

Features

Reports of Soviet apparitions herald improbable summit

By Father Robert F. McNamara

Don't look now, but a great spiritual encounter is taking place in Russia.

For many years, the Blessed Virgin has promoted the conversion of the professedly atheistic Soviet state. Of late, General Secretary Mikhail S. Gorbachev has advocated a national "updating." However diverse the understanding of that term may be, Mary seems to approve of the trend, since she has reportedly been appearing within Soviet borders with a splendor unequalled by any previous Marian apparitions to humankind.

Details of the apparitions are scarce, yet the story deserves to be told, even if inadequately.

The appearances supposedly took place in Hruschiv, a village near Drohobych in the Lviv region of the western Ukraine. Village tradition relates that Mary had appeared there twice before in 1865 and in 1914. In fact, the church connected to the new apparitions had been built to honor the earlier Marian events. However, this church has been empty and unused since its confiscation by the Soviet government after 1946.

On Sunday, April 26, 1987 — just a year after the nuclear disaster at the Ukrainian town of Chernobyl — Marina Kizyn, an 11-year-old who lived next to the Hruschiv church, said she saw Mary and the Christ Child appear high up on the facade of the church building. She ran to tell her mother. Mrs. Kizyn gathered some friends, and they returned to the church with Marina. They, too, claimed to see the vision.

News of the appearance spread quickly across the nation, and visitors by the thousands began to pour into the village from all over the Soviet Union from as far away as Siberia. Many were Catholic Ukrainians, but the pilgrims also included Orthodox, Jews and Moslems, believers and non-believers. Of course, the militia also were there, along with officers of the KGB. Fortunately, the secret police did not interfere with the throngs, but merely kept order among them. Even communist newspapers and television reported on the events; and although the reports were critical, they nonetheless bore witness to what was happening.

I first read of the apparitions at Hruschiv in issue No. 280 of the bulletin of Keston College News Service, an English agency that provides reliable information on religion in communist lands. I obtained further details from the taped broadcast of an April, 1988, interview between Kevin Doran of Hornell radio station WLEA and Josyp Terelya, a recent Soviet exile currently living in Toronto, Canada.

At considerable personal risk — since he had just been discharged from a 12-year prison term — Terelya joined a pilgrimage to Hruschiv from May 12 to May 19, 1987. He claims that while there he saw the Mother of God six times.

Mary is said to have made her daily appearance at varying times. Observers reported that her arrival was heralded by an unearthly, iridescent, pulsating light that suffused the church building. Light also formed a fantastic aureole around the leaves and branches of the trees, and even around the fingernails of people nearby. Mary would emerge from this soft but radiant light, floating in the air above the church building. Apparently visible to all who were present, Mary was said to be no mere shadow or silhouette, but fully lifelike.

Individuals who witnessed the same apparition reported minor differences in Mary's appearance. Terelya reported that when he first beheld her, she was dressed in flaming red. Yet, a nun next to him at the same time said Mary was wearing white. The last time Terelya and the nun saw the Blessed Mother, however, both agreed that she was wearing monastic black.

The Blessed Mother is also said to have spoken to all those present at each apparition — a unique occurrence in the annals of Marian apparitions. Witnesses never saw her lips move, but said her message came forth from the "very center of her being."

Part of the message attributed to Mary is familiar. She urged her audience to forgive injuries, to have sorrow for their sins, and to do penance. She also asked that all regularly pray the rosary and teach it to their children. The rosary, she insisted, is the most effective weapon against Satan.

What was new and different about Mary's message were the special instructions she offered Ukrainian Catholics. Of all the Soviet people, she said, Ukrainians were most deeply faithful. Hence, their task was to work for the conversion of Russia. If Russia is not converted, Mary reportedly declared, there will be a third World War. She described, in vision-



A priest distributes Communion during a 1987 clandestine Mass reportedly celebrated in a forest in the Ukraine, where religious rights are severely restricted. NC News

ary terms, what that conflict implied: human bones piled high, cities aflame. If, on the other hand, Russia accepted Christ as its king, these calamities would not come to pass, she reportedly said.

Two extended religious observances in 1988 make this odd "summit" between Mary and the Soviet general secretary especially appropriate. The first is the Marian Year of Pope John Paul II, which runs from June 7, 1987, to August 15, 1988. The second is the millennium of the mass baptism of the "Kievan Rus" in A.D. 988.

As Pope John Paul II has pointed out, all Christians in the Soviet Union are entitled to rejoice on this great anniversary. Christians throughout the world also rejoice that the Soviet government is cooperating with the Russian Orthodox festivities being held in Muscovite Russia and Byelorussia.

Sadly, however, the ethnic descendants of those who were baptized in the Dnieper River 1,000 years ago at the behest of Grand Prince St. Volodymyr (Vladimir) are not permitted a public commemoration within their homeland. These are the Eastern-Rite Ukrainian Catholics of the original Russia, the "Kievan Rus." Welcomed into the Church in 988 when Christianity was as yet undivided and Moscow was a remote village, they reaffirmed their loyalty to the pope in 1595. Since then, they have suffered incredibly for that loyalty.

