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Norms of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith for proceeding in the discernment of alleged supernatural phenomena

NORMS

FOR PROCEEDING IN THE DISCERNMENT OF ALLEGED SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA

Presentation

Listening to the Spirit Who Works in the Faithful People of God

God is present and active in our history. The Holy Spirit, who flows from the heart of the risen Christ, works in the Church with divine freedom and offers us many valuable gifts that aid us on the path of life and encourage our spiritual growth in fidelity to the Gospel. This action of the Holy Spirit can also reach our hearts through certain supernatural occurrences, such as apparitions or visions of Christ or the Blessed Virgin, and other phenomena.

Many times, these events have led to a great richness of spiritual fruits, growth in faith, devotion, fraternity, and service. In some cases, they have given rise to shrines throughout the world that are at the heart of many people's popular piety today. What life and beauty the Lord sows beyond our human understanding and procedures! For this reason, the *Norms for Proceeding in the Discernment of Alleged Supernatural Phenomena* that we now present here are not intended to control or (even less) stifle the Spirit. In fact, in the best cases involving events of alleged supernatural origin, "the Diocesan Bishop is encouraged to *appreciate* the pastoral value of this spiritual proposal, and even to *promote* its spread" (I, par. 17).

St. John of the Cross recognized "the lowliness, deficiency, and inadequacy of all the terms and words used in this life to deal with divine things." [1] Indeed, no one can fully express God's inscrutable ways: "The saintly doctors, no matter how much they have said or will say, can never furnish an exhaustive explanation of these figures and comparisons, since the abundant meanings of the Holy Spirit cannot be caught in words." [2] For "the

way to God is as hidden and secret to the senses of the soul as are the footsteps of one walking on water imperceptible to the senses of the body.”[3] Indeed, “since he is the supernatural artificer, he will construct supernaturally in each soul the edifice he desires.”[4]

At the same time, in some events of alleged supernatural origin, there are serious critical issues that are detrimental to the faithful; in these situations, the Church must respond with utmost pastoral solicitude. In particular, I am thinking of the use of such phenomenon to gain “profit, power, fame, social recognition, or other personal interest” (II, Art. 15, 4°)—even possibly extending to the commission of gravely immoral acts (cf. II, Art. 15, 5°) or the use of these phenomena “as a means of or pretext for exerting control over people or carrying out abuses” (II, Art. 16).

When considering such events, one should not overlook, for example, the possibility of doctrinal errors, an oversimplification of the Gospel message, or the spread of a sectarian mentality. Finally, there is the possibility of believers being misled by an event that is attributed to a divine initiative but is merely the product of someone’s imagination, desire for novelty, tendency to fabricate falsehoods (mythomania), or inclination toward lying.

Therefore, in its discernment in this area, the Church needs clear procedures. The *Norms Regarding the Manner of Proceeding in the Discernment of Presumed Apparitions or Revelations*, in use until now, were approved by Pope St. Paul VI in 1978, more than four decades ago. They remained confidential until they were officially published in 2011, thirty-three years later.

The Recent Revision

After the 1978 *Norms* were put into practice, however, it became evident that decisions took an excessively long time, sometimes spanning several decades. In this way, the necessary ecclesiastical discernment often came too late.

The revision of the 1978 *Norms* began in 2019 and involved various consultations envisioned by the then Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (*Congresso, Consulta, FERIA IV*, and *Plenaria*). During the subsequent five years, several proposals for revision were made, but all were considered inadequate.

In the *Congresso* of the Dicastery on 16 November 2023, it was acknowledged that a comprehensive and radical revision of the existing draft was needed. With this, the Dicastery prepared a new and entirely reconsidered draft that clarified the roles of the Diocesan Bishop and the Dicastery.

The new draft underwent review in a *Consulta Ristretta* on 4 March 2024. Overall, the experts had a favorable opinion of the text, though they made some suggestions for improvement, which were subsequently incorporated into the document.

The text was then studied in the Dicastery’s *FERIA IV* of 17 April 2024, during which the Cardinal and Bishop Members gave it their approval. Finally, on 4 May 2024, the new *Norms* were presented to the Holy Father, who approved them and ordered their publication. He established that these *Norms* will take effect on 19 May 2024, the Solemnity of Pentecost.

Reasons for the New Norms

In the *Preface* to the 2011 publication of the 1978 *Norms*, the then Prefect, His Eminence, William Cardinal Levada, clarified that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has the competence to examine cases of alleged “apparitions, visions and messages attributed to supernatural sources.” Indeed, the 1978 *Norms* had also established that “it is up to the Sacred Congregation to judge and approve the Ordinary’s way of proceeding” or “to initiate a new examination” (IV, 2).

In the past, the Holy See seemed to accept that Bishops would make statements such as, “*Les fidèles sont fondés à la croire indubitable et certaine*”: Decree of the Bishop of Grenoble, 19 September 1851) and “one cannot doubt the reality of the tears” (Decree of the Bishops of Sicily, 12 December 1953). However, these expressions conflicted with the Church’s own conviction that the faithful did not have to accept the authenticity of these events. Therefore, a few months after the latter case, the Holy Office explained that it had “not yet made any decision regarding the *Madonna delle Lacrime*” ([Syracuse, Sicily] 2 October 1954). More recently, in reference to Fatima, the then Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith explained that ecclesiastical approval of a private revelation highlights that “the message contains nothing contrary to faith or morals” (26 June 2000).

