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# The FURROW

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## Medjugorje – the Church takes a Pastoral Response

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The International Youth Festival *Mladifest* met for the first week of August again in Medjugorje. The festival has been going for thirty years now. After the World Youth Day is the second largest regular Catholic gathering of youth. This year, despite Covid difficulties, there were some 50,000 youth and 500 priests, as has been the case in recent years. This year Pope Francis sent a message to attendees, encouraging them to “follow Christ with courage and joy.” It was a blessing he started in 2020. In both letters of encouragement he made no mention of the controversial apparitions at Medjugorje which are still under investigation by a Vatican commission.

The Church has chosen a *pastoral* response. There can be no doubt that many good fruits have come for pilgrims to Medjugorje; deepening of faith, conversion, the sacrament of Confession, prayer. At the same time there have been difficulties. The apparitions have never been accepted by the local Bishops, which traditionally – as with the case of Lourdes, Fatima, Knock etc., has been the requirement for acceptance by the Church. It has led to some fierce divisions between the Franciscans in Bosnia-Herzegovina who have been the great supporters of Medjugorje and the Diocesan hierarchy which has been critical. In the 1980’s and 90’s two of the spiritual directors of the seers acted in open denial of the local Bishop’s authority – the very two who first established and ran the *Mladifest* in its early years. Slavko Barbarić was suspended from priestly duties but continued active in Medjugorje until his death in 2000. Tomislav Vlašić was indicted of more serious misconduct. He was forcibly laicised but after refusing to give up ministry was excommunicated by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith in 2020.

Still, the Youth Festival has grown and it has distanced itself from any association with Vlašić who even the Franciscans now oppose. “God can write straight with crooked lines” and it is evident that

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good fruit has come from Medjugorje. The ecclesiastical history in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the Franciscan mission in the Middle Ages preceded any Diocesan organization, helps explain how there are two poles of authority. Medjugorje is part of a longer story. Most of the faithful both in Bosnia and neighbouring Croatia don't give it much attention and even less do the pilgrims who come from abroad. They are grateful for the sacramental life and pastoral care that is offered in Medjugorje.

The undoubted bravery of the seers during the communist persecution of the phenomena in the 1980's has shown their strong faith. Their witness boosted the moral of Catholics who had had to lie low under a more severe communist regime in Bosnia than in the rest of Yugoslavia. At a time when Lourdes and Fatima were hard to travel to the Croats now had their own Marian shrine. Nowadays, Croatian pilgrims to Lourdes are in a high number. And at Medjugorje they are a smaller proportion compared to the many pilgrims who come there from all over the world today. It is very popular for the Polish and the Italians, for whom it is relatively easy to get to. The Charismatic Renewal movement throughout the world in the 90's took to Medjugorje because there were 'live' apparitions. The emphasis on religious experience among Charismatics made Medjugorje a favourite. Most Catholic Croats believe simply that Mary calls people. The enthusiasm pilgrims feel has given them something of a mission to encourage others to go.

The hospitality industry in the small town of Medjugorje has grown exponentially though in the last year, as groups have not been able to come, many who invested a lot have been sorely tried. Government compensation in Bosnia for loss of earnings is not high. Pilgrims are starting to return though, but with one of the visionaries ceasing in 2020 to have her monthly public apparition, joining the three others who also now no longer have them, and another 'live' visionary moving to America, the emphasis has shifted to the Sacramental life and the prayer so evident there.

This has helped in the softening of the Church's official attitude to Medjugorje; since May 2019 Diocesan pilgrimages have been allowed to go. The ongoing apparitions still leaves many sceptical within the Church, the attitude, however, has settled somewhat into advice of Gamaliel to the Sanhedrin in the *Acts of the Apostles* 5:38, "Leave these alone. If their purpose or activity is of human origin it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop them." Such an attitude is not quite adequate to the situation though as one of the charisms of the Church is discernment of spirits and it has long recognized that when it comes to public apparitions it is necessary to give guidance to the faithful.

