

Episcopal Affirmations of the Supernatural: Some Historical Cases

ROBERT FASTIGGI, PHD

Introduction: The importance of Marian apparitions

Marian apparitions have played an important role in the life of the Church.¹ We only need think of how the 1531 apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe to St. Juan Diego—along with Mary’s miraculous image on his tilma—led to the conversion of over nine million Aztecs to the Catholic faith.² Shrines that have been erected because of Marian apparitions continue to draw millions of pilgrims each year. About 20 million pilgrims visit the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe annually; about 6 million go to Lourdes; 6–8 million to Fatima; and about 10 million to the Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health in Vailankanni, which is recognized as “the Lourdes of the East”(John Paul II, Angelus address, July 31, 1988).

Marian apparitions as private revelations

Marian apparitions fall into the category of “private revelations” to distinguish them from the public revelation of Scripture and apostolic tradition. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains,

Throughout the ages, there have been so-called "private" revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ's definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history. Guided by the Magisterium of the Church, the *sensus fidei* knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church (no. 67).

¹ See Robert Fastiggi, “Mary and Our Pilgrimage to Heaven” *The Priest* (September, 2024): <https://thepriest.com/2024/06/16/mary-and-our-pilgrimage-to-heaven/>.

² Francis Johnson, *The Wonder of Guadalupe* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1981), 56.

The distinction between the deposit of faith and the messages of private revelations is important to keep in mind when discerning the validity of reported apparitions. The Catechism, though, also recognizes how the *sensus fidelium*, guided by the Magisterium, “knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church.” If the *sensus fidelium*—the supernatural sense of the faithful—can discern and welcome authentic calls from Christ or his saints to the Church, does this not suggest the ability to discern whether or not reported Marian apparitions are supernatural?

The New Norms of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF)

I raise this question in light of the cautious approach to the validity of private revelations provided by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith [DDF] in the new *Norms for Proceeding in the Discernment of Alleged Supernatural Phenomena* of May 17, 2024.³ The DDF is concerned that direct affirmations of the supernatural character of apparitions or phenomena will give the faithful the impression that they are obliged to believe in them as supernatural. Because of this concern, the DDF will not allow bishops to issue statements affirming the supernatural character of apparitions or miraculous events. The highest form of episcopal approval now permitted is a declaration of *nihil obstat*, which means that nothing stands in the way for the faithful to believe in the reported apparitions or miraculous event. But even with the *nihil obstat*, the diocesan bishop is asked to “clearly indicate, through a decree, the nature of the authorization and the limits of any permitted veneration, specifying that the faithful ‘are authorized to give to it their adherence in a prudent manner’” (Art. 22 § 1). Moreover, “The Diocesan Bishop will also take care to ensure that the faithful do not consider any of the determinations as an approval of the supernatural nature of the phenomenon itself (Art. 22 § 2).

³ These Norms can be found on the Vatican website:
https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240517_norme-fenomeni-soprannaturali_en.html.

In support of this cautious approach, the DDF cites this 2010 statement of Pope Benedict XVI:

Ecclesiastical approval of a private revelation essentially means that its message contains nothing contrary to faith and morals; it is licit to make it public and the faithful are authorized to give to it their adherence in a prudent manner. [...] It is a help which is proffered, but its use is not obligatory. In any event, it must be a matter of nourishing faith, hope and love, which are for everyone the permanent path of salvation.⁴

The Church for centuries has taught that the faithful are not obliged to believe in private revelations—even those approved by the Church. The question can be asked, though, whether the non-obligatory character of a private revelation should prevent a bishop from making a personal affirmation of it as supernatural. According to the 1978 *Norms Regarding the Manner of Proceeding in the Discernment of Presumed Apparitions or Revelations* issued by the then Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [CDF], it was possible for the diocesan bishop “to express a judgment regarding the authenticity and supernatural character if the case so merits.”⁵

The 1978 Norms were sent to Catholic bishops in Latin to guide them in discerning reported apparitions. There were, though, many unauthorized translations that made their way into the public domain. Because of this, the CDF published its own official translations of the Norms in a number of languages in 2012 along with a preface by

⁴ Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (30 September 2010), no. 14: *AAS* 102 (2010), p. 696; this exhortation is also available on the Vatican website: https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html.

⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Norms Regarding the Manner of Proceeding in the Discernment of Presumed Apparitions or Revelations* (Feb. 25, 1978), no. 2c, available at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19780225_norme-apparizioni_en.html.

