

Medjugorje messages echo worldwide

By John Thavis

Medjugorje, Yugoslavia (NC) — About a million people are expected to descend on the tiny central Yugoslavian village of Medjugorje in 1988, drawn by reports that the Virgin Mary is appearing daily to a group of young people.

Many of the pilgrims come in search of signs and miracles. Others come for physical healing, or with a special petition for Mary. Most depart more than satisfied with simpler results — a good confession, a mountainside Way of the Cross or a rediscovery of personal prayer.

A three-day visit to Medjugorje in mid-February — the low season for pilgrimages — found the place alive with an atmosphere of spiritual conversion. More than 200 visitors, many of them Americans, were there seeking renewal.

The visionaries still provide the essential link to the Marian story. But, while they were children when they first reported seeing apparitions in 1981, they have grown and are gradually turning to other things — marriage and a family, studies and possible religious vocations.

For these reasons, only one visionary, Marija Pavlovic, went through the apparitions ritual in the church February 15-17, and she left Yugoslavia for several months at the end of February.

A Franciscan priest predicted that Medjugorje would soon move into a "transitional period" that focuses more on Mary's lessons than her appearances.

The faith of the local people, who help pack the church daily for Mass and prayers, is frequently cited as the "real miracle" of Medjugorje. But the town also has been transformed in a different way: Virtually the entire village is a construction site, with dozens of houses being remodeled into mini-hotels. New restaurants, bars and even a duty-free shop have been constructed.

Along the lane filled with potholes that leads to St. James Church, tour buses must maneuver carefully between rows of souvenir kiosks. Tobacco and grape farming have given way to the religious tourist trade.

What do people make of these changes? The answer depends on who you ask.

"Medjugorje is not some little village. It's a spiritual reality, a spiritual dimension of salvation, a new end-of-the-millennium name for what God's doing," said U.S. Franciscan

Father Philip Pavich, who works at St. James Parish.

He said Mary is "touching the whole world" through the apparitions.

A tour operator in Dubrovnik, an Adriatic city through which many visitors pass on their way to Medjugorje, said, "Every day more people are going to Medjugorje, especially Americans. Personally, I don't believe, but you cannot deny there is something very attractive to people there."

But Bishop Pavao Zanic of Mostar-Duvno, the diocese that includes Medjugorje, was more harsh. "Every day I become more and more convinced that this is all a sham, a trick," he said.

The bishop's opposition to the pilgrimages is well known to most visitors. Visitors also know that the Vatican is cautious about the events and has requested a study into their supernatural authenticity.

However, visitors and the Franciscans who run the parish are convinced that Mary is present. Her message, repeated hundreds of times in slightly different wording, is consistent and simple, said Father Pavich.

"It's five key words: peace, faith in God, conversion, prayer and fasting," he said. "It's not sophisticated; it's meat and potatoes. The message is not new — what's new is that thousands of people are doing it."

The daily sessions of the visionaries in the church are still of central importance to visitors, although they now occur out of sight, in the choir balcony above the congregation. Reporters and visiting priests are sometimes allowed to witness the event.

Mary's frequent presence is one of the most striking claims of Medjugorje. If eventually confirmed as authentic, the apparitions would number into the thousands. At Lourdes and Fatima, by comparison, Mary was said to have appeared a total of 24 times.

This is one point that bothers Bishop Zanic, who dismisses the events, with their movable sites and schedules, as "Mary on demand." More recently, two younger girls in the parish began having "interior conversations" with Mary, and their messages, too, now receive widespread attention among Medjugorje followers.

For the pilgrims, inner conversion is the main thrust. Those in the 50- to 70-year-old range typically described the experience as a

return to the faith of their youth. Said Ethel Reynolds of Santa Ana, Calif.: "Mary's asking us to go back to the church of 35 years ago."

Younger pilgrims also expressed enthusiasm for devotional prayer and fasting.

