

World & Nation

Bishop forms panel to study Lubbock 'messages'

By Cindy Wooden
 Washington (NC) — The "authenticity and significance" of messages allegedly given by the Virgin Mary to three members of a Lubbock, Texas, parish will be investigated by a panel of specialists, said Bishop Michael J. Sheehan of Lubbock.

One week after more than 12,000 people flocked to the parish expecting miracles on the feast of the Assumption, Bishop Sheehan told National Catholic News Service August 22 that he was establishing the panel with the help of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

None of the panel members had been named as of August 22, the bishop said.

Bishop Sheehan also said he has asked Monsignor Joseph W. James, pastor of St. John Neumann Parish, to discontinue promoting and printing copies of the alleged messages, which the three parishioners said they began receiving last March.

Bishop Sheehan said he had been in touch with the Vatican Embassy in Washington concerning the so-called "rosary messages" and the planned investigation.

The decision to form a special panel was based on an August 17 unanimous recommendation by the diocesan presbyteral council, a group of priest-consultors, Bishop Sheehan said.

The bishop said the investigating panel will

include a psychiatrist or psychologist, which he said is "standard practice;" a theologian specializing in Marian doctrine; "a wise, prudent, older pastoral person;" a canon lawyer; and "certainly a woman or several women."

He said the panel would be given "pertinent written materials" from the three parishioners, the pastor and others before convening in Lubbock to interview those involved.

During weekly Monday evening recitations of the rosary, 33-year-old Mary Constancio, Mike Slate, 38, and Theresa Werner, 33, have reported hearing messages from the Virgin Mary and, sometimes, from God. The messages urge prayer, fasting, penance and increased faith.

The weekly messages, some of which are in Spanish, are typed and copied for distribution. More than 50,000 copies of the messages were given out during the daylong August 15 celebration of the feast of the Assumption.

The major points Church investigations look for with such occurrences include: whether those involved are psychologically healthy, faithful to the Church and lead

moral lives; whether the messages are consistent with Church teaching; whether the messages are not financially motivated; whether people drawn to the site do not exhibit a collective hysteria; and whether the experience leads to positive changes in people's lives.

Even when those conditions exist and a pope declares that the phenomenon may have a supernatural basis, the faithful are not required to believe in them.

Bishop Sheehan, who had planned to celebrate the close of the Marian Year at St. John Neumann August 15, decided after the messages began that he would not attend because his presence could have been "misinterpreted as approval" of the messages.

"I did not want to look like I was promoting something that had not been carefully investigated," the bishop said.

In a July 25 statement, Bishop Sheehan said he was taking "a cautious attitude about the rosary messages" and "I neither encourage people to participate in the events nor do I discourage them."

At the same time he said the Church's tradition "is never to presume supernatural causes for things that can have natural explanations."

Bishop Sheehan said August 22 that he asked Monsignor James and members of St. John Neumann to postpone plans for the "Queen of Mercy Peace Project," an effort to spread word of reported Marian apparitions in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia.

"I want to discourage any further publicity, press and media coverage" of St. John Neumann's, Bishop Sheehan said. "They need to be a parish again."

Junta choosing candidate

Santiago, Chile (NC) — Chile's bishops have called for a consensus candidate for the upcoming national plebiscite. The four commanders-in-chief of Chile's armed forces and police are to meet August 30 to choose a candidate for president. In October, Chileans will vote "yes" or "no" to confirm that candidate.

The bishops asked the junta to choose a candidate who would "impartially preside" and whose candidacy would "inspire the respect and trust of the great majority." Most observers believe the candidate will be the 72-year-old current president, Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

If Pinochet were confirmed as president, he would be entitled to rule Chile until 1997, when he could seek another eight-year-term. If the majority voted against him Pinochet could remain in power up to one year.

Radio Catolica reopens

Managua, Nicaragua (NC) — The Nicaraguan government has authorized the reopening of Radio Catolica, which was closed July 11 in a government crack-down. The closing was precipitated by a news report of a demonstration conducted by factions that oppose the government. The station was scheduled to resume operations August 18, but its news broadcasts have been suspended indefinitely.

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