

REFLECTION

The Oasis of Medjugorje and the Desert of Satan

ECCLESIA

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News of the events of 28 July, concerning the desecration of some of Medjugorje's sacred sites, has now spread around the world. Thousands of photos have appeared online and there has been no shortage of video footage, including that from the parish's CCTV cameras. This subsequently led to the arrest of the person responsible for targeting the statues of the Queen of Peace on Podbrdo (the hill of the first apparitions)

and at the Blue Cross, as well as burning the outdoor altar of St James' Church.

These 'acts of vandalism', as they have been described and reported in many quarters, are said to have been committed by a 31-year-old Polish man with a history of drug abuse and a remarkable conversion. He is said to have recently experienced a serious personal crisis accompanied by mental health issues. Another factor contributing to the view that the incident is now considered closed, however serious and disturbing it may be, is that by the evening of 28 July, the sacred sites had practically returned to normal: the statue of Our Lady on Podbrdo had been completely cleaned by 6:40 pm, the time of the daily apparition of the Queen of Peace [see photo], and the parish's outdoor altar had been restored in record time. This meant that the 7:00 pm international Mass could be celebrated there, followed by the traditional Eucharistic adoration attended by thousands of pilgrims as a sign of reparation and thanksgiving.

In my view, however, the matter cannot be considered closed. Nor can it be reduced to a mere human or earthly assessment of the criminal act carried out by the individual who appears to be solely responsible for what happened in Medjugorje to date. Why do I say this? Because I experienced the events first-hand: I was in Medjugorje with the Community of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus from the evening of 27 July onwards. When I received the first reports of the incident at around 8 am, I was immediately reminded of a message delivered by Our Lady in Medjugorje through the visionaries on 7 August 1986: 'Dear children, you know that I have promised you an oasis of peace, but you must also be aware that next to the oasis lies the desert, where Satan waits to tempt each one of you. Dear children, it is only through prayer that you will be able to overcome Satan's influence in the place where you live. I am with you, but I cannot deprive you of your freedom. Thank you for responding to my call!' These words reminded me that wherever God reveals himself, the devil also seeks to make his presence felt.

Just as the Queen of Peace states: Medjugorje is an oasis of peace, as the millions of pilgrims who have come to this small village in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 24 June 1981, the first day of the apparitions, can testify. But right beside it, the devil lies in wait, 'seeking whom he may devour' (1 Pet 5:8).

One might be tempted to say that the unleashing of the powers of darkness should come as no surprise, as it seems to confirm God's presence and action. In seeking to counter this, the Evil One 'cannot help but' reveal himself. However, I believe that we are facing an even more remarkable episode here that must not be underestimated. The sacrilegious acts that took place in the early hours of 28 July occurred in the run-up to

the Youth Festival (Mladifest in Croatian), which is due to take place in Medjugorje from 1 to 6 August. This event, established in 1989 by Father Slavko Barbarić (1946–2000), brings together over 70,000 young people and hundreds of priests from around eighty countries every year. Through days filled with prayer, testimonies, songs of praise, Eucharistic celebrations, and sharing, countless young people rediscover their faith, renew their personal encounter with the Lord, embark on a genuine journey of conversion, or discover their vocation. Faced with such an event, it is only natural that the devil should seek to stir up confusion, fear, dread and bewilderment in order to distract people from the far more significant and effective presence of the Lord through Mary's maternal intercession.

So how should we approach these days, when the devil seems to be working with increasing intensity? Let us treasure the words that the Queen of Peace addressed especially to young people right from the beginning of the apparitions: 'I wish to say in particular to young people: be open to the Holy Spirit, for God wishes to draw you to Himself in these days when Satan is at work' (Message of 16 May 1985). Today, just as then, the devil seeks to seduce young people and they must 'be on their guard', for the enemy is cunning. This is why Our Lady has never failed to urge prayer for the young people who are so dear to her heart: 'Dear children! You know that the situation of young people today is critical. I therefore urge you to pray for them and speak to them, because young people no longer go to church, leaving the churches empty. Pray for this, for young people have an important role to play in the Church' (15 August 1988), and 'Dear children! Tonight, too, your mother invites you to pray for young people all over the world. Pray, my children! Prayer is essential for young people today. Live out my messages and pass them on to others, especially young people. I also wish to urge all my priests to form and organise prayer groups, especially among young people, to bring them together and guide them along the path of goodness' (22 August 1988).

The call to pray for young people is addressed in particular to their families: "This evening, too, your mother is warning you against the workings of Satan. I wish to warn young people in particular, for Satan is especially active among them. Dear children, I want families to pray together, especially at this time. Parents should pray with their children and talk to them more! I will pray for them and for all of you. Pray, dear children, for prayer heals.' (9 September 1988)

Our Lady urges young people not to give in to worldly temptations, which the devil uses to ensnare them. "Dear young people! Everything that today's world offers you is an illusion; it will pass away. For this very reason, you must understand that Satan

seeks to destroy you and your families through his presence. Satan is powerful, dear young people, and he will do everything to disturb you and hinder you in all your endeavours. Therefore, increase your prayers, for you need them particularly in these last days. The most effective weapon against Satan is the rosary' (1 August 1990).

The 'last days' of which the Queen of Peace speaks are now imminent and will be marked by the ten secrets of Medjugorje. At the end of this period, there will be the long-awaited triumph of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which was promised by the Queen of the Rosary in the second part of the secret revealed to the three shepherd children on 13 July 1917 at Fátima: 'In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph. The Holy Father will consecrate Russia to me, and it will be converted. A period of peace will then be granted to the world'.

Unsurprisingly, the devil is unleashing an unprecedented attack precisely now that we are moving towards the fulfilment of this plan of peace and salvation. The Queen of Peace warned us of this in the early days of the Medjugorje apparitions: "This century in which you live is under the power of Satan, but when the secrets entrusted to you are fulfilled, his power will be broken. He is already beginning to lose his power and has therefore become more aggressive. He destroys marriages, stirs up discord amongst consecrated souls and causes obsessions and murders' (14 April 1982). She has also addressed a similar warning in her most recent message. "Dear children! While darkness and unease reign in many hearts, you, my little children, be prayer and my hands outstretched in love. For Satan is strong and seduces hearts. I wish to entrust your hearts, through my motherly heart, to the heart of my Son Jesus, so that he may reign within you and bring you joy' (25 July 2026).

In short, to remain in the peace and joy of the heart, even during this time of trial when there are many signs of the powers of darkness being unleashed, Our Lady's path is always the same: through prayer, we must return to Jesus so that we can share in His victory over the Evil One, sin and death. Only in this way will dramatic events such as the recent desecrations in Medjugorje fail to disturb us. Indeed, they will encourage us to intensify our prayer and fasting in anticipation of Mary's triumph.