

fact, if an alleged visionary disobeys a legitimate order from the Bishop, and claims God's backing for the action, this is a sure sign that the message is not from God. Even if a genuine private revelation has been given, *not even God Himself would want or command a seer to spread it against a lawful decree of a Bishop to desist*. In fact, there are occasions in the life of St Teresa of Jesus of Avila (died 1582) and St Margaret Mary (died 1690) and Sr Josefa Menendez (died 1923) where Our Lord gave them a directive, but then their superior forbade it. What did they do? They obeyed their human superior on earth. What did Our Lord then tell them? - 'You were right to obey my representative.'

On one occasion, the Sacred Heart of Jesus told St Margaret Mary to do something, but her Superior did not approve. When He came again, she asked Him about this, and He replied: "...not only do I desire that you should do what your Superior commands, but also that you should do nothing of all that I order without their consent. I love obedience, and without it no one can please me" [Autobiography of St Margaret Mary].

Spiritual writers have an axiom: A Superior may or may not be inspired by God in his command, but you are always inspired in obeying. (Of course, we're not talking about where a Superior commands a sin; and, as I said above, it is not a sin to drop a private revelation).

Satan may really promote good things for a while, provided that he gains in the long run. The revelations of Necedah, Wisconsin, seemed to have good fruits, yet were false. Rosaries were said to change to gold. Similarly for Bayside. But disobedience showed them false. St Margaret Mary was told by Our Lord: "*Listen, My daughter, and do not lightly believe and trust every spirit, for Satan is angry and will try to deceive you. So do nothing without the approval of those who guide you. Being thus under the authority of obedience, his efforts against you will be in vain, for he has no power over the obedient*" [Autobiography].

After error itself, the mark of a false mystic is wilfulness and disobedience. I love this quote from Saint Faustina Kowalska: "*Satan can even clothe himself in a cloak of humility, but he does not know how to wear the cloak of obedience.*" (Diary, par. 939). Genuine mystics, like Saint Pio of Pietrelcina (Padre Pio), are models of obedience. They never pretend to set up Christ against His Church.

Everyone is free to have an opinion, but all have to submit to the judgement of the Church with practical obedience. What I mean is: you are still free to disagree (the Bishop is not infallible in this matter), but you owe him *practical obedience*, that is, you may not *act* against the decree; you may not propagate a revelation that the

Bishop has judged negatively, or continue to say publicly that you regard it as genuine. Remember, a Church commission may give a negative verdict for reasons which it cannot state publicly, e.g., it may have found out things against the character of the seer, but will not say so publicly, even though this would justify the decision and help people to accept it.

If a so-called message is judged not authentic for *doctrinal* reasons, then you are not free to defend such messages, because then you will be defending error. Vassula Ryden is an example of this: the judgement against her was for false doctrine in her writings. How and why pious Catholics defended her *after* the negative judgement by the Holy See's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is beyond me. Her whole case is black-and-white. Apart from unorthodoxy, her alleged messages, which are meant to be handwritten by Our Lord Himself, contain mistakes in English spelling and grammar!

Can you say publicly that an approved revelation is not genuine? Yes, if you want to. The Church never orders you to accept any private revelation. But any such disagreement should be voiced respectfully.

Caution never does harm

The simple fact is that most claimed revelations are false. It is extremely foolish, therefore, to devote oneself to propagating a disapproved or dubious message, which might actually come from the Father of Lies. If one day you see its falsity for yourself, you will regret it enormously, and be unable to undo the harm done to others. On the other hand, there are more than enough approved messages to spread, if you want to spread them. It is better to keep to what is countenanced by the Church, than to go it alone and risk being a dupe of the devil.

