

PRIVATE APPARITIONS IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH¹

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When cases of apparitions are reported, the first problem that presents itself in their regard is that of authenticity: did a true apparition take place and can we have trust in the person giving testimony? A second problem cannot fail to present itself: is it possible to enunciate a theology of apparitions and determine the legitimate place that they can claim in the life of the Church? In a certain way the second problem precedes the first, because only in the working out of a reflection on the truths of the faith and on the nature of revelation can a place for apparitions be recognized, and the conditions for their validity can be examined. Thus theological reflection has a fundamental function in evaluating this phenomenon.

From the apparitions of God to the mystery of the Incarnation

According to what the Old Testament tells us, the revelation of God to the Jewish people happened essentially by means of words directed to the chiefs of that people and to prophets. But the high point of that revelation consisted of apparitions in which He who spoke not only made Himself heard, but revealed something of his own being. Thus, for example, God let Moses catch a glimpse of His glory, even if He did not show him His face (Ex. 33:23). Or again, He revealed Himself to Ezekiel through symbolic images (Ez. 1). The revelation of the divine name (Ex. 3:14) implies the intention to reveal the mysterious depth of the divine being, given that, for the Hebrews, a name expresses a reality.

It was thinkable that these apparitions, while partial and incomplete, were preparing for a final apparition in which the splendor of the divine being would have blazed forth. The announcement of the “day of Yahweh” could be interpreted in the sense of a supreme moment in which God would have manifested Himself in all the splendor of His light.

But that was not the definitive revelation of God that took place in Jesus. The latter was not a more perfect apparition than the others; indeed, the Incarnation is not an apparition. An apparition is set outside of the normal conditions of earthly human life.

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A spiritual being manifests itself here by clothing itself in a sensible form² that it does not habitually possess and which allows it to render itself accessible to human perception. In the first centuries, certain gnostics or docetists conceived of the presence of Christ as an apparition or a sensible appearance that a divine being assumes. Far from being an appearance or an assumed form, the flesh of Jesus is reality of the human nature assumed by the Son. The Word did not appear in flesh, but was made flesh, and thus committed Himself into an ordinary human existence, subject to all the conditions of space and time.

The regime of divine revelations and apparitions proper to the Old Covenant has been surpassed, therefore, with the Incarnation. The superiority of the Incarnation derives from the depth of the divine commitment. The Son of God makes Himself known to men, becoming a man; declaring that the Word was made flesh, the Gospel of John wants to underscore that he has assumed in particular the weakness of the human condition. Moreover this Word “has dwelt among us”: while apparitions are a transitory phenomenon characterized by a certain brevity, permanence among men signifies a permanent contact that develops with the same human life. The commitment into human existence is thus complete.

The Johannine prologue lets us understand that with the coming of the only Son, the supreme aim of the divine apparitions of the past has been reached. “No one has ever seen God”, he says. “To see God” was the great desire that had developed in the heart of the many who sought more intimate contact with Yahweh. Although they offered a certain partial satisfaction of this desire, the apparitions of the Old Testament never had permitted those who received them the privilege of seeing the divine face. Not even Moses, the mediator *par excellence* in the transmission of the law, had been able to accede to such a favor. What had been impossible in the past was realized by the presence on earth of the Word made flesh.

The Evangelist ends the prologue with these words: “The only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has revealed Him” (Jn. 1:18). With the Incarnation, the Son has made God seen, not by means of a glorious vision, but with a revelation that reveals itself to faith. It is the greatest revelation that can be granted to those who find themselves in the condition of earthly life.

The revelation of God in Christ is therefore superior to all the partial revelations that flowed from the apparitions of God in the Old Testament. This one brings higher and more perfect light. God has shown His face in Jesus; as is described for us in the Gospel, we must concentrate our effort on Him in order to know the divine mystery. When the Teacher declared to Philip: “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn

² “Un essere spirituale vi si manifesta attraverso un rivestimento sensibile...”