Despite this clear stance, the actual procedures followed by the Dicastery, even in recent times, were still inclined toward the Bishop making a declaration that the event was “supernatural” or “not supernatural”—so much so that some Bishops insisted on being able to make a positive declaration of this type. Even recently, some Bishops have wanted to make statements such as, “I confirm the absolute truth of the facts” and “the faithful must undoubtedly consider as true...”. These expressions effectively oriented the faithful to think they had to believe in these phenomena, which sometimes were valued more than the Gospel itself.

In dealing with such cases, and especially when preparing an official statement, some Bishops sought the necessary prior authorization from the Dicastery. Then, when granted that permission, Bishops were asked not to mention the Dicastery in their statement. This was the case, for example, in the rare instances that concluded in recent decades, in which the Dicastery included provisions such as “*Sans impliquer notre Congrégation*,” Letter to the Bishop of Gap [France], 3 August 2007) or “the Dicastery shall not be involved in such a pronouncement” (*Congresso* of 11 May 2001, regarding a request from the Bishop of Gikongoro [Rwanda]). In these situations, the Bishop could not even mention that the Dicastery had given its approval. Meanwhile, other Bishops, whose Dioceses were also affected by these phenomena, were also seeking an authoritative opinion from the Dicastery to attain greater clarity.

This way of proceeding, which has caused considerable confusion, shows how the 1978 *Norms* are no longer adequate to guide the actions of the Bishops and the Dicastery. This has become even more of a problem today since phenomena rarely remain within the boundaries of one city or Diocese. This concern was already noted during the 1974 Plenary Assembly of the then Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where the members acknowledged that an event of alleged supernatural origin often “inevitably extends beyond the limits of a Diocese and even of a Nation and [...] the case automatically reaches proportions that can justify intervention by the supreme Authority of the Church.” Meanwhile, the 1978 *Norms* recognized that it had become “more difficult, if not *almost impossible*, to achieve with the required speed the judgments that in the past concluded the investigation of such matters (*constat de supernaturalitate, non constat de supernaturalitate*)” (Preliminary Note).

The expectation of receiving a declaration about the supernatural nature of the event resulted in very few cases ever reaching a clear determination. In fact, since 1950, no more than six cases have been officially resolved, even though such phenomena have often increased without clear guidance and with the involvement of people from many Dioceses. Therefore, one can assume that many other cases were either handled differently or just not handled at all.

To prevent any further delays in the resolution of a specific case involving an event of alleged supernatural origin, the Dicastery recently proposed to the Holy Father the idea of concluding the discernment process not with a declaration of “*de supernaturalitate*” but with a “*Nihil obstat*,” which would allow the Bishop to draw pastoral benefit from the spiritual phenomenon. The idea of concluding with a declaration of “*Nihil obstat*” was reached after assessing the various spiritual and pastoral fruits of the event and finding no substantial negative elements in it. The Holy Father considered this proposal to be a “right solution.”

New Aspects

Based on the factors mentioned above, with the new *Norms*, we are proposing a procedure that is different from the past but is also richer as it involves six possible prudential conclusions that can guide pastoral work surrounding events of alleged supernatural origin (cf. I, pars. 17-22). These six possible determinations allow the

Dicastery and the Bishops to handle in a suitable manner the issues that arise in connection with the diverse cases they encounter.

As a rule, these potential conclusions do not include the possibility of declaring that the phenomenon under discernment is of supernatural origin—that is, affirming with moral certainty that it originates from a decision willed by God in a direct way. Instead, as Pope Benedict XVI explained, granting a *Nihil obstat* simply indicates that the faithful “are authorized to give [the phenomenon] their adhesion in a prudent manner.” Since a *Nihil obstat* does not declare the events in question to be supernatural, it becomes even more apparent—as Pope Benedict XVI also said—how the phenomenon is only “a help which is proffered, but its use is not obligatory.”[5] At the same time, this response naturally leaves open the possibility that, in monitoring how the devotion develops, a different response may be required in the future.

Moreover, it should be noted that reaching a declaration affirming the “supernaturalness” of an event, by its very nature, not only requires a suitable amount of time to carry out the analysis but it can also lead to the possibility that a judgment of “supernatural” today might become a judgment of “not supernatural” years later—and precisely this has happened. An example worth recalling is a case involving alleged apparitions from the 1950s. In 1956, the Bishop issued a final judgment of “not supernatural,” and the following year, the Holy Office approved the Bishop’s decision. Then, the approval of that veneration was sought again. In 1974, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared the alleged apparitions to be “*constat de non supernaturalitate*.” Thereafter, in 1996, the local Bishop positively recognized the devotion, and in 2002, another Bishop from the same place recognized the “supernatural origin” of the apparitions, leading to the spread of the devotion to other countries. Finally, in 2020, at the request of the Congregation, a new Bishop reiterated the Congregation’s earlier “negative judgment,” requiring the cessation of any public disclosures regarding the alleged apparitions and revelations. Thus, it took about seventy excruciating years to bring the whole matter to a conclusion.

Today, we have come to the conviction that such complicated situations, which create confusion among the faithful, should always be avoided. This can be accomplished by ensuring a quicker and clearer involvement of this Dicastery and by preventing the impression that the discernment process would be directed toward a declaration of “supernaturalness” (which carries high expectations, anxieties, and even pressures). Instead, as a rule, such declarations of “supernaturalness” are replaced either by a *Nihil obstat*, which authorizes positive pastoral work, or by another determination that is suited to the specific situation.