Cardinal William Levada, the prefect of the CDF.⁶ In his preface, Cardinal Levada cites Benedict XVI's *Verbum Domini* on the nature and purpose of private revelations and their non-obligatory character. The 1978 Norms, though, still allows bishops "to express a judgment regarding the authenticity and supernatural character" of the apparition.

As we have seen, the May 17, 2024 DDF Norms no longer allow the diocesan bishop to issue a statement affirming the supernatural character of the apparition. Instead, the most positive judgment a bishop can offer is a *nihil obstat* in consultation with the DDF. The reason for this cautious approach is to avoid giving the impression that belief in an approved apparition is obligatory. The new Norms make this clear:

Whenever a *Nihil obstat* is granted by the Dicastery (cf. Par. 17, below), such phenomena do not become objects of faith, which means the faithful are not obliged to give an assent of faith to them. Rather, as in the case of charisms recognized by the Church, they are "ways to deepen one's knowledge of Christ and to give oneself more generously to him, while rooting oneself more and more deeply in communion with the entire Christian people." (no. 12).

The DDF, therefore, believes bishops should avoid declaring an apparition or event supernatural. This explanation is given:

In the past, the Holy See seemed to accept that Bishops would make statements such as, "*Les fidèles sont fondés à la croire indubitable et certaine*" [The faithful have grounds to believe it as indubitable and certain]: Decree of the Bishop of Grenoble, 19 September 1851) and "one cannot doubt the reality of the tears" (Decree of the Bishops of Sicily, 12 December 1953).

⁶ Cardinal Levada's Preface is dated December 14, 2011, and it can be found on the Vatican website:

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20111214_prefazione-levada_en.html.

However, these expressions conflicted with the Church's own conviction that the faithful did not have to accept the authenticity of these events. Therefore, a few months after the latter case, the Holy Office explained that it had "not yet made any decision regarding the *Madonna delle Lacrime*" ([Syracuse, Sicily] 2 October 1954). More recently, in reference to Fatima, the then Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith explained that ecclesiastical approval of a private revelation highlights that "the message contains nothing contrary to faith or morals" (26 June 2000).

The DDF is rightly concerned that the faithful should not feel obliged to believe in apparitions that have received Church approval. Private revelations—even those that have been approved—cannot demand the assent of faith as do truths set forth by the Church as revealed by God. In the past it was generally understood that belief in approved apparitions was not obligatory. This was handled by proper catechesis. The DDF, though, now feels the need to be very cautious in this regard. Thus, it instructs bishops not to make statements affirming apparitions or miraculous events as supernatural.

The DDF provides two examples of episcopal statements judged to conflict "with the Church's own conviction that the faithful did not have to accept the authenticity of these events." It should be noted, though, that the 1851 approval of the La Salette apparition by Bishop Philibert de Bruillard does not explicitly say that the faithful *are obliged* to believe in it as supernatural. Instead the Bishop says: "The apparition of the Holy Virgin to the two shepherds on the mountain of La Salette [...] bears in itself all the characteristics of truth and the faithful have grounds to believe it as indubitable and certain" ("*L'apparition de la Sainte Vierge à deux bergers sur la montagne de La Salette [...] porte en elle-même tous les caractères de la vérité et que les fidèles sont fondés*

à la croire indubitable et certaine)”.⁷ The Bishop does not say that the apparition is indubitable and certain but the faithful have grounds (or are justified) in believing it as such. The DDF, though, believes that even this type of approval conflicts “with the Church’s own conviction that the faithful did not have to accept the authenticity of these events.”

Episcopal approvals as worthy of belief and supernatural

What type of episcopal approval, then, would be acceptable to the DDF? In the history of the Church, some apparitions seem to have been approved with the type of cautious language that the DDF now prefers. For example, the 1877 Marian apparitions received by two young Polish girls in Gietrzwałd, Poland were given indirect approval by Bishop Filip Krementz of the Diocese Warmia (Ermland), Poland in 1878. Bishop Krementz did not issue a decree approving the apparitions as supernatural. Instead, “he promoted the publication in German and in Polish of the study by Father Franciszek Hipler entitled ‘The Apparitions of Our Lady in Gietrzwałd to the Catholic People According to the Official Documents.’”⁸ On September 11, 1977, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the apparitions, Bishop Julian Wojtowski, issued a decree recognizing the apparitions as “worthy of credibility.”⁹ This would seem to be the type of approval that DDF now prefers. Bishop Wojtowski in 1977 did not declare the 1877 apparitions to be supernatural. He simply said they were worthy of

⁷ My translation taken from the French text cited on the website of La Salette <https://lasalette.cef.fr/lhistoire/>.