Fr Peter Joseph of Wagga Wagga, Australia, has a doctorate in dogmatic theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, is the editor of the revised version of Archbishop Sheehan's "Apologetics and Catholic Doctrine" (Saint Austin Press 2001) and is currently the Chancellor of the Maronite Diocese of Australia. Copied in part from <http://www.christianorder.com>

Pope John Paul II Society of Evangelists

14818 Ranchero Road
Hesperia, California, USA
Telephone: 760-220-6818
FAX: 760-948-7620

E-mail: pjpiisoe@earthlink.net
www.pjpiisoe.org

Pamphlet 173

Some norms for discernment of Spirits

Fr Peter Joseph

The following norms are offered as guides for the spiritual director in the discernment of spirits so far as they pertain to revelations and prophecies:

1. Any revelation contrary to dogma or morals must be rejected as false. God does not contradict himself,

2. Any revelation contrary to the common teaching of theologians or purporting to settle an argument among the schools of theology is gravely suspect.

3. If some detail or other in a revelation is false, it is not necessary to reject the entire revelation; the remainder may be authentic.

4. The fact that a prophecy is fulfilled is not of itself a conclusive proof that the revelation was from God; it could have been the mere unfolding of natural causes or the result of a superior natural knowledge on the part of the seer.

5. Revelations concerning merely curious or useless matters should be rejected as not divine. The same is to be said of those that are detailed, lengthy, and filled with a superfluity of proofs and reasons. Divine revelations are generally brief, clear, and precise.

6. The person who receives the revelation should be examined carefully, especially as to temperament and character. If the person is humble, well balanced, discreet, evidently advanced in virtue, and enjoys good mental and physical health, there is good reason to proceed further and to examine the revelation itself. But if the individual is exhausted with excessive mortifications, suffers nervous affliction, is subject to periods of great exhaustion or great depression, or is eager to divulge the revelation, there is cause for serious doubt." (p. 430)

Curiosity

Is the information useful for the salvation of souls? If it is merely to satisfy curiosity it is unlikely to be of divine origin. Some seeming seers act like mediums, give information on births, marriages, legal processes, diseases, political events, etc. God does not run an Inquiry Office. Some are very clever at observing, or very intuitive, and can work with little things. At séances, furniture is often pushed about, or a spirit moves a person's hand to write messages, etc. God has never done these things in any approved revelation.

Curiosity sticks out in people who claim to tell you what was the ultimate fate of Princess Diana, Frank Sinatra,

Elvis Presley, etc. We'd all love to know who's in Heaven and who isn't! A lady I heard of claims to know where every deceased person is: funnily enough everyone's either in Purgatory or Heaven! I suppose it would do harm to business and popularity to tell people that certain relatives are in Hell! Actually, anyone who pronounces on famous people is immediately to be disbelieved.

Also suspect are revelations that merely give truisms and platitudes.

Why does the devil do it?

Catholics ought be very cautious in giving credence to visions and messages *before* they have received approbation from the Church. The devil has raised up many false mystics in recent years. People ask: "Why would the devil be behind a revelation which encourages people to pray and fast and do penance? That would be Satan divided against himself."

Fair question. Why would he do it?

Answer: For a number of reasons: to distract people from the genuine private revelations; to lead them into exercises not blessed as such by God; to bring private revelations into complete disrepute; to cause disenchantment and even a crisis of faith when a seer is later plainly seen to be false; and, worst of all, subtly to lead some people out of the Church altogether. The devil is willing to lose a lot, if he can gain in the long run.

The devil rejoices when Catholics reject the tried and true means of spiritual growth to chase after the extraordinary and the unapproved. The Church is extremely careful before approving a private revelation, for she knows how "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14). She must avoid both credulity and unfounded scepticism. "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything," directs St Paul (1 Thess 5:19-21). And St John warns, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God" (1 Jn 4:1). Some spirits are quite easy to discern; others very difficult. Priests in particular must be examples of prudence and obedience in this area.

Examples of visionaries judged to be false

Some individuals have been pronounced against by name, e.g., Vassula Ryden, and the Little Pebble, William Kamm. Vassula has been condemned twice by the Holy Office (the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), on the grounds that her revelations do not come from God, and

because they contain errors against the Faith. You hear people say: "But her writings are so spiritual and so beautiful!" I agree; possibly 99% of Vassula's messages are in conformity with the Catholic Faith—but that is just how the devil operates to deceive pious Catholics. It is the 1% that does harm. A poison apple is mostly good apple—but will harm you nevertheless. The devil knows he cannot mislead devout Catholics with outright heresy, but he can appeal to their piety and then subtly plant errors within.