The procedures outlined in the new *Norms*, which offer six possible final prudential decisions, make it possible to reach a decision in a more reasonable period, helping the Bishop to manage a situation involving events of alleged supernatural origin before such occurrences—without a necessary ecclesial discernment—acquire very problematic dimensions.

Nevertheless, the possibility always remains that the Holy Father may intervene exceptionally by authorizing a procedure that includes the possibility of declaring the supernaturalness of the events. Yet, this is an exception that has been made only rarely in recent centuries.

At the same time, as stipulated in the new *Norms*, the possibility of declaring an event as “not supernatural” remains, but only when there are objective signs that clearly indicate manipulation at the basis of the phenomenon. For instance, this might occur when an alleged visionary admits to having lied or when evidence shows that the blood on a crucifix belongs to the alleged visionary.

Recognizing an Action of the Holy Spirit

Most of the shrines that today are privileged places of popular piety for the People of God have never had an official declaration of the supernatural nature of the events that led to the devotion expressed there. Rather, the *sensus fidelium* intuited the activity of the Holy Spirit there, and no major problems have arisen that required an intervention from the pastors of the Church.

Often, the presence of the Bishop and priests at certain times—such as during pilgrimages or celebrating certain Masses—has served as an implicit acknowledgment that there are no serious objections and that the spiritual experience had a positive influence on the lives of the faithful.

Nevertheless, a *Nihil obstat* allows the pastors of the Church to act confidently and promptly to stand among the People of God in welcoming the Holy Spirit's gifts that may emerge "in the midst of" these events. The phrase "in the midst of"—used in the new *Norms*—clarifies that even if the event itself is not declared to be of supernatural origin, there is still a recognition of the signs of the Holy Spirit's supernatural action in the midst of what is occurring.

However, in some cases, alongside this recognition of the signs of the Holy Spirit's action, there is also a need for certain clarifications or purifications. It may happen that the Holy Spirit's action in a specific situation—which can be rightly appreciated—might appear to be mixed with purely human elements (such as personal desires, memories, and sometimes obsessive thoughts), or with "some error of a natural order, not due to bad intentions, but to the subjective perception of the phenomenon" (II, Art. 15, 2°). After all, "an experience alleged to be a vision simply cannot compel one either to accept it as accurate in every detail or to reject it altogether as a human or diabolical illusion or fraud." [6]

The Involvement and Accompaniment of the Dicastery

It is important to understand that the new *Norms* clarify a significant point about the competence of this Dicastery. On the one hand, they affirm that discernment in this area remains the task of the Diocesan Bishop. On the other hand, recognizing that, now more than ever, these phenomena involve many people from various Dioceses and spread rapidly across different regions and even countries, the new *Norms* establish that the Dicastery must always be consulted and give final approval to what the Bishop decides before he announces a determination on an event of alleged supernatural origin. While previously the Dicastery had intervened but the Bishop was asked not to mention it, today, the Dicastery openly manifests its involvement and accompanies the Bishop in reaching a final determination. Now, when the Bishop makes his decision public, it will be stated as "in agreement with the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith."

At the same time, as already envisioned in the 1978 *Norms* (IV, 1 b), the new *Norms* also indicate that, in some instances, the Dicastery may intervene *motu proprio* (II, Art. 26). Once a clear determination is made, the new *Norms* specify that "the Dicastery, in any case, reserves the right to intervene again depending on the development of the phenomenon in question" (II, Art. 22, § 3) and request the Bishop to continue "to watch over the phenomenon" (II, Art. 24) for the good of the faithful.

God is always present in human history and never stops bestowing his gifts of grace upon us through the workings of the Holy Spirit, daily renewing our faith in Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. It is the responsibility of the pastors of the Church to keep their faithful always attentive to this loving presence of the Most Holy Trinity in our midst, as it is also their duty to protect the faithful from all deception. These new *Norms* are but one way in which the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith places itself at the service of the pastors of the Church in docile listening to the Spirit at work in the faithful People of God.

Víctor Manuel Card. Fernández

Prefect

Introduction

1. Jesus Christ is the definitive Word of God, "the First and the Last" (Rev. 1:17). He is the fullness and fulfillment of Revelation; everything God wanted to reveal, he did through his Son, the Word made flesh. Therefore, "the Christian economy, since it is the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord, Jesus Christ." [7]

2. In the revealed Word, there is everything necessary for the Christian life. St. John of the Cross affirms that “in giving us his Son, his only Word (for he possesses no other), [the Father] spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word—and he has no more to say [...] because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has now spoken all at once by giving us the All, who is his Son. Those who now desire to question God or receive some vision or revelation are guilty not only of foolish behavior but also of offending him by not fixing their eyes entirely on Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty.”[8]

3. In the time of the Church, the Holy Spirit leads believers of every era “into all truth” (Jn. 16:13) to “bring about an ever deeper understanding of revelation.”[9] It is the Holy Spirit, in fact, who guides us ever further in understanding the mystery of Christ, for “however numerous are the mysteries and marvels [...] discovered and [...] understood in this earthly life, all the more is yet to be said and understood. There is much to fathom in Christ, for he is like an abundant mine with many recesses of treasures, so that however deep individuals may go they never reach the end or bottom, but rather in every recess find new veins with new riches everywhere.”[10]