⁸ See the outline of events provided by Michael O’Neill in his Miracle Hunter website: https://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/approved_apparitions/gietrzwald/index.html.

⁹ *Dictionnaire des “Apparitions” de La Vierge Marie*, edited by René Laurentin and Patrick Sbalchiero (Paris:: Libraire Arthème Fayard, 2007), 389.

belief as such. In other words, nothing prevents (*nihil obstat*) the faithful from believing in these apparitions.

There have also been episcopal declarations on Marian apparitions and miraculous events that have affirmed the supernatural while also making it clear that the faithful are not obliged to believe in the apparitions. One example of this type of declaration is that of Most. Rev. John Shojiro Ito, the Bishop of Niignata, Japan, who issued a pastoral letter on April 22, 1984 in which he states:

I recognize the supernatural character of a series of mysterious events concerning the statue of the Holy Mother Mary which is found in the convent of the Institute of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist at Yuzawadai, Soegawa, Akita. I do not find in these events any elements which are contrary to Catholic faith and morals.¹⁰

Bishop Ito's recognition of the supernatural character of the events, however, is followed by this explanation and qualification:

Consequently, I authorize, throughout the entire diocese, the veneration of the Holy Mother of Akita, while awaiting that the Holy See publishes definitive judgment on this matter. And I ask that it be remembered that even if the Holy See later publishes a favorable judgment with regard to the events of Akita, it is a question only of a private Divine revelation. Christians are bound to believe only content of public Divine revelation (closed after the death of the last Apostle) which contains all that is necessary for salvation.¹¹

As can be seen, Bishop Ito recognizes the supernatural character of the events of Akita, but he makes it clear that the faithful are not

¹⁰ The text of Bishop Ito's Pastoral letter of April 22, 1984 can be found at: https://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/statements/akita_statement_01.html.

¹¹ Ibid.

obliged to believe in these events as supernatural. This is because it concerns a private revelation, which is distinct from public divine revelation.

In terms of Catholic history, there seem to be numerous examples of bishops making explicit affirmations of the supernatural character of various Marian apparitions. Here are some examples.

In July of 1836 Archbishop Hyacinthe-Louis de Quélen of Paris approved the supernatural character of the Miraculous Medal, based on the 1830 apparitions to St. Catheriine Labouré, with these words:

... [T]he prodigious number of medals that have been stamped and distributed, the stunning benefits and singular graces ... truly seem to be the signs by which heaven has wished to confirm the reality of the apparitions, the truth of the report of the visionary and the diffusion of the medal.¹²

Archbishop de Quélen does not appeal to his own authority to confirm the supernatural nature of the apparitions received by the visionary (at that time not named). Instead, he appeals to the signs of heaven that confirm the reality of the apparitions. Behind his statement, though, is the belief that he, as the Archbishop, can discern the signs given by heaven.

On January 18, 1862, Bishop Bertrand-Sévère Mascarou-*Laurence* of Tarbes, France, published a letter confirming the validity of the apparitions of Lourdes. He did not hesitate to say: “The Immaculate Mother of God has really appeared to Bernandette” (“*L’Immaculée Mère de Dieu a réellement apparu a Bernadette*”).¹³

On February 2, 1872, Bishop Casimir-Alexis-Joseph Wicart of Laval, France, issued his official judgment on the 1871 apparition of the Virgin Mary in Pontmain, France. In approving the apparition, he said:

¹² As cited in Robert L. Fastiggi and Michael O’Neill, *Virgin, Mother, Queen: Encountering Mary in Time and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2019), 89. The French text is found in Nicole Vray, *Un autre regard sur Marie: Histoire et religion* (Lyon: Olivetan, 2008), 86.

¹³ Laurentin and Sbalchiero I, 564.