14:9), he indicated the reality and the fullness of the revelation that was concealed within His person. Asking “Show us the Father”, Philip probably had hoped for an apparition, an exceptional vision. Jesus wants to make him understand that his desire has been satisfied, but by another way. He offered him what a vision could not have given him: the continual presence of the face of the Father, through his face, the face of the Son.

We can add that even in an event such as that of the Transfiguration, in which the glory of Christ made itself perceived in a sensible manner, the voice of the Father sounds without His face being revealed. From this we grasp better the intention to rule out every apparition of the Father, even in a moment in which it might have been expected. This intention is connected to the will to concentrate the revelation of the face of God in the human face of Jesus.

As the religion of Christ, the Christian religion remains therefore a religion of the Incarnation, of an Incarnation that is superior to all apparitions. This means that it has no need of apparitions in order to develop and that the search for the presence and the face of God must be realized in the discovery of the face of Jesus. It does not call for visions but for intimate contacts with Christ in faith.

The period of the apparitions of Christ arisen

Apparitions had an essential function after the death of Jesus until the moment of His Ascension. The earthly life of Jesus had ended; the Resurrection did not signal a resumption of the previous condition in which the Teacher lived with His disciples. In other resurrections, as in the case of the son of the widow of Naim, or of the daughter of Jairus, or of Lazarus, those who had been raised had simply continued to live their terrestrial life. The condition of Christ arisen was completely different: the body that left the tomb had been raised to a celestial, glorious condition. This body therefore was no longer in the situation of an earthly existence: likewise the human soul of Jesus, from the instant of death, enjoyed celestial glory.

Therefore Jesus no longer returned to His disciples except by means of apparitions. In this way he showed them that his state of life was completely changed. He appeared where He willed, moving in such a way as to dominate the constrictions imposed by space, presenting Himself in a room whose doors were closed. Those who had known Him very well earlier had difficulty in recognizing Him, as if the features of His face now evaded normal perception.

In any case, in these apparitions, he offers an objective presence to those to whom He

appears. It is not a vision of the subjective order. Numerous people see Him in the place where He appears. He lets Himself be touched, and even invites Thomas to place his finger or his hand into His wounds. He shows His disciples His hands and His feet, to make them accept the reality of His flesh and the identity of the risen body with the crucified body (Lk. 24:30). He eats under the gaze of his disciples to dispel the doubts that they might yet have. He possesses that body in which he lived his earthly life, with all its properties; those that pertain to the glorious state did not attenuate His corporeal reality.

The aim of these apparitions was above all to provide the disciples the proof of His Resurrection. The event of the Resurrection could not have been observed by any witness. No one was present in the tomb at the moment in which the body of Jesus had taken up life again. Even if there had been someone present, he would not have been able to observe the Resurrection properly speaking, that is, the passage which is from one state of death to that of a glorious life, of the celestial order, because this superior life renders the body invisible. A witness could have only observed the disappearance of the body. The event of the Resurrection includes an essentially transcendent, meta-historical aspect, even if it is produced within the course of history, in a determined place and on a precise date.

The apparitions are the proof that Jesus is alive, with a life superior to His earthly condition, and the proof of His Resurrection. In that way, they offer the supreme guarantee of the authenticity of the complete revelation of the Savior. They confirm the divine answer to the conflict which the Jewish religious authorities had put up against the authority claimed by Jesus. The victory reported over death is the sign of the truth taught by the Teacher and the completion of his redeeming mission.

Moreover the apparitions permit the Risen One to complete his work, imparting final instructions to the disciples and preparing more directly for the formation of the Church. He entrusts in particular to the Apostles the power to remit sins, and assigns them the mission to evangelize humanity. To Peter he entrusts the mission as universal pastor. He orients the aspirations of His own toward the coming of the Holy Spirit. This double function of the apparitions is only transitory: once a sufficient proof of the Resurrection has been offered, and the final dispositions have been taken in view of Pentecost and the future of the Church, these apparitions cease to be necessary. Therefore they are limited to the forty days that precede the Ascension. The period of the apparitions of Christ arisen is therefore exceptional, and ended before the development of the Church.

