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Press Conference to present the Note “The Queen of Peace” about the spiritual experience connected to Medjugorje, of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith

Intervention of His Eminence Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández

Intervention of Msgr. Armando Matteo

Intervention of Dr. Andrea Torielli

At 11.30 today a press conference was livestreamed from the Holy See Press Office to present the Note “The Queen of Peace”, on the spiritual experience connected to Medjugorje, of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The speakers were: His Eminence Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Msgr. Armando Matteo, secretary for the Doctrinal Section of the same Dicastery, and Dr. Andrea Torielli, editorial director of the Dicastery for Communication.

The following are their interventions:

Intervention of His Eminence Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández

These words of mine, although the printed pages will be distributed to journalists for their use, do not constitute an official document. They will include some explanations that can help to grasp better the meaning of the decision taken. On some details of what I will say, there have already been long discussions that may continue, and I simply give my interpretation of these data, shared by the many other people who have studied the matter.

Therefore, I will not repeat what the Note says, even though I hope it has been read carefully, because what I will say now will complete that Note, adding some useful elements.

We are aware of the negative opinion of the Bishop emeritus of Mostar, who has expressed himself many times and in a very different manner. He had the right and the duty to do so. Given that there was no consensus around his view, the episcopate of the then-Yugoslavia created a study commission, and at the end of its work, in 1991, it issued the so-called Zara Declaration on the events of Medjugorje.

Unlike the more decisive opinion of the Bishop of Mostar, the Zara Declaration says only that “on the basis of the research carried out so far, it is not possible to state that these are supernatural apparitions and phenomena”. Then, referring to the many pilgrims, it proposes that “in Medjugorje and with Medjugorje, a healthy devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary can be promoted, in harmony with the teaching of the Church”.

This report did not produce the expected effects, and so Pope Benedict XVI decided to create an International Commission, extraneous to the internal problems of the Church in Yugoslavia. Let us look at the conclusions of this Holy See International Commission, known as the “Ruini Commission”.

With regard to the initial phase of the “Medjugorje” phenomenon, the Commission considers that “in the first seven apparitions, between 24 June and 3 July 1981, the youngsters, psychically healthy, were not influenced by anyone and they unanimously testified that they saw Our Lady entrusting them with messages of conversion and penance. In other words, **the devotion that has arisen in Medjugorje has a supernatural origin, it is authentic**”.

And these are the results of the vote on the first seven alleged apparitions:

Constat de supernaturalitate: 13 votes in favour

Constat de non supernaturalite: 1

Nondum decernendum: 1

With regard to the supernatural nature of the subsequent apparitions, the report says that in the successive phase, one might think of an external influx on the part of various subjects, and that the apparitions become almost “planned”. Although only two Members expressed a *Constat de non supernaturalite* for these successive apparitions, 12 Members instead voted with *Nondum decernendum*: that is, they were unable to issue a definitive judgement.

With regard to the consequences of the phenomenon, these are the results:

Positive effects: 5 votes.

Mixed but predominantly positive effects: 6 votes.

Mixed effects: 3 votes.

As you know, there are thousands of groups linked to Medjugorje in the world. In a small percentage (five or six dioceses), important problems have emerged, and this prevents us from talking about solely positive effects. For this reason, some members refer to mixed results.

Then, opinion is largely in favour of the appointment of an Authority dependent on the Holy See, and the erection of a pontifical Shrine.

The attitude of the Supreme Pontiffs:

Saint John Paul II

On 6 July 1995, a visit by John Paul II to Medjugorje was announced, during the apostolic journey to Sarajevo. The Pope, in some private letters, had in fact referred positively to Medjugorje, and had expressed the desire to visit the place. Informed of this, Bishop Perić of Mostar asked the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to avoid such a visit. Two letters of Pope Saint John Paul II are of special importance, of which I will provide some passages:

“(…) I thank Sofia for what she has told me about Medjugorje. I too visit **this place every day** when I pray; I join with all those who pray there and receive from there a call to prayer” (Letter of 8 December 1992 to Marek and Zofia Skmarnickidi, in Emmanuel Maillard, *The hidden child of Medjugorje*, Shalom, 2012);

“(…) Unfortunately, I have never been to Medjugorje, even though **my gaze is turned towards that place**. Tell your wife this. I look towards that place and it seems to me that the terrible things happening now in the Balkans **cannot be understood without Medjugorje**” (Letter of 6 December 1993 to Mr. Marek, *ib.*).

According to various witnesses, who repeat what is said in these letters, several times the Holy Father expressed an intense wish to visit Medjugorje.

Benedict XVI

We have clear thought from the then-Cardinal Ratzinger with regard to Medjugorje, dating from 1985. The then-Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said: “One of our criteria is to separate the aspect of the true or presumed “supernaturalness” of the apparition from that of its spiritual fruit. The pilgrimages of ancient Christianity were directed towards places about which our critical spirit as moderns would sometimes be perplexed as to the ‘scientific truth’ of the tradition attached to them. This does not detract from the fact that **those pilgrimages were fruitful, beneficial, and important for the life of the Christian people**. The problem is not so much that of modern hypercriticism (which then ends up, among other things, in a form of new credulity) but that of **evaluating the vitality and orthodoxy of the religious life that develops around these places**”.

You can see, in this passage, that Cardinal Ratzinger uses the expression “around”. In the recently published norms it states “in the midst of”, but in the final analysis it affirms the same thing: beyond the origin of the apparitions, supernatural or otherwise, what really happens “around” or “in the midst of” Medjugorje? Is there spiritual vitality, faith, conversion, positive results? Can it be seen that God is doing good work? We do not say that he does so “because of” or “through” the apparitions, on whose origin we do not express a judgement. That criterion of the then-Cardinal Ratzinger is the same as Pope Francis’, and it is what is applied in this Note.

