

Why Apparitions?

By Father M. A. Ricaud, O.P.

Catholic Truth Society of Ireland No.dd0651a (1951)

The growing incidence of apparitions in recent times [Note: 1951,] has given rise to conflicting currents of thought. While confirming the critics in their ridicule and unbelief, these apparitions have put the Catholic conscience to the test. Slow to court derision at the hands of the critics, some Catholics are disturbed and vaguely concerned; others, more credulous and quick to enthuse, tend to create the impression that their own favourite vision has opened up the sources of Revelation, or at least modified them.

In so vexed a matter, perhaps it may not be untimely to devote a pamphlet to expounding the doctrine of the Church, in the hope that it may help to define more clearly the position of thoughtful and orthodox minds.

I. WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES.

Our first concern must be to search the Scriptures. That will fix our minds upon the mind of God, on which they should depend for guidance.

The Bible is the story of the intervention of God in human affairs, and of its acceptance by man. It is not surprising that we should find repeated on almost every page such phrases as “And God said...” or “The word of God was made unto...” But in what way was God said to “speak?” Expressions such as these, might be interpreted, simply as some form of interior enlightenment.

The word “appear” which is also met with very frequently implies a good deal more. We are told how God appeared many times; to Abraham, when he beheld “three men” in the Vale of Mambre (Gen. chapter 18); to Jacob, at the ford of Jabbok, where, he wrestled mysteriously with the angel (Gen. 32:23-33) (some Bedouin still call the place, the ford of Jacob); to Moses, in the, vision of the burning-bush on the mount of Horeb or Sinai. (Exod. 3:2). The prophets also bear willing witness to the inaugural vision which launched them on their mission. Isaiah says, for example, “In the year that King Ozias (Uzziah) died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and elevated” (Is 6:1).

By way of contrast, when God would seem to have abandoned His people, we are told, “The word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no manifest vision” (1 Sam. 3:1). Jeremiah sums up a period of calamity, saying, “Her prophets have found no vision from the Lord” (Lam. 2:9).

These references present us with the essential factor in the phenomenon of apparitions in so far as we are discussing it now. It may be called God’s privileged way of making known to men what He is, what He will do, or what He would have men do. Our notion of it becomes still clearer when we remember that all the apparitions of the Old Testament were granted by way of preparation for the appearing of the Son of God in our flesh.

NEW TESTAMENT APPARITIONS.

In the New Testament, apparitions were not lacking. Briefly, they began with the wonderful apparition which announced the Incarnation, and ended with the scene of the Ascension, which was also an apparition.

Linked with those two were many other apparitions. An angel appeared to Zachary by way of preparation for the Annunciation. An angel came to Joseph on three different occasions, to instruct him in the mystery of the Virgin-birth, to command the flight into Egypt, and the return again to Nazareth. The shepherds of Bethlehem saw the angel on the first Christmas night. Angels ministered to Jesus in the desert after His temptation by Satan, himself an angel, though a fallen one! An angel comforted the Saviour in Gethsemani: another rolled away the stone from the tomb, and told the women of the Resurrection.

At His Baptism, and Transfiguration, apparitions accompanied by a voice from heaven concurred to confirm the glorious realities that were thereby revealed.

Here again the fact of apparitions is presented to us as a vital part of the spreading of the good news of the Gospel, which is none other than the “appearing of the goodness and kindness of God our Saviour” (Tit. 3:4).

APPARITIONS IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH.

The Church began with the appearance of tongues of fire. Apparitions are frequently mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. There we have described for us how an angel released the imprisoned Peter; how another angel appeared to him at Joppe (Jaffa). We can all recall Saul’s experience on his way to Damascus, and that of the Centurion Cornelius at Caesarea. One night at Troas, a Macedonian appeared to Paul to urge him to come and preach the gospel in his country. At Corinth, Our Saviour showed Himself to the same Apostle to strengthen him and encourage him to preach in that city.

These are but a few incidents gleaned from the Sacred Text. Since these early days volumes would be required to tell of all the apparitions which took place down the nineteen centuries and more of the Church’s existence, even if we rigorously exclude all but the absolutely genuine.

In other words, it may be said that outward manifestations of persons or things that are normally invisible occupy quite a prominent place in the pages of history which provide accounts of the intervention of God amongst His people, firstly in favour of Israel, and lastly in favour of His Church.