The mystery of the Ascension, which concludes this period, contributes to illustrate the meaning of the inauguration of a new regime in the spread of salvation. It signals the

definitive departure of the Savior of this world: now the disciples no longer will see their Teacher. Now Jesus had explained the motive for this His departure, saying that it was to the advantage of those who were saddened to lose Him: "It is good for you that I depart, for if I do not leave you, then the Consoler will not come to you; but when I will have gone, I will send Him" (Jn. 16:7). Christ leaves bodily with the aim of coming spiritually by means of the action of the Holy Spirit. Now, to act on humanity and transform it, He will no longer make use of His bodily presence, as during his earthly existence; His spiritual presence will be that to characterize the life of the Church.

According to the evangelist Matthew, the final words of Jesus to the Apostles express the guarantee of this spiritual presence: "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the world" (28:20). In fact his departing is destined to allow for a much fuller presence, which permanently accompanies the disciples.

In that way Jesus indicates that after His departure the disciples must not turn a nostalgic look on the past, nor look back with regret on the days of his visible presence among men. The presence assured for the future is richer and more universal. Therefore we need not wish for the return of the regime of apparitions. On this point there is the explicit declaration of the risen Teacher to the Apostle Thomas: "Because you have seen me you believed. Blessed are those who will believe without having seen" (Jn 20:29). The great privilege received by the Apostle, to see Christ arisen with his own eyes and to be able to touch Him with his hand, is not the greatest favor that one can desire. He who believes without having seen enjoys a superior happiness. The ideal does not consist, then, in a faith that would seek its support in apparitions or in visions.

The life of the Church after Pentecost. Testimony and the call to faith.

At the moment of the Ascension Jesus defined the way by which the evangelization of the world will take place: "You will receive power from the Holy Spirit, who will descend upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and unto the ends of the world" (Ac. 1:8).

The essential mode of transmission of the truth taught by the Teacher is therefore testimony. The Apostles act as witnesses. The words of Peter about the election of someone to take the place of Judas, are significant: "We need, therefore, that one of those who were companions for the whole time in which the Lord Jesus lived among us, beginning from the baptism by John, until the day when he was taken up from us into Heaven, become a witness to His Resurrection, together with us" (Ac. 1:21-22).

The witnesses of His Resurrection are those who received the apparitions of Christ arisen; but it is necessary to observe that such testimony cannot be separated from that concerning all the public life of Jesus. The Resurrection has meaning only inasmuch as it is the crowning of all that happened preceding in the earthly mission of the Savior.

Placing the accent on testimony for the spread of the Good News, Jesus has given us to understand that Christianity would not be spread in the world by means of apparitions, visions, or other similar supernatural phenomena. Men receive the message of salvation not by a direct and miraculous intervention of God, which He would present to them from above, but by an indirect attestation, that of witnesses who guarantee the truth that they propagate. The only direct intervention in the life of humanity has been the Incarnation, with the presence of the Son of Man; this intervention ended with the Resurrection and the apparitions of the risen Savior. Now it is the testimony concerning the coming of the Son of God among men that has the mission to lead them to accept this truth. The testimony receives this one and the same superior guarantee from the fact that it is inspired and illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

Certainly the supernatural is not really excluded in the transmission of the truth, but the latter is not identified with extraordinary phenomena: it consists rather in the action of the Holy Spirit who guides all the activities of the Apostles and directs the development of the Church. The Spirit causes the testimony and also assures its fruitfulness.

In this testimony animated by the Spirit is found an invitation to faith. That is what the last words of Jesus underscore, as Mark reports to us: “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever will not believe will be condemned” (16:15-16). This affirmation of the necessity of faith corresponds to the beatitude of those who “will believe without having seen” (Jn. 20:28). To believe, we must not pretend to see. Testimony offers a secure basis for faith.

The regime of Christian life is therefore essentially that of faith. The regime of vision is reserved for the beyond. In faith there is a fundamental light but one that remains wrapped in obscurity. This is painful, and the desire that drives some believers to seek the visible to confirm their faith is understandable. They would like to make up with a “seeing” for the clearness that is lacking in “believing”. This very desire drives a good number of Christians today toward persons who claim to have apparitions or visions.

