

A Fatima in a Communist Land?

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The past fifty years have seen a veritable explosion of visions, revelations and other allegedly miraculous events whose authenticity has been or is still being investigated by the Roman Catholic Church. Over a hundred have been officially notified to the church authorities: about sixty or so in Italy, eleven in France, seven in Spain and so on, but none as far as is known in countries that find themselves under communist rule. This is perhaps why reports in the summer of 1981 that the Virgin Mary had appeared in a mountainous region of central Yugoslavia received so much publicity and caused so much genuine popular interest both in Yugoslavia itself and abroad. The fact that the alleged apparitions led to a bitter clash between Yugoslavia's communist régime and the Roman Catholic Church added to the interest in the whole affair.

It all started in a small village called Bijakovici about twenty kilometres from Mostar, the capital of the province of Hercegovina which is part of the republic of Bosnia and Hercegovina, one of the six republics of the Yugoslav federation. The village, in the Catholic parish of Medjugorje and the municipality of Citluk, is inhabited by Catholic Croats. In Bosnia and Hercegovina Croats number, according to the latest census of March 1981, 758,000 and are the third largest group after the Muslims counted as an ethnic group (1.6 million) and the Serbs (1.3 million). In Bosnia, as elsewhere in the Balkans, religion tends to overlap with nationality and so Croats are Catholics and Serbs Orthodox. A large part of the republic's Catholics live in Hercegovina.

On 24 June 1981, six children, two boys and four girls, aged from eleven to eighteen, reported to their families that they had seen an apparition on a hill called Crnica not far from the village. The following day they reported the same and so it went on. At exactly the same time each day—6.30 p.m.—they claimed to have seen and spoken to a beautiful, slim young woman, wearing a long grey dress with a white veil and a belt who declared herself as the Virgin Mary, the Queen of Peace. The children claimed that she urged them and the rest of the populace to return to God through fasting and prayer. She also called for peace and

reconciliation among the people. The reaction in the village was amazement mixed with incredulity—and derision. Medjugorje's parish priest, Father Jozo Zovko, a Franciscan (the order still has a number of parishes in Bosnia and Hercegovina dating back to the days of Turkish rule before 1878 when the Franciscans, popularly known as the "uncles", were the only ones allowed to minister to the Catholic population) was away during the first few days of the apparitions. When he came back on 27 June, he was said to have been reserved and sceptical. He questioned the children very closely but could not shake them. On 29 June they were interviewed by the police and taken to Mostar for an examination by psychiatrists, who found them quite normal. The original suspicion that perhaps the eldest girl, aged eighteen, a local but going to grammar school in Sarajevo, might be under the influence of drugs, was rejected. The following day a lady social worker from Bijakovici and a friend took the children for a car ride to see whether, away from the Crnica hill, they would still have the same experience. At the appointed hour they duly did.

The news of the apparition spread very quickly and within a few days large crowds of people were arriving in the parish from other parts of Hercegovina, as well as from Bosnia, western Serbia, southern Croatia and even Belgrade, more than 10,000 on weekdays and several times that on Saturdays and Sundays. Not all of the visitors were Catholics: Muslims and Serbian Orthodox came too. They walked, some of them barefoot, to the hillside, stood or knelt there, fasting, praying and singing religious anthems. Some claimed that they could see the big stone cross on the hill overlooking the church in Medjugorje rotating. Others claimed to be seeing strange lights in the air. With their bare hands people dug out weeds on the hill or just earth to take away with them. Miraculous cures were claimed. An old man was supposed to have rubbed his tumour with the earth from the Crnica hill and to have seen the tumour disappear within a day or two. People reported that bad rashes, back-ache, nervous trouble and other complaints had disappeared after a visit to Medjugorje. The visitors usually called at the church, often to attend mass. The local priests could hardly cope with the influx and had to call in help. It is estimated that between July and the end of October at least half a million people visited the Crnica hill and the Medjugorje church. During that time at least 150,000 confessions were heard and at least 200,000 people received communion. Many of those who came claimed that they had lapsed for many years. Convinced atheists claimed that they were converted as a result of the visit.