4. While all that God has willed to reveal he has done through his Son and while the ordinary means of holiness are made available to every baptized person in the Church of Christ, the Holy Spirit may grant some people distinct experiences of faith, the purpose of which is not “to improve or complete Christ’s definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history.”[11]

5. The call to holiness concerns all the baptized; it is nourished by a life of prayer and participation in the sacramental life of the Church, and is expressed in an existence imbued with love of God and neighbor.[12] In the Church, we receive the love of God, fully manifested in Christ (cf. Jn. 3:16) and “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). Those who allow themselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit with docility experience the presence and action of the Trinity, and such a lived existence—as Pope Francis teaches—results in a mystical life that, although “apart from any extraordinary phenomena, offers itself to all the faithful as a daily experience of love.”[13]

6. Nevertheless, occasionally phenomena occur that seem to exceed the bounds of ordinary experiences and present themselves as having a supernatural origin (such as alleged apparitions, visions, interior or exterior locutions, writings or messages, phenomena related to religious images, and psychophysical phenomena). Speaking accurately about such occurrences can surpass the capabilities of human language (cf. 2 Cor. 12:2-4). With the advent of modern means of communication, these phenomena can attract the attention of many believers or cause confusion among them. Since news of these events can spread very quickly, the pastors of the Church are responsible for handling these phenomena with care by recognizing their fruits, purifying them of negative elements, or warning the faithful about potential dangers arising from them (cf. 1 Jn. 4:1).

7. Moreover, with the development of modern means of communication and the increase in pilgrimages, these phenomena are taking on national and even global proportions, meaning that a decision made in one Diocese has consequences also elsewhere.

8. When spiritual experiences are accompanied by physical and psychological phenomena that cannot be immediately explained by reason alone, the Church has the delicate responsibility of studying and discerning these occurrences carefully.

9. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis reminds us that the only way to know whether something comes from the Holy Spirit is through discernment, which must be sought and cultivated in prayer.[14] This is a divine gift that aids the Church’s pastors in fulfilling what St. Paul says: “test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). To assist Diocesan Bishops and Episcopal Conferences in discerning phenomena of alleged supernatural origin, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith promulgates the following *Norms for Proceeding in the Discernment of Alleged Supernatural Phenomena*.

I. GENERAL GUIDELINES

A. The Nature of the Discernment

10. By following the *Norms* below, the Church will be able to fulfill its duty of discerning: (a) whether signs of a divine action can be ascertained in phenomena that are alleged to be of supernatural origin; (b) whether there is that anything conflicts with faith and morals in the writings or messages of those involved in the alleged phenomena in question; (c) whether it is permissible to appreciate their spiritual fruits, whether they need to be purified from problematic elements, or whether the faithful should be warned about potential risks; (d) whether it is advisable for the competent ecclesiastical authority to realize their pastoral value.

11. While the following provisions foresee the possibility of a discernment in the sense described in Par. 10 (above), it must be noted that, as a general rule, it is not foreseen in these *Norms* that ecclesiastical authority would give a positive recognition of the divine origin of alleged supernatural phenomena.

12. Whenever a *Nihil obstat* is granted by the Dicastery (cf. Par. 17, below), such phenomena do not become objects of faith, which means the faithful are not obliged to give an assent of faith to them. Rather, as in the case of charisms recognized by the Church, they are “ways to deepen one’s knowledge of Christ and to give oneself more generously to him, while rooting oneself more and more deeply in communion with the entire Christian people.”[15]

13. Even when a *Nihil obstat* is granted for canonization processes, this does not imply a declaration of authenticity regarding any supernatural phenomena present in a person’s life. This is evident, for instance, in the decree of canonization of St. Gemma Galgani: “[Pius XI] *feliciter elegit ut super heroicis virtutibus huius innocentis aequae ac poenitentis puellae suam mentem panderet, nullo tamen per praesens decretum (quod quidem numquam fieri solet) prolato iudicio de praeternaturalibus Servae Dei charismatibus.*”[16]

14. At the same time, it should also be acknowledged that some phenomena, which could have a supernatural origin, at times appear connected to confused human experiences, theologically inaccurate expressions, or interests that are not entirely legitimate.

15. The discernment of alleged supernatural phenomena is carried out from the start by the Diocesan Bishop (or by another ecclesiastical authority mentioned in Part II, Arts. 4-6) in dialogue with the Dicastery. However, since special attention to the common good of the entire People of God can never be lacking, “the Dicastery reserves the right to evaluate the moral and doctrinal elements of that spiritual experience and the use that is being made of it.”[17] It is important not to overlook that sometimes the discernment may also deal with problems, such as delicts, manipulation, damage to the unity of the Church, undue financial gain, and serious doctrinal errors that could cause scandals and undermine the credibility of the Church.

B. Conclusions

16. The discernment of alleged supernatural phenomena may reach conclusions that are usually expressed in one of the terms listed below.

17. *Nihil obstat* – Without expressing any certainty about the supernatural authenticity of the phenomenon itself, many signs of the action of the Holy Spirit are acknowledged “in the midst”[18] of a given spiritual experience, and no aspects that are particularly critical or risky have been detected, at least so far. For this reason, the Diocesan Bishop is encouraged to appreciate the pastoral value of this spiritual proposal, and even to promote its spread, including possibly through pilgrimages to a sacred site.