When Peter wished to add weight beyond all question to his testimony, he instinctively appealed to the Transfiguration; “For we have not by following artificial fables made known to you the power and the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. But we were witnesses of His greatness... And this voice (of His Father) we heard brought down from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mount” (2 Pet. 1:16-18).

The word “apparition” is, furthermore, used by Saints Peter, Paul and John to describe the mystery yet to come of the “Parousia,” (the final coming of Christ): “The second time He shall appear to them that expect him unto salvation” (Heb. 9:28; see also: Col. 3:4; 1 Pet. 5:4; 1 John 2:28).

Finally, we must include the Apocalypse, which from the beginning to end is a revelation in the form of visions.

So much for the facts.

II. DIFFERENT ATTITUDES.

The various attitudes of mind evoked by apparitions may be divided as follows:

Rationalist Scepticism. — This first attitude consists in a complete denial. This mentality is found in all who refuse to accept in principle the possibility of the supernatural in general, and of miracles in particular. Since the phenomenon of apparitions belongs to this category, it is not worth a moment's consideration, except in so far as a natural explanation, devoid of anything mysterious, may be immediately forthcoming, or at least to be expected at some future time.

Argument with a blind man about colours would be less futile than discussion on such matters with minds so tempered.

Insatiable Love of Novelty. — Here we have to deal with those who rush into print with the latest news of each fresh apparition.

Undoubtedly, many, led in part by curiosity, are fascinated by these phenomena. Such attitudes are not always healthy. With no small risk to themselves, they devour the accounts of the latest prodigies, or rush off to where they are said to have taken place with the eagerness of unreasoning children, without sufficient guarantee of their authenticity, or, in the case where the prodigy happens to be genuine, with dispositions which betray their want of faith.

Long ago Saint Paul laid down that miracles, as for instance the gift of tongues, were signs not for the believer, but for the unbeliever. What is of concern to every Christian is that the Word was made flesh. He must not fritter away his life, reaching out tactlessly for prodigies.

The Christian Attitude — In reply to the sceptics the Christian professes his faith in God. Whoever accepts God must necessarily admit the possibility of miracles. Being the Creator of all things, God cannot be limited in His action by anything that He has made, since everything is absolutely dependent on Him. Holy Scripture continually stresses this fundamental truth. Whilst the powers of man are limited and circumscribed, God's power knows of no such limitations.

"Nothing is impossible to God," declared the angel to Mary to reassure her regarding the truth of his announcement.

At the same time, God's government of all things is a measured power — measured, we dare say, by the design which He Himself established, which we call the nature of things. It is important to insist on this point, so as not to give the impression to freethinkers that we regard a miracle as some kind of freak on God's part, which does not fit into His ordered plan. Just as the laws of the Universe take their root in the nature of things, and find in each nature their specific purpose, so, also, God's interference with these laws is inspired by His Divine Wisdom, and can only be explained by fresh motives.

We need then have no fear in forming for ourselves some idea of what God has in mind in planning apparitions.

That import is rooted in our human nature, which is, and ever remains, both corporal and spiritual. The normal course of a nature such as this requires that what is grasped by the intelligence passes through the mechanism of the senses. It is to be expected that God would conform His salutary action to this inherent requirement. Just as while on earth He used material things to explain His divine message (e.g. "The kingdom of God is like to a grain of mustard seed") so does He avail of apparitions to announce and bear witness to His accredited messengers.

At the root of apparitions, then, we find this fundamental reason God, in speaking to men, uses the language of men.

Unfortunately, sceptics are prepared to agree with this law of proportion, but they deny that there exists any such need on God's part to communicate with men, apart from what they term the "voice" of the universe, and the history of its events.

This objection of theirs is very important, and can help us to a profounder knowledge. If God is not content to limit His revelation to what creatures in their merely natural state, and within the range of their natural experiences, can tell us, one reason is that our minds have been darkened, and our wills weakened by the wounds of original sin. As a result, we are considerably hampered by the condition of our natural reason from employing these resources to the full. But the real explanation is yet more profound. The world cannot reveal what it 'does not itself contain'. The entire voice of the universe is infinitely too small to convey to us, or even to give us the faintest hint of, what God has done for us, and of what He desires still to do. Briefly, the created universe, and all the universes that could be created, being of themselves limited to the merely natural reflection of the power that called them into being, cannot convey the least idea of the intimate mystery of God's life within Himself, nor, consequently, of the enormity of sin, nor the grandeur — beyond all comprehension — to which grace restores us.

