

Apparitions and Dogma

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As Catholics, we make a distinction between public and private revelation. Public revelation is defined as follows: God, in His infinite goodness and wisdom, chose to reveal Himself to mankind; in accord with God's divine plan of salvation, Jesus Christ — true God who became also true man, the Word of God incarnate — perfectly and fully revealed the Father to us in union with the Holy Spirit. St. Paul in the *Letter to the Hebrews* (1:3), taught exactly this definition: "In times past, God spoke in fragmentary and varied ways to our fathers through the prophets; in this, the final age, He has spoken through His Son, through whom He first created the universe. This Son is the reflection of the Father's glory, the exact representation of the Father's being, and He sustains all things by His powerful word."

More recently, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* of the Vatican Council II (no. 4) specifically stated, "After God had spoken many times and in various ways through the prophets, 'in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son.' For He sent His Son, the eternal Word Who enlightens all men, to dwell among men and to tell them about the inner life of God. Hence, Jesus Christ, sent as 'a man among men,' 'speaks the words of God,' and accomplishes the saving work which the Father gave Him to do. As a result, He Himself — to see Whom is to see the Father — completed and

While these apparitions were carefully investigated and judged credible, keep in mind that the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is rooted in Sacred Scripture, presented in the writings of the Church Fathers, and taught by many others prior to and following after St. Margaret Mary. This point was clearly underscored in the beautiful encyclical *Haurietis aquas* (1956) of Pope Pius XII concerning the proper devotion of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. A faithful Catholic ought to have a devout reverence for the Sacred Heart of Jesus, whether or not he personally accepts, doubts, or rejects the private revelations to St. Margaret Mary.

Some important points must be kept in mind regarding private revelations: First, private revelations do not add nor complete the deposit of revelation found in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. Never must a private revelation be given the same weight as Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. The Church always warns against a spiritual enthusiasm for such private revelations to the neglect of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.

Second, the Magisterium must carefully and scrupulously examine all private revelations. Since these private revelations are granted to individuals, human error, illusions and distortions in reporting or remembering are possible. Frankly, the possibility of diabolical action must also be considered, for the devil even uses what seems to be good to draw people away from the Lord. Third, the approval of a private revelation

means that it does not contradict the deposit of revelation in faith or morals, that the contents may be published, and the faithful may believe the messages with caution and prudence. If the Church has not officially approved a private revelation, be very cautious. If the Church has declared that a private revelation is not credible and contradicts that faith, stay away from it.

Fourth, even if the Church does give an official approval to a private revelation, the faithful are not obliged to believe in the private revelation. A faithful Catholic is called to give the assent of faith to the deposit of faith found in sacred Scripture and sacred Tradition.

In the culture of "new age" spirituality in which we live, faithful Catholics need to focus on reading primarily the Bible and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and secondarily the authorized writings of the saints. When intrigued by reported apparitions or other spiritual phenomena, keep in mind, "Buyer beware!"

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perfected Revelation and confirmed it with divine guarantees. He did this by the total fact of His presence and self-manifestation — by words and works, signs and miracles, but above all by His death and glorious resurrection from the dead, and finally by sending the Spirit of truth. He revealed that God was with us, to deliver us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to eternal life. The Christian economy, therefore, since it is the new and definite covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord, Jesus Christ."

This revelation God has given to all people for all ages is preserved in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. Sacred Scripture — or the Bible — is God's word recorded in writing by human authors inspired by the Holy Spirit; no book or verse will be added to or deleted from the Bible. Sacred Tradition is the handing on of the Word of God, which Jesus entrusted to the apostles; the apostles and their successors, guided and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, Whom our Lord identified as the Spirit of Truth, have preserved, expounded, and preached these revealed truths. An example of Sacred Tradition is the Nicene Creed. Together, Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition form one deposit of revelation, "for both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal" (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, no. 9).

In these definitions, an important point is emphasized: While the deposit of revelation is complete, "it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its significance over the course of the centuries" (*Catechism*, no. 66; also confer no. 74-83). Herein lies the role of the Magisterium as the authentic guardian, interpreter, and teacher of the revelation which is guided and protected from error by the Holy Spirit. All faithful Catholics are bound to accept these revealed truths with a divine faith. To deny these revealed truths would be considered heresy; such as denying the mystery of the Incarnation of our Lord, the real presence of our Lord in the Holy Eucharist, or the existence of Hell.

With this solid understanding of public revelation, we can turn to private revelation and the issue at hand. Over the ages, individuals have experienced a private revelation from God, e.g., a message given only to them. For example, the following saints received messages from our Lord: St. Hildegarde (d. 1179), St. Gertrude (d. 1301), St. Bridget of Sweden (d. 1373), St. Catherine of Siena (d. 1380), St. Vincent Ferrer (d. 1419), St. Teresa of Avila (d. 1582), St. John of the Cross (d. 1591), and St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (d. 1690). The various apparitions of our Blessed Mother also are private revelations whereby she has spoken on behalf of her Son; some of the most famous are the apparitions at Guadalupe (1531), Rue du Bac (1830), La Salette (1846), Lourdes (1858), Pontmain (1871), and Fatima (1917).

While the Church may recognize these private revelations and approve the content of their message, they neither add to nor belong to the deposit of faith. Given the circumstances of the Church at the time of the private revelation, the message simply inspires the individuals to live more faithfully and draw closer to Christ.

For example, in 1983, during his pilgrimage to Fatima, Pope John Paul II stated, "The Church has always taught and continues to proclaim that God's revelation was brought to completion in Jesus Christ, who is the fullness of that revelation and that 'no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord'" (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, no. 4). The Church evaluates and judges private revelations by the criterion of conformity with that single Revelation. If the Church has accepted the message of Fatima, it is above all because the message contains a truth and a call whose basic content is the truth and the call of the Gospel itself. Essentially, the Holy Father underscored that the private revelations of Fatima do not add to, contradict, or delete from the deposit of revelation contained in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition; however, they do move people to heed and to live the message of that deposit of revelation.

Take for example the apparitions of our Lord to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque in which He showed to her His Sacred Heart, and revealed the Twelve Promises to her.