

## **Global Network of Divergent Marian Devotion**

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### *Background*

From its earliest days the Roman Catholic Church has given an important place to the veneration of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Marian devotion has become the most significant saint's cult in the Church. At certain times Mary reveals herself to various Catholics through visions and messages. Since the early Middle Ages a phenomenological tradition of apparitions came into being. Before the 1920s almost all the places where this occurred developed into shrines acknowledged by the Church. Sometimes these shrines became of international importance, such as Guadeloupe in Mexico, Lourdes in France, Knock in Ireland and Fatima in Portugal. The activity of this devotional circuit focuses on devotions and sites of approved apparitions which take part in the mainstream Marian veneration of the Roman Catholic Church.

Approximately since the 1940s there has been an exponential increase in the number of new apparitions of and messages from Mary, and also of other saints and Christ, although they are less frequent. Sometimes the intervention by them is also manifest in weeping, bleeding or moving statues and pictures. Most of the cults and shrines connected with these recent apparitions and private revelations are not acknowledged by the Church and form a divergent or 'deviant' devotional circuit. The Catholic Church has become increasingly wary of the boom in such private devotional activities, groups and organizations, especially because the number of people who can be reached by them and the impact of their activities is much greater than it would have been in the past. As such, it affects the position of the Catholic Church, its doctrines and religious practices.

### *Network structure*

These divergent or opposing devotions are not shaped within official ecclesiastical structures. Rather, their spiritually and devotional rituals are shaped, profiled and propagated from the bottom up, in an informal manner, with the aid of visionaries, their own cult leadership and related groups of devotees. The apparitional cults are each independent, but have a collectivity that lies in the type of visitors they attract, visitors who generally can be accounted as devotees and believers with conservative, (neo-)traditionalist or fundamentalist views. Collectively, the individual devotions or shrines are parts of a globally oriented network which to a large extent is 'controlled' by the devotees and their prayer groups. The network which arises in this manner has absolutely no formal status or structure. It also has no actual home base, and is therefore extremely elusive as an object of research. As a matter of fact, the way it functions is similar to the World Wide Web: it exists and functions in an entirely open manner. Hundreds of thousands, even millions of devotees are connected with one another in an entirely free manner. They find and communicate with each other in eclectic ways at ever-changing sacred sites, in this way participating in the devotional life or

cult of each place, and at the same time creating their own specific religious system with its own concentrated spirituality and rituality. In their own local setting they practise the cult, and propagandize by distributing prints, folders and images, but even more by word-of-mouth advertising and active participation in prayer groups.

In addition to the above-mentioned quantitative change in the number of apparitions there has also been a sociographic shift with regard to those receiving the visions: instead of coming to children, the revelations increasingly come to adults. The wariness of the Church also stems from the fact that these visionaries not only spread the messages related to their 'own' apparitions, but also interpret them in relation to their personal views on the Church and world. Because these messages and interpretations can be distributed much more widely and intensively by adult visionaries, and also because, with or without the support of the media, they are often able to organize the resources and structures to institutionalize a cult, create prayer groups and organizations to publish and disseminate the messages, they are no longer amenable to ecclesiastical control.

In their local community, a large proportion of the individual devotees nowadays belong to one or more prayer groups. Some of these groups are linked to a person (often the visionary) or a shrine; others are 'free' prayer groups. The thousands of prayer groups in Europe and Northern America form a basic structural element for the devotion network. These groups often play an important role in missionary 'world actions' such as those from Amsterdam, in which dozens of copies of the painting of The Lady of All Nations were personally entrusted to individuals and sent out to travel the world in order to expand the devotion. In the same way, for several decades hundreds of copies of the Rosa Mystica statue of Montichiari in Italy have been sent out around the world, some dozens of which became the nucleus of miraculous branch shrines. Many, like de Baysiders and their shrine of Our Lady of the Roses or the Queen of Love followers around Schio, have their own websites.

On the transnational or global level the network has no institutional umbrella organization or structure, apart from some international publishers who tailor their book lists and magazines to these devotional interests. With the information they supply they also form important *traits d'unions* among the various cults. For example, the magazine *Maria Heute* (or the French *Stella Maris*) is an outright mouthpiece for various devotions. Although they have commercial motives, there are also strong, religiously defined propagandist forces at work, and the editors prepare their own commentaries with well-substantiated, polemic support for revelations criticized by the Church. The major network publishers are Parvis-Verlag, Switzerland; Miriam-Verlag, Germany; Segno Edizioni, Italy; and TAN Books & Publishers in the USA.