Such being the case, God must adopt a mode of speech, which we may classify as "extraordinary." That is to say that He explains by means of His creatures, and in human words, what neither creatures nor any human speculation can of themselves explain. "No man," says Saint John, "has seen God at any time," and for that reason, something further became necessary: "The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him" (John 1:18).

As opposed to both sceptic and rationalist, the Christian calmly and firmly accepts not only the possibility of miracles and apparitions, but even their necessity. The necessity of such things is, first of all, a relative one in regard to natural truths, which our minds, darkened by sin, can discover only with much difficulty, with accompanying uncertainty, and with grave risk of error. The necessity becomes absolute, when, as has been made manifest, God desires to speak to us of His own innermost life. "We speak," says St. Paul, "the wisdom of God in a mystery... that eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for them that love him" (1 Cor. 2:9).

In the light of these considerations, we are better qualified to deal with the question regarding the too hasty publicising of new apparitions. What of the insatiable lovers of novelty?

There is nothing novel in seeking signs. The Jews asked them of Jesus. We would all love to have visions and revelations. Who has not in the fervour of prayer felt that our Lord was near or our Lady quite close to us, even to the extent of imagining that they had showed themselves. I would not say that there was anything wrong in that, provided always that we do not make it a requirement of our faith, or regard it as one of faith's essential accompaniments in ourselves. "Blessed are they that have not seen and have believed."

It is well to bear in mind that since the revelation of Jesus nothing essential is left for us to learn. The Church is always there to guard and interpret the deposit of revelation, which can be surpassed by nothing less than the Beatific Vision.

Saint John of the Cross expresses the same truth in an admirable and well known page of his “Ascent of Mount Carmel” (Book II, Chapter 22).

“We see in the Divine Scripture that Moses always enquired of God, as did King David, and all the other kings of Israel, with regard to their wars and necessities, and the priests and the prophets of old, and God instructed them... Why, then, in the New Law — the law of grace — may it not now be as it was aforetime?

“To this it must be replied that the principal reason why in the law of Scripture the enquiries that were made of God were lawful, and why it was fitting that the prophets and priests should seek visions and revelations from God, was because at that time faith had no firm foundation, neither was the evangelical law established; and thus it was needful that they should enquire of God and that He should speak, whether by words or by visions and revelations, or whether by figures and similitudes or by many other ways of impressing His meaning. For all that He answered and spoke and revealed belonged to the mysteries of our faith and things touching it or leading to it...But now that the faith is founded in Christ, and in this era of grace, the evangelical law has been made manifest, there is no reason to enquire of Him in that manner, nor for Him to speak or to answer as He did then. For in giving us, as He did, His Son, which is the Word — and He has no other — He spoke to us all together, once and for all in the single Word, and He has no occasion to speak further. And this is the sense of that passage of Saint Paul: ‘God who at sundry times and in divers manners, spoke in times past to the Fathers by the prophets, last of all, in these days has spoken to us by His Son’. (Hebrews 1:1) Wherefore he that would now enquire of God...God might answer him after this manner, saying: ‘If I have spoken all things to you in my Word which is my Son, and I have no other Word, what answer can I now make to you, or what can I reveal to you that is greater than this? Set your eyes on Him alone, for in Him I have spoken and revealed to you all things, and in Him you shall find yet more than that you ask and desire’.”

This thought is also expressed by Saint Paul (Rom. 8:32):

“What (more) shall we then say... He that spared not even his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how has he not with him given us all things.”

III. APPARITIONS SINCE THE TIME OF OUR LORD.

Keeping the foregoing principles before our minds, we can formulate a way of discernment of apparitions which have occurred down the centuries, and which would seem to have in our own day considerably increased. In France, for example, it is reckoned that our Blessed Lady appeared forty-two times during the years 1830-1833, an average of one for every five weeks.

Prudence. —

First of all, it is helpful to point out how the attitude of the Church in all cases submitted for her decision is guided by the strong consciousness that she possesses the fulness of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Only after long years does she pronounce for or against the authenticity of events that occur outside the normal. Nothing drives home this lesson so well as this dignified reserve and wise slowness in all that pertains to the realm of the marvellous. The Church is not unmindful that the devil can transform himself into an angel of light to corrupt man. She realises how attraction for the abnormal on the one hand, and the unhealthy nervous disposition of many people on the other, furnish further reasons for guarding against haste. The wise course is to begin

with a calm distrust, which is gradually set aside only when facts are carefully established in the normal course of each particular case.

