

NEW RULES

Tightening up on apparitions: only Pope decides if event is supernatural

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"The Norms for proceeding in the discernment of alleged supernatural phenomena that we now present are not necessarily meant to be a control nor, even less, an attempt to extinguish the Spirit". This is the premise of Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect

of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, [in the document on apparitions](#) published and presented today by the Holy See.

In spite of this reassurance, the intent of these new guidelines is clear, and further on it is "Tucho" himself who makes it explicit: "It must be recognised that in some cases of events of presumed supernatural origin there are very serious criticalities to the detriment of the faithful, and in these cases the Church must act with all its pastoral solicitude". These phenomena, the prefect points out in the text, are in some cases used "to gain profit, power, fame, social notoriety, personal interest" or even to "exercise dominion over people or commit abuses". Not to mention the "possibility of doctrinal errors, of undue reductionism in the proposal of the Gospel message, the spread of a sectarian spirit" as well as "the possibility that the faithful are dragged behind an event, attributed to a divine initiative, but which is only the fruit of fantasy, the desire for novelty, mythomania or someone's tendency to falsification".

The guidelines seem to suggest a greater centralisation of decision-making power on the authenticity of the alleged apparitions in Rome. The rationale behind this centralisation is explained in the introduction: "With the development of today's means of communication and the increase in pilgrimages," the text reads, "these phenomena are reaching national and even worldwide dimensions, so that a decision concerning one diocese has consequences elsewhere.

The influence of the mass media and the ease of travel for pilgrimages were two factors that had already been taken into account for the 1978 Norms. The investigation remains the prerogative of the diocesan bishop, but in the concluding phase it is specified that "the dicastery could request further information from the diocesan bishop, or ask for other opinions, or proceed, in extreme cases, to a new examination of the case, separate from that carried out by the diocesan bishop". Therefore, "in light of the examination carried out, it will proceed to confirm or not the determination proposed by the diocesan bishop".

Cardinal Fernández presented some extreme cases to justify the need for intervention by the dicastery he heads: "In one place," said the prefect, "a bishop declared a phenomenon not supernatural, after him came a bishop who authorised the cult, then another bishop who was even more enthusiastic declared it supernatural".

These changes in the event based on the positions of the incumbent diocesans, according to Tucho, lead to a loss of credibility. Hence the dicastery's decision to prefer prudential interventions rather than declarations of supernaturalness. This path is

considered better