In any case, there has been no approved revelation in the history of the Church where God took someone's hand and gave messages by writing with their pen. But you *do* find handwriting messages given at séances—and séances are condemned by the Church as a practice of the occult against the law of God.

I have seen one pious magazine defending Vassula by saying that Cardinal Ratzinger never signed the statement against her printed in *L'Osservatore Romano*. A man I know sent them the official statement from *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, the official Vatican gazette, which has the Cardinal's signature at the bottom, along with the Bishop Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Unfortunately, the editor of the magazine had neither the humility nor the honesty to print a correction in the next issue.

Another example: the alleged apparitions in Garabandal in northern Spain, in which four young girls alleged that the Virgin Mary appeared to them from 1961-1965. The response of successive bishops of the diocese of Santander has been uniformly negative, and the present Bishop Vilaplaua has concurred with this verdict. Despite this, there are a number of active associations supporting Garabandal. A simple case of disobedience to lawful authority.

This is only one of a countless number. There's Montichiari in Italy (1947), Necedah in the United States (1949), Palmar de Troya in Spain (1968), Bayside in the U.S. (1970), Dozule in France (1972), and hundreds of others - to say nothing of all the alleged visionaries and locutionists past and present, such as the Irish lady, Christina Gallagher, and many another poor deluded souls. Mrs Gallagher's messages, in part, read like a frantic worried woman lamenting the state of the world. There are plenty of frantic worried people, lamenting the state of the world, who are good Catholics - but the Blessed Virgin from Heaven does not talk like them, in such a human, earthly, fretful fashion. To attribute such talk to Our Lady is an insult.

"Have visions; will travel!" - such publicity seekers are not to be believed. Genuine visionaries fly from publicity. They do not go around with photographers and camera

crews. They submit to investigation by Church authorities; but they do not have publicity agents.

The authority to judge and the duty to obey

No private individual has the authority to judge definitively and officially which private revelations are true and which are not.

The authority to rule on the genuineness of a private revelation rests first with the *local Bishop*.

The apparitions of Lourdes, Knock, Fatima, Beauraing, Banneux - to name only a few - were approved by the *local Bishops*. The Popes of the time never issued any judgement on them. The current canonical practice is that the local Bishop must appoint a committee to investigate and rule on any private revelation (if he thinks it worthy of investigation), but the Holy See may intervene if necessary or if the Bishops ask it to. Alternatively, he may ask the Episcopal Conference of his country to assist in the investigation and judgement.

It is forbidden, as well as sinful, to propagate private revelations which have received a negative judgement from the local Bishop, the conference of Bishops, or the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Some people say, "I'm going to follow it until the Pope says it's false." This is a useless guide for action in this matter - very rarely does the Pope make a pronouncement for or against a revelation.

As for statements attributed to the Pope (e.g., "I heard that the Pope told Mrs Smith after Mass in his private chapel that he believes in Garabandal and Bayside;" "The Pope told Jack that he could go ahead and print that condemned book") - no one is entitled to act on such gossip. The Church is governed by publicly promulgated statements - not by hearsay and personal communications.

The Popes may choose to show their approval of certain revelations, *after* the decision of a local Bishop or conference of Bishops, by speaking of them, or by placing a new feast in the liturgical calendar, or by visiting the places intrinsically connected with them (e.g., Guadalupe, Paray-le-Monial, Rue de Bac, Lourdes, Knock, Fatima, Beauraing, Banneux).

Even should the local Bishop mistakenly disapprove of a genuine revelation, obedience to the Church remains paramount. It is a sin to propagate a private revelation disobediently, but it can *never* be a sin *not* to propagate one. This applies both to claimed seers and to followers. In