The secular authorities' reaction was quick—and hostile. On 4 July, Mr Branko Mikulic, the senior party figure in Bosnia and Hercegovina and a member of the party presidium in Belgrade, attacked the Medjugorje apparitions. He said that "clerico-nationalists" were using the "Lady" to

“intimidate uneducated people and try to fool them; that is, to manipulate them politically and make them serve those who work against the interests of our nations and nationalities”. (In Yugoslavia, the smaller national groups without a republic of their own are called the nationalities). The press took its cue from the politicians like Mr Mikulic or a local official from Citluk, Mr Milenko Bevanda, who spoke of the “*Ustasa Lady*” (the *ustasas* were followers of Ante Pavelic, leader of the extreme nationalist movement which was in power during the 1941-45 period of German and Italian occupation when Bosnia and Hercegovina were part of the Croatian state). The papers (wrongly) called Father Zovko a trained psychologist or even nuclear physicist, implying that he had used his training and skills to perpetrate a hoax. “The Lady of Citluk—Mere Superstition” was the headline the Belgrade mass-circulation evening paper *Vecernje novosti* placed over its report from Medjugorje on 8 July. A little later *Borba*, the former party daily and still very much the régime’s official voice, carried several rather laboured satirical pieces about the events.

Strong pressure was put behind the scenes on Mgr Pavao Zanic, the Catholic bishop of Mostar, to dissociate the church from the Medjugorje events or even forbid them. He refused. Instead the diocese put out a statement which strongly protested against the “unacceptable and offensive” reporting of the events in the press, noting that not a scrap of evidence had been produced to back the contention that the children had been manipulated. The statement strongly condemned insinuations that priests, acting without the knowledge of the parents, had used the children to convince the world that the Virgin Mary had appeared in human form. It also rejected as untrue suggestions that the church authorities had in fact distanced themselves from the events by calling them a case of superstition. Such visions and miracles are, for us believers, possible, it said, but the church had always been careful before pronouncing a positive verdict on visions and miracles in Lourdes, Fatima and elsewhere. It was certainly true, it recalled, that pious souls had often claimed to have seen something that eventually proved to have been a hallucination, a personal psychological experience or a plain untruth. In the Bijakovici case, the statement stressed, nobody (least of all from the church) had put up the children to speak untruths. The big question remained: was this the children’s subjective experience or something supernatural? The statement ended with the words of Gamaliel (Acts 5: 38-39): “If this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to naught. But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it . . .”

The statement was published in *Glas koncila*, the Zagreb fortnightly and the main Croatian-language Catholic publication in Yugoslavia, on 16 August. Four days before, on 12 August, the police had placed a cordon round the Crnica hill to stop people going there. On 17 August,

the day after the Mostar diocese statement was published, the parish church and the presbytery in Medjugorje were surrounded by the police. They searched the premises, including the church, and everybody within. Nuns working there as pastoral assistants were subjected to a body search by a policewoman specially brought there for the purpose. The police took away the money the faithful had left in the church and arrested Father Zovko. Two months later he was put on trial in Mostar. The charge against him was that in a reference in a sermon on 11 July to forty years' slavery, he had meant the forty years since the 1941 uprising against the occupying powers. He was also accused of having said that the faithful were afraid to go to church, to have their children baptized and to send them to religious instruction, to go to confession and to get married in the church because they thought this might cost them their job. Altogether eighteen witnesses were heard for the prosecution, and a statement by a witness who could not attend court was read out. The court refused to hear the testimony for Father Zovko by 330 people, who had asked to be heard. Nor did it allow biblical experts to be called in to explain the biblical character of references to forty years of slavery to sin. Further, the court refused defence lawyers' request for tape recordings of Father Zovko's sermons on 11 and 25 July to be heard to prove that quotes produced by the prosecution were taken out of context and deliberately slanted to obscure the sermons' spiritual character. On 22 October, the court sentenced Father Zovko to three and a half years' imprisonment. However, it ordered the police to return to the church in Medjugorje the money taken away during the search on 17 August.