Simplicity. —

Let us suppose, as happened in cases like that of the Rue du Bac, of Lourdes, of Fatima, that ecclesiastical authority has prudently decided that the Faithful may give credence to the “seers” and renew their piety in the atmosphere of the sign of God; let us suppose in other words that the apparition is declared authentic. When that happens the simplicity of the children of God, who are aware that such things are possible, that God makes frequent use of them for man’s salvation, and that He has given us the Church to guide us in matters needing such keen discrimination, will suggest how to come closer to Him by devoutly availing of the path which He has deigned to tread to come to us.

Renewal of the Gospel Message. —

What precise disposition of soul is required that the Faithful may reap the benefits of the announcements and pilgrimages which are associated with the apparition? The spirit in which they should be approached demands: firstly, that we accept the Gospel revelation, as interpreted by the Church, as the entire and in itself the all-sufficing substance of our faith; and, secondly, that all else, even when duly authorised by God, is ordained by Him to recall to mind the truths and precepts of His Gospel.

Facts provide proof of how necessary is such a disposition.

We shall confine ourselves to observations on the best known and most recent apparitions.

Paray-le-Monial. —

In 1674, at a time when the soul-killing doctrines of the Jansenists were eating their way ever more deeply into Christian life, and a cold abstract rationalism was widespread, the Saviour reminded men of His love and of His desire to be loved by appearing to a humble religious of the Visitation at Paray-le-Monial. “Behold the Heart that has loved men so much.” By this, the Christian soul was plunged again into the purest fountain of love — namely, the sacred Humanity of the Saviour, which is the symbol of God’s unutterable love.

The Miraculous Medal. —

On the 27th November 1830, at the Mother House of the Sisters of Charity, (Saint) Catherine Labouré was favoured with a vision of the Blessed Virgin. Amidst rays of light, Our Lady’s feet rested on the globe, and around her letters of gold formed the ejaculation, “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.” Our Lady thus prepared the minds of the Faithful for the definition of her Immaculate Conception (1854), and recalled the plan of God, Who gave His Son to the world through her, His Mother. The Miraculous Medal, which was modelled on the vision, has made innumerable conversions, of which the most famous was that of the Alsatian Jew, Alphonse de Ratisbonne. It was his brother, Theodor, who had earlier been converted, who founded the Congregation of “Notre Dame de Sion” (Our Lady of Zion).

It is significant that the Legion of Mary chose the statue of the Miraculous Medal as its standard of battle under the leadership of the Immaculate Queen of Heaven. Such a choice provides an example of how deeply an apparition, seen by one unknown religious, has penetrated into the life of the entire Church in order to bring souls back to the living waters of the Gospel: “Jesus was born of the

Virgin Mary” — we shall never be able to exhaust the telling of the immensity of riches contained in that central mystery of our faith.

La Salette. —

When it became imperative to stem the tide of blasphemy and of profanation of the Lord’s Day, when at the same time the foul stain of indifference darkened the lives of the people, Our Lady appeared on the 19th September, 1846, at La Salette, and spoke tearfully to two little children about the gravity of sin and the necessity of prayer and penance.

Lourdes. —

Four years after the definition of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, on the 11th February, 1858, Our Lady appeared to a child on the banks of the Gave at Lourdes. “I am the Immaculate Conception,” she announced. In a series of eighteen apparitions from February to July, she taught (Saint) Bernadette how to do penance, and how to recite her privileged prayer of the Rosary. In a period of unbelief, of luxury amongst the higher classes, of want of religion amongst the people, Mary’s exhortations brought Christians back to the lessons of the Gospel.

For want of space, we must pass over the apparition of Pontmain, 17th January, 1871, and more recently that of Beauraing in Belgium in 1932 and 1933.

Fatima. —

The apparition of Fatima in Portugal, 1917, has in its turn become world famous. To three children, Mary urges again, as ever, her message of prayer and penance. The prayer is to be the Rosary, and she asks, especially for the family Rosary. Penance is to be for the conversion of sinners. These three little children, of whom the two youngest died some months afterwards, and of whom the third is a religious, began straight away reciting long prayers and performing penances with amazing ardour of soul. [Sister Lucia, the third seer, died in 2005.] Fatima’s message has resounded far and wide, and, like Lourdes, is today as vital as ever.