Francis

Pope’s Francis view is very explicit in the words pronounced on the return flight from Fatima in 2017:

“As for Medjugorje, a commission was set up headed by Cardinal Ruini. Benedict XVI set it up. At the end of 2013 or the beginning of 2014, I received the results from Cardinal Ruini. The commission was made up of good theologians, bishops and cardinals. Good, good, good people. The Ruini report is **very, very good**. Then, there were some doubts at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and the Congregation judged it appropriate to send each member ... the entire documentation, even the things that seemed contrary to the Ruini report. ... It didn’t seem right to me; it was like putting the Ruini report up for auction – sorry for this word – a report which had been **done very well**. ... The real core of the Ruini report: the spiritual fact, the pastoral fact, the people go there and are converted, the people who meet God, who change their lives... **For this there is no**

magic wand, this spiritual-pastoral fact cannot be denied” (Press Conference of the Holy Father during the return flight from Fatima, 13 May 2017).

In that press conference, Pope Francis also said that he had decided to appoint a special envoy to see the situation on the ground, to be able to say something in relation to it.

When Archbishop Henryk Hoser was appointed as *Holy See Special Envoy* “to examine” the situation in Medjugorje, it is known that the conclusions of his examination, after having lived for a period in Medjugorje, were very positive, in line with the Ruini report.

Years later, the current *Apostolic Visitor*, Archbishop Aldo Cavalli, although he prefers not to give an opinion on the supernatural character of the messages, also had a very favourable outlook, due to his experience on the ground. Indeed, some days ago I spoke at length with him, and he recounted to me his daily life in Medjugorje, which in his opinion is an oasis of peace and faith where God, through the Queen of Peace, does a great deal of good. Then there are countless positive fruits throughout the world, of which Pope Francis is well aware.

On 14 January 2019, a disposition of the Holy Father was made public, according to which “it is possible to organize pilgrimages to Medjugorje, always taking care to avoid that they be interpreted as an authentication of the events”.

In the wake of this, the current *nihil obstat*

From what we have been able to see thus far, what stands out in the Pontiffs is an attitude of great respect towards a devotion that is very widespread among in the People of God, which translates into an analysis of the positive spiritual phenomenon that occurs in the heart of the people, rather than in a conclusion on the origin, supernatural or otherwise, of the phenomenon. This is expressed in the *nulla osta* provided by the Dicastery’s new Norms. The phenomenon we are able to observe today is analysed and a pastoral conclusion is reached.

With regard to a spiritual event, the faithful, through the *nihil obstat*, “are authorized to give to it their prudent adhesion” (*cf. Norms*, Art. 22; Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 14).

This determination indicates that the faithful can receive a positive stimulus for their Christian life through this spiritual proposal, and it also authorizes public worship, because in any case **in its midst** (not because of presumed supernatural phenomena) many positive results have been verified and there is no apparent danger that negative or risky effects are widespread among the People of God.

Although the decree is issued by the local Bishop, in a case with such widespread diffusion, the Dicastery is involved in an entirely special way.

Indeed, besides the pilgrimages to Medjugorje, devotion to the Mother of God, Queen of Peace, has spread throughout the world. Charitable works linked to various communities and associations, in particular those concerned with orphans, drug addiction, alcoholism, the disabled and young people with various problems, have emerged.

All this is not only a spirituality of ecclesial groups; it has become a popular phenomenon that does not pay a great deal of attention to the messages or discussions regarding supernatural origin. What attracts people is the Queen of Peace and the presence of her image that is found in all sorts of places.

In many small villages, in the countryside, niches with the image of the Queen of Peace can be found everywhere. I must confess that, when I was a parish priest in Argentina, I had proposed to the faithful of various

quarters to build aedicules with the image of Our Lady, and the first image that was proposed to me was that of the Queen of Peace.

The messages

Along with the results mentioned in the Note, without referring to the supernatural origin, the Dicastery has had to analyze the messages, because this is a task directed by the Dicastery.

The majority of the messages include good content that can stimulate the faithful to conversion, to growth in the encounter with Christ, to be builders of peace in the world. That is, they repropose, with other words closer to the simple language of our peoples, the encouragement and exhortations that come from the Gospel.

There are also a few messages that can contain phrases that are not precise from an academic point of view, phrases certainly not from Saint Thomas Aquinas. For example, there has been criticism of a message in which it says that the deceased feel joy when Mass is offered for them. It is a popular language, poetic and existential, not purely theological. If someone looks at it with a magnifying glass, they come to say that this means that there is no condemned person, or that one cannot speak of joy if the deceased are in purgatory. But it is another language that ultimately conveys a very Catholic conviction: that it is good and beautiful to pray for our dead, and that this act of charity is worth more than our sadness at their death.

On the other hand, we must remember that when there are spiritual experiences of different kinds, there is no dictation, Our Lady does not say: “repeat or write word for word what I tell you”. The person perceives a content and makes an effort to remember it and express it as best he can, and he may not find the most suitable words for it. So, this means that these supposed messages should not be read as if they were a magisterial text, a piece of academic theology or catechism. One must grasp the core, the deeper thought behind the imperfection of the words.

Moreover, the Note recalls a decisive principle: when one recognizes the action of the Holy Spirit in the midst of a spiritual experience, it does not mean that everything that belongs to that experience is exempt from any imprecision, imperfection or possible confusion. It should again be recalled that these phenomena “at times appear connected to confused human experiences, theologically inaccurate expressions, or interests that are not entirely legitimate”. This, therefore, does not exclude the possibility of some error of a natural order not owing to bad intentions, but to the subjective perception of the phenomenon.

After the study by the Commission of the Bishops’ Conference of Yugoslavia, the Bishop Secretary of the Commission acknowledged that, although some messages could be erroneous, confused or meaningless, “the majority of these messages implement the teaching of the Gospel and the Church ... and as such are the basis of her renewal and of the prosperity of many faithful”.

