

Officials challenged by 'apparition' claims

By John Thavis

Vatican City (NC) — Mention the name "Pescara" these days at the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and you're likely to see some vigorous eye-rolling.

Pescara, an Italian city on the Adriatic Sea, recently became a worst-case scenario for those who study Marian apparitions. For Vatican officials, it illustrated why the Church is extremely cautious when dealing with such reports.

After claiming she had seen Mary about 500 times over recent months, a Pescara woman announced that on February 28 the sun would dance around the sky from noon to 1:30 p.m. Then, at midnight, Mary's message would be written brightly in the heavens.

Supported by a local priest and tourist officials, the event drew tens of thousands to the city, where seaside hotels were forced to reopen out of season. On February 28, some 100,000 people stared into the sky for hours, but nothing happened. The next day, it was announced that the local priest would withdraw for a period of "psychological rest."

"These things, when false, can damage the Church greatly," a Vatican official lamented two days later.

"In principle, the Church has to adopt a certain 'coolness' toward reports of apparitions," he explained. "Its attitude must be one of circumspection. It cannot be taken in by superficiality, nor can it become psychologically involved in the events."

Mary's appearance has been reported dozens of times in recent years and in various parts of the world, especially where devotion to her is traditional. Directly across the Adriatic Sea from Pescara, millions of international pilgrims have thronged the site of reported apparitions in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, since 1981.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the doctrinal congregation, has described the multiplication of "Marian apparitions" as a spiritual "sign of the times." For his congregation, it also adds up to more work.

One of the congregation's four departments, the disciplinary section, is charged with investigating apparition reports. According to Vatican and other Church sources in Rome, the procedures it follows are contained in a 1978 memo, which also gives guidelines for local bishops.

Congregation officials like to stress that the local bishop is the first and main authority in apparition cases. But before a judgment is issued, and in controversial cases like Medjugorje, the congregation also plays a crucial role.

When a bishop finally makes a decision, it

is in concert with the Vatican's doctrinal experts.

The Church's final judgment is represented by one of two key phrases: "constat de supernaturalitate" or "non constat de supernaturalitate." Either the events are of a supernatural nature or not; there is no explicit mention of Mary.

In making their decision, investigators generally do not rely on a single piece of evidence such as a sign or miracle, but weigh the answers to a wide variety of questions. The process can take years, especially in cases like Medjugorje, where the apparitions are said to still be occurring. A total of six apparitions in Fatima, Portugal, were "authenticated" only after 13 years of study.

For a positive judgment, the following elements are considered important:

- A high probability or moral certainty that the facts are consistent with what has been claimed.
- That the seer or seers are psychologically balanced; honest; respectful toward the Church and without serious moral weakness.
- That there be no errors of faith attributed to God, to Mary or to saints.
- That material or financial interests be absent as a motive in the reported apparitions.
- That there be no evidence of collective hysteria among people drawn to apparition sites.
- That the spiritual fruits of the reported apparitions be healthy ones.

These criteria are not considered as absolute rules; rather, they are supposed to indicate where the weight of evidence lies.

The congregation's memo emphasizes one other important point: that even in events of "supernatural" origin, human error can filter in. That's why, for example, Fatima was approved even though some specific interpretations of promises there proved to be wrong.

With Medjugorje, a new problem has been introduced for the congregation and the episcopal authorities: an explosion of evidence. There are two reasons. First, the supposed apparitions, to six different people, now number in the thousands. Second, the millions of pilgrims drawn there are becoming part of the case to be studied as witnesses, as cases of alleged healings and as petitioners.

"This represents a new difficulty for the Church," the Vatican official said. But he said the investigation would not be rushed, despite the site's mushrooming popularity and the local bishop's increasing but futile efforts to stop pilgrimages.

If the study takes years or decades, what are



A metal cross on Mount Krizevac marks the site of alleged Marian apparitions to young seers in the village of Medjugorje, Yugoslavia. The incidents at Medjugorje are among a rash of recent apparitions being investigated by the disciplinary section of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

local bishops to do in the meantime? The congregation guidelines say bishops have a responsibility to:

- Stay well-informed about the details of the events.
- Allow, if warranted, certain forms of devotion until a final judgment is made.
- Correct any abuses in devotional practices.
- Condemn any errors in doctrine.

The Church's attitude of prudence continues even after a final judgment is made. No one is asked to believe in approved apparitions. The main reason is that, for the Church, there is no real addition to the faith.