The most notable characteristic common to all these heavenly messages — for we must emphasise it again — consists in their announcing the simple lessons of the Gospel, recalling the necessity of penance and prayer, reminding us that we are sinners, telling us of the awful evil of sin which offends God, and at the same time emphasising the unchangeable goodness of God, His Fatherly solicitude for our salvation, and reminding us, also, of Our Lady’s part in that salvation, and of her maternal care in our regard. In such things, there is no possibility of deception, and lovers of novelty find but little for their pains. But that, precisely, is the secret of their usefulness. Like a late news column, they attract the attention of our confused ears and eyes to the all important demands of the Gospel message.

Pilgrimages bring further confirmation of the effectiveness of these heavenly “missions” by the fruits shown forth in pious souls.

IV. IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH.

Docility. —

Let us gain all the benefit possible from the renewal of spirit and from the wholesome leaven provided by these heavenly visitations, and by the pilgrimages organised wherever they have taken

place. We never can have too much of what opens to us the mercy of God to aid us along the road of our return to Him.

Beyond all doubt, when Our Lady, at Lourdes, for example, invites the Faithful to come in procession, she gives assurance also that they will find there her very special presence and the abundant graces which she has there in store for all of good will.

Yet, is it not true that God or Our Lady can give these favours anywhere?

Certainly! But, nevertheless, we are so made that account must be taken both of the time and place of our actions.

God profits by that law of our nature. He invites us to set aside both times and places, which against the background of our dim horizons stand out in the brightness of His light, and seem, charged with His sanctifying power.

Let us put all our child-like fervour, as far as opportunity offers, into the availing of these strong currents of grace which God provides as a remedy for our weakness and slothful tendencies.

Seeking the Big Things. —

Whilst our faith helps us, to welcome humbly every offer made us by the Saviour, it ought also urge us beyond the measure of sense emotion, and lead us into its own pure motive: I believe in the Gospel of Jesus, because it is the word of God given to the world; and not because of anything else.

To faith of that kind is reserved the conquest of the world (1 John 5:4). We must ever get back to that essential motive of our faith, and never allow it to be contaminated by contact with merely natural motives, however noble they may seem.

This persevering pursuit of essentials can be studied in actual practice in what the apparitions themselves reveal. Let us take Lourdes as an example.

Much has been said of the cures of Lourdes; and rightly so, since they redound to the glory of Mary. But we must try to see the deeper lesson that is thereby concealed. No Christian has any misgivings about Our Lady's power to cure all the sick that are brought to her there. But in fact, what happens? Of the thousand sick, present at one time, she deigns to cure two or three (I speak of cures approved by the medical authorities, and permanent). What an infinitesimal percentage! And how full of meaning for those who see clearly!

By the cure of a few sick, or even of one, in a way beyond the power of nature, Our Lady shows that she is at hand and — all-powerful. She bestows thereby a visible sign and a touching pledge of her presence and of her vigilant care. She makes known also that she does not consider such cures to be of primary importance. What is for her of greatest moment is the invisible health of the soul, which is infinitely more precious than the health of the body. By means of her action in one sphere, which can be seen by all, even by unbelievers, she gives assurance of her action in the other — and that is the one which really counts.

It is good for us to realise that we are not all alone in the world, to have evidence that she is there. For that reason, she works a few prodigies. But it is still more important that we should realise that it does not profit us to gain the whole world, or to regain our health, and at the same time suffer the loss of our souls. To that higher consideration, she invites us by the fewness of her miracles. "See,"

she would seem to say, “the return of the soul to the state of grace is something incomparably greater, not only than the health of the body, but the whole world.”

Thanks to this sign given us by Mary, we can put things in their proper perspective. That is the urgent teaching of our pilgrimages. It is one that centres us again with great accuracy in the Gospel. Let us turn our attention to the manner in which that Gospel was delivered to us by Our Lord.

The Word of God took flesh to set us on the right road, which by becoming incarnate He made recognisable and visible. But, by assuming our minds and our hearts, He established a way of communication with us which enables Him to “speak” to us of the mystery of His Father. He instructed His Apostles in that mystery by His words, His deeds, and His daily life which He spent in their midst. All that was excellent, wonderfully revealing, and very necessary. But how slow they were in seeing beyond the visible, and in reaching out to the invisible. “Philip, so long a time have I been with you; and have you not known me?” We must all be on our guard against this kind of disposition.

