys and four girls. A woman, whom they describe as about 18 years old, dark-haired, dressed in a silvery tunic or robe, and wearing a veil and a crown of stars, has reportedly appeared to several of them each day since June, 1981.

The woman has reportedly told the children that she is the Blessed Mother, and has charged them with relaying an urgent message to the rest of the world, calling for reconciliation, conversion, peace, penance and fasting.

"I came because there are many good believers here," the woman is said to have told one of the children. "I want to be with you, to convert and reconcile everyone."

When asked why she chose the parish in Medjugorje, the woman in the apparition reportedly responded: "I want to protect you and guide you in love. And therefore, I ask for a total conversion of the parish, so that the pilgrims can find a fountain of conversion here."

Father Mugavero was studying in Italy two years ago when he first visited the Yugoslavian village, located on the Balkan peninsula about 100 miles southwest of Sarajevo.

Considering that he left Italy without a visa or any other provisions for the trip, Father Mugavero's arrival in Medjugorje was near-miraculous in itself.

Ironically, he never truly questioned the authenticity of the apparitions until after he witnessed one for the first time. Compared to the excitement of the trip and the anticipation that built each step of the way, he found the actual event anti-climactic.

"When you see them, these kids are just normal kids," he said. "They fell on their knees and prayed and then it was over. I couldn't get over how natural it was, and for the first time, a little doubt trickled into my heart."

But the following day, Father Mugavero said that all his doubts disappeared after he experienced what he believed was one of a number of supernatural signs reported in the vicinity of the village.

As he crossed a small piazza between the rectory and the church, he recalled passing a woman who was looking intently down at a small, dusty swirl of leaves and wind near her feet. A moment later, Father Mugavero said he turned to look again and saw a swirling column, perhaps 15 or 20 feet high, that stood directly in front of the woman.

Father Mugavero said that as he watched the column slowly moved toward him, paused directly in front of him for a moment, then moved on to pause in front of another man nearby.

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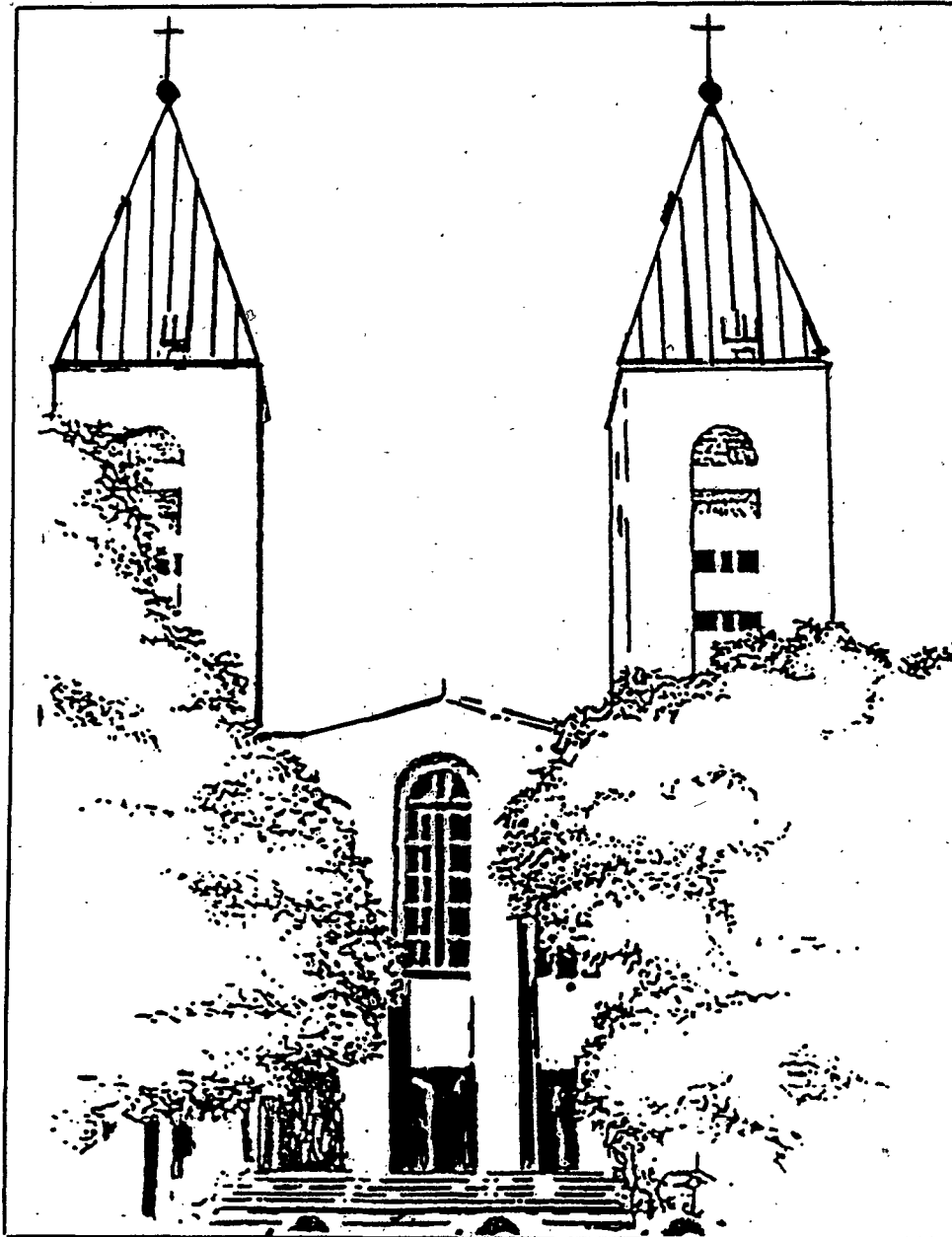
"I felt a presence there of something far greater than me, and far greater than anything I could understand — a spiritual power," he said. "Somehow that column of wind and leaves absorbed all my doubts."

