

CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

PREFACE

1. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is competent in questions regarding the promotion and safeguarding of the teaching of faith and morals. It is also competent to examine difficulties regarding the proper understanding of the faith, such as cases of pseudo-mysticism, presumed apparitions, visions and messages attributed to supernatural sources. In regard to these very delicate tasks, more than thirty years ago this Dicastery prepared the *Normae de modo procedendi in diudicandis praesumptis apparitionibus ac revelationibus*. This document, formulated by the Members of the Plenary Session of the Congregation, was approved by the Servant of God, Pope Paul VI, on 24 February 1978, and subsequently issued on 25 February 1978. At that time the *Norms* were sent to Bishops for their information, without, however, being officially published, as the norms were given for the direct aid of the Pastors of the Church.

2. Over the years this document has been published in various works treating these matters, in more than one language, without obtaining the prior permission of this Dicastery. Today, it must be recognized that the contents of these important norms are already in the public domain. Therefore, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith believes it is now opportune to publish these *Norms*, providing translations in the principle languages.

3. In the Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God held in October 2008, the issue of the problems stemming from the experience of supernatural phenomena was raised as a pastoral concern by some Bishops. Their concern was recognized by the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, who inserted the issue into the larger context of the economy of salvation, in a significant passage of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*. It is important to recall this teaching of the Pontiff, which is an invitation to pay appropriate attention to these supernatural phenomena:

“In all of this, the Church gives voice to her awareness that with Jesus Christ she stands before the definitive word of God: he is ‘the first and the last’ (*Rev* 1:17). He has given creation and history their definitive meaning; and hence we are called to live in time and in God’s creation within this eschatological rhythm of the word; ‘thus the Christian dispensation, since it is the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. *1 Tim* 6:14 and *Tit* 2:13)’. Indeed, as the Fathers noted during the Synod, the ‘uniqueness of Christianity is manifested in the event which is Jesus Christ, the culmination of revelation, the fulfilment of God’s promises and the mediator of the encounter between man and God. He who ‘has made God known’ (*Jn* 1:18) is the one, definitive word given to mankind.’ Saint John of the Cross expresses this truth magnificently: ‘Since he has given us his Son, his only word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything at once in this sole word – and he has no more to say... because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has spoken all at once by giving us this

All who is his Son. Any person questioning God or desiring some vision or revelation would be guilty not only of foolish behaviour but also of offending him, by not fixing his eyes entirely on Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, 22).”

Bearing this in mind, the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, notes the following:

“Consequently the Synod pointed to the need to ‘help the faithful to distinguish the word of God from private revelations’ whose role ‘is not to complete Christ’s definitive revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history.’ The value of private revelations is essentially different from that of the one public revelation: the latter demands faith; in it God himself speaks to us through human words and the mediation of the living community of the Church. The criterion for judging the truth of a private revelation is its orientation to Christ himself. If it leads us away from him, then it certainly does not come from the Holy Spirit, who guides us more deeply into the Gospel, and not away from it. Private revelation is an aid to this faith, and it demonstrates its credibility precisely because it refers back to the one public revelation. 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 prudent adhesion. A private revelation can introduce new emphases, give rise to new forms of piety, or deepen older ones. It can have a certain prophetic character (cf. *1 Th* 5:19-21) and can be a valuable aid for better understanding and living the Gospel at a certain time; consequently it should not be treated lightly. 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.”[1]

4. It is my firm hope that the official publication of the *Norms regarding the manner of proceeding in the discernment of presumed apparitions or revelations* can aid the Pastors of the Catholic Church in their difficult task of discerning presumed apparitions, revelations, messages or, more generally, extraordinary phenomena of presumed supernatural origin. At the same time it is hoped that this text might be useful to theologians and experts in this field of the lived experience of the Church, whose delicacy requires an ever-more thorough consideration.

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Prefect

Vatican City State, 14 December 2011, Feast of Saint John of the Cross.

[1] Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, on the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church, 30 September 2010, n. 14: AAS 102 (2010) 695-696. See also those passages of the *Catechism for the Catholic Church* dedicated to this topic (nn. 66-67).

SACRED CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

NORMS REGARDING THE MANNER OF PROCEEDING IN THE DISCERNMENT OF PRESUMED APPARITIONS OR REVELATIONS

PRELIMINARY NOTE

Origin and character of these norms

During the annual Plenary Session in November 1974, the Fathers of this Sacred Congregation examined the problems relative to presumed apparitions and to the revelations often connected with them and reached the following conclusions:

1. Today, more than in the past, news of these apparitions is diffused rapidly among the faithful thanks to the means of information (*mass media*). Moreover, the ease of going from one place to another fosters frequent pilgrimages, so that Ecclesiastical Authority should discern quickly about the merits of such matters.
2. On the other hand, modern mentality and the requirements of critical scientific investigation render it more difficult, if not almost impossible, to achieve with the required speed the judgments that in the past concluded the investigation of such matters (*constat de supernaturalitate, non constat de supernaturalitate*) and that offered to the Ordinaries the possibility of authorizing or prohibiting public cult or other forms of devotion among the faithful.

For these reasons, in order that the devotion stirred among the faithful as a result of facts of this sort might manifest itself in full communion with the Church, and bear fruits by which the Church herself might later discern the true nature of the facts, the Fathers judged that in this matter the following procedure should be promoted.