Extraordinary phenomena

If we turn to the description of the early development of the Church, as it is presented in the *Acts of the Apostles*, we notice that, being the work of a testimony that causes faith, the expansion of Christianity is accompanied by certain extraordinary phenomena, in which a more visible manifestation of the supernatural can be recognized. Everything happens as if God had wanted to take account of the hunger for vision that is hidden in the heart of believers and give them some kind of satisfaction in particular circumstances, without otherwise abolishing the regime of faith.

As phenomena that surpass the forces of nature, we recall those accounts in the first ten chapters of the *Acts of the Apostles*: the marvels of Pentecost with the fact that people of diverse nationalities understood what the Apostles were saying, each in his own mother-tongue (Ac. 2:8,11); the healing of a man crippled from birth, performed by Peter in the name of Jesus of Nazareth (Ac. 3:1-10); the miraculous liberation of the Apostles from prison (Ac. 5:19); the vision of Stephen, who declared that he saw the heavens open and the Son of Man at the right hand of God (Ac. 7:56); the miracles of healing or deliverance of the possessed, completed by Philip (Ac. 8:5-7); the revelation of Christ to Saul on the way to Damascus, which triggers his conversion and commitment to the apostolic mission (Ac. 9:1-19); the healing of a paralytic and the resurrection of a woman, performed by Peter (Ac. 9:32-35), etc.

The circumstances of Saul's conversion – an event so important for the primitive Church – are particularly impressive. Paul considered his encounter with Jesus as one of the apparitions of Christ arisen. After having recalled a series of apparitions, the last of which is directed “to all the apostles”, he adds: “Last of all, he appeared also to me, as to one born out of due time” (1 Cor 15:8). He desired in this way to confirm his status as an apostle.

Anyway, this apparition is not obviously of the same order as those that had come prior to the Ascension. Saul did not see the features of the face of Jesus, nor his hands, nor His feet, nor his bodily stature. He was dazzled by a light; rather than seeing someone, he became blind. The one element of the bodily identity of Jesus that he perceived was His voice. This type of encounter confirms the fact that after the Ascension the human face of Jesus no longer appears on the earth. The event consists of an extraordinary manifestation of the power of Christ arisen, that hurls Saul to the ground, topples his convictions, and changes the meaning of his life. The authenticity of the encounter was confirmed by all the subsequent existence of the Apostle.

From the confidences of Paul, we know that this exceptional contact with Christ was followed, in the secret of his inner life, by other contacts under the form of mystical visions. In fact he writes to the Corinthians: “I will go on to visions and to revelations

in the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – was taken up to the third heaven. And I know that this man – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – was taken up into paradise and heard unutterable words that no man may pronounce” (1 Cor 12:1-4). These raptures have a more subjective nature than the encounter on the Damascus road; in the latter there is an external action by Christ, while the raptures are confined to the inner life.

From the accounts that have been handed on to us, we can conclude that in the life of the primitive Church there was no lack of supernatural interventions of an extraordinary character. In particular, regarding the apparitions, we should note that of the angel who opens the prison doors for the Apostles and leads them out, urging them to announce the message of salvation (Ac. 5:19-20); later the angel will free Peter, accompanying him to the corner of a street (Ac. 12:6-11). These angels, who take a human appearance, are compared to those mentioned in the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection and of the Ascension. Only one apparition of Christ is reported, that which causes the conversion of Saul; but it is an apparition that does not show the face of Christ at all, and lets only His voice be heard.

In contrast the mystical contacts of Paul with Christ in his raptures are of a completely different type. Christ made him feel His presence and manifested Himself in the inner life of His Apostle. These manifestations cannot be compared to those that are ordinarily called apparitions, because they do not include any visible external element.

Basing ourselves on what happened at the beginnings of the Church, we can therefore affirm that the life of the Church and the individual life of the disciples of Jesus belong essentially to the regime of testimony and of faith, but do not exclude prodigies that give an exterior confirmation to the faith, nor phenomena of the mystical order that make the life or the presence of Christ “felt”. It could be objected that the initial period of the Church, as the *Acts of the Apostles* describe it, was too privileged to be able to draw conclusions about the lasting conditions of Christian existence. The privilege could consist in more abundant and more impressive supernatural interventions, but the fact remains that such interventions are presented as characteristic of the regime of life of the Church. It must simply be added that these have an exceptional character: they are not produced in a regular manner, but arise in unforeseeable moments, bearing the sign of the mysterious divine sovereignty.