Their slowness and heaviness of heart brought the mysterious declaration from the lips of the Saviour: “It is expedient to you that I go.” Strange words! The presence of Jesus in the flesh would seem to have been a wonderful blessing, a marvellous incentive. Did He not also say: “Many have desired to see the things that you see.” How then could it have been good for them that He should disappear from their sight? The answer is: “For if I go not, the Spirit will not come to you” (John 16:7).

It is in the same spirit that the Christian should receive the message of genuine apparitions, and take part in pilgrimages which are inspired by them. We should value them as tokens of God’s wonderful condescension to our human weakness, our slothful tendencies, and our natural attraction for the visual. But, at the same time, we must seek for what lies beyond the visible, and strive to reach God in spirit and in truth in the clear light of a steadfast faith.

We must be convinced that the more visible and more appealing signs of His action in our midst, which belong to those elect times and places, have as their sole purpose to remind us of His ever abiding presence, less impressive, but not less real, whereby He dwells with us wherever we spend our days and work out our destinies.

Permanent Apparitions. —

To ensure a complete knowledge of anything which we desire to study we must view it in relation to other things which are connected with it. We must see it against the whole of which it forms a part.

To appreciate the worth of apparitions they must be set within the entirety of God’s intervention for man’s salvation, as part of the visible manifestation of His mystery, through which He opens a way which invites us heavenwards where alone are found the lasting realities.

The Saviour has provided us with permanent and visible manifestations of both His presence and His action in our midst: the Church to confirm our faith, the Sacred Scriptures which the Church preserves and interprets, the Sacraments, especially that of His physical presence, to bestow and increase within us the life of grace; finally, our neighbour who takes the place of the Saviour, Who accepts as for Himself all the good we do to others. — “I was naked and you clothed me.”

Whether it be beneath the veils of the Church’s authority, (“He that hears you, hears me”), or beneath the Eucharistic species (“This is my body”), or beneath the likeness in my neighbour

(“Whatever you do to these my least brethren, you do unto me”), it is ever Jesus Who is present and Who “appears” in all reality to each one along his own individual way.

Our ears must be attentive to these “apparitions” all the days of our life. The Saviour does not ask us to go on pilgrimages when that is beyond the means at our disposal, but He does ask us not to overlook the least of His ways of being present, and which genuinely attach us to Him, not in a passing way, as in the case of apparitions, but permanently.

It is significant that pilgrimages made to places of apparitions have straight away become organised centres of the cult of His normally abiding presence. Lourdes has become a capital of Eucharistic worship, of fraternal charity, especially towards the sick, of community prayer and of apostolic preaching of the Gospel truths which are taught us by the Church.

Let us have a keen sense of this approved way. Let us profit by all apparitions whose genuineness is made certain by confronting their messages with those of the Gospel, and by the fruits which they show in the renewal in souls of the practice of the commandments. Thus supported by the enthusiasm of grace, which God has in store for us in such visions, we shall be borne along towards the glorious and mysterious apparition which is already promised even on this earth. “Yet a little while and the world sees me no more. But you see me; because I live, and you shall live (by my own life)... He that has my commandments and keeps them; he it is that loves me. And he that loves me shall be loved of my Father: And I will love him and will manifest myself to him” (John 14:19-20).

APPENDIX: TRUE CHRISTIANITY, SIGNS AND WONDERS.

This is taken from: *Osservatore Romano, 4th February, 1951, by Monsignor Alfred Ottaviana, Assessor of the Holy Office. N.C.W.C. News Service translation (mainly).

NO Catholic questions the possibility of miracles or doubts that they actually do take place. Christ’s mission and His Divine Nature were proved by the many great miracles He performed here on earth. The early Church overcame initial difficulties and persecutions because the Holy Ghost gave her special help that expressed itself visibly in the gifts the Apostles enjoyed and in the large number of the elect among the first generations of Christians. Once the Church was consolidated, these special gifts of the Holy Ghost, as we can well understand, grew less. But they have not ceased. The help of the Holy Ghost and the presence of Christ in His Church are two things that will last until the end of time. The former shows itself by means of supernatural signs, too, with miracles.

By way of example, it is sufficient to call attention to the miracles that are examined during the process of the beatification of the Servants of God or the canonisation of the Blessed. Such miracles are rigourously verified both scientifically and theologically. And we might add here that the rigour with which the miraculous cures at Lourdes are examined is common knowledge.

Let no one call us enemies of the supernatural, therefore, if we gird ourselves now for the task of warning the faithful against unchecked statements concerning supernatural happenings that are supposed to have taken place, statements which are fairly widespread at the present time, statements which create the danger of seeing the true miracle discredited.

Our Lord Himself has put us on our guard against ‘false Christs and false prophets’ who ‘will show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect’ (Matt 24:24). Such happenings have occurred from the earliest days of the Church (Acts 8:9).

For this reason, the Church has the right and the duty to judge the truth and the nature of the facts or revelations said to have come about by a special intervention of God. And it is the duty of all good sons of the Church to submit to this judgment.

As a mother, the Church has to bear the burden of a mother's onerous and doleful duties, and, like all mothers, she sometimes has the duty not only of taking action, but also of suffering, keeping silent, and waiting. Fifty years ago who would have thought that the Church would now be in the position of having to put its sons, even some of those who are priests, on their guard against so-called miracles, against all those happenings acclaimed as preternatural, which are arousing the interest of the masses here and there in almost every continent and country? Fifty years ago, when the 'scientific' and positivist attitude was rife, people would have laughed at anyone who paid attention to and believed in what were called superstitions of the dark ages. Fifty years ago, people reviled the Church because it alone persisted in upholding their existence, their spiritual worth, negative or positive, and their beauty or ugliness. One of the commonest and most solemn of subjects as far as the apologetics of the day was concerned was miracles. Now the Church has to warn its sons through the mouths of its Bishops by repeating the words of the Divine Master (Matt 24:24), not to allow themselves to be led astray by similar happenings and not to believe in them save with eyes wide open and after the authorities have made all the necessary inquiries and given their reports.

For some years past, we have witnessed an increase of popular hankering after the wonderful, even when it concerns religion. The faithful repair in vast crowds to places where visions and wonders are supposed to have taken place and, at the same time, abandon the Church, the Sacraments and preaching and instruction. People who are ignorant of the first words of the Creed set themselves up as ardent apostles of religiousness. Some of them do not hesitate to speak of the Pope, the bishops and the clergy in terms of severe reprobation and then grow indignant when the latter do not take part, together with the mob, in all the enthusiasms and outbursts of certain popular movements.

Although this is a displeasing situation, it is not one that causes surprise. Men's feelings are natural, even those towards religion. Just as man is a rational animal, so he is a political and a religious animal. By bringing disorder and confusion into the nature of man and all his feelings, original sin has attacked, so to speak, religious feelings also. This is the explanation of the deviations and the errors of so many natural religions, no more and no less than the explanation of so many other distortions in the history of man. But it is a fact that errors of this kind are much more troublesome where religion is concerned. Coming to redeem man from his darkness and shortcomings, revelation and grace have restored him to his right nature especially where religion is concerned. Having healed man's wounded and stricken nature, grace gives it a superabundance of strength to be used in the service and love of God. The Church, the custodian and interpreter of the true religion, was born of the Word and of the blood of Our Lord.

To think oneself religious, however that may come about, is not required. What is required is to be truly religious. As in the case of other feelings, there can be, and in point of fact there are, also deviations from true religious feeling. Religious sentiment must be guided by reason, nourished by grace, and as is our whole life, controlled by the Church, and even more strictly. There are such things as religious instruction, religious education and religious training. Those who have fought the authority of the Church and religious sentiment in so light-headed a way find themselves to-day faced with imposing outbursts of an instinctive religious feeling entirely deficient in the light of reason and the consciousness of grace, one that has no check or control.

Such action results in deplorable acts of disobedience to the ecclesiastical authorities when they intervene to apply the necessary brake. This is what happened in Italy after the co-called visions of Voltago, [in 1937,] in France over the Espis [in 1946] and Bouxieres [in 1936] incidents which were allied to those [of 1936] in Ham-sur-Sambre (Belgium), in Germany at Heroldsbach [in 1949], and in the United States of America over the manifestations at Necedah, Wisconsin [of 1949-50]. I could go on quoting other examples in other countries both near and far.

The period through which we are passing stands between these two excesses: open, inhuman irreligion or unbounded, blind religiosity. Persecuted by the supporters of the first and compromised by those who uphold the second, the Church does nothing more than repeat its maternal warning. But its words remain unheard amidst denial on the one hand and exaltation on the other.

There is no doubt that the Church does not wish to cast into the shadow the wonders which God works. It merely wants to keep the faithful watchful concerning what comes from God and what does not come from God, and which can come from His and our adversary. The Church is the enemy of the false miracle.

A good Catholic knows from his catechism that the true religion rests on the true Faith, on Revelation, which ended with the death of the last Apostle and has been entrusted to the Church, its interpreter and custodian. Nothing else necessary to our salvation can be revealed to us. There is nothing more for which we must look. We have everything, if we wish to make use of it. Even the most accredited visions can furnish us with new motives for fervour, but not with new elements of life or doctrine. True religion abides essentially, apart from the conscience, in the love of God and the consequent love of our neighbour. And, more than in acts of worship and rite, the love of God consists in doing the will of God, obeying His commandments. This is true religion.

A good Catholic knows that in the saints themselves the nature of sanctity consists not in the preternatural gifts of visions, prophecies and wonders, but in the heroic exercise of virtue. That God should in some way, authenticate holiness by miracles is one thing, but that holiness consists in performing miracles is another. We must not confound holiness with what can be and is, as a rule, an unmistakeable sign of holiness. Miracles are meant to be a sign of holiness, but the sign is often not always sufficiently clear so as not to need the necessary supervision of religious authorities.

On this point, the teaching of the Church has never been equivocal. The man who turns back to events of dubious interpretation rather than accept the word of God loves the world more than God. Even when the Church authoritatively canonizes a saint, it does not by this act guarantee the preternatural character of all the extraordinary facts connected with his life. Still less does it approve all his personal opinions. By the same token, it gives even less guarantee to all that is written, often with unpardonable levity, by biographers with more imagination than judgment.

We repeat that in order to be religious, it is necessary to be so in a proper fashion and as a matter of duty. In order to be good Catholics and devout people we must act with all the attention with which we act when applying ourselves to the most serious things in life. Incredulity is just as harmful to the sincere believer as credulity. True, it is not everyone who can form his own opinion on every point. But what are the bishops and the Pope for?

It is a strange thing: no untrained person would dare to build a house by himself, tailor his own clothes, make himself a pair of shoes or cure himself of a sickness. Yet when it is a question of religious life, people reject all authority, refuse to place any trust in it, even distrust and disobey it with impunity.

During the past 200 years, especially the last half century, the Catholic priesthood has been so much the object of accusations, insults and defamation both by politicians and writers that one can well understand how it is that the faithful have the greatest difficulty in approaching a priest and becoming friendly with him. But during the undeniable return to God we are now witnessing, the faithful must overcome their bias and return once more to sharing their feelings, their thoughts and their faith with the priest.

For the last ten years, while the religious authorities have remained hesitant, the people have acted hastily and busied themselves with wonders which, to say the least, have not been verified.

Speaking honestly, we must admit that such events may be expressions of natural religious enthusiasm (religiosity). But they are not Christian events, and they give a dangerous pretext to those who are out to discover at all costs the infiltrations and survivals of paganism and superstition in Christianity, especially Catholicism. Just as wrongdoing may insinuate itself in our daily lives, so may error insinuate itself into this individual Catholic or that, a thing which causes no wonder to those who understand what man is. But, just as sin must be recognised as sin if we would free ourselves from it, so too, in the case of error, we must recognise it as such. Just as the Church has the power to forgive sins, so has it also been commanded by God to redeem us from error.

Let Catholics hear the word of God which the Church, and the Church alone, preserves and repeats, whole and incorrupt. Let them not run like sheep without a shepherd after other voices seeking to drown the voice of God if in truth they are opposed to the voice of the Church. We have Holy Scripture, we have Tradition, we have the Chief Shepherd and a hundred other shepherds next door to our homes. Why should we offer the spectacle of foolishness or unhealthy exaltation to those who oppose and despise us? 'Christians, be more prudent,' wrote Dante in his day. 'Do not be like feathers that bend to every wind.' The great poet urged the very same reasons that we give today: 'You have the Old and the New Testament, and the Shepherd of the Church to guide you.' Dante's conclusion too, is the same as ours: 'That is sufficient for your salvation'. (Canto, V. verses 73-77).