Some might dispute this decision to give a general *nulla osta* to the texts published, saying that, since there are other doctrinally very clear texts that the faithful can read, it would be better to prohibit these messages, which at times appear not to be very precise. But if we do this, not much would remain to be read even among the spiritual authors. Or, there would remain only a genre of very precise texts with the consequent impoverishment of the broad spiritual richness of the Church. One would have to forbid, for example, texts by Doctors of the Church such as Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux or even Saint John of the Cross.

Let us give an example. In the poem *Living Flame of Love*, the Doctor Saint John of the Cross describes – follow this reasoning – the centre and foundation of the soul as the purest and most intimate substance of it. But he also speaks about the infinite centre of the substance of the soul. Here things become complicated because: in what sense would the substance of the soul be infinite? But still more problematic is the fact that he affirms that this centre of the soul is God. If one does not interpret them adequately, these texts by the Doctor Saint make

one think that the substance of the soul is God himself. Does it seem to you to be precise language, that could not cause confusion?

In the case of Saint Thérèse, also a Doctor of the Church, we see for example this phrase: “I always feel the same bold confidence of becoming a great saint because I don’t count on my merits since I have *none*, but I trust in Him who is Virtue and Holiness. God alone, content with my weak efforts, will raise me to Himself and make me a *saint*, clothing me in His infinite merits” (Ms A, 32r^o: 124).

Look instead at what the Council of Trent teaches:

“If anyone says that the just ought not for the good works done in God to expect and hope for an eternal reward from God ... let him be anathema” (*Council of Trent, Canon on Justification*, 26).

“If anyone says that the good works of the one justified are in such manner the gifts of God that they are not also the good merits of him justified ... let him be anathema” (*Canon* 32).

When Saint Thérèse was proposed as a Doctor of the Church, some were opposed because they said that she was Lutheran, precisely because of these texts of hers. Indeed, there was no shortage of fanatics who proposed to forbid the faithful from reading these authors, just like in the time when even the reading of the Bible was prohibited because it could have led to confusion.

And both Saint John of the Cross and Saint Thérèse had had a long formation in the convent, unlike these young people from Medjugorje.

Even the language of the great mystics strives to transmit to hearts the desire for God, the wish to entrust oneself fully to him, the capacity to forget oneself faced with the infinite glory of God, and they succeed in attracting many people on the path of spiritual maturation. Their language, that which is most symbolic and succinct, strives for this, and very often it is far more effective for this purpose than the *Summa Theologica*.

In the spiritual experience of the alleged visionaries of Medjugorje, whether or not it has a direct supernatural origin, we can first of all presume that there is an internal experience that they attempt to translate into words, and that they do so with the few elements they may have received in catechesis.

The demand, rather, is this: what do these texts stimulate in us? With their simple and existential language, they attract many people who draw from it a stimulus for their life. So, when they say that the dead rejoice when we offer the Mass for them, they call us to a gesture of mercy towards the deceased and to have profound trust in the value of the sacrifice of the Mass, and these things are profoundly Catholic, in a world that believes in nothing, even though a theologian with a magnifying glass might rightly say that they are inaccurate words or even doctrinal errors.

We now welcome these messages, those published in the volume cited in the Note, not as private revelations, because we have no certainty that they are messages from Our Lady, but we welcome them only as edifying texts that can stimulate a true and beautiful spiritual experience.

But regarding this point, the Note insists on another principle: the messages are to be accepted and valued *in their entirety*. It is precisely from this overview that the less clear texts become luminous and complete. Rather than the details, what counts above all are the great exhortations that appear insistently in the totality of the messages. This applies both to the texts of the great Doctors, like Saint John of the Cross or Saint Thérèse, and to the simple texts of Medjugorje.

So, what can we highlight as central and specific aspects of this experience of Medjugorje?

First of all, the proposal for peace, which is translated into the symbolic figure of the Queen of Peace.

“Dear children, I came to you and introduced myself as the Queen of Peace because my Son sent me. I desire, dear children, to help you: to help you so that peace may come” (10 August 2012).

“Love one another. Be brothers and sisters to one another and avoid all quarrels” (25 December 1981). “Dear children, also today I want to call upon you to forgive. Forgive, my children! Forgive others, forgive yourselves” (13 March 2010).

This charity, which enables us to bring peace to the world, also implies loving those who are not Catholics. This is a point that one understands better in the ecumenical and interreligious context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, marked by a terrible war with strong religious components:

“On earth, you are divided, but you are all my children. Muslims, Orthodox, Catholics, all of you are equal before my Son and me. You are all my children. This does not mean that all religions are equal before God, but people are. It is not enough, however, to belong to the Catholic Church to be saved: one must respect God’s will [...]. To whom little has been given, little will be asked” (20 May 1982). “You are not true Christians if you do not respect your brothers and sisters who belong to other religions” (21 February 1983).

How can one not call for peace between religions in the context of a war strongly marked by diverse religious identities?

In the messages there appears, then, a constant invitation to abandon a worldly lifestyle, with frequent calls for conversion, and this appears as the *central* theme: ““Dear children! Today I call you to conversion. This is the most important message I have given you here” (25 February 1996).

“My heart is burning with love for you. The only word I want to say to the world is this: conversion, conversion. Make it known to all my children; I only ask for conversion” (25 April 1983).

At the same time, there is an insistent exhortation not to underestimate the *gravity of evil* and sin, and to take very seriously God’s call to fight against evil and the influence of Satan, without fear in the face of trials.

“You have allowed [Satan], without realizing it, to take over in you, to dominate you [...]. Do not give in, my children! Wipe from my face the tears I shed seeing what you do. Look around you! Find time to approach God in the Church. Come into your Father’s house. Find time to gather as a family and plead for God’s grace. [...] Do not look with scorn on the poor man begging you for a morsel of bread. Do not send him away from your full table. Help him! And God will also help you [...]. You, my children, have forgotten all these things, and Satan has also contributed to this. Do not give in! [...] I do not want to reproach you further; instead, I want to call you once again to prayer, fasting, and penance” (28 January 1987).