Priests, on the other hand, seemed inspired by the sudden demands on their ministry. Confessionals are full, and the Communion lines seem endless.

Healing — spiritual and physical — is a main theme at Medjugorje. Priests and visionaries said they have witnessed miraculous cures. Some are under study by the new commission. But according to Bishop Zanic, similar claims during the first commission's work were not followed up by "a single piece of medical documentation" of healings.

Most intentions for healing are presented privately and quietly. Typical was a petition left by an American in the apparition room, which read: "Please make my daughter Hazel well again. Let her be able to walk and talk again."

There is little time for discussion in the Medjugorje "program." Nor is there much talk about applying Mary's message of faith and peace to specific social issues.

Asked about this, visitors quote Vicka's advice: "Don't talk about it, pray about it."

For most visitors, the talking will come after they return home. They said they planned to spread the Medjugorje message by speaking to individuals in their families, in their local churches and in their workplaces.



Pilgrims from all over the world visiting the village of Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, where Mary is said to appear in a choir balcony.

Trio from DeSales committed to s

By Lee Strong

If Diane Hauer had been reading this article two months ago, chances are she would have read this sentence backwards.

She had dyslexia, a learning disorder that causes its victims to read words, phrases, and sometimes sentences backwards.

Hauer says her condition disappeared last month during a visit to Medjugorje, Yugoslavia.

Along with 29 other teenagers from the Finger Lakes region, Hauer spent April 23 through May 2 in the remote village where the Blessed Mother has reportedly been appearing since 1981.

Auburn residents John and Marsha Bisgrove, the parents of five children, organized the trip for Auburn-area teenagers following the couple's own pilgrimage to the village in October, 1987.

As word of the upcoming trip spread, young people from all over the Finger Lakes region asked to go along — including Hauer and DeSales classmates Andy Chilbert and Eric Lewis.

The three returned as committed believers. They produced rosaries they'd taken to Medjugorje, pointing out that the links between the beads had changed in color from silver to gold.

The teenagers said that when they pray the rosary — which they now do daily — the gold color grows darker and shinier. Hauer also reported that nail holes in the figure on her crucifix turn red as she prays.

The trio also said they witnessed numerous signs and miracles at Medjugorje — many of which are regularly reported by other visitors to the village. They claimed that as they gazed at the sun, for example, it changed in appearance and color, throbbed, and at one point completely disappeared. On one occasion, they

saw the cross on Mount Krizevac giving off a pink light.

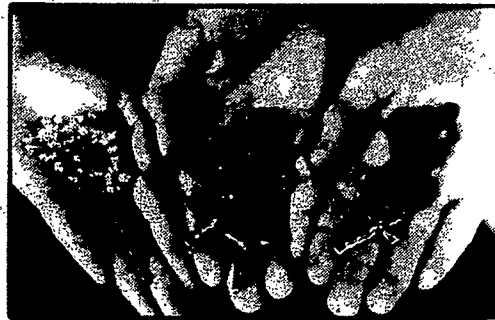
Despite the curiosity engendered by such "signs," Louis noted that "the miracles are not what's important. The important thing is to live out the message she gave us."

That message, Lewis added, is directed to the entire world, and consists of a call for peace, prayer, fasting, conversion and penance.

"The messages are now very urgent," Chilbert said. "If people don't convert now by the time of her appearances' end, it will be too late for them to be saved!"

None of the three DeSales students knew much about the reported Marian apparitions at Medjugorje before seeing a film on the subject in theology class earlier this year. The film, along with subsequent class discussions, encouraged them to want to see what was going on for themselves. So they talked to their parents, met with the Bisgroves, and arranged for sponsors to pay for the cost of the trip.

All of the three teenagers say their faith has grown stronger since their return. Before Medjugorje, Hauer said she didn't even know how to pray the rosary. Now she does so daily.



Three Geneva teens say the metal links in these rosaries turned gold at Medjugorje.



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