

Update on events and reactions in Medjugorje

The Catholic Church in Yugoslavia has not yet reached a definitive verdict on the reported appearances of the Virgin Mary in the village of Medjugorje (*RCL* Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 4-9). While reports continue to emerge of the regular recurrence of the visionary experiences of the children who were the original "seers", the Bishop of Mostar, Mgr Pavao Žanić, and the Commission appointed by the Church to investigate the matter remain extremely cautious in their statements. One interesting point on which the enthusiastic visitors and the cautious clergymen agree, however, is that since the "apparitions" began in June 1981, a definite change has occurred in the life of the villages in the area. The following excerpts are taken from reports made by visitors to Medjugorje in late 1983 and early 1984:

"There is already a remarkable response that can be seen by any visitor to Medjugorje. The priests and nuns working in the parish are animated by their mission. The Christian life of the local people is inspiring. Some five hundred of them gather for the rosary and Mass every evening, attendance on Sundays hardly being greater than on other days. The Friday fast is observed all over the area. People walk about praying. Young people are turning to the Church and to vocations to the religious life. Above all, the fulness of participation and the devotion at Mass is the single most dramatic attestation of the authenticity of what is occurring for many of the visitors to whom I spoke. There is a rare kind of unison about the prayers and hymns, real attentiveness to the lengthy sermons, tolerance for cold stone floors for hour after hour, long lines of penitents waiting for confession at the head of each aisle and at many other points in the church. I felt personally that I was in the midst of people who were truly raising their minds and hearts to God."

"Perhaps the most remarkable fact of the story that is emerging from Medjugorje is the transformation which it is effecting in the whole village and the surrounding areas. According to the parish priest, the local people have learnt forgiveness. There are no more quarrels and old people are not left alone. Many people are attending Mass every day, and up to 2,500 attend regularly on Sundays in the church of St James in the village where the apparitions now take

place. It is also said that large numbers have taken to fasting on bread and water not only on Fridays, but on Wednesdays as well, and in all respects the village has become a real community with hospitality freely given, and mutual help in projects such as house building and land clearing a common part of daily life. The apparitions have had no less an effect on the faith of young people in the area. Eyewitnesses say that Medjugorje is very popular with young people of Croatia, who form as much as half of the large crowds that gather on major feasts, and are content to sleep in the open as no accommodation can be provided for pilgrims by order of the authorities. The authorities tried to woo the young people away from religious devotions by organising dances and film shows, but they stayed away, preferring to recite the rosary."

Mgr Žanić, the Bishop of Mostar (the capital of Hercegovina) under whose jurisdiction Medjugorje falls, has also acknowledged the changes that have taken place in the community life of the villages around Medjugorje. In an interview with the Austrian Catholic News Agency, *Kathpress*, he conceded that the "faith, zeal for prayer and the general attitude of visitors to Medjugorje are high" and noted "an inner reformation among the local population".

The *Kathpress* interview also threw some light on the controversy which has arisen within the Church in Yugoslavia in reaction to the events at Medjugorje. The background to this controversy lies in the century-old tension between the Franciscans and the Bishop of Mostar and his diocesan clergy. Under the Turkish occupation the Franciscans were given the right to act as parish priests in this mission territory: they lived close to the people and defended them from secular power. During the last hundred years, bishops have been appointed from among the diocesan clergy, to whom the Franciscans are not subject: this has been at the root of many of the difficulties of the last few years. Mgr Žanić explained that the dispute between himself, the Franciscans and the Holy See flared up fifteen years ago, and was finally settled in 1973, when an agreement was reached on a division of parishes between the Franciscans and the secular clergy; at the same time the entire leadership of the province was removed and a new provincial cathedral

parish was established in Mostar which displaced the existing Franciscan parish. Father John Vaughan, the general of the Franciscans in Rome, found it necessary to dismiss two young Franciscans from the Order, and they were suspended *a divinis* from their priestly functions; in spite of this they continued to celebrate Mass and to hear confessions "with the permission, as they said, of the Mother of God", said Mgr Žanić.

Kathpress indicated that the Franciscans were themselves divided over the issue of the apparitions: those who cooperate with the Bishop tend to share his extreme caution, while those who oppose him believe in the authenticity of the visions. Since the publication of the *Kathpress* interview, however, the Franciscans have issued a statement, also through *Kathpress*, giving their comment on the interview. They suggest that the declarations of the Bishop need supplementing:

"It is a matter of the message of the Madonna and her commission to the young people. From the Bishop's answers one might have drawn the conclusion that there was no more to the appearance than what was contained in the Bishop's critical assessment. The message had come to the Franciscans of Medjugorje, the direct witnesses of the appearance, as a message of peace. It is directed to every individual, to the Church and to the whole world. The way to peace, as the seers constantly stress, demands readiness for an inward change of heart, which in turn expresses itself in a deep faith, a renewed readiness to fast and a yet deeper faith."

The Bishops' Investigative Commission of the Mostar Diocese, which was enlarged in early 1984 to include members from all the theological centres of Croatia and Slovenia and representatives of the medical faculties, has advocated great caution in assessing the validity of the appearances. After a two-day meeting in April 1984 the Commission gave its comment on the invest-

igation so far. It spoke appreciatively of the gatherings for prayer at Medjugorje, but criticised organised pilgrimages before the Church has ruled on the authenticity of the visions. A decision of the Archbishop of Zagreb on 14 January 1984 was described as "significant": in this pronouncement, Cardinal Kuharić forbade any activity of the "seers" in churches of the Zagreb diocese until the Church makes an official decision. The "seers" and those responsible for pastoral oversight in Medjugorje were instructed by the Bishops' Commission to make no public statements about the appearances of the Virgin or about reported miraculous healings. The priests have been instructed to make no differentiation between the "seers" and the faithful, although it should be understood that "young Christians with experiences of this kind stand in need of spiritual direction by their priests". The Commission also concerned itself with press reports from Yugoslavia and abroad, which have allegedly not been critical enough of the Medjugorje affair. On the first day of the Commission's deliberations, Bishop Žanić was present. In the course of their work the Commission visited Medjugorje where they took part in the celebration of the Mass. The deliberations lasted only two days because nothing significantly new was forthcoming from the "seers"; also the local bishop had been advised by the Vatican not "to hurry with the business of assessing proofs and the reaching of a conclusion, because experience in other similar situations had taught that the passage of time helps in coming to a wise conclusion." The Commission took note of the uncritical comments which have circulated inside and outside Yugoslavia, including alleged miracles of healing, which have had no medical confirmation. They declared their intention to investigate all these reports and meanwhile appealed to people not to write about them in the Yugoslav religious press, or at least to do so in a cautious and critical spirit.

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