Our Lady points out an opportunity to end the war, but it requires the cooperation of Christians in giving the gift of their lives. This implies a strong call to responsibility: “You talk, but do not live. That is why, my children, this war is lasting so long. I call upon you to open yourselves to God and to live with God in your hearts” (25 October 1993).

In this context, we find a constant invitation to prayer in its various forms, but alongside prayer there must be fraternal love, the centre of the Gospel: “This is the **only truth**, and it is the truth that my Son left you. You do not need to examine it much. What is asked of you is to love and to give” (2 January 2015).

There are then pressing calls to personal witness:

“My children, great grace has been given to you to be witnesses of God’s love. Do not take lightly the

responsibility that has been given to you” (2 November 2012).

“Apostles of my love, my children, be like rays of the sun that, with the warmth of my Son’s love, warm everyone around them. My children, the world needs apostles of love” (2 October 2018).

Aspects to consider carefully

We said previously that in these spiritual experiences there is usually a mixture of what may come from God and other things that may come from the desires, the stories lived, the training received, the culture of the supposed visionaries. On reflection, if this also happens in the Bible, where one has to discern between what is divine teaching and what is culture or human weakness, all the more so does it happen in these spiritual experiences. The question then is: what are the weaknesses in these Medjugorje messages?

For some, the frequency of the messages is problematic; that in reality they add nothing and at times insist too much on the need to listen to these messages: “Listen to my messages”, “Accept my messages”, “Live my messages”. At times, even the Virgin talks about her plans of salvation and insists that they be accepted, as though she had plans different from those of God. In this regard, there appears to be the danger of creating an excessive dependence with regard to the apparitions and the messages.

But the fact that several Medjugorje messages warn against falling prey to precisely this risk is striking:

“Do not go in search of extraordinary things. Instead, take the Gospel, read it, and everything will be clear to you” (12 November 1982).

“Why do you ask so many questions? Every answer is in the Gospel” (19 September 1981).

“Do not believe the lying voices that speak to you about false things, a false light. You, my children, return to Scripture!” (2 February 2018).

“My children, read the book of the Gospels. It is always something new; it is what binds you to my Son, who was born to bring words of life to all my children” (2 November 2019).

“You seek signs and messages and do not see that, with every morning sunrise, God calls upon you to convert and return to the path of truth and salvation” (25 September 1998). “May the wheat fields speak to you of God’s mercy toward every creature” (25 August 1999). “God wants to save you, and so he sends you messages through people, through nature, and through many other things that can help you understand that you must change the direction of your life” (25 March 1990).

“I am closer to you during the Mass than during an apparition. Many pilgrims would like to be present in the small room of the apparitions, and so they crowd around the rectory. When they swarm in front of the tabernacle, as they now do in front of the rectory, then they will have understood everything; they will have understood the presence of Jesus, because receiving Holy Communion is greater than being a visionary” (12 November 1986).

“You ask me for a sign so that my presence may be believed. The sign will come. But you do not need it: you yourselves must be a sign for others” (8 February 1982).

“Dear children, I speak to you as Mother, with simple words [...]. My Son, on the other hand, who comes from the Eternal Present, he speaks to you with words of life and sows love in hearts that are open” (2 October 2017).

These messages are very clear, and are to be held in special consideration. In this way it seems that, in the

messages as a whole, precious invitations with the scent of the Gospel are mixed with the understandable desires of the alleged visionaries who hope that these appeals be heard so that the world may listen to Christ and change. This is why, at the same time that there appears the crushing insistence to listen to the messages, it seems that the Mother of heaven is going forward by saying: do not stop at these messages, read the Gospel; do not concentrate so much on these extraordinary things, seek Christ who is the only Saviour.

As a consequence, the problem that is eventually posed is solved within the same body of messages. Therefore, this is not problematic since what the messages say is the Gospel itself expressed in existential, current, simple words. When Our Lady asks to be heard, it is her invitation to seek God's love and that of Jesus Christ, which must be put into practice. This is highlighted very clearly in some messages:

"Behold, for this I am with you: to teach you and bring you closer to the Love of God" (25 May 1999).

"Do not waver in your faith and do not ask 'why', thinking that you are alone and abandoned. Instead, open your hearts, pray, and believe firmly. Then your hearts will feel God's closeness and that God never abandons you—that he is always beside you" (25 December 2019).

"Pray, and through prayer encounter my Son, so that *he* may grant you the strength, that *he* may grant you the grace" (23 June 2017).

"I do not directly dispose of divine graces, but I receive from God what I ask for through my prayer" (31 August 1982).

"By living my messages, I desire to lead you to my Son. In all these years that I am with you, *my finger is pointing to my Son*, to Jesus, because I desire to lead you all to him" (28 December 2012).

"I call on you, dear children, so that your life may be united with him. Jesus is the King of Peace, and only he can give you the peace that you seek. I am with you, and I present you to Jesus" (25 December 1995). "In my hands, I have little Jesus, the King of Peace" (25 December 2002). "With great joy, I bring you the King of Peace, that he may bless you with his blessing" (25 December 2007).

"I desire to draw you ever closer to Jesus and his wounded heart so that you might understand the immeasurable love that gave itself for each of you. Therefore, dear children, pray that a fountain of love might flow from your hearts to every person, as well as to those who hate and despise you. In this way, with the love of Jesus, you will be able to overcome all the misery in this world of sorrows, which is without hope for those who do not know Jesus" (25 November 1991).

Therefore, what matters is to be attentive to what the whole of the Medjugorje manifestations reminds us about the teachings of the Gospel, and in any case to focus our gaze not on the details.

But this insistence on listening to the messages becomes problematic in some messages where Our Lady gives orders about dates, places, practicalities, makes decisions about ordinary matters that should be discerned in community. It is the model of "Our Lady the telegraph reporter" that Pope Francis rejects. For example, when she tells what time Mass should be celebrated, or what to do next Advent, or when the Church should celebrate the memory of her birth. We recall the following message, which falls into this category:

"This August 5th will mark the celebration of the second millennium of my birth [...]. I ask you to prepare yourselves intensively over three days [...]. Do not work on these days" (1 August 1984).