When Ecclesiastical Authority is informed of a presumed apparition or revelation, it will be its responsibility:

- a) first, to judge the fact according to positive and negative criteria (cf. *infra*, no. I);
- b) then, if this examination results in a favorable conclusion, to permit some public manifestation of cult or of devotion, overseeing this with great prudence (equivalent to the formula, “for now, nothing stands in the way”) (*pro nunc nihil obstare*).
- c) finally, in light of time passed and of experience, with special regard to the fecundity of spiritual fruit generated from this new devotion, to express a judgment regarding the authenticity and supernatural character if the case so merits.

I. CRITERIA FOR JUDGING, AT LEAST WITH PROBABILITY, THE CHARACTER OF THE PRESUMED APPARITIONS OR REVELATIONS

A) Positive Criteria:

- a) Moral certitude, or at least great probability of the existence of the fact, acquired by means of a serious investigation;
- b) Particular circumstances relative to the existence and to the nature of the fact, that is to say:
 1. Personal qualities of the subject or of the subjects (in particular, psychological equilibrium, honesty and rectitude of moral life, sincerity and habitual docility towards Ecclesiastical Authority, the capacity to return to a normal regimen of a life of faith, etc.);
 2. As regards revelation: true theological and spiritual doctrine and immune from error;
 3. Healthy devotion and abundant and constant spiritual fruit (for example, spirit of prayer, conversion, testimonies of charity, etc.).

B) Negative Criteria:

- a) Manifest error concerning the fact.

b) Doctrinal errors attributed to God himself, or to the Blessed Virgin Mary, or to some saint in their manifestations, taking into account however the possibility that the subject might have added, even unconsciously, purely human elements or some error of the natural order to an authentic supernatural revelation (cf. Saint Ignatius, *Exercises*, no. 336).

c) Evidence of a search for profit or gain strictly connected to the fact.

d) Gravely immoral acts committed by the subject or his or her followers when the fact occurred or in connection with it.

e) Psychological disorder or psychopathic tendencies in the subject, that with certainty influenced on the presumed supernatural fact, or psychosis, collective hysteria or other things of this kind.

It is to be noted that these criteria, be they positive or negative, are not peremptory but rather indicative, and they should be applied cumulatively or with some mutual convergence.

II. INTERVENTION OF THE COMPETENT ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY

1. If, on the occasion of a presumed supernatural fact, there arises in a spontaneous way among the faithful a certain cult or some devotion, the competent Ecclesiastical Authority has the serious duty of looking into it without delay and of diligently watching over it.

2. If the faithful request it legitimately (that is, in communion with the Pastors, and not prompted by a sectarian spirit), the competent Ecclesiastical Authority can intervene to permit or promote some form of cult or devotion, if, after the application of the above criteria, nothing stands in the way. They must be careful that the faithful not interpret this practice as approval of the supernatural nature of the fact on the part of the Church (cf. Preliminary note c).

3. By reason of its doctrinal and pastoral task, the competent Authority can intervene *motu proprio* and indeed must do so in grave circumstances, for example in order to correct or prevent abuses in the exercise of cult and devotion, to condemn erroneous doctrine, to avoid the dangers of a false or unseemly mysticism, etc.

4. In doubtful cases that clearly do not put the good of the Church at risk, the competent Ecclesiastical Authority is to refrain from any judgment and from any direct action (because it can also happen that, after a certain period of time, the presumed supernatural fact falls into oblivion); it must not however cease from being vigilant by intervening if necessary, with promptness and prudence.

III. AUTHORITIES COMPETENT TO INTERVENE

1. Above all, the duty of vigilance and intervention falls to the Ordinary of the place.

2. The regional or national Conference of Bishops can intervene:

a) If the Ordinary of the place, having done his part, turns to it to judge the matter with greater certainty;

b) If the matter pertains to the national or regional level; always, however, with the prior consent of the Ordinary of the place.

3. The Apostolic See can intervene if asked either by the Ordinary himself, by a qualified group of the faithful, or even directly by reason of the universal jurisdiction of the Supreme Pontiff (cf. *infra*, no. IV).

IV. ON THE INTERVENTION OF THE SACRED CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

1. a) The intervention of the Sacred Congregation can be requested either by the Ordinary, after he has done his part, or by a qualified group of the faithful. In this second case, care must be taken that recourse to the Sacred Congregation not be motivated by suspect reasons (for example, in order to compel the Ordinary to modify his own legitimate decisions, to support some sectarian group, etc.).

b) It is up to the Sacred Congregation to intervene *motu proprio* in graver cases, especially if the matter affects the larger part of the Church, always after having consulted the Ordinary and even, if the situation requires, the Conference of Bishops.

2. It is up to the Sacred Congregation to judge and approve the Ordinary's way of proceeding or, in so far as it be possible and fitting, to initiate a new examination of the matter, distinct from that undertaken by the Ordinary and

carried out either by the Sacred Congregation itself or by a special Commission.

The Present Norms, deliberated in the Plenary Session of this Sacred Congregation, were approved by the Supreme Pontiff, Paul VI on 24 February 1978.

In Rome, from the palace of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 25 February 1978.

Francis Cardinal Šeper
Prefect

Jérôme Hamer, O.P.
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