Moscow's most brutal act of genocide towards the Ukrainians took place in 1946. After the Kremlin had imprisoned the whole Ukrainian Catholic hierarchy and decimated its clergy, a pseudo-synod was staged at Lviv, during which the "Ukrainian Catholic Church" dutifully begged to be liquidated and to hand over its members and property to the Russian Orthodox Church. The Soviet government naturally welcomed this prearranged sellout. So did the Russian Orthodox hierarchy.

After 1946, therefore, the Ukrainian Church officially existed only in its diaspora outside of Russia. Actually, it was continuing to function at home, but underground. Only recently has the West learned something of the 40 years of this "catacomb" survival.

The story of Terelya outlines the struggle of the underground Church in the Ukraine. Although born in 1943 to a communist office holder, he was raised a convinced Catholic by his grandmother. At 14, he joined Catholic Action, and within five years, his activism had earned him the first of eight prison terms.

In 1976, Terelya became the head of the Central Committee for Ukrainian Catholics. Later, he organized the Helsinki Initiative Group for the Rights of Believers in Ukraine. He also served as editor of the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Ukraine*, an important underground publication that collects news on all Christian denominations in Eastern-bloc nations for publication in the West.

Once in Hruschiv, Terelya assumed a leadership role, preaching at the liturgy the pilgrims ventured to celebrate. Once, when he observed visitors leaving money behind, he warned, "The Mother of God is not asking for money, but for prayers." Then he knelt and began to pray the rosary. Thousands of others followed his lead — including a KGB officer whom Terelya recognized. Afterward, he asked the officer, "Do you also believe?" True to Marxist dialectic, the man replied,



Josyp Terelya addresses a secret forest gathering of the Ukrainian faithful on August 28, 1987, a month before his exile from the Soviet Union.

"If I had not knelt, the crowd would have cut me to pieces."

By the time Terelya was deprived of his Soviet citizenship in September, 1987, he had chalked up more than 23 years in a servitude that was never pleasant and sometimes cruel. But like the Scarlet Pimpernel, a hero of the French Revolutionary era, Terelya is strong in faith, courage and humor, and has a gift for improvising in adverse situations. He accepted his deportation as a new opportunity to further his cause.

Terelya first traveled to Rome for a private audience with Pope John Paul II. Then, along with his wife and three children, he moved to Toronto, from which he continues to promote the Ukrainian cause and spread word of the reported Hruschiv apparitions.

The Catholics of the Ukraine today number perhaps five million. They are served by 15 bishops secretly consecrated, and have more than 1,000 priests and religious. Though deprived of churches, they have continued their services in the woods or in other hidden places. Since they are forbidden to give formal religious education to their youth, they have been instructing them during "camping trips." Their many seminarians study theology in secret. Even the Soviet press acknowledges the stubborn persistence of religious belief among the Ukrainian Catholics, despite the heavy fines and other penalties levied on those caught practicing their faith.

Once installed in 1985 as head of the Soviet government, Mikhail Gorbachev, more bourgeois than proletarian in manner, proposed an updating of the Soviet political system. He summarized his aims as *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring).

The underground Catholics have wondered just how radical a reform the secretary intends, or could possibly accomplish. Deciding nonetheless to call his bluff, two of their secret bishops, 35 of their secret clergy, and 174 Ukrainian Catholic laymen presented to him on August 4, 1987, a declaration that they, at least, intended to emerge from the catacombs.

They therefore demanded that the Ukrainian Catholic churches be officially registered by the state, as required by Statute 52 of the Soviet constitution.

Since then, thousands of other Ukrainians have signed and submitted similar petitions. Thus far, none of the petitions has been formally acknowledged.

From a safe distance, Terelya crosses his fingers on Gorbachev. He will not take the general secretary seriously until he proclaims religious liberty. But the exiled Ukrainian does consider this millennial year a time of decision for the Soviet Union. He likewise connects the Marian Year with the era of which Mary spoke to Lucy of Fatima.

Meanwhile, great things are happening in Russia through the people of the old Kievan Rus. There have been remarkable conversions, even of whole villages. According to Terelya, 10,000 of the Catholic faithful are engaged in a national apostolate of prayer and love. They have had special success with Africans from Angola who had been sent to the Soviet Union by their government for graduate studies in Marxism.

The Hruschiv apparitions ceased after three weeks. Nevertheless, pilgrims continue to arrive in droves, despite government efforts to impede them. It remains for the Ukrainian Catholic Church authorities to study the reports of Marian appearances with a view to declaring whether they are credible. Surely there will be no shortage of witnesses, but there's the rub! How can a secret church conduct a public investigation? The present laws forbid it.

Accreditation can wait, however. Miracles, as Terelya reminds us, are for the unbelieving. The Ukrainian believers have already accepted Mary's commission. "Hruschiv," Terelya says, "has united them as one."

So then, will the new "summit" of the Mother of God and Gorbachev really become a prelude to the reconversion of Russia? *Credo quia impossibile*: I myself believe it will precisely because it is impossible.