The apparitions in Medjugorje began on the side of a hill known as Podbro, but have since moved to a small room inside the Church of St. James. Each day, the children arrive at the church about 5:30 p.m. They enter the room, which is always crowded with observers, and begin to pray together. Within moments, they usually fall to their knees — a sign that the apparition has begun.

Videotapes made during the apparitions show the children staring fixedly at a point on the wall. At times, their lips move soundlessly, and then a child will pause, as if to listen. Occasionally they smile or laugh. The apparition is believed to carry on individual conversations with each child at the same time. While the visions are in progress, flash bulbs go off in their faces, yet they don't blink.

Nowadays, the apparitions at Medjugorje usually last less than five minutes, but earlier, they occupied nearly an hour. The children have said that as each of them learns the last of 10 secrets, the apparitions will gradually end.

Some of the secrets are believed to relate to



The Marian apparitions, which were said to begin on a nearby hillside, moved several years ago to a small room in the Church of St. James in Medjugorje.

the children's futures and to the village of Medjugorje, while others relate to the entire world. The only secret made public to date is that before the apparitions cease, the Blessed Mother will leave a permanent sign on the hillside where she first appeared providing proof to non-believers of the validity of her message. Before the permanent sign appears, the children have been told to expect three warning signs to the world.

Prior to the apparitions, none of the youths was distinguished in any way that might indicate why they were chosen as "seers" or "visionaries," which is what they are now called. Today, however, the seers dedicate as much as six hours a day to prayer, and fast three times a week on bread and water. Two of the girls hope to enter religious orders, as does one of the boys.

The eldest, Marija Pavlovic, was 17 when the apparitions began. The youngest, Jakov Colo, was only 10. Many observers point to Colo as an indication of the apparitions' authenticity, since his age belies his willingness to spend two or three hours in church every day.

But the sincerity of each of the seers has been tested by interrogations, threats and harassment from government officials as well as neighbors, relatives and friends who refused at first to believe their story.

At one point, the pastor of St. James Church was arrested by government officials and charged with spreading false rumors about miraculous incidents in the parish. Government officials are said to have relented somewhat since Medjugorje became one of Yugoslavia's top tourist attractions.

Officials of the Roman Catholic Church have yet to issue a formal pronouncement on the validity of the apparitions. In March, 1984, the bishop of the local diocese appointed a 14-member commission to study the events at Medjugorje. The commission completed its study last year, but none of the results have been released.

Medjugorje is similar in many ways to earlier Marian apparitions. The Church has judged valid — Fatima, Lourdes, La Salette, Beauregard and Banneaux. All occurred within the past 150 years in remote, poverty-stricken or mountainous European villages, and all were greeted with skepticism. In each case, the Blessed Mother is said to have chosen children as the visionaries and entrusted them with mes-

sages that urged repentance and prayer for peace.

In the wake of the Blessed Mother's last apparition in the small Portuguese village of Fatima, onlookers reported that for a few moments they were able to stare directly at the sun as it spun in circles, shot off rays of multicolored light, and appeared to plummet toward the earth.

Antoinette Patamia of Gates and other visitors to Medjugorje have reported a similar phenomenon. Without damaging their eyes, they say that they gazed at the sun for long periods of time as it spun and radiated various colors.

