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Caution marks church's stand on apparitions

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

Don Dwello is convinced that the Blessed Virgin Mary is appearing daily at Medjugorje, Yugoslavia.

In fact, Dwello is so certain that he has returned to the site 21 times since his initial visit in 1987. And he has organized 26 trips to Medjugorje, accommodating more than 1,300 pilgrims.

The Waterloo native was convinced that the appearances are real not by the reported phenomena — healings, rosary links turning gold, the sun dancing, fire burning on the hillside above the town without causing damage — but by the people.

"I watch and continually watch the people," Dwello said. "Not only the visionaries, but the townspeople.

"When I saw the love and peace that was in their hearts," he continued, "they immediately made me feel at peace with myself and the people around me. I just knew it couldn't be anything but real."

The Catholic Church has yet to rule on the validity of apparitions at Medjugorje. But one would be hard pressed to dissuade the thousands of pilgrims of the belief that Mary has been appearing there since 1981.

It would be equally difficult to dissuade the thousands of people who have traveled to Bayside, Queens, since 1970, or the 12,000 people who went to St. John Neumann Parish in Lubbock, Texas, on August 15, 1988. Both cities are sites of reported communications from the Blessed Mother, but the church has ruled both instances unworthy of belief.

'I don't think it's unusual for God to seize what opportunities he can to convey grace and love to people who expend time and effort trying to get closer to the Blessed Mother or whatever is appearing.'

Father James Gill, SJ

In fact, of the hundreds of Marian apparitions — or manifestations of Jesus, the saints and angels — that have been reported since the apostolic era, the church has deemed fewer than 10 worthy of belief. Whether Medjugorje eventually joins Fatima and Lourdes and Guadalupe among the sites of accepted apparitions depends on a careful investigation by church authorities.

The church's official position on apparitions is that those it has deemed genuine are worthy of pious belief, but that no apparitions can be considered official teachings of the church. Thus a Catholic has no obligation to believe in post-apostolic apparitions in general.

According to Father Frederick Jelly, OP, dean of studies at Mt. St. Mary Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, the message promulgated through an alleged apparition is the one of the key elements determining whether the church will rule in favor of or against the apparition's validity.

"The message that comes from the apparition must be in conformity with the Gospel and the Church's teaching tradition," Father Jelly observed in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. The priest, who headed the committee investigating the reported Marian messages at Lubbock, added, "If the message includes something that goes against (Scripture or church teaching), certainly it would be suspect from the outset."

In addition, investigating panels attempt to determine if the visionaries are mentally stable, if any signs of deliberate deception are present, or if the visionaries



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and/or their associates have any financial motives for promoting the apparitions. The investigators also examine the effects the alleged apparition is having on people who visit the site or follow the messages promulgated there.

The examination of 1988's so-called "Rosary Messages" in Lubbock provides a case study of the workings of such church investigations.

The case began when three parishioners of St. John Neumann Parish reported that while praying the rosary on Monday nights, they received messages from Mary. Although they said they did not see her, the three parishioners said Mary told them to urge people to fast, pray, and go to confession.

On August 15, 1988, the Feast of the Assumption, 12,000 people visited the site of the supposed apparitions. A number of alleged "miracles" were reported, including healings, the sun spinning and pulsing, and rosaries changing color.

Father Jelly was appointed to head a committee to look into the reports.

The committee reported that much spiritual good had come of the Aug. 15 Mass, but ruled that the "miracles" could be explained naturally. The committee determined that the three visionaries were sincere and that there was no evidence of deception or financial gain on their part.

But after examining the content of the messages, the

committee wrote in its report that some of them "portray an angry God in language that is strident, affected, and makes one question the claim to divine inspiration."

Father James Gill, SJ, a psychiatrist and a member of the committee, noted that portrayals of an angry, vindictive God go against the teachings of the church.

"This runs counter to the church's teaching that God is infinite love, a divine parent who cherishes his children unconditionally," Father Gill told the *Catholic Courier*. He said that when reported messages from God contain anger and hostility, "You can't help but suspect that this is the projection of the thinking of a person with a paranoid personality."

After receiving the committee's report — which found that the claims were not supportable — Bishop Michael Sheehan of Lubbock told the parish's pastor, Monsignor Joseph James, "to get the parish back to normal," according to the diocese's chancellor, Sister Elena Gonzalez, RSM. The manifestations stopped, she reported.

Similarly, church investigators discredited claims of Bayside's Veronica Lueken, who alleged — among other revelations — that Mary told her Pope Paul VI had been kidnapped and that an impostor took his place during the final years of his pontificate.

The incidents at Bayside and Lubbock have fed charges

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