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A Vatican commission was set up in 2010. Traditionally approval by the local Bishop was essential, however it was recognized that the historical situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina could not assure impartiality. An Apostolic Visitor was appointed to supervise Medjugorje in 2018, relieving the local Bishop of his worries over it. Archbishop Henryk Hoser, the retired Archbishop of Warsaw-Prague, has taken that role, and has encouraged Medjugorje as a Marian pilgrimage place. Gradually attention is being drawn away from the apparitions, which now only two of the original six seers are still receiving, and emphasis put on the ‘place’ as holy, Diocesan pilgrimages have been given a ‘green light’.

The Vatican commission, known as the Ruini Report, presented its findings in 2014 but is still inconclusive - partly because a report cannot come to its conclusions until the apparitions investigated are ended, but also to allow the Church to take a pastoral approach to those who have found faith and sustenance at Medjugorje. There is not point pulling out the wheat with the chaff – “If you pull out the weeds now, you might uproot the wheat with them” (*Mathew* 13:29). So Medjugorje has been allowed to grow, becoming a spiritual resource for many. The Ruini report, so far, leans toward affirming the supernatural nature of the first seven visions – those between June 24th and July 1st 1981 - but voices doubts, serious doubts, as to the ongoing visions after that (which in the end is 99.99% of the apparitions). If the apparitions have been continuing for 40 years, sometimes weekly, sometimes daily, to six visionaries and in recent decades independently, they have had well over 30,000 apparitions, maybe up to 50,000. Now this is quite a different situation than the eighteen apparitions at Lourdes, one at Knock and the six at Fatima. Also the nature of the apparitions which are scheduled and much more wordy compared to the silent or concise locutions given by Mary at other apparitions. Prompting Pope Francis to make the wry comment that “the Virgin is not the chief of the post-office who would send messages every day. She is a mother.” (November 2013).

Such differences certainly leaves many doubting whether these apparitions are all to be regarded as prophetic revelations for the Church as a whole as previous approved ones are recognized to be. They could be at the level of ‘private revelations’ with a pious message that can have meaning for the faithful but in no way of the same value as the few and condensed prophetic mysteries revealed at Fatima. Pope Francis in May 2017 candidly gave his own personal opinion in 2017: “On the original apparitions, the ones the children had [in 1981] the enquiry says that the investigations have to continue, but the ones that come after – I’m giving my personal opinion – don’t have much value” Certainly it is hard to believe

tens of thousands of ‘messages’ can have the same ecclesial and prophetic significance as the few revealed words of Mary prior to this. As ‘private revelations’ to the seers they can still be of value but are not meant to be regarded as compelling for the Church as a whole.

The shift in Medjugorje is toward the more usual mediums of grace, the sacraments and personal and communal prayer, than ‘extraordinary phenomena’. The Christian contemplative tradition has long recognized that the need for experiences is never the best foundation for faith. If we have an extraordinary experience it can be very important for *that* moment but should not be ‘clung to’. The grace it imparts hopefully stays but the experience is temporary and should be accepted as such. We must not become overly attached to the ways grace is mediated but always stay open the unexpected summons of faith. “Straining forward to what lies ahead” (St Paul to the Philippians 3:13). Or, as Jesus says simply, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (John 20:29).

The Church in taking a pastoral response to the popularity of Medjugorje is recognizing the many good things that have come from there but is also putting the emphasis on the sacramental and the prayer life there rather than visions or extraordinary experiences. The youth are drawn there because it is a holy place and for many in Eastern Europe much more accessible than the great Marian pilgrimage places in Western Europe. It is a blessing for the faithful here. And a wonder that, out of one of the most complex discernment of spirits the Church has been faced with in the modern era, the simplicity of faith has for many people been born and those flagging in the spiritual life have been renewed.

The present Medjugorje is a less controversial place, as the visions are winding down, and it is under the wing of an Apostolic visitor. In time there will be a sifting of the wheat from the chaff. Where in the west Medjugorje has been associated with a little fanaticism and far too much emphasis on the devil hiding away in the modern world, here among the Croats it is a holy place which they love. The devotion of most Croats to Medjugorje is quite natural – it is the most recent part of their rich spiritual heritage. We could learn from them how to approach what could be a blessing for the whole Church without any extreme or exaggerated loyalty. In the end the important message of Medjugorje is Our Lady as our mother, more silent than speaking, and Jesus Christ her son as our Lord, source of courage and joy for the youth and of tolerant open-mindedness and clear discernment for those a little older.