Shortly afterwards another trial took place in Mostar of two Franciscans closely associated with Medjugorje and friendly with Father Zovko. They were Father Ferdo Vlastic (61), editor of the popular religious magazine *Nasa ognjista (Our Hearths)*, a publication widely read among Croatian workers in the west; and Father Jozo Krizic (30), secretary of the magazine, both from the Franciscan monastery of Duvno, not far from Medjugorje. They were accused of hostile activity, particularly for being in touch with the extreme Croatian nationalists émigré groups in the west and co-operating with them. Father Vlastic, who had already been arrested in Medjugorje in August on a fabricated charge of obstructing security organs in their work and had been sentenced by a magistrate to two months' imprisonment without right of appeal, was charged at the Mostar trial with having received from abroad books about the late Cardinal Stepinac. The cardinal, who was appointed Archbishop of Zagreb before the Second World War, was sentenced after a rigged trial in 1946 for alleged wartime collaboration to sixteen years' imprisonment and died in internment in 1960. He is much revered among Croats. Another offence for which Father Vlastic was tried was to have published in his magazine a picture of Father Lucijan Kordic, a Croatian Franciscan

and a poet living in exile in Switzerland. Father Krizic was accused of having preached back in 1979 in Canada to Croatian congregations which have included political exiles. It is worth recalling that, since the signing of the so-called Belgrade protocol between Yugoslavia and the Vatican in 1966, Catholic priests have been allowed to carry out pastoral work in the west (Croatian priests minister to Croatian Catholics while Slovene priests minister to the Slovene Catholics, another Catholic nation in Yugoslavia). Inevitably, this means that priests from Yugoslavia, travelling on Yugoslav passports, come across not just Yugoslav passport-holders but also others who do not wish to go back for political reasons. The Yugoslav authorities have, quite sensibly from their point of view, been prepared to accept this because of the greater importance they now attach to the strengthening of the expatriates' links with Yugoslavia, where, they saw, again correctly, that the church could be quite helpful. Father Vlastic was sentenced on 11 November to eight years' imprisonment and Father Krizic to five and a half years'. Both were also banned from publishing and editing for another three years after the completion of their sentences.

These harsh sentences should be seen against the background of the Yugoslav régime's nervousness about the political and economic situation in the country. The Catholic Church, in particular, is seen as a potential threat because of its hold over the Croats, the second largest nation in Yugoslavia and the one that is most restive. In recent years, the church has made, particularly among the Croats, very great strides, modelling itself to a certain extent on the Polish church. It has been particularly successful among the young. The election of Pope John Paul II has had a strong impact in Yugoslavia, especially among the Croats and Slovenes. From time to time, régime spokesmen remind the church that Yugoslavia is not Poland, for which as a fellow-Catholic and Slav nation there is, among the Croats and the Slovenes, a lot of love and admiration. Since the imposition of martial law on 13 December 1981, this is mixed with sympathy. What the authorities clearly fear is that nationalist discontent such as that already going on among the ethnic Albanians in the province of Kosovo may erupt elsewhere, especially among the Croats, and that it may coalesce with social and economic discontent felt throughout Yugoslavia over high inflation, shortages, unemployment and so on. Another Fatima, or Lourdes, is clearly the last thing the Yugoslav régime wants to have on its hands now.

But the attempt to discourage the development of the cult at Medjugorje must also be attributed to its impact among Party members. In Citluk, eleven were expelled from the Party and 48 punished in other ways for going to Medjugorje. But the population even now still continues to go to Medjugorje in large numbers, especially over the weekend. The people cannot now go to the Crnica hill, where there is a

permanent police guard, but they can and do go to the parish church to attend Mass, say their confession, receive Communion, and pray with those of the original six children who are still there or who happen to be back for a time from school or seminary. The usual form is that after Mass seven Our Fathers and Hail Marys are said. The rosary is also often said before Mass. What those who come to Medjugorje claim above all is a sense of peace, almost serenity, that the visit gives them.

The children claim to continue to see the Virgin Mary, but nothing is published about that now since the bishop's latest action. On 11 January Bishop Zanic appointed a four-member commission to investigate the events in Medjugorje. Catholic papers have been instructed not to write anything about these events pending the end of the investigation. Only the commission and the bishop himself are allowed to make statements or communicate with competent bodies about the matter. The commission includes a Franciscan novice-master, a professor of psychology, a canon law expert and an expert on ecclesiology. At the end of its labours the commission (which may be broadened during its work) will submit its findings to the bishop. He will then give his verdict on whether or not the visions and healings were supernatural. He will also decide whether the cults and devotions that have grown up around Our Lady of Medjugorje are permissible. Then we shall know whether or not the Catholic Church thinks that it has another Fatima in the East.

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