18. *Prae oculis habeatur* – Although important positive signs are recognized, some aspects of confusion or potential risks are also perceived that require the Diocesan Bishop to engage in a careful discernment and dialogue with the recipients of a given spiritual experience. If there were writings or messages, doctrinal clarification might be necessary.

19. *Curatur* – While various or significant critical elements are noted, at the same time, the phenomenon has already spread widely, and there are verifiable spiritual fruits connected to it. In this situation, a ban that could upset the People of God is not recommended. Nevertheless, the Diocesan Bishop is asked not to encourage this phenomenon but to seek out alternative expressions of devotion and possibly reorient its spiritual and pastoral aspects.

20. *Sub mandato* – In this category, the critical issues are not connected to the phenomenon itself, which is rich in positive elements, but to a person, a family, or a group of people who are misusing it. For instance, the spiritual experience may be exploited for particular and undue financial gain, committing immoral acts, or carrying out a pastoral activity apart from the one already present in the ecclesiastical territory without accepting the instructions of the Diocesan Bishop. In this situation, the pastoral leadership of the specific place where the phenomenon is occurring is entrusted to the Diocesan Bishop (or to another person delegated by the Holy See), who, if unable to intervene directly, will try to reach a reasonable agreement.

21. *Prohibetur et obstruatur* – While there are legitimate requests and some positive elements, the critical issues and risks associated with this phenomenon appear to be very serious. Therefore, to prevent further confusion or even scandal that could erode the faith of ordinary people, the Dicastery asks the Diocesan Bishop to declare publicly that adherence to this phenomenon is not allowed. At the same time, the Diocesan Bishop is asked to offer a catechesis that can help the faithful understand the reasons for the decision and reorient the legitimate spiritual concerns of that part of the People of God.

22. *Declaratio de non supernaturalitate* – In this situation, the Dicastery authorizes the Diocesan Bishop to declare that the phenomenon is found to be not supernatural. This decision must be based on facts and evidence that are concrete and proven. For instance, if an alleged visionary admits to having lied or if credible witnesses provide elements of proof that allow one to discover that the phenomenon was based on fabrication, an erroneous intention, or mythomania.

23. In light of the aforementioned points, it is reaffirmed that, as a rule, neither the Diocesan Bishop, nor the Episcopal Conferences, nor the Dicastery will declare that these phenomena are of supernatural origin, even if a *Nihil obstat* is granted (cf. Par. 11, above). It remains true, however, that the Holy Father can authorize a special procedure in this regard.

II. PROCEDURES TO FOLLOW

A. Substantive Norms

Art. 1 – It is the responsibility of the Diocesan Bishop, in dialogue with the national Episcopal Conference, to examine cases of alleged supernatural phenomena that occur within his territory and to formulate a final judgment on them, including the possible promotion of an associated veneration or devotion. The judgment of the Bishop is to be submitted to the Dicastery for approval.

Art. 2 – After having investigated the events in question according to the following norms, it is the responsibility of the Diocesan Bishop to transmit the results of the investigation, with his *Votum*, to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and to intervene according to the indications provided by the Dicastery. It is the responsibility of the Dicastery to evaluate the Diocesan Bishop's way of proceeding and to approve or not approve the determination that the Bishop proposes to attribute to the specific case.

Art. 3 § 1 – The Diocesan Bishop is to refrain from making any public statement in favor of the authenticity or supernatural nature of such phenomena and from having any personal connection with them. Yet, he must remain vigilant and, if necessary, intervene with swiftness and prudence, according to the procedures indicated in the following norms.

§ 2 – If forms of devotion emerge in connection with the alleged supernatural event, even without true and

proper veneration, the Diocesan Bishop has the serious obligation of initiating a comprehensive canonical investigation as soon as possible to safeguard the Faith and prevent abuses.

§ 3 – The Diocesan Bishop should exercise particular care, even using the means at his own disposal, to prevent the spread of confused religious manifestations or the dissemination of any materials pertaining to the alleged supernatural phenomenon (such as the weeping of sacred images; the sweating, bleeding, or mutation of consecrated hosts, etc.) to avoid fueling a sensationalistic climate (cf. Art. 11 § 1).

Art. 4 – When the alleged phenomenon involves the competence of multiple Diocesan Bishops, due to the domicile of the individuals involved or the spread of the forms of veneration or popular devotion associated with the phenomenon, those Diocesan Bishops, in consultation with the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, can establish an Interdiocesan Commission. This Commission, presided over by one of the Diocesan Bishops, will provide for the investigation in accordance with the following articles. For this purpose, they may also seek the assistance of the relevant offices of the Episcopal Conference.

Art. 5 – If the alleged supernatural events involve the competence of Diocesan Bishops belonging to the same ecclesiastical province, the Metropolitan—after consulting the Episcopal Conference and the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, and upon the Dicastery’s mandate—can assume the task of establishing and presiding over the Commission referred to in Art. 4.

Art. 6 § 1 – When the alleged supernatural events involve an ecclesiastical region referred to in cann. 433-434 *CIC*, the presiding Bishop shall ask the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith for a special mandate to proceed.

§ 2 – In this case, the procedures will follow *ex analogia* the provisions of Art. 5, while observing the directions received from the Dicastery.

B. Procedural Norms

Investigatory Phase

Art. 7 § 1 – Whenever the Diocesan Bishop receives a report, which has at least the semblance of truth, about events of an alleged supernatural origin pertaining to the Catholic Faith and occurring within the territory of his competence, he shall prudently inform himself about the events and circumstances either personally or through a Delegate. He should also promptly gather all the elements useful for an initial assessment.

