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Visionary says Virgin Mary is aware of economic crisis

by Greg Garrison by Religion News Service

STERRETT, Ala. -- Marija Lunetti, one of six young peasants who claimed that the Virgin Mary began appearing to them in 1981 in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, says the mother of Jesus is aware of the economic crisis in Europe.

"She's more preoccupied with spiritual (matters)," Lunetti said. "When there is a spiritual crisis, there is also an economic crisis."

Lunetti spoke briefly in an interview about the economic crisis in Europe and the weather -- "Hot like here," she said -- before she had her daily apparition on Sunday night on her visit to Shelby County, Ala. During the apparitions, she says the Virgin Mary appears to her and prays over the pilgrims, even though they cannot see her vision.

She's staying this week at the home of Terry Colafrancesco, founder of Caritas of Birmingham, a ministry that runs a large publishing operation and promotes the visions in Medjugorje.

Colafrancesco just returned with a group from Medjugorje, in what is now known as Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Lunetti arrived in Alabama on Friday night. Lunetti is married with four children and lives most of year in Milan, Italy.

Lunetti's normal time for an apparition Friday morning was while they were on an airplane bound for Alabama. Instead, Lunetti had her vision Friday night after 8 p.m. once she arrived at the Colafrancesco home.

On her first visit to Alabama in 1988, when Lunetti came to donate a kidney to her brother, Andrija Pavlovic, at UAB Hospital, she had the apparitions in her hospital room. She sometimes has apparitions on airplanes, but often the times change when she travels to Alabama, Colafrancesco said.

She had her apparitions at 6:40 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday at Colafrancesco's house.

"We consider this a special blessing for us," Colafrancesco said. On past visits during the week of July 4, Lunetti has had an apparition at 10 or 10:30 p.m. on July 3 and July 4, with crowds gathering around her in the field by a statue of the Virgin Mary. Caritas decorates the statue by surrounding it with red, white and blue candles.

As the economic and political situation in the world grows more dire, people are taking the visions of Medjugorje and the calls for repentance and faith more seriously, Colafrancesco said. "The importance of it is growing bigger and bigger," he said.

Lunetti said the solutions to the worldwide economic troubles are spiritual, not political. In her apparitions, the Virgin Mary calls for people to turn from sin and follow her son, Jesus.

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"God knows very well what we need," said Lunetti, 47, who has been having her daily visions since she was 16.

More than 1,000 people have gathered to pray in a field under a pine tree at the Caritas property, about six miles off U.S. 280 on Shelby County 43 near Chelsea. They pray the rosary starting at 6 p.m., leading up to the time of the apparitions.

Long lines of cars with tags from Louisiana, Texas, California, Florida and other states are parked on both sides of the two-lane country highway.

The Vatican has a commission investigating the validity of the visions in Medjugorje. So far, the Roman Catholic Church has neither condemned nor accepted the visions as valid. In other cases such as claims of Virgin Mary apparitions in 1858 in Lourdes, France and in 1917 in Fatima, Portugal, the church waited until the apparitions ended to rule on their validity.

Official Vatican acceptance is unlikely while the visions are taking place, because there's a risk of heretical pronouncements. Most of the messages are simple calls for prayer and conversion.

Colafrancesco expects that the visions in Medjugorje, and in Alabama, will one day be accepted as true. "The Vatican is going to take the taboos off and let it flower," he predicted.

[Greg Garrison writes for The Birmingham News in Birmingham, Ala.]

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