Although messages of this type are infrequent in this experience of Medjugorje, and some have not even been published, we can find some of them that are explained solely from the personal desires of the alleged visionaries.

It is reasonable for the faithful, using prudence and common sense, not to take these details seriously nor heed them. One must always recall that in this spiritual experience, along with positive and edifying elements, there are others that are less important.

Negative views. Shadows on Medjugorje

What I have just mentioned is one of the arguments used by those who have said that the phenomenon of Medjugorje is false and even harmful to the faithful.

With respect to these negative opinions, the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, at the beginning of the pontificate of Pope Francis, was very opposed to the Ruini report, based above all on the opinion of two people who concluded their study by even pointing towards a demonic origin of the Medjugorje phenomenon.

Among the comments in support of a negative opinion on Medjugorje, we would like to mention a few.

Some indicated that the lives of the children were not exemplary. And they said so by recounting certain details such as the fact that in the period before the first apparition, one of the girls smoked, raising the suspicion that she had stolen cigarettes from her father. They also emphasized the fact that the boys acknowledged that they had lied twice, once to keep a message that they considered to be private and once under pressure from Father Vlasic. They acknowledged that this was the only time Father Vlasic managed to pressure any of the boys against their will.

Some emphasize the absence of heroic virtues: but it is not necessarily the case that people who receive charismatic gifts or messages must exercise the virtues to a heroic degree. This is required for a beatification, and when beatifying someone there is a very important criterion: beatification does not imply recognizing as authentic the alleged supernatural phenomena experienced by that person. Both of these things must be separated. Even in the case where there is a declaration of supernatural origin, this does not offer any certainty as to the holiness of the person. They are two different things, because, as the Note explains: "When recognizing an action of the Spirit for the good of the People of God "in the midst of" a spiritual experience, present from its beginnings until now, we should remember that the charismatic gifts (*gratiae gratis datae*) that may be connected to that experience do not necessarily require those involved to have moral perfection" (Note, 1).

The fact is that if a person has a charism, for example a charism of healing, when they fall prey to sin, they do not lose that charism, and they continue to heal. Certainly, in some cases, out of prudence, the Church may prohibit the exercise of a charism because there exists a grave risk of scandal or an improper use of the charism.

Another criticism has been that none of the visionaries has become a priest or a religious sister; but these experiences do not necessarily have to be connected to the religious life.

The fact that at times the Virgin announced the apparitions has also been criticized. It is true that the initial events were unexpected, whereas afterwards they were predictable. However, in other apparitions, like at Fatima, there were also indications of the place or time of an apparition.

It has also been said that there are contradictory or unorthodox messages, about which we have already spoken, but some stopped at denouncing religious syncretism, because Our Lady would have said that all religions are equal. However, the messages on this point, which have a very precious meaning in the context of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, do not affirm this. On the contrary, they say the following: This does not mean that all religions are equal before God, but people are" (20 May 1982).

Another point is that at the beginning of these phenomena, there were priests who were not exemplary, even great sinners, close to the alleged visionaries. Father Vlasic, who was a great propagandist of Medjugorje, was dismissed. He was a man with many problems and confusions, but it should be clarified that his moral and sexual failings did not involve the alleged visionaries, but other people from outside, especially in Italy.

He was not exactly a spiritual director, and in fact another of the criticisms is that these young people did not have or had any real spiritual direction that could enlighten and guide them. Father Vlasic was provisionally in charge in the parish of Medjugorje for a short time, after Father Jozo. But at the time of the first apparitions there was Father Jozo. Vlasic was very active in spreading Medjugorje, and from 1986 he moved permanently to Italy. He sought out the children, but it was not true that they were attached to him. In reality, the first apparitions happened when there were no priests in the country, and they continued in the same style when they were no longer there, but it is also true that the Franciscans protected the boys from the persecution of the communist government; two Franciscans were dismissed but later rehabilitated by the Apostolic Signatura, several times they were imprisoned by the communist government. The situation of these Franciscans has many very diverse and complex aspects. Some have even issued a *mea culpa* for leaving these young men alone in a situation that was beyond them.

The darkest and saddest point is the long conflict between the rebel Franciscans (including those who worked in Medjugorje) and the bishops. But this goes far beyond Medjugorje; it began much earlier and did not happen because of Medjugorje, but for other historical reasons that also cast shadows on their work in Medjugorje. This conflict continues today with some rebellious Franciscans, but these are not at all connected with Medjugorje. Those who help in Medjugorje together with the Visitor are far from those attitudes. This has been confirmed to me by the Bishop of Mostar, the Apostolic Nuncio and the Visitor. In other words, it is water under the bridge. On those early days of Medjugorje, the Ruini Commission investigated and concluded that “the boys, who were psychically healthy, were not influenced by anyone and they agreed that they saw Our Lady”.

On the other hand, some repeat comments that have appeared in *social media* without any confirmation. It is said that one of the visionaries had bought an entire building, very expensive, but in reality, she had bought only the apartment where she lived. And so “would have” and “would be” are repeated many times.

However, even if there were a true divine action in these alleged apparitions, the visionaries do not become impeccable. They could and can sin. So, one asks: could they sin in the future? Certainly, they could. And all this does not make the good things of Medjugorje become bad or demoniacal, and the Queen of Peace would continue to do good.

Certainly, if there were a scandal, a public fact that could confuse the faithful, there would need to be an intervention both by the Apostolic Visitor and by the Bishops of the Diocese involved. The nihil obstat does not resolve or close everything for the future. It is a determination open to developments in time and space. In this case we are talking about married people with children, people working in society, people living in the midst of the world subject to temptations like everyone else, and not protected by the religious context of a convent. However, the authorization of public worship to Mary, Queen of Peace, will always remain firm.