“The Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God, truly appeared on January 17, 1871 to Eugène Barbedette, Joseph Barbedette, Françoise Richer and Jeanne-Marie Lebossé, in the hamlet of Pontmain” (“*L’Immaculée Vierge Marie, Mère de Dieu, a véritablement apparu, le 17 janvier 1871, à Eugène Barbedette, Joseph Barbedette, Françoise Richer et Jeanne-Marie Lebossé, dans le hameau de Pontmain*”).¹⁴

On November 21, 1987, Bishop Pio Bello Ricardo of Los Teques, Venezuela, issued a pastoral instruction on the apparitions of Our Lady to Maria Esperanza Medrano de Bianchini, which began in Betania in 1976. In approving these apparitions, the Bishop stated: “I declare that in my judgment the aforesaid apparitions are authentic and have a supernatural character. I therefore officially approve that the place where they were produced be considered sacred.”¹⁵

On June 29, 2001, Bishop Augustin Misago of Gikongoro, Rwanda, issued a declaration affirming the Marian apparitions that took place in Kibeho, Rwanda in 1981–1982. The full text of the French original was released by the Holy See on July 2, 2001, and key parts of this declaration were published in *L’Osservatore Romano* English edition of July 11, 2001.¹⁶

In affirming the apparitions Bishop Misago is quite explicit: “Yes, the Virgin Mary appeared at Kibeho on 28 November 1981 and in the months that followed. There are more reasons to believe in the apparitions than to deny them.”¹⁷ Even though Bishop Misago states clearly that the Virgin Mary did appear at Kibeho, he offers this qualification:

¹⁴ Laurentin and Sbalchiero I, 749–750.

¹⁵ Laurentin and Sbalchiero II,1056.

¹⁶ The full text of the July 11, 2001 *L’Osservatore Romano* article can be found on the Miracle Hunter website:

https://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/statements/kibeho_statement_01.html.

¹⁷ The translation is from the *L’Osservatore Romano* Eng. ed. article of July 11, 2001. French original is given in Laurentin and Sbalchiero,II,1056: “*Oui, La Vierge Marie est apparue à Kibeho dans la journée du November 1981 [...]. Il y a plus des bonnes raisons d’y croire que de le nier.*”

The recognition or negation of the authenticity of an apparition does not guarantee infallibility; it is based on proofs of probability more than on apodictic arguments". In the sphere of the apparitions there is then no absolute certainty for the witnesses, except perhaps for the visionary. The definitive judgement about the Apparitions of Kibeho should be interpreted in this spirit. The recognition of these apparitions should not be considered a requirement of faith. Therefore each Christian is free to believe or not.¹⁸

Bishop Misago's qualification is similar to the one given by Bishop Ito in 1984. His explicit statement that the Virgin Mary did appear at Kibeho is balanced with a reminder that belief in the apparitions is not a requirement of the faith.

During Mass on May 4, 2008—with officials of the Roman Curia present— Bishop Jean-Michel di Falco of the Diocese of Gap and Embrun, announced his approval of the Marian apparitions of Laus received by Benoîte Rencurel, between 1664 and 1718. In his words of approval, he clearly affirms the supernatural character of the apparitions:

After having carefully studied the facts and taken counsel from competent people, I recognize the supernatural origin of the apparitions and events experienced and related by Benoîte Rencurel between 1664 and 1718. The testimony of her life is a guarantee of the truth of her statements. I encourage the faithful to come and pray and renew themselves spiritually in this sanctuary.¹⁹

¹⁸ This text is found on the Miracle Hunter website:

https://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/statements/kibeho_statement_01.html.

¹⁹ My translation of the French, which reads: "*Après avoir soigneusement étudié les faits et pris conseil auprès des personnes compétentes, je reconnais l'origine surnaturelle des apparitions et faits vécus et relatés par Benoîte Rencurel, entre 1664 et 1718. Le témoignage de sa vie est une garantie de la vérité de ses dires. J'encourage les fidèles à venir prier et à se ressourcer.*" This passage from the French text is found at: <https://www.la->

After having recognized the supernatural origin of the apparitions, Bishop di Falco then adds this qualification: “Nobody is obliged to believe in apparitions, even in those officially recognized, but if they help us in our faith and our daily lives, why should we reject them?”²⁰

Here we see an approach similar to that of Bishop Ito with regard to Akita and Bishop Misago with regard to Kibeho. The Bishop affirms the supernatural character of the apparitions, but he makes it clear that the faithful are not obliged to believe in apparitions, even those officially recognized by the Church.

On December 8, 2010, Bishop David L. Ricken of Green Bay, WI issued a “Decree on the Authenticity of the Marian Apparitions of 1859 at the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help Diocese of Green Bay.” The key part of his Decree reads as follows:

I declare with moral certainty and in accord with the norms of the Church that the events, apparitions and locutions given to Adele Brise in October of 1859 do exhibit the substance of supernatural character, and I do hereby approve these apparitions as worthy of belief (although not obligatory) by the Christian faithful.²¹

Here we see another example of an affirmation of “supernatural character” along with the qualification that belief in the approved apparition is not obligatory.

croix.com/Religion/Actualite/Les-apparitions-de-Notre-Dame-du-Laus-officiellement-reconnues-_NG_-2008-05-05-671012.