Sensible manifestations of the supernatural in the current life of the Church

In the current life of the Church there are sensible manifestations of the supernatural. It

is not possible to review them here in an exhaustive manner, but only to cite some examples: there are the places of pilgrimage, where miracles of bodily healings are observed; even if the miracles are somewhat rare in relation to the number of the sick who pour in to these places, they are extraordinary signs of the divine omnipotence that directs human life. They are the prolongation of the miracles worked by Jesus in His earthly ministry and of the Apostles in the primitive Church, which especially had the function of signifying the spiritual healing offered by the Savior to humanity.

According to some testimonies relative to the life of certain saints, such as Jean-Marie Vianney or John Bosco, facts of a prodigious nature have been verified in connection with their apostolic activity or of their works of charity, for example, the miraculous distribution of food, which recalls the multiplication of loaves.

In the field of visions and apparitions, it must equally be recognized that serious and trustworthy testimonies guarantee their reality in well determined cases, which however remain always exceptional. Among these cases, a few recall the meeting of Saul with Jesus on the Damascus road: numerous accounts of conversion underscore the role of an apparition of Christ or of a mystical experience of the divine presence even before it produces the acceptance of faith. Also some vocations can be manifested through a direct contact with Christ: this is the recent case of a young man who in fact was not thinking of becoming a priest, but who in a dramatic moment sees Christ who formally calls him to the priesthood, providing him concrete guarantees of the truth of His apparition and of His call.

To assure the authenticity of such visions or apparitions, we have at our disposal only the testimony of those who report it. It is necessary every time to judge the value of such testimony, which is the more assured, the more the personal life of the witnesses testifies to the truth of their account. At times the extraordinary phenomenon produces a change in behavior so evident that its authenticity becomes clearly confirmed.

The nature of visions or apparitions poses delicate problems. In what measure does it imply an objective external reality or a sensible presence determined by the coordinates of time and of space in the material universe? It seems that in many cases the vision, despite being an authentic perception, remains subjective: what is appearing is not located in the material world, but seems to remain confined in the perception of the individual. It could be said, for example, that Christ, when he appears to those whom He wishes to convert or call, makes use of a sensible image and of a sensible voice to express His presence, but not that it could be recognized as an objective bodily manifestation analogous to those that were verified in the apparitions of Christ arisen.

The subjective interpretation imposes itself especially in cases of mystical visions, in

which one and the same person appears under different sensible forms. When Saint Teresa of Avila recalls successive visions, in which the Virgin Mary is not always dressed in the same way, it would be difficult to claim that objectively Mary had been present successively with different clothes. In this there is the sign of a simple sensible appearance, adapted to some needs of the human imagination. This subjectivity does not compel us to deny that a real, spiritual contact with Mary was established, but forbids us to conclude about an external sensible reality in keeping with the appearance.

With or without a vision, a message can be transmitted by an extraordinary supernatural way. The *Acts of the Apostles* furnish us two particularly impressive cases of a vision accompanied by a message: that of the centurion Cornelius invited to make contact with Peter, and that of Peter illuminated about the necessity of surpassing the prohibitions of the Jewish law (Ac. 10:1-10). So we need not be amazed if God at times reveals a message through a vision or by means of a mysterious voice. Here too it is necessary to underscore the exceptional character of such a communication of the divine thought or will; ordinarily this communication takes place by means of the secret inspirations of the Holy Spirit that illumine human thought and influence the will in a less formal, more subtle manner. But it is important to observe that in some circumstances, in virtue of His sovereignty, God chooses a more direct mode of revelation.