A different context

In any case, all these things that have been commented on for years are now situated in **another context**, because we are not reflecting on the supernatural origin. These objections might have more importance if there were a declaration of supernaturalness, but they have less importance because what is being evaluated is rather the **present** spiritual phenomenon, the present fruits, the work that the Holy Spirit does at this time “in the midst of” this phenomenon and not “because of” this phenomenon.

If I say “because of this phenomenon” or “through this phenomenon”, then I need a moral certainty about its supernatural origin. But if I only say that the Holy Spirit does good things “in the midst of” this phenomenon, then

I do not need that same certainty, but only concrete and objective elements about the actual situation.

We therefore continue to speak of alleged supernatural events and alleged supernatural messages, but we can recognize that the Holy Spirit works very well in this devotion to the Queen of Peace, in the midst of pilgrimages, prayer meetings and other pastoral actions carried out in connection with this devotion. The Holy Spirit wants to take advantage of this occasion in which the faithful feel gathered, to work many good things in them. And the Church, by giving this *nihil obstat* and approving the public worship of Our Lady of Peace, expresses that it does not want to leave them by themselves.

The future

What will happen next? How important will the future messages be, if there are any? If there are, they will have to be evaluated and approved for possible publication, and until they are analyzed, the faithful are not advised to consider them as edifying texts.

Does this imply a future risk? Of course it does, which is why the Visitor is given the authority to make decisions in this regard, in dialogue with the Dicastery.

Could there be errors in the new messages? Possibly, but there could also be a great deal of carelessness. That is, communicating things as if they came from the Virgin without proper discernment as to their appropriateness and expediency. Many say: but is it possible to keep silent about something that is believed to have been communicated by Our Lady? Of course it is, as happened with the secrets of Fatima. Think also that the Pope has the charisma of infallibility: he could use it every week so everything is clearer, and instead he does not use it because he does not consider it convenient or prudent.

Let us recall that when Saint Paul spoke of the charismatic gifts, he explained that they do not operate automatically or by force, but that “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (1 Cor 14:32-33). Saint Paul himself, while convinced of the gifts and missions he had received from the Lord, nevertheless went to Jerusalem to consult the Apostles “lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain” (Gal 2:2). On the most important matters for the good of the Church, we cannot discern without the guidance of the authorities.

This is why Our Lady does not command that anything be communicated necessarily or immediately; she does not use us as puppets or dead instruments, she always leaves room for our responsible discernment, both personal and ecclesial, about the convenience, the opportunity, the clarity of what can be transmitted.

On Medjugorje, the discernment of the Visitor will measure expediency. There are already many messages that repeat the same exhortations many times, and let us remember that, as Pope Francis says, it is not advisable to be enthusiastic about a Virgin Postmistress.

In any case, as the Visitor also noted, the vast majority of pilgrims do not go to Medjugorje to seek out the visionaries and hear their messages, but to seek strength, inner peace, the grace to be holier. It is above all a simple place of peace that does much good.

But Medjugorje is also joy. The spirituality of Medjugorje is joyful, festive, and includes an invitation to live the joy of following Christ, giving thanks even for the small beautiful things in life:

“I want to introduce you continually to the joy of life. I desire that each of you may discover the joy and love that can be found only in God and that only God can give” (25 May 1989).

“Dear children, I call upon you to give thanks to God for all the gifts you have discovered during your life and even for the smallest gift you have perceived. I give thanks together with you. And I desire that all of you may experience the joy of these gifts” (25 September 1989).

“My children, those who pray feel the freedom of the children of God ... because God is love and freedom” (25 October 2021).

“I want each of you to be happy here on earth” (25 May 1987).

Finally, at Medjugorje it is also clear that we are called to a life without confines, beyond death. In many messages there is a strong call to awaken the desire for paradise, the search for the ultimate meaning of the existence of eternal life:

“Dear children, today I want to call all of you to decide for Paradise” (25 October 1987). “In your heart, the desire for heaven will be born. Joy will begin to reign in your heart” (25 August 2006). God sent me to guide you toward eternal life” (25 October 2006). “Do not forget that you are pilgrims on the road to eternity” (25 November 2006). “Do not forget that you are passing, like a flower in a field” (25 January 2007). “I desire, my children, that each of you fall in love with the eternal life that is your future” (25 January 2009).

These words may be a combination of human desires and divine motions, but we cannot connect them with the forces of evil. God, in his mysterious designs, even in the midst of human imperfections, has found a way in Medjugorje to make a river of good and beauty flow. It will probably continue to be so.

Intervention of Msgr. Armando Matteo

Good morning!

The last Dicastery Press Conference was held on 17 May on the occasion of the presentation of the new *Norms for Proceeding in the Discernment of Alleged Supernatural Phenomena*.

These new Norms, which came into force on 19 May, have enabled the Dicastery, in dialogue with the diocesan bishops involved, to be able to deal with various cases of alleged supernatural phenomena and to find a pastoral solution to them. In recent months it has thus been possible to carry out the necessary discernment concerning

- to the devotion to Maria Rosa Mistica (Montichiari);
- to the spiritual experience linked to the Shrine of Our Lady of the Rock in Santa Domenica di Placanica;
- to the spiritual experience linked to the Shrine of Maccio (Villa Guardia);
- to the spiritual experience of Chandavila (Spain)
- and to the spiritual experience of Estelle Faguet.

In all these cases, the *nihil obstat* provided for by the Norms was decided.

Over the past few months, the Dicastery has also been able to deal with some other alleged supernatural phenomena: specifically, the alleged apparitions and revelations reported by Mrs Gisella Cardia (born Maria Giuseppa Scarpulla) and Mr Gianni Cardia; the alleged apparitions and revelations of the years 1945-1959 in

Amsterdam and linked to the devotion of the “Lady of All Nations” and the figure of Elenita de Jesús. In all these cases, a *constat de non* was determined (or confirmed).