The devotional network is to a large extent independent of or parallel to mainstream Marian devotion, but not in a static way: there is a continued interaction with the institutional church. On the one hand the Catholic Church ignores, discourages or impedes these devotions because of the possible negative consequences for catholic faith; on the other there are also conservative forces within the Church that wish to give elements of this *vox populi dei* a stronger role, because of the indirect benefits for the 'threatened' modern Church, as in the case of the Medjugorje cultus out of which many vocations for the priesthood vocations are said to come. During the pontificate of John Paul II this has led to highly controversial visionaries (the Polish nun Faustina Kowalska and the Italian Franciscan Padre Pio) and their devotions nevertheless being formalized, while some 'banned' sites of apparitions (such as The Lady of All Nations in Amsterdam and the Queen of Love at Schio, Italy) have received positive toleration, or at least a level of acknowledgment.

### *Spiritual sources*

The apparitions and messages received at Fatima in 1917 (and before that, the Rue du Bac visions in Paris in 1830 and those of La Salette in 1846) are still one of the most important sources of inspiration in the network's spirituality. Although Fatima was recognized by the Church in 1930 as a place of pilgrimage and 'mainstream' Marian devotion, it also still has a particular function as a standard-bearer for conservative and fundamentalist Marian movements, comprised of a number of Catholic groups and institutions which take their inspiration from the messages. The Fatima messages frequently reappear, either in their original form or interpreted, in the messages announced by contemporary visionaries. The importance of Fatima can also be seen in several conservative groups with large numbers of adherents, such as the Marian Movement of Priests, with about 100,000 members, The Legion of Mary, with three million, and the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima, which claims to have about 10 million adherents worldwide.

According to the organizations and devotees involved, the messages of Fatima should form the basis for a worldwide re-evangelization and missionary program, in order to save the 'degenerate' world and Church from the ever-present Satan. Among the typical and central themes in the messages are penitence, prayer (particularly the rosary), conversion of all sinners, war, anti-Communism and anti-atheism. The constant activity of the Devil further points to an approaching end of time and a definitive separation of good and evil individuals.

The renewal within the Church launched by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was an extra stimulus for the rise of heterodox views that were particularly circulated by Marian messages. In that period the self-designated French antipope Clemens XV was one of the most important exponents of (neo-)traditionalist views. He undertook a media crusade within Europe against Pope Paul VI, who was carrying through the renewal of the Church, but who according to Clemens was really a devil in disguise. Clemens's ideas and those of the schismatic and suspended integralistic bishop Marcel Lefèbvre found acceptance among various visionaries and cult advisors. Since the 1930's the much contested devotional 'underdog' Padre Pio, who became an important spiritual guide and binding element for many divergent devotions, has fulfilled a comparable role.

Since the Council the interpretation of the Fatima messages has begun to take on a life of its own, and has increasingly begun to function as the paradigm for new alternative of divergent devotions and Marian apparitional cults. After the fall of Communism new enemies were found, including apostasy, social degeneracy, abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia and the corruption of the Church and many of its priests. This forms the 'classic' representation of the church-related range of thought and belief of the conservative devotees. Major unacknowledged and private shrines, as for example Medjugorje, Amsterdam or Montichiari, generate their own spiritual paradigm, a paradigm that influences other sites.

Another important issue in many recent apparitions is the question of the recognition of the fifth dogma. Various visionaries claiming Marian apparitions promote the desirability of recognizing the position of Mary as co-redemptrix. This dogma, which was particularly propagated in the Amsterdam apparitions (1945-1959), is heavily contested both inside and outside the Church. Mary revealed herself there as 'The Lady of All Nations', and introduced a prayer that, together with a desired spread of the rosary, was to realize the swift promulgation of a new, fifth dogma of Mary as 'Coredemptrix, Mediatrix, Advocate'. This view has now won worldwide support from devotees who want to give Mary a place of her own in God's acts of salvation, something toward which Fatima would have pointed also.