The necessity of insisting on the exceptional character of sensible extraordinary manifestations of the supernatural is due to the fact that the current life of the Church remains in the regime of faith, a regime that could be defined as that of non-vision. Even those who benefit from special mystical favors are never withdrawn from the order of faith. The example of Saint John of the Cross, the Mystical Doctor, who developed the doctrine of naked faith, in the night of the senses and of the spirit, contributes to show that mystical experiences can never suppress nor attenuate faith, and that they aim rather to give it all its fullness.

The credibility of apparitions

Often apparitions have been received with a passionate enthusiasm, and have made crowds of faithful rush to the place where they have occurred. In effect, many expect to find a confirmation of their faith in those who “see”. This favorable prejudice could easily encourage a credulity that does not really seek to test the signs of authenticity of the phenomenon.

Others, in contrast, assume in regard to apparitions an attitude of skepticism that closes

them to any judicious examination of the facts stated. Sometimes this skepticism touches their faith itself, because it is from a lack of faith that some reject all sensible manifestations of the supernatural. In other cases skepticism is simply that of the believer who wants to hold to the faith as given and feels repugnance in the face of something that seems to introduce elements of vision.

Verifying the credibility of apparitions requires a balanced attitude, open to the examination of the facts and capable to keep a distance from both a too passionate acceptance and from skeptical refusals. It is a matter of taking into account the conditions and limits in which the life of the Church and of Christians can involve sensible manifestations of contact with the spiritual world.

Among these conditions there is the secondary and exceptional character of such manifestations. They cannot substitute for the regime of faith. Thus, apparitions that may, over a sufficiently long time, become so frequent as to become part of the daily life of the seers would tend to transform Christian existence into vision, and free it from the obscurity of faith. Such frequency would be a motive to suspect the authenticity of the apparitions. It would support the image of a Christian religion that is nourished much more from current visions than from the revelation brought in the past from the coming of Christ on earth. Piety would develop as a function of ongoing apparitions, more than from the impulse of faith; or rather, faith would tend to become a faith in the truth of the contemporary apparitions and would base itself on the testimony of those who see.

Another condition of authenticity consists in the conformity of the apparitions, and the messages or revelations which these bring, with the truth of the doctrine of the faith. If in the words heard in the course of the apparitions a doctrinal error is found, or an assertion incompatible with the teaching of the Gospel, it would be necessary to deny those words the supernal origin attributed to them. The same would be said of words that might contain denunciations or disparagements contrary to charity, threats of vengeance, or that would imply attitudes in discord with the moral precepts of Christ, or would have the effect of spreading a spirit of denigration or of revolt, disobedience to the authority of the Church. In such cases it would be necessary to question their value.

Also, independently of conformity with the doctrinal and moral principles of Christian life, it is important to verify the signs of the transcendent origin of the apparitions. It is necessary to examine especially in what manner they began: if the first apparition consisted only in a very vague perception of a luminous phenomenon, and involved a good amount of interpretation of that phenomenon, we would have to ask whether there had not been a progressive psychological formation of an attitude of vision which

would render a divine intervention improbable.

Apart from the beginning of the apparitions, it is necessary to take into consideration all its elements in order to see if they contribute to attest to its transcendent origin. Thus, we must ask if the words of the apparition have not been suggested humanly from the environment, by prior conversations or by the songs of the crowd, or by the seers themselves. I can recall the case of a priest who, after he had held a conversation with a seer, had had the surprise of reading in the account of the next day's apparition, a reproduction of the questions which he himself had formulated.

Equally an obstacle to affirming a transcendent origin of the apparitions would be any indication of a certain human manipulation of them: when the beneficiaries of the apparitions determine themselves their location, date, frequency, or program. Then it is not a matter of a phenomenon coming from on high, but an experience more or less directed by those who are their protagonists on earth.

The testimonies must be evaluated according to the ordinary rules of credibility. When there is more than one seer, the comparison of their statements can furnish an important confirmation of the authenticity of the facts. In the case of messages or dialogues, their agreement on the words heard is an index of credibility. If, to the contrary, they have heard different words, it becomes more difficult to attribute them to the same person in a single objective apparition. Rather, there would be multiple apparitions adapted subjectively to each one.