The Church teaches that public revelation ended with Jesus Christ and the New Testament. On the other hand, it sees in the "private revelations" of authentic apparitions a chance to throw light on the faith and, in the words of Cardinal Ratzinger, "demonstrate that revelation is not dead, that it is living and vital."

The risk is that false apparitions can hurt the Church and the faithful. For that reason, the Church will continue to pore carefully over the evidence in its files, including the thick one labeled "Medjugorje" and the thin one labeled "Pescara."

Amid widespread criticism, Congregation likely to revise proposed education norms

Vatican City (NC) — The Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education has indicated that its proposed norms for Catholic colleges and universities around the world may be revised considerably as a result of criticisms by bishops and Catholic educators.

A copy of the proposal, released to National Catholic News Service in early March, showed most of the sharpest criticism came from North America, whose Catholic colleges and universities make up more than half the worldwide total of such institutions.

Many bishops and educators from the United States and Canada opposed legal language of the norms. They argued that the direct hierarchical jurisdiction over academic institutions envisioned by the proposal would undermine the academic freedom and institutional autonomy which U.S. and Canadian Catholic colleges and universities need to maintain their credibility as educational institutions.

From Asia, especially India and Japan where Catholic universities provide a significant Catholic presence in overwhelmingly non-Christian cultures, the proposed norms were viewed as too Western.

The education congregation sent a first draft of its proposed norms to bishops and educators in 1985 and asked them for their reactions.

This March it also announced plans for a major meeting in 1989 of delegates from Catholic institutions of higher learning from

around the world — the first such Vatican-sponsored meeting since 1972. Preliminary plans for the meeting called for representatives of U.S. Catholic institutions to have 18 of 96 delegate slots allocated to university representatives.

Among the 500 comments on the proposed norms, as summarized by the education congregation, were calls for:

- A clearer distinction between norms for canonical institutions and non-canonical ones, which are not under direct control of Church authorities.
- Norms that are "primarily pastoral rather than juridical."
- Language that reflects "the autonomy of the various secular sciences" and promotes a spirit of dialogue between faith and science.
- Respect for academic freedom and research, even in cases of theological dissent from the magisterium or Church teaching authority. A number of critics of the proposed norms said such dissent is a risk that must be taken if Catholic universities are to enjoy respect as educational institutions in pluralistic societies.
- Recognition of the different conditions facing Catholic institutions in Third World countries and in nations where Catholics are a tiny minority.
- Recognition of the many differences in civil law under which Catholic institutions in different countries operate.

In treating many of the criticisms, the Vatican summary stated them in terms indicating that substantial changes may be made to meet the concerns expressed.

In treating the relationship between "legitimate freedom" and "authority and fidelity," for example, it said: "Though fidelity is necessary, the way in which this fidelity to the magisterium is expressed (and enforced) needs more careful and nuanced development."

It said many bishops who responded "seem sensitive to the delicate issue of the legitimate autonomy of the university and wish to exercise 'vigilance' while at the same time respecting autonomy."

Despite criticism, some bishops and educators in various parts of the world, including a minority within the United States, supported the proposed norms that would give Church authorities direct jurisdiction over Catholic colleges and universities.

"A few indicate a desire to have even more direct control" than the draft document proposed, the summary said.

On the other hand, it said, "responses from Asia, Latin America, North America and Northern Europe point out that some proposed norms would violate civil law in their countries."

It said the "tone and style" of the first draft of norms was criticized as too authoritarian, legalistic and "preoccupied with control."

Respondents urged a "more positive, more encouraging, more inspiring" document, it said.

On March 10, U.S. Jesuit Father James Sauve, an official of the education congregation, said a "crucial issue" in the proposed norms is the relationship to Church authorities of "a university that is truly Catholic and non-canonical in status."

"If a university is canonically established," he said, Church authorities have the right to intervene in internal affairs. In non-canonical universities, the Church would have the right to say, "to be Catholic you must do these things," but without the juridical right to intervene."

There is no general set of Vatican norms governing the operation and ecclesiastical relationship of Catholic colleges and universities around the world.

A major document viewed by many Catholic leaders of higher education as a guiding charter is "The Catholic University in the Modern World," which was produced by the Vatican-sponsored 1972 meeting of delegates from Catholic institutions around the world.

That document was approved with qualifications by the Congregation for Catholic Education in 1973. The congregation told presidents and directors of Catholic institutions that the document was "valid but needing improvement."