"It looked like a host," Patamia said. "One time the sun was white with a golden rim all around it. Another time it was black, like an eclipse, with a gold rim."

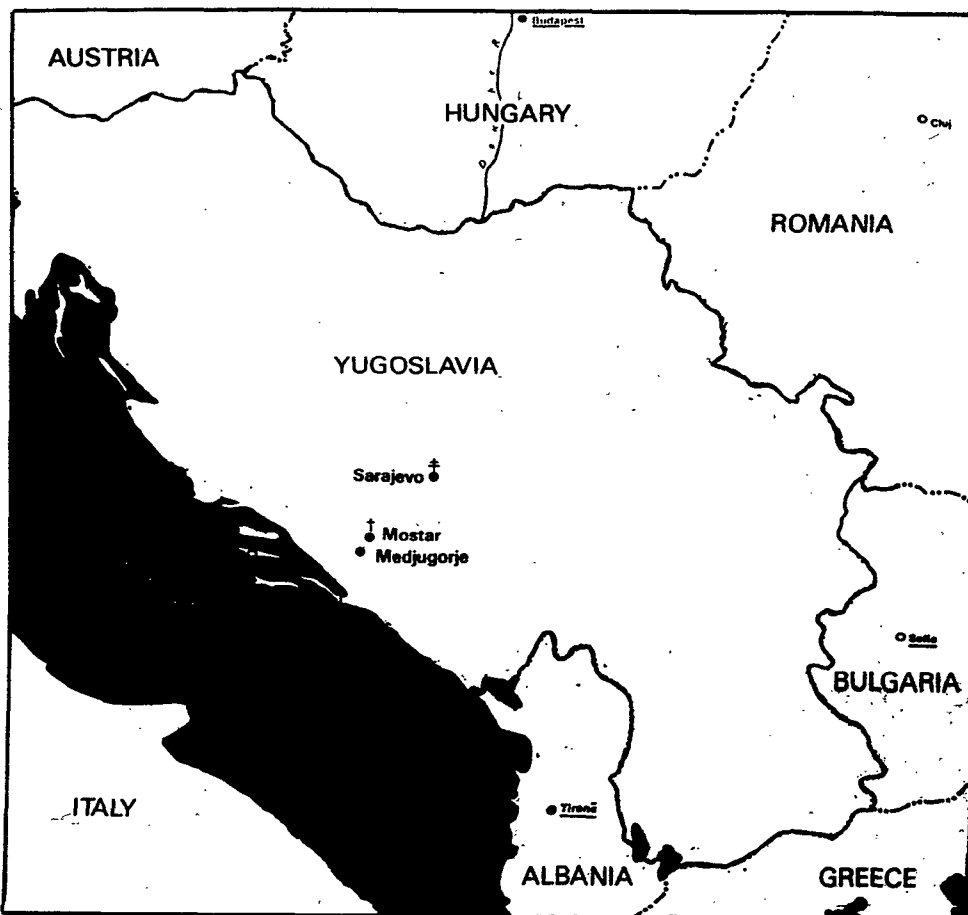
Patamia also told of returning from an evening prayer vigil on a hill known as Krizevac. At the top of the hill stands a huge concrete cross, erected by the villagers in 1933 to commemorate the 1,900th anniversary of Christ's death. After Patamia and the others had made their way carefully down the dark hillside with the aid of flashlights, she turned and saw the cross glowing as if it were lit from within. Later she learned that there was no electricity at the top of the hill.

Despite their dramatic stories of signs and wonders, pilgrims from St. Theodore's cited as most impressive the demeanor of the people of Medjugorje. Described as simple, hardworking farmers who raise sheep and grow grapes and tobacco, the village residents are said to have undergone a sweeping spiritual renewal during the period of the apparitions.

Now, after a full day's work, virtually every man, woman and child in Medjugorje congregates at the Church of St. James each evening at about 5:30 p.m. For the next two or three hours, they pray the rosary, celebrate Mass and Benediction, and pray some more.

Since the village lacks hotels and restaurants, the local people have also willingly opened their homes and shared their simple meals with unending waves of tourists.

"They live the message of the Blessed Mother by the way they treat one another," said Ada Ferrari, another parishioner from St. Theodore's who made the trip. "That's the biggest miracle of all."



The remote mountain village of Medjugorje has drawn thousands of visitors from all over the world since the Blessed Virgin Mary reportedly began appearing to local teenagers in 1981. Located approximately 100 miles southwest of Sarajevo, Medjugorje claims a population of about 400 families.