

TRACES OF GOD

The new norms on apparitions tear apologetics to pieces

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The new norms on Marian apparitions presented last 17 May, force a fresh look at the Church's traditional attitude towards supernatural phenomena in order to understand whether or not these norms are in continuity. It has always been known that the

Church's attitude in this field is one of prudence. On the other hand, we have the apostle Paul's imperatives: "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophecies; examine everything, hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess 5:19-21). These two aspects are complementary: prudence is precisely at the service of the Pauline exhortation, i.e. the Church is called upon to examine everything, in order to arrive as far as possible at the moral certainty as to whether a certain event is indeed a manifestation of the Spirit.

The Church's attitude has always been precisely that of observing, examining, sifting, in order to arrive at a positive or negative judgement as to the possible supernatural origin of certain phenomena. A certain systematisation of these criteria was the work of important 15th century theologians, such as the Dominican Cardinal Juan de Torquemada, and the Doctor Christianissimus, Jean de Gerson. It seems that what ignited the theological interest in the subject of supernatural phenomena was the decision of the (controversial) Council of Basel to place the famous Heavenly Revelations of St. Bridget of Sweden under scrutiny.

Two subsequent ecumenical councils, Lateran V (1512-1517) and the Tridentine (1545-1563) expressed that it was up to the competent bishop to act and pronounce definitively on any supernatural phenomena, with the help of some 'docti et gravi' (Lateran) and 'theologi et pii' (Tridentine) men. This is a dual principle - competence of the bishop and recourse to experts - which guarantees on the one hand the dimension of hierarchical communion, and on the other the necessary science and competence to reach a judgement that comes as close as possible to moral certainty. There remains the so-called 'apostolic reservation', i.e. the possibility of intervention by the Apostolic See, even without the bishop's consent.

The 16th century then witnessed the extraordinary contribution of mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and St. Ignatius of Loyola, who enriched the discernment of alleged supernatural phenomena with finer criteria. The following centuries saw the emergence of important theological treatises, among them Cardinal Giovanni Bona's *De discretione spirituum*, and above all the work of Cardinal Prospero Lambertini, the future Benedict XIV, both the monumental *De servorum Dei beatificatione*, and the work, now attributed to him by critics and now finally available in a critical edition, *Notæ de miraculis*.

This leads to the Normæ of 1978, which summarise the long historical development traced, enumerating some positive and negative criteria by which the Ordinary can judge the fact under consideration, the relations with the relevant Bishops' Conference and with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The aforementioned Normæ

served to "judge, at least with a certain probability" the possible supernatural origin of the phenomenon concerned.

The 1978 document was already well aware of today's rapidity of dissemination of news about alleged phenomena, as well as "today's mentality and the scientific demands and requirements of critical enquiry" that "make it more difficult, if not almost impossible, to issue with due celerity the judgements that concluded enquiries on the subject in the past". But it is precisely because of these difficulties that the Normæ were issued, in order to arrive "in the light of elapsed time and experience, with special regard to the fruitfulness of the spiritual fruits" to, "express a judgement de veritate et supernaturalitate, if the case so requires".

The reader will forgive the long excursus, necessary, however, to understand the Church's direction in this matter: utmost prudence, without being in a hurry to pronounce one way or the other, but also openness to recognising the presence of the Spirit, through the attestation of elements that appeal to man's reasonableness, capable of arriving at a highly probable judgement and moral certainty.

Against the backdrop of all this historical development one can identify precisely this fixed point: the Church has an awareness of the capacity of human reason to grasp the signs of the supernatural. This principle underlies the credibility of the Person of Jesus Christ Himself, the Gospel and evangelisation. The Apostle Peter, on the day of Pentecost, addressing the Jews, described the Lord Jesus as the "man credited by God to you through miracles and wonders and signs" (Acts 2:22); God also credited the work of the Apostles themselves through "many signs and wonders" (Acts 5:12). The miracle, the supernatural event is a kind of "signature of God", which man is able to decode, a clue that God offers precisely to man's reason, so that he can recognise its origin. The whole prophetic action, of Christ himself and of the Apostles is based precisely on this principle: man is able not to know the supernatural directly, but to identify its signs, its traces, so as to recognise the imprint of God and open himself up to welcome his action and message.

Now, what do we find in the New Norms? Cardinal Fernández has tried to justify the new document with the need for greater prudence on the part of the Church, due to the confusion generated by the actions of some bishops and contradictory pronouncements. But the truth is that the problem does not lie in the lack of norms or their obscurity, but more simply in the imprudent actions of individual prelates; so much so that the New Norms substantially take up the criteria of the 1978 document. If the problem were therefore one of prudence, the document would be useless.

The real novelty of the document, however, lies in the fact that from now on the possibility of expressing a positive opinion on the supernatural nature of an event will be precluded, but will be limited, at most, to a nihil obstat; the caveat in Article 22 §2 expresses this novelty: even in the case of the nihil obstat, "the diocesan bishop will take care (...) that the faithful do not consider any of the determinations as an approval of the supernatural character of the phenomenon". The concept was reiterated by Fernández at the press conference, responding to a question from journalist Diane Montagna. Justifying himself on the grounds that a prudential decision is necessary, the cardinal stated that 'one cannot ask for a declaration of supernatural origin to decide in this case, precisely because the risk of declaring [a phenomenon] as supernatural is that of giving full certainty. So that, in the final analysis, one can no longer doubt'.

Now, even stones know that when a bishop expresses himself favourably about the supernaturalness of an apparition or miracle, and even when a pope does so, he neither intends nor can bind the conscience of the faithful, as if he were teaching a dogma or a truth de fide tenenda. It has always been a matter of prudential judgement, even when expressed with a constat de supernaturalitate, whose highest degree of assent is moral certainty, not the absolute certainty of an act of faith. So much so that opposition to the bishop's authoritative judgement in such a matter in itself would at most signify temerity, not heresy or schism.

The specific content of the document is therefore quite different: the denial that the Church has the means to be able to bring to bear on an event a judgement of probability or moral certainty regarding its supernatural origin; but how can we give credence to the Church that proclaims the miracle of the healing of the hydroptic man by the Lord, or of the cripple by Peter and John, if that same Church today tells us that in essence it is not possible to say anything about the supernaturalness of an event? Because the point at issue is not what is an object of faith and what is not, but the ability to say anything about the credibility of a fact. Notwithstanding the many differences in this regard among theologians, the line that the Dicastery is pursuing appears to be

entirely new in the history of the Church: sacrificing *credibilitas* in order to safeguard *credentitas*, i.e. renouncing to pronounce on the supernaturalness of a fact in order to preserve the act of faith. Tucho's worry, as he states in the Presentation of the New Notes, is that the approval of certain revelations leads one to appreciate them "more than the Gospel itself"; ergo, it is better not to give signs of approval, but only of concession.

Experience is different, however, and considers reasons of credibility an aid to the act of faith proper and not an obstacle. This is observed daily in our churches and in the practice of the people of God: if certain Marian apparitions, such as Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe, had not been accepted by the Church, the Christian life of the people and the frequency of the sacraments would be even worse than it already is. The strength of the credible signs of Eucharistic miracles or apparitions, which emerged precisely thanks to the prudent and sometimes diffident investigation of the bishops, has always sustained people's faith, especially in times of darkness. So much for hindering faith.

The feeling is that Tucho is completely conditioned by the current that has been pulverising apologetics for several decades, creating not a leap but a gap between the demands of reason and the act of faith, supporting a substantial impossibility of recognising with (moral) certainty the traces of God's interventions in human history.