It is necessary to take account of all the behavior of the seers in their everyday life and not only at the time of the apparitions. The sincerity of their words and of their acts tends to favor a positive judgment, while maneuvering in their affirmations, contradictions or modifications in their successive statements, would create perplexity.

Finally, we cannot neglect to consider the fruits of the apparitions, whether for the seers themselves, or for those who enter into relationship with them. But it is necessary to observe that by themselves spiritual fruits do not suffice as a criterion to judge the authenticity of apparitions: cases are known in which numerous conversions have been observed and in which the alleged apparitions have been later rejected by the authority of the Church as lacking a serious foundation. In any case, when the consensus of the other indexes is positive, fruits bring a valuable confirmation.

Apparitions and the authority of the Church

In the case of apparitions the authority of the Church can intervene and formulate its

judgment. But it is necessary to understand its significance well.

Regarding public revelation, the Magisterium has competence to define its content in all its fullness, for anything regarding either doctrine or historical facts. At its highest level, this authority can issue infallible declarations in order to make precise what all the faithful must accept as a truth of the faith.

But here this is not a matter of public revelation, even if the apparitions and the revelations that accompany them are brought widely to the awareness of the public. Public revelation is that which took place in the past and was fully completed with the coming and the work of Christ. It is closed after the apostolic era. No present-day fact in the life of the Church and of Christians could become part of it or enrich it.

Revelations that have occurred after the apostolic era cannot ever claim the same authority: whatever may be their spread or influence in the Church, they are called private revelations in order to distinguish them from the one public revelation. Certain theologians have contested the legitimacy of this appellation, but it seems that this is the best way to safeguard the distinction: the “private” character means that the revelations of this order are not revealed to the Church in such a way as either to dictate her doctrine to her, or to indicate to her her way of development.

Cardinal Lambertini, who later became Pope Benedict XIV, indicated the value of the approval given to apparitions, visions, revelations: “This is nothing other”, he affirms, “than the permission to spread them for the guidance and the use of the faithful, after mature examination”. He specifies: to these revelations, approved in this manner, an assent of catholic faith is not owed, and it cannot be given to them; “however, an assent of human faith is due, according to the rules of prudence, in virtue of which these revelations are probable and worthy of being piously believed.”³

No guarantee of divine faith, properly speaking, can therefore be accorded to apparitions. But approval offers a guarantee of human credibility and encourages Christians to receive their benefits.

The approval given to certain apparitions, such as those of Lourdes or Fatima, has favored the development of centers of intense Marian piety, in which pilgrimages have multiplied and in which the marvels of grace have been particularly manifest. The formation of these centers attests to the spiritual fruitfulness of prayer directed to Mary

³ *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione*, L. II, c. 32, 11, Foglierini, Venetiis 1764, II, 187: «...Sciendum est approbationem istam nihil aliud esse quam permissionem ut edantur ad fidelium institutionem et utilitatem, post maturum examen: siquidem hisce revelationibus taliter approbatis, licet non debeatur, nec possit adhiberi, assensus fidei catholicae, debetur tamen assensus fidei humanae iuxta prudentiae regulas, iuxta quas nempe tales revelationes sunt probabiles et pie credibiles...».

and of the trust placed in her intercession. This cannot confer an absolute certainty on the apparitions that are at the origin of their development, but it attests concretely to the solid foundation of the impulse given in this occasion to the marian cultus.

The rules of prudence recorded by Pope Benedict XIV remain valid, but, if they prohibit every peremptory affirmation on the truth of the apparitions and the revelations which are spoken of today, they do not impede in certain cases an approval by authority, which exercises a positive influence on certain manifestations of Christian piety. It is necessary to admire the effective prudence of ecclesiastical authority, which by showing itself open to all the extraordinary interventions of God in the life of the Church, submits the facts of an apparition to a judicious examination before approving it, and, in the case of approval, does not in fact demand an assent of faith similar to that required by public revelation.

This recognizes and reflects the wisdom of the divine design which has established a regime of faith for the reception of the grace of salvation and attributes to the more direct manifestations of the supernatural only a function of secondary support in encouragement to the faith.