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Visions

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For example, for decades the 16th century nun Magdalena of the Cross fooled countless people, including bishops and clergy, into thinking she had the stigmata of Christ, Father Groeschel wrote. She also levitated, experienced ecstasies, and prophesied, he wrote, noting people saw these abilities as signs of her sanctity.

But, the priest wrote, she confessed on her deathbed that she had sold her soul to the devil in exchange for her seemingly divine gifts, and an exorcism was performed on her.

"Believers, especially Christian believers, are taught to think the best of others and not to judge," Father Groeschel wrote. "It makes us vulnerable to deceivers, especially those who use direct conscious deception. If nothing else, this realization should make it a bit more understandable when ecclesiastical authorities are slow and cautious about embracing a claim of private revelation."

Church criteria

While Catholics are called to believe in public revelation — teachings that have been revealed to the whole church — the church emphasizes that Catholics are never obligated to believe private revelation, even those church authorities have approved.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church addresses this in section 67:

"Throughout the ages, there have been so-called 'private' revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ's definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history. Guided by the magisterium of the church, the *sensus fidelium* (consensus of the faithful) knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church.

"Christian faith cannot accept 'revelations' that claim to surpass or correct the Revelation of which Christ is the fulfillment, as is the case in certain non-Christian religions and also in certain recent sects which base themselves on such 'revelations'."

Mgr. William H. Shannon, professor emeritus of Rochester's Nazareth College, echoed the catechism's stance on private revelations. Private revelations can never, ever contradict the accepted faith of the church, he said.

"If there's anything contrary to public church teaching, immediately, that leads one to believe it's not of supernatural ori-

gin," he said.

In 1978, the Vatican issued confidential guidelines — which have since become public — to instruct bishops on the handling of private revelations. The guidelines stress that the local bishop is the first and main authority in apparition cases, but that — in the most difficult cases — the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith may become involved as well.

The church's final judgment is on whether events are of a supernatural nature or not. The Vatican guidelines provide six criteria for making such a judgment:

1. The facts in the case are free of error.
2. The person(s) receiving the messages is/are psychologically balanced, honest, moral, sincere and respectful of church authority.
3. Doctrinal errors are not attributed to God, Mary or to a saint.
4. Theological and spiritual doctrines presented are free of error.
5. Moneymaking is not a motive in the events.
6. Healthy religious devotion and spiritual fruits result, with no evidence of collective hysteria.

Trial and tribulation

In late June, the Diocese of Rochester announced the outcome of its own investigation into certain private revelations. Bishop Matthew H. Clark declared that John E. Leary Jr. — a Catholic layman who has claimed to receive interior visions of Jesus, Mary and some saints — had misjudged ordinary mental prayer for supernatural communication.

Leary, a Greece resident, gives talks on the messages he has claimed to receive. He also has written about them in his 13 volumes of *Prepare for the Great Tribulation and the Coming Era of Peace*. The books have sold in the tens of thousands and have appeared on Catholic bestseller lists. Each is a diary of the messages — known as "locutions" — Leary claims to have received daily since 1993.

The diocesan commission appointed by Bishop Clark to investigate Leary's writings concluded that he was a faithful Roman Catholic with no intentions of defrauding the public. However, the commission found that Leary's messages contained numerous errors. Primary among them were "millenarianism," a literal interpretation of the Book of Revela-



tion, and "anti-papalism," because Leary's messages called Catholics to reject Pope John Paul II's successor as an "anti-pope."

The bishop did not forbid Leary to publish his messages. But he did insist that Leary preface any new books or reprinted volumes with a statement that the diocese found his writings to be of human origin, and to contain error.

Father Joseph A. Hart, moderator of the diocesan pastoral center and vicar general, said Leary's books illustrate what happens when

people confuse their own beliefs with those they believe to be held by heavenly emissaries appearing or speaking to them.

For example, Father Hart said, Leary claimed in one of his books that Christ was unhappy with the post-Vatican II practice of moving eucharistic tabernacles from behind main altars to side areas and chapels. However, that would mean Christ was unhappy with the church for most of its history, Father Hart said, since the church only began placing tabernacles behind the main altar a few hundred years ago.

"This seemed to be much more Mr. Leary than the Lord Jesus," Father Hart said.

In a phone interview, Leary told the *Catholic Courier* that he will abide by the diocese's decision about his writings. He declined to comment on whether he agreed with the commission's findings that his locutions were the product of mental prayer — as opposed to messages from supernatural sources.

"The fact is, the church had to take a stand," Leary said. "That happens with many visionaries ... The church is doing its job."

Leary noted he is speaking at a day-long conference on "God The Father" slated for Saturday, Aug. 7, at Nazareth College. He pointed out that he would no longer include any mention of an "anti-pope" or millenarianism in his talks.

Mixed messages

Even private revelations that are seemingly divine — or that receive church approval — should be approached with caution, according to Father Groeschel.

In *A Still Small Voice*, the priest discussed the cases of Ss. Catherine of Siena and Joan of Arc. Both women reportedly had visions that contained error, or that they interpreted erroneously.

He also pointed out that St. Catherine

Laboure — who said Mary had given her a model in 1830 for what became the Miraculous Medal that many Catholics wear today — also made several wrong predictions about the future. St. Catherine later admitted her errors, the priest wrote, adding that few would-be visionaries would be willing to do so.

"No private revelation comes directly from God, and, therefore, none can be assumed to be inerrantly true," he wrote. "... For centuries it has been clear papal teaching that even a canonized saint who has reported a private revelation which has been approved by the Church for acceptance by the faithful may have introduced some personal element that is subject to error or distortion."

Many church leaders have also cautioned against the desire for private revelations. For example, in the spiritual classic *Interior Castle*, St. Teresa of Avila — herself a visionary — counseled that no Christian should ever seek visions. Such a desire shows a lack of humility, leaves one open to Satanic influences and could lead a self-appointed visionary to convince "himself that he is seeing or hearing what he desires," she wrote.

Good fruit

Despite the immense caution with which private revelations should be treated, they can bear great spiritual fruit if nothing in them is contradictory to the faith, according to Father Albert Shamon, *Catholic Courier* columnist and administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel in Fleming.

Father Shamon publishes a bimonthly newsletter, "Via Pacem" ("Way of Peace"), which is devoted to the messages Mary is said to have given to visionaries in Medjugorje. The church has not approved Medjugorje for devotion and, indeed, forbids priests and bishops to lead pilgrimages to the site in the former Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, Father Shamon said, Mary's alleged apparitions there inspired many Catholics to return to such practices as fasting, penance and saying the rosary.

"Our Lady at Medjugorje is leaving messages that are in harmony with the church's magisterium," he said. "I think it would be rash and almost prideful (to reject them) on the grounds that the church has not approved them yet. The church hasn't condemned them either."

However, Father Shamon stressed that Catholics should always abide by what church authorities say regarding such revelations. He added that Catholics should also remember that in the sacraments and church teachings they have ready access to spiritual tools for growth that don't depend on private revelations.

"Everything that we need to advance in sanctity and salvation we have in the ordinary magisterium of the church," he said.

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