

APPARITIONIS CUSTODES

New norms to deny Marian apparitions

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To ascertain everything except supernaturalness: this is the meaning of the new Norms of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith for the proceedings to discern alleged supernatural phenomena, signed by the Cardinal Prefect Víctor Manuel Fernández and the secretary Monsignor Armando Matteo. In synthesis - as Nico Spuntoni pointed out yesterday here on the *Daily Compass* - in the evaluation of possible apparitions (or other

phenomena) there is: a greater centralisation in the hands of the Dicastery, six possible conclusions regarding the facts under examination and above all the almost total exclusion of a positive judgement regarding the supernaturalness of the phenomena - something which only the Pope will be able to do "in a totally exceptional way". During the presentation press conference, Cardinal Fernández made it clear that (barring supreme intervention) "supernaturalness will not be declared". Once the previous categories confirming, denying or suspending the judgement of supernaturalness (respectively: *constat de supernaturalitate*, *constat de non supernaturalitate* or *non constat de supernaturalitate*) have been archived, it will be possible to say at most: *nihil obstat* (nothing forbids that...). For the record: it does no harm...

Considering that private revelations should not be confused with Revelation tout court (even though they can offer a valid help in understanding and living it) and that - unlike the latter - they are not strictly necessary for salvation, the Church had said this clearly even before. Just as a prudential *nihil obstat* was already mentioned in the Norms of 1978, in which we read that the ecclesiastical authority may "permit certain public manifestations of worship or devotion, continuing to watch over them with great prudence (this is equivalent of the formula: "pro nunc nihil obstare")". Which now turns from prudential to definitive and is the only possible favourable conclusion. Indeed, definitive expressions in this regard are explicitly reprobated (except in the negative case, of course). The document cites as an example not to be followed, the declaration of the Sicilian bishops who stated regarding Our Lady of Tears of Syracuse: "The reality of the tears cannot be doubted". From now such a statement will be inconceivable.

In the best of predicted hypotheses - *nihil obstat* - "even if no certainty is expressed as to the supernatural authenticity of the phenomenon, many signs of an action of the Holy Spirit "in the midst" of a given spiritual experience are recognised, and no particularly critical or risky aspects have been detected, at least up to that point". That is, the positive fruits are there but in context, "in the midst", and without expressing "any certainty about the supernatural authenticity of the phenomenon". On the contrary, "it is reiterated that neither the diocesan bishop, nor the Episcopal Conferences, nor the Dicastery, as a rule, will declare that these phenomena are of supernatural origin, not even if a *nihil obstat* is granted". Cardinal Fernández then wished to reassure that "it is not just a permission" and in this regard he quoted the text: "the diocesan bishop is encouraged to appreciate the pastoral value and also to promote the diffusion of this spiritual proposal". But precisely, only 'pastoral value', discouraging everything else.

The other criteria, in order of increasing criticality, are: *prae oculis habeatur* ("Although important positive signs are recognised, some elements of confusion or possible risks are also felt"); *curatur* ("Several or significant critical elements are noted, but at the same time there is already a wide spread of the phenomenon and a presence of spiritual fruits"); *sub mandatur* ("The critical issues detected are not linked to the phenomenon in itself, which is rich in positive elements, but to a person, a family or a group of people who make improper use of it"); *prohibetur et obstruatur* ("even in the presence of legitimate demands and some positive elements, the critical issues and risks appear serious"); finally, the *declaratio de non supernaturalitate* ("the phenomenon is recognised as not supernatural"). Thus, one can express an opinion on supernaturalness, but only when it is necessary to deny it. Sometimes the negative elements are already discernible in the conduct of the presumed recipient of the phenomena, as the Cardinal Prefect explained using colourful language: "if he does not live in sanctifying grace", he said in a press conference, "it is easier for him to screw-up" (sic!).

It is up to the bishop to examine and supervise, specifying that 'the Dicastery must always be consulted and intervene'. It will in fact be the Dicastery "to examine the acts of the case" and "confirm or not the determination proposed by the diocesan bishop". Even in the case of a positive outcome, "the diocesan bishop shall pay the utmost attention to the correct appreciation of the fruits of the phenomenon examined, continuing to watch over them with prudent care"; and above all, "he shall also take care that the faithful do not consider any of the determinations as an approval of the supernatural character of the phenomenon". It is understood that "the Dicastery reserves the right, in any case, to intervene again following the development of the phenomenon". In short, even if the investigation concludes favourably, the diocesan bishop has the role of controlling rather than encouraging: after *Traditionis custodes* is followed by a sort of *Apparitionis custodes*.

A final note on the timing and genesis of the new norms, evoked at the beginning of the document. A review of the criteria for discernment, inevitable after a few decades, had begun in 2019, but "over these five years, several proposals for revision have been drawn up, all of which, however, were judged insufficient". Until, on "16 November 2023, the need was finally recognised for a global and radical revision of the draft that had been drawn up up to that point, and another draft document was prepared, totally rethought in the direction of greater clarification of the roles of the diocesan bishop and the Dicastery". In short, there was no end in sight and then the situation was unblocked -

we could say 'by a miracle', but without any certainty as to supernaturalness - immediately after the arrival of Cardinal Fernández. So that after five years of delays, in just five months the document came to light. Naturally operating "a global and radical revision" - on the other hand, the leitmotif of this and other acts of the present pontificate is: "Before we did so and so, but we instead...".

Some doubt remains in the end. Because of the previous legislation, the only element that remains unchanged concerns the declaratio de non supernaturalitate; the change, rather than resolving the negative cases, seems aimed at reducing the impact of the positive ones. What if Our Lady really did appear? Good for her - the Dicastery seems to reply - but don't come and teach us the trade.