²⁰ This part of his discourse is found at:

https://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/approved_apparitions/laus/index.html.

²¹ Bishop Ricken’s 2010 Decree can be found at: chrome-

extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglefindmkaj/https://championshrine.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Shrine-of-Our-Lady-of-Good-Help-Declaration.pdf.

On May 22, 2016, Bishop Hector Cardelli of St. Nicolas, Argentina formally declared that the apparitions of Our Lady of the Rosary to Gladys Quiroga de Motta were "supernatural in character" and "worthy of belief." He approved the apparitions—which were mostly from Mary but some from Jesus—for the period from 1983 to 1990.²² Bishop Cardelli announced his approval in a homily of May 22, 2016, but his more formal approval was by means of Decree issued that same day entitled “The Spiritual School of Holy Mary of the Rosary of San Nicolas” (*La Escuela Espiritual de Santa Maria del Rosario de San Nicolas*).²³ In this Decree, Bishop Cardelli carefully reviews the 1978 CDF Norms for Discerning Apparitions. He also cites the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 67 to make the distinction between public revelation and private revelation. After ruling out a natural or a diabolical origin of the apparitions, he concludes that the origin is beyond the natural. Following the 1978 CDF Norms he notes that no negative criteria apply but only positive criteria. Therefore, he issues his judgment that the case “exhibits a supernatural character and is worthy of belief. Consequently, for us, it is *constat de supernaturalitate*” (*exhibe carácter sobrenatural y es digno de creencia. Consecuentamente, para nosotros, constat de supernaturalitate*).

Bishop Cardelli’s Decree is a model of how a Bishop would arrive at a judgment according to the 1978 CDF Norms. He carefully distinguishes between the assent owed to public revelation and the assent owed to private revelation. Nevertheless, he believes that the evidence points to a supernatural origin, and he ends his Decree giving thanks to God and encouraging devotion to Our Lady of the Rosary.

Final Reflections

²² See this June 4, 2016 article from the *Catholic News Agency*: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/33982/a-marian-apparition-has-been-approved-in-argentina-and-its-a-big-deal>.

²³ The Spanish text of this Decree can be found at Michael O’Neill’s Miracle Hunter website: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/statements/la-escuela-espiritual-de-santa-maria-del-rosario-de-san-nicolas.pdf.

In light of the examples given above, it's clear that many bishops have made formal declarations of the supernatural character of Marian apparitions. In many of these formal statements, the bishops have also been careful to note that belief in approved Marian apparitions is not obligatory because these apparitions pertain to private rather than public revelation. If the major concern of the new DDF Norms is to make it clear that the faithful are not obliged to believe in even approved apparitions, then it seems that many bishops have already stressed this point. The question is whether a formal declaration of the supernatural character of a Marian apparition necessarily conflicts with the Church's conviction that the faithful are not obliged to accept the authenticity of the approved apparition or event. A deeper issue is whether bishops, by virtue of their office as successors to the apostles, have the capacity and the authority to declare that an apparition or miraculous event is supernatural. The new DDF Norms allow for the Pope, in rare cases, to declare an apparition to be supernatural. The Dicastery for the Causes of the Saints, which operates under the authority of the Roman Pontiff, clearly has the authority to affirm miracles as supernatural interventions. Why, though, do bishops lack this authority?

Perhaps the DDF is not denying the capacity of individual bishops to recognize the supernatural. The Dicastery might be operating more out of prudential caution than denying the episcopal ability to discern the supernatural. As Catholics we must respect the new Norms of the DDF, but we must also realize that they are more disciplinary rather than doctrinal in nature. In abiding by these new Norms, bishops will need to approve Marian apparitions judged to be worthy of belief by means of a *nihil obstat* rather than a judgment that they are supernatural in character. If a *nihil obstat* is issued, the faithful would have the right to discern for themselves whether an apparition is supernatural.

Bishops, though, are members of the faithful. Nothing, therefore, would stand in the way for a bishop to say something like: "I personally believe this apparition is supernatural, and I approve it as worthy of belief as such. The faithful, however, are not obliged to believe in this apparition as supernatural, but nothing stands in their way to believe it is." As long as these new Norms remain in force, this might be the

proper way for a bishop to affirm an apparition or event as supernatural.