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A Vatican gag order for Marian visionaries?

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 14, 2009 All Things Catholic

British media are justly renowned for their tongue-in-cheek treatment of matters Catholic, and this week they?ve had some fun with a story about a new set of Vatican guidelines for investigating reports of apparitions and visions, such as those surrounding the Virgin Mary. The story first broke Jan. 6 in Rome, on the Italian Catholic web site ?Petrus,? but it?s taken a week or so for the Anglo-Saxon press to catch up.

Global discussion was sparked by a report on Tuesday in the British paper *The Independent*, with the provocative headline, ?Catholics ordered to keep quiet over Virgin visions.?

From John Allen's Daily Blog
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tBriefly, the story is that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is preparing a new document to be sent to the world?s bishops outlining the procedure to be followed in cases of reports of supernatural happenings, such as a statue that sheds tears or Mary delivering messages to alleged seers. It amounts to an update of a 1978 document from the congregation treating the same subject.

tIn broad strokes, the congregation will reportedly recommend that dioceses commission a team of psychiatrists, theologians and spiritual experts (including exorcists) to look into such reports. They?re supposed to establish whether the visionary seems psychologically stable; whether trickery or economic interests may be involved; whether any alleged revelation is consistent with church teaching; and whether there are grounds to suspect demonic influence.

The guidelines also apparently suggest that bishops should instruct alleged visionaries to remain silent while they wait for the church to render a verdict, the assumption being that hunger for publicity is not a good sign. Since the initial inquest would remain in the hands of the local bishop, this does not really amount to a Vatican "gag order," though the clear implication appears to be that discretion is the better part of valor.

tOne interesting wrinkle, according to the ?Petrus? report, is that alleged seers will be required to turn over their computers to investigators, who are supposed to determine if they've gone on-line researching various miracles and wonders ? suggesting, perhaps, that they wanted to mimic other famed incidents.

tIn the background to the new guidelines lurks continuing controversy over Medjugorje, the Bosnian site where the Virgin Mary has allegedly been delivering revelation to a group of local seers since 1981. Medjugorje has become a pilgrimage destination for millions of devotees each year, despite the fact that the church has never authenticated the visions, and that two local bishops in a row have been openly skeptical. To a lesser extent, Vatican concern has also been shaped by ferment in Italy over the *Madonnina*, or ?little Madonna,? of Civitavecchia ? a small statue of the Virgin, originally purchased in Medjugorje, which has reportedly been shedding tears since the mid-1990s. (Ever alert to the possibility of splashy headlines, the *Guardian?s* 2000 story on the statue was slugged ?The Crying Game.?)

tAt one level, the Vatican?s interest is in quality control ? making sure that the good faith of devotees is not abused by con artists or the unhinged, and that Catholic teaching is not doctored on the fly. Inevitably, however, issues of power may also be involved, since in the Catholic system the only ?licensed? spokespersons for God, so to speak, are the ordained. The eruption of alternative channels of revelation, especially among laity, thus has the potential to make officialdom nervous.

tIn general, the new guidelines seem likely to raise the bar for such phenomena to be officially declared legitimate, though it?s hardly as if standards are currently lax. French theologian Fr. René Laurentin has documented some 2,450 reports of Marian appearances in the history of the church, with roughly 300 investigations of such occurrences in the last century alone. Of that number, church authorities have sanctioned only about a dozen. (The most recent is Our Lady of Laus in France, declared authentic by the Vatican on May 5, 2008. The judgment came after the local diocese gave its thumbs-up in 1665, meaning that devotees had to wait three and a half centuries.)

t Widening the focus, the new guidelines are consistent with the Marian devotion of Pope Benedict XVI, who tends to accent the affective and maternal dimension of Mary?s role rather than alleged visions and healings. That approach, which I styled the pope?s ?Marian Cool,? was on display during his September 2008 visit to Lourdes. My piece from the time can be found here: Pope in France: A Lesson in ?Marian Cool? [1]

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