A further case of the application of the Norms is, in a certain sense, the letter of the Prefect to Bishop Sagayaraj Thamburaj of Tanjore, about the Shrine of Our Lady of Health, in Vailankanni. In his letter, Cardinal Fernandez states that the presence of so many non-Christian pilgrims in that place should not be considered as a form of syncretism or mixing of religions.

In other cases, for the moment confidential, there is constant dialogue with bishops to clarify the situation: in many of these cases the judgement corresponds to the current “curator” of the new Norms.

In this wide-ranging task of discernment, today’s Press Conference takes place, which has as its theme the spiritual experience linked to Medjugorje. The Note on this subject - which will soon be presented in detail by the Prefect - is also the fruit of the new Norms. Given the magnitude of the “Medjugorje phenomenon”, a long and in-depth study was necessary in the Dicastery - and here I would like to thank all the officials of both Sections of the Dicastery who work with incredible dedication - and it seemed opportune to package the conclusions reached in a document that is broader than a letter addressed to the diocesan Bishop.

Before handing over the floor to the Prefect, I wish to briefly reiterate the phases regarding the matter of Medjugorje.

The phenomenon of the alleged apparitions of Our Lady in Medjugorje concerns the events that began on 24 June 1981 in the parish of *Saint James* in Medjugorje, administered by the Franciscan Fathers O.F.M., of the province of Herzegovina, in the diocese of Mostar-Duvno in former Yugoslavia (today Bosnia and Herzegovina). In the late afternoon of that day, two girls, Ivanka Ivanković and Mirjana Dragičević, went to Podbrdo, at the foot of the Crnica hill. Suddenly, Ivanka saw Our Lady (who did not appear to Mirjana). The two girls continue on their way through the village. On the same day, around 6 p.m., six boys saw the figure of Mary with a child in her arms at the same place: besides Ivanka and Mirjana, there were Vicka Ivanković, Ivan Dragičević, Ivan Ivanković and Milka Pavlović. Marija Pavlović and Jakov Čolo, who are still among the six visionaries, joined the other children the next day, 25 June.

On 21 July of the same year, Bishop Pavao Žanić, Bishop of Mostar-Duvno, met with the six “visionaries”, who told him of their recent experience. The Ordinary remains convinced that “the children do not lie”. He went on to manifest this conviction a few days later, on the occasion of the administration of Confirmation in the parish of Medjugorje.

Subsequently, on 19 November 1983, Bishop Pavao Zanić sent a confidential report to the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith concerning the alleged apparition of Mary, expressing his “very strong doubts” about it.

On 12 October of the following year, the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia issued a declaration concerning the alleged events of Medjugorje, recalling the competence of the ecclesiastical authority to evaluate the apparitions and prohibiting official pilgrimages to Medjugorje.

On May 19, 1986, the Diocesan Commission charged with the evaluation of the alleged apparitions in Medjugorje issued its judgement: for 11 members against 4 *Non constat de supernaturalitate*.

In the same year, the pro-nuncio in Belgrade gave a negative opinion on the work of the Diocesan Commission. The then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith decided to entrust the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia with a new examination of the case.

The following year, on April 9, the Commission of the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia began its work, which continued until April 1991. On the 10th of that month, the final report of the Commission of the Bishops'

Conference of Yugoslavia on the phenomenon of Medjugorje, known as the Declaration of Zadar, was published, which I quote:

“The bishops from the very beginning have been following the Medjugorje apparitions through the bishop of the diocese, the Episcopal Commission and the Commission of the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia for Medjugorje. On the basis of the research carried out so far, it is not possible to affirm that these are supernatural apparitions and phenomena. However, the numerous believers who come to Medjugorje from various places and who are driven by religious and other motives need the attention and pastoral care first of all of the bishop of the diocese and then of other bishops so that a healthy devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary can be promoted in Medjugorje and with Medjugorje, in harmony with the teaching of the Church. To this end, the bishops will provide suitable liturgical-pastoral indications and through the commission will continue to follow and shed light on the events of Medjugorje”.

Let us move on to 1994. On 28 October, Bishop Ratko Perić, the new Ordinary of Medjugorje, asks John Paul II to establish a Commission for a definitive verdict on the “apparitions”. In July 1995, a visit of John Paul II to Medjugorje was announced during his apostolic journey to Sarajevo. The Pope, in some private letters, expressed himself positively about Medjugorje and his desire to visit the place. Informed of this, Bishop Perić asked the then Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to prevent such a visit, which in fact did not take place.

On 2 March 1998, at the request of the bishop of Saint-Denis-de-La Reunion, the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith replied that private pilgrimages to Medjugorje were permitted, provided that Medjugorje was not declared to be a place of authentic apparitions. It is also stated that Bishop Perić's position on the judgment *constat de non supernaturalitate* does not correspond to that of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

In the years that followed, there were various consultations between the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the new Bishops' Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina with regard to a new examination of all the documentation. The Bishops' Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, declared that it was unable to undertake a new examination, and did not consider it opportune.

The turning point came on 14 January 2008, when Benedict XVI decided to establish a new international Commission to evaluate the alleged supernatural phenomena in Medjugorje.

The chair of the Commission was Cardinal Camillo Ruini. In January 2014, after around six years of work, the international Commission issued its judgement. The conclusions of the Ruini Commission were not made known, and this is the reason for an explicit request from the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

This latter, in the subsequent years, prepared a series of in-depth studies of the whole Medjugorje affair. The opinion of two experts was sought, who arrived at very different results to those of the Ruini Commission.

In December 2015, having received all the documentation, Pope Francis took every decision on Medjugorje into his own hands.

Subsequently, on 11 February 2017, Pope Francis appointed Archbishop Henryk Hoser as special envoy of the Holy See to examine the pastoral situation in Medjugorje, while on 14 January 2019, a disposition of the Pontiff was made public, according to which “it is possible to organise pilgrimages to Medjugorje, as long as care is taken to avoid them being interpreted as an authentication of the events”.