Into the 1990s, the 'Third Secret' of Fatima, which the visionary Lucia shared only with the Pope, continued to be the inspiration for end-time prophecies and speculations of an eschatological and apocalyptic nature about the further course of the world and the concrete beginning of the end times. The fall of the Communist regimes, growing interest in the end of

the world caused by the approach of the year 2000, and his own personal devotion to Fatima led Pope John Paul II to reveal the Third Secret in that year. The content appeared less dramatic and apocalyptic than many had thought. The year 2000 having quietly passed, fundamentalist circles suggested that the message has not yet been fully revealed, and that the end of time will begin some years later. In this way too Fatima continues to be an important source of nourishment for cults within the network.

*Case-study: Medjugorje*

Medjugorje is probably the most famous and most frequently visited shrine within the network. The authenticity of the apparitions that have taken place there since 1981 is among the most contentious topics in the modern Catholic Church. Since that year six children have been receiving daily messages from Mary, who appears under the title of Queen of Peace. From the beginning the Bishop of Mostar-Duvno had doubts about the authenticity of the apparitions, and suspicions of manipulation by the Franciscans arose. Over the years many influential persons in the Catholic Church, right up through Pope John Paul II, have spoken out on the cult, or on the other hand expressly refused to take a position on it. They are caught in a field of forces which include adherents who really 'see' Mary, others who consider it all the work of Satan, still others who suggest pious deception on the part of the visionaries and their advisors, and still others who assume machinations of the Franciscans in their strife with the local bishop are involved. Whatever the case, three diocesan investigative committees have declared the apparitions and messages non-authentic, and in 1998 the Vatican itself also accepted that standpoint.

However, over against the negative position of the Church hierarchy stands a massive following of believers who find considerable strength in the shrine and the series of messages. In 2001 more than 35 million pilgrims, devotees and believers, including thousands of regular priests and hundreds of bishops, visited the shrine. The majority were Catholics of conservative outlook. Because of the opposition of the hierarchy, the cult exists in a problematic spiritual vacuum, and links have arisen with other unacknowledged apparitions and devotions around the world, like the mentioned Lady of All Nations in Amsterdam. The spiritual and theological autonomy of the devotion is further stimulated by a powerful relation between the cult and charismatic renewal, a movement which disassociates itself from institutional ecclesiastical structures. Charismatic prayer groups have been set up from Medjugorje which function as models for such groups elsewhere in the world, and which serve to further spread the cult. The intensive mission activities are supported by world tours by the visionaries and the Fathers themselves. Worldwide establishment of Medjugorje prayer groups, foundations, committees and magazines, and the creation of branch shrines, meets the demand for opportunities for frequent and nearby devotion from the millions of devotees who can not come to Medjugorje often enough, or not at all.

The massive growth of the cult means that any retreat on its part, and continued rejection by the Vatican, are actually no longer possibilities. Its position is strengthened by the constant reference to the 'fruits' the cult has borne for the Catholic Church, such as conversions, vocations for the priesthood, and also healings. When they achieve a certain critical mass, devotions are often officially recognized and appropriated by the Church. That is one of the factors which makes the network so very dynamic.

Medjugorje is one of the hundreds of sacred sites around the world where visionaries or cult guardians claim to receive the only correct or true apparitions or messages. It is true that the largest places exercise the most influence, but ultimately it is the visitors, pilgrims and devotees moving among the sites who disseminate the local spirituality and are thus both influenced themselves and in turn influence the other sites they visit.

The important devotions and shrines in the network include, among many others: Heede, Germany (established 1937), Kérizinen, France (1938), Amsterdam, The Netherlands (1945), Montichiari, Italy (1946), Marienfried, Germany (1946), Heroldsbach, Germany (1949), Necedah Wisc., USA (1949), Eisenberg, Austria (1955), Garabandal, Spain (1961), San Damiano, Italy (1961), Wollongong, NSW, Australia (1968), Akita, Japan (1969), Bayside NY, USA (1970), Tampa, FL, USA (1973), Dorrego, Argentina (1975), Olawa, Poland (1981), Kibeho, Rwanda (1981), Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina (1981) Soufanieh, Syria (1982), Maasmechelen, Belgium (1982), Melleray, Ireland (1985), Schio, Italy (1985), Naju, South Korea (1986), Cuenca, Ecuador (1988), Conyers GA, USA (1988), Manduria, Italy (1992), Paratico, Italy (1994), Valkenswaard, The Netherlands (1998), Marpingen, Germany (1999), Seuca, Romania (2000).

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