§ 2 – If the phenomena in question can be easily managed within the scope of those directly involved and if no danger to the community is perceived, the Diocesan Bishop, after consulting with the Dicastery, shall take no further action, although the duty of vigilance remains.

§ 3 – If persons involved are dependent on different Diocesan Bishops, the opinions of these Bishops should be heard. When an alleged phenomenon originates in one place and involves further developments in other locations, it may be evaluated differently in those locations. In such a situation, each Diocesan Bishop always has the power to decide what he considers pastorally prudent in his own territory, after consulting with the Dicastery.

§ 4 – When the alleged phenomenon involves various types of objects, the Diocesan Bishop, personally or through a Delegate, may order that those objects be stored in a safe and secure place, pending clarification of the case. When it involves an alleged Eucharistic miracle, the consecrated species must be kept in a confidential place and in an appropriate manner.

§ 5 – If the gathered elements seem sufficient, the Diocesan Bishop shall decide whether to initiate a phase of evaluating the phenomenon, to propose to the Dicastery in his *Votum* a final judgment for the greater good of the

faith of the Church and in order to safeguard and promote the spiritual welfare of the faithful.

Art. 8 § 1 – The Diocesan Bishop^[19] shall constitute an Investigatory Commission, among whose members there is to be at least one theologian, one canonist, and one expert chosen based on the nature of the phenomenon.^[20] The purpose of this Commission is not only to reach a statement regarding the truthfulness of the occurrences in question but also to carry out a detailed examination of every aspect of the event, with the goal of providing the Diocesan Bishop with every element that would be useful for an evaluation.

§ 2 – The members of the Investigatory Commission shall be of unquestionable reputation, sure faith, certain doctrine, and proven prudence. They shall have no direct or indirect involvement with the persons or events that are being discerned.

§ 3 – The Diocesan Bishop shall appoint a Delegate, either chosen from among the members of the Commission or external to it, with the responsibility of coordinating the work of the Commission, presiding over it, and preparing its sessions.

§ 4 – The Diocesan Bishop or his Delegate shall also appoint a Notary to attend the meetings and record the minutes of the witness examinations and of any other official act of the Commission. The Notary is responsible for ensuring that the minutes are duly signed and that all the acts of the investigatory phase are collected, well-ordered, and stored in the archives of the Diocesan Curia. The Notary will also provide for the convocation of the Commission and prepare its documents.

§ 5 – All of the members of the Commission are required to maintain the secrecy of office, which is to be sworn by oath.

Art. 9 § 1 – Witness examinations are to be conducted in analogy to what is prescribed by the universal norms (cf. cann. 1558-1571 *CIC*; cann. 1239-1252 *CCEO*). They shall be based on questions formulated by the Delegate, after a suitable discussion with the other members of the Commission.

§ 2 – The sworn depositions of the persons involved in the alleged supernatural occurrences are to be given in the presence of the entire Commission, or at least some of its members. When the facts of the case are based on eyewitness testimony, witnesses are to be examined as soon as possible to benefit from temporal proximity to the event.

§ 3 – Confessors of the persons claiming to be involved in events of supernatural origin may not testify about any of the matters they have learned in sacramental confession.^[21]

§ 4 – Spiritual directors of the persons claiming to be involved in events of supernatural origin may not testify about any of the matters they have learned in spiritual direction, unless the persons involved authorize the deposition in writing.

Art. 10 – If the materials under investigation include written texts or other elements (e.g., video, audio, photographic) disclosed through the media and authored by a person involved in the alleged phenomenon, those materials shall be subjected to a careful examination by experts (cf. Art. 3 § 3). The Notary is to include the results of the examination in the documentation of the investigation.

Art. 11 § 1 – If the extraordinary events referred to in Art. 7 § 1 involve different types of objects (cf. Art. 3 § 3), the Commission shall undertake a thorough investigation of those objects using the experts on the Commission or other experts identified for the case. The aim of this investigation is to reach a scientific, doctrinal, and canonical assessment of the objects to aid in the subsequent evaluation.

§ 2 – If the extraordinary event involves any findings of an organic nature that require special laboratory and, in any case, technical-scientific investigations, the Commission will entrust the study of those elements to genuine

experts in the relevant area of investigation.

§ 3 – If the phenomenon involves the Body and Blood of the Lord in the sacramental signs of bread and wine, special care should be given so that any analyses on the Eucharistic species do not result in disrespect for the Blessed Sacrament, ensuring that due reverence for it is maintained.

§ 4 – If alleged extraordinary events give rise to problems of public order, the Diocesan Bishop shall cooperate with the competent civil authority.

Art. 12 – If the alleged supernatural events continue during the investigation and the situation suggests prudential measures, the Diocesan Bishop shall not hesitate to enforce those acts of good governance to avoid uncontrolled or dubious displays of devotion, or the beginning of a veneration based on elements that are as of yet undefined.

Evaluation Phase

Art. 13 – The Diocesan Bishop, with the help of the members of the Commission established by him, will thoroughly evaluate the collected material following the discernment criteria cited above (cf. I, Pars. 10-23, above), as well as the positive and negative criteria that follow, which are also to be applied cumulatively.

Art. 14 – Among the *positive* criteria, the following points should be considered:

1°. The credibility and good reputation of the persons who claim to be recipients of supernatural events or to be directly involved in them, as well as the reputation of the witnesses who have been heard. In particular, one should consider the mental equilibrium, honesty and moral uprightness, sincerity, humility, and habitual docility toward ecclesiastical authority, willingness to cooperate with it, and promotion of a spirit of authentic ecclesial communion;

2°. The doctrinal orthodoxy of the phenomenon and any messages related to it;

3°. The unpredictable nature of the phenomenon, by which it is evident that it is not the result of the initiative of the people involved;

4°. The fruits of the Christian life, including a spirit of prayer, conversions, vocations to the priesthood and religious life, acts of charity, as well as sound devotion and abundant and constant spiritual fruits. The contribution of these fruits to the growth of ecclesial communion is to be evaluated.

Art. 15 – Among the *negative* criteria, one should carefully consider:

1°. The possibility of a manifest error about the event;

2°. Potential doctrinal errors. One must consider the possibility that the person claiming to be the recipient of the events of supernatural origin may have added—even unconsciously—purely human elements or some error of a natural order to a private revelation, not due to bad intentions, but to the subjective perception of the phenomenon;

3°. A sectarian spirit that breeds division in the Church;

4°. An overt pursuit of profit, power, fame, social recognition, or other personal interest closely linked to the event;

5°. Gravely immoral actions committed by the subject or the subject's followers at or around the time of the

event;

6°. Psychological alterations or psychopathic tendencies in the person that may have exerted an influence on the alleged supernatural event. Also, any psychosis, collective hysteria, and other elements traceable to a pathological context should be considered.

Art. 16 – The use of purported supernatural experiences or recognized mystical elements as a means of or a pretext for exerting control over people or carrying out abuses is to be considered of particular moral gravity.

Art. 17 – The evaluation of the results of the investigation into the alleged supernatural phenomena referred to in Art. 7 § 1 shall be carried out with care and diligence, respecting both the persons involved and any technical-scientific examination that was conducted on the alleged supernatural phenomenon.

Conclusory Phase

Art. 18 – After completing the investigation, carefully examining the events and the information that has been gathered,[22]considering the impact that the alleged occurrences have had on the People of God entrusted to him, and taking special account of the abundance of the spiritual fruits brought about by any new devotion that may have emerged, the Diocesan Bishop, with the help of the Delegate, should prepare a report on the alleged phenomenon. Taking into account all the facts of the case, both positive and negative, he shall prepare a personal *Votum* on the matter, in which he proposes to the Dicastery a final judgment that normally follows one of the following formulas:[23]

1°. *Nihil obstat*

2°. *Prae oculis habeatur*

3°. *Curatur*

4°. *Sub mandato*

5°. *Prohibetur et obstruatur*

6°. *Declaratio de non supernaturalitate*

Art. 19 – When the investigation is concluded, all the acts related to the case are transmitted to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith for final approval.

Art. 20 – The Dicastery will then proceed to examine the acts of the case, evaluating the moral and doctrinal elements of the spiritual experience, the use that has been made of it, and the *Votum* of the Diocesan Bishop. The Dicastery may request further information from the Diocesan Bishop, seek other opinions, or, in rare instances, even proceed to a new examination of the case separate from the one carried out by the Diocesan Bishop. In light of its examination, the Dicastery will either confirm or not confirm the determination proposed by the Diocesan Bishop.

Art. 21 § 1 – Upon receiving the Dicastery's response, unless directed otherwise, the Diocesan Bishop, in agreement with the Dicastery, will clearly make known to the People of God the judgment on the events in question.

§ 2 – The Diocesan Bishop will inform the national Episcopal Conference of the determination approved by the Dicastery.

Art. 22 § 1 – In cases where a *Nihil obstat* is granted (cf. Art. 18, 1°), the Diocesan Bishop will pay the utmost attention to the correct appreciation of the fruits resulting from the examined phenomenon, while also continuing to exercise vigilance over it with prudent attention. In such a case, the Diocesan Bishop will clearly indicate, through a decree, the nature of the authorization and the limits of any permitted veneration, specifying that the faithful “are authorized to give to it their adherence in a prudent manner.”[24]

§ 2 – The Diocesan Bishop will also take care to ensure that the faithful do not consider any of the determinations as an approval of the supernatural nature of the phenomenon itself.

§ 3 – The Dicastery, in any case, reserves the right to intervene again depending on the development of the phenomenon in question.

Art. 23 § 1 – If a precautionary (cf. Art. 18, 2-4°) or a negative (cf. Art. 18, 5-6°) determination is made, the Diocesan Bishop must formally make it known, after having obtained the Dicastery’s approval. In the announcement, the Bishop should use clear and easily understandable language. Moreover, to foster the growth of a healthy spirituality, he should consider the advisability of making known the reasons for the decision and its doctrinal basis in the Catholic Faith.

§ 2 – In communicating a negative decision, the Diocesan Bishop may omit information that might cause unjust detriment to the persons involved.

§ 3 – If the dissemination of writings of messages continues, the legitimate pastors are to be vigilant according to can. 823 *CIC* (cf. cann. 652 § 2; 654 *CCEO*), admonishing abuses and whatever brings damage to right faith and good morals or is otherwise dangerous for the welfare of souls. Ordinary measures may be used for this purpose, including penal precepts (cf. can. 1319 *CIC*; can. 1406 *CCEO*).

§ 4 – It is particularly appropriate to make use of the measures named in § 3 (above) when the behaviors to be corrected involve objects or places connected to alleged supernatural phenomena.

Art. 24 – Regardless of the final approved determination, the Diocesan Bishop, either personally or through a Delegate, must continue to watch over the phenomenon and the people involved, exercising his ordinary power.

Art. 25 – If the alleged supernatural phenomena can be traced with certainty to a deliberate intent to bewilder and deceive others for ulterior motives (such as for profit or other personal interests), the Diocesan Bishop will apply, on a case-by-case basis, the relevant canonical penal norms in force.

Art. 26 – The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith can intervene *motu proprio* at any moment and stage of the discernment regarding alleged supernatural phenomena.

Art. 27 – These *Norms* entirely replace the previous *Norms* of 25 February 1978.

The Supreme Pontiff, Francis, at the Audience granted to the undersigned Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, together with the Secretary for the Doctrinal Section of the same Dicastery, on 4 May 2024, approved these Norms, which were deliberated in the Ordinary Session of this Dicastery on 17 April 2024, and he ordered their publication, establishing that they enter into effect on 19 May 2024, the Solemnity of Pentecost.

Given in Rome, at the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith on 17 May 2024.

Víctor Manuel Card. Fernández

Prefect

Msgr. Armando Matteo

Secretary

for the Doctrinal Section

Ex Audientia Die 4.5.2024

FRANCISCUS

[1] John of the Cross, *The Dark Night II*, 17, 6, in in Id., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. 20173, pp. 437-438.

[2] Id., *The Spiritual Canticle B*, prol., 1, in *op. cit.*, p. 470.

[3] Id., *The Dark Night II*, 17, 8, in *op. cit.*, p. 438.

[4] Id., *The Living Flame of Love B III*, 47, in *op. cit.*, p. 692.

[5] Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (30 September 2010), no. 14: AAS 102 (2010), p. 696.

[6] K. Rahner, *Visions and Prophecies*, Burns & Oates, London 1963, p. 73. Emphasis added.

[7] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* (18 November 1965), no. 4: AAS 58 (1966), p. 819.

[8] John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2, 22, 3-5, in Id., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. 20173, p. 230. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 65.

[9] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* (18 November 1965), no. 5: AAS 58 (1966), p. 819.

[10] John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle B*, 37, 4, in *op. cit.*, pp. 615-616.

[11] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 67. Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *The Message of Fatima* (26 June 2000), Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2000.

[12] Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (7 December 1965), nos. 39-42: AAS 57 (1965), pp. 44-49; Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (19 March 2018), nn. 10-18, 143: AAS 110 (2018), pp. 1114-1116, 1150-1151; Id., Apostolic Letter *Totum Amoris Est* (28 December 2022), *passim*: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28 December 2022, pp. 8-10.

[13] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *C'est la confiance* (15 October 2023), no. 35: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 16 October 2023, p. 3.

[14] Cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (19 March 2018), nos. 166 and 173: AAS 110 (2018), pp. 1157 and 1159-1160.

[15] John Paul II, *Message for the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities* (27 May 1998), no. 4: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XXI 1: 1998, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2000, p. 1064. Cf. Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (30 September 2010), no. 14: AAS 102 (2010), p. 696.

[16] Sacra Rituum Congregatio, *Decretum beatificationis et canonizationis Servae Dei Gemmae Galgani, virginis saecularis*: AAS 24 (1932), p. 57. In English translation, it reads: “[Pius XI] happily chose to dwell on the heroic virtues of this innocent as well as penitent girl, without, however, by the present decree (which, of course, is never usually done) passing judgment on the supernatural charisms of the Servant of God.”

[17] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishop of Como about an Alleged Visionary* (25 September 2023).

[18] The expression “in the midst of” does not mean “by means of” or “through,” but indicates that even though a certain context is not necessarily of supernatural origin, the Holy Spirit is working good things.

[19] Or one of the other ecclesiastical authorities referred to in Arts. 4-6.

[20] Such as a medical doctor (and preferably one who specializes in a related discipline, such as psychiatry or hematology), a biologist, a chemist, etc.

[21] Cf. cann. 983 § 1; 1550 § 2, 2° *CIC*; cann. 733 § 1; 1231 § 1, 2° *CCEO*; Congregation for the Causes of Saints, *Instruction “Sanctorum Mater” for Conducting Diocesan or Eparchial Inquiries in the Causes of Saints* (17 May 2007), artt. 101-102: AAS 99 (2007), p. 494; Apostolic Penitentiary, *Note on the Importance of the Internal Forum and the Inviolability of the Sacramental Seal* (29 June 2019): AAS 111 (2019), pp. 1215-1218.

[22] All testimonial evidence should also be thoroughly evaluated by carefully applying all the criteria in light of the canonical norms regarding the probative force of testimonies (cf. *ex analogia* can. 1572 *CIC*; can. 1253 *CCEO*).

[23] See above, I, pars. 17-22.

[24] Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (30 September 2010), no. 14: AAS 102 (2010), p. 696. The paragraph in full states, “Ecclesiastical approval of a private revelation essentially means that its message contains nothing contrary to faith and morals; it is licit to make it public and the faithful are authorized to give to it their adherence in a prudent manner. [...] It is a help which is proffered, but its use is not obligatory. In any event, it must be a matter of nourishing faith, hope and love, which are for everyone the permanent path of salvation.”