Finally, it should be recalled that, on 27 December 2021, Pope Francis appointed Archbishop Aldo Cavalli as the new *Special Apostolic Visitor* for the parish of Medjugorje, for an indefinite period and *ad nutum Sanctae Sedis*. Archbishop Cavalli succeeded the Polish Archbishop Henryk Hoser, who died on 13 August of that year.

After a good 43 years since the beginning of the matter, in the light of the current *Norms for Proceeding in the Discernment of Alleged Supernatural Phenomena*, the Dicastery has provided the Note “The Queen of Peace”,

which was approved by the Supreme Pontiff last 28 August, and will now be presented by the Prefect.

Thank you for your attention.

Intervention of Dr. Andrea Torielli

In this brief intervention of mine, I would like to provide first some statistical data, and finally to recount a personal experience.

If we use a search engine on the internet to enquire about the presence of pilgrims in Medjugorje, we find an approximate indication of around **one million** per year. According to Archbishop Henryk Hoser, then the Apostolic Visitor at the shrine of Medjugorje, the influx before the pandemic was around **three million pilgrims per year**, especially in the summer. A large part of the pilgrims come from Poland and Italy, but they originate from around **eighty countries around the world**.

“The number is certainly growing”, said Hoser in August 2019. “In our opinion, the figure is around three million people a year. The majority of the influx is in summer, but there are pilgrims throughout the year. It is difficult to explain what attracts them; it is not something tangible, people are looking for a spiritual reality that they manage to find here in moments of prayer, **Eucharistic adoration, meditation on the Word of God, and the Sacrament of Confession** which is typical of Medjugorje. The majority of the faithful come from Italy and Poland, but there are also many local visitors, from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, from the Balkans. This atmosphere of peace and silence, of moments with the Lord, attracts them; they are experiencing strong moments of faith, they come closer to God and many return, bringing their friends with them”.

Despite the different estimates, it can certainly be stated that Medjugorje is one of the most visited Marian locations, despite transport problems, since it is not easy to reach. **And it is also a phenomenon and devotion that is widespread throughout the world**, among the many people who do not have the possibility of making the pilgrimage.

There are two interesting statistical data. The first relates to the number of Communion distributed in the parish and the places connected to the apparition, which from January 1985 to June 2024 were **47,413,740**.

Whereas with regard to the number of priests who concelebrated in Medjugorje from December 1986 to June 2024, the number is **1,060,799**. Since many priests who come to Medjugorje usually return there, and that million includes the number of concelebrants divided by month during the time span I mentioned, in all probability the figure includes many who were counted several times.

The statistics are constantly updated: last month, **August 2024**, **325,000** Communion were distributed and there were **9,582** priests who concelebrated (309 per day).

I would now like to mention a fact concerning the typology of pilgrims on the basis of the only scientific study, edited by the sociologist from the Catholic University of Milan, Luca Pesenti. His research is published in the volume “*My life changed in Medjugorje*”, edited by Gerolamo Fazzini (Edizioni Ares).

Pesenti, who does not hide his “diffidence” with respect to the phenomenon, analyzed a sample of **1049 questionnaires**, filled in by pilgrims taken by Rusconi Viaggi to Medjugorje between April and October 2015 by bus or plane. Here too, it should be clarified that this is a selective sample, as it concerns only one travel agency specialized in organizing pilgrimages to Medjugorje.

The following are the motivations leading to the pilgrimage: for **38%**, the search for spiritual comfort; for **23%** the request for grace for oneself or for others; for **11.7%**, thanksgiving for graces received; **17.7** for a need for contact with the sacred or for **15%**, due to an invitation. Only **5.6%** were simply curious.

The pilgrims are believers who place at the top of their ideal priorities those related to meeting the needs of others (**53.3%**) and defending and respecting life in all its forms (**51.4%**).

An interesting fact: almost half the sample (**48.8%**) had already been to Medjugorje previously, and in two thirds of these latter cases, we encounter a sort of **pilgrimage repeated** over and over again. For **39%** it was their very first pilgrimage destination, while for **8%** it was the first Marian pilgrimage.

Judgement on the apparitions changes from before to after the journey: from moderate certainty at the beginning, marked by **70%**, to more than **85%** at the end of the journey, with “absolute” certainty reached by **59%** (compared to the **41%** declared at the outset). Pesenti explains, “This is a very significant displacement effect, lowering the area of doubt and scepticism to **under 9%** compared to **22%** at the start. Only **5%** of the respondents returned home with a disappointing opinion”.

The great majority of those who return to Medjugorje indicate a change of life: **48.8%** declare that “something” changed after the first visit, and that “much” changed for a further **30.4%**, up to a “radical” change declared in **14.5%** of cases. The Medjugorje effect leads to an increase in frequency of religious practice, the sacraments and prayer.

Allow me now a brief personal tale. I wanted to make the pilgrimage to Medjugorje in June 2011, when I was beginning my work at the daily newspaper *La Stampa* and at *Vatican Insider*. I wanted to do so starting with a bus of pilgrims from Milan, not by air. I listened to and met the visionary Vicka. I climbed the mountain of the apparitions.

Two things struck me deeply. Despite the fact they were midweek days, at the evening Eucharistic adoration inside the large parish church, there wasn't a single free square centimetre to kneel on, because so many people were participating. And then some testimonies from friends of the visionaries, their contemporaries, touched my heart. They had not been directly involved in the alleged supernatural phenomenon, they had not “seen” anything. Yet they were living an intense experience of faith, which reverberated above all in their capacity for forgiveness and mercy towards neighbours who had been guilty of serious crimes during the terrible years of the fratricidal war in the Balkans.

To me, more than the words of the visionaries, more than the questioning of secrets and the future, these simple testimonies of people who, by faith, were able to forgive those who had killed one of their relatives and who until a few weeks before was a normal neighbour, struck and filled my heart. I went back with the knowledge that something good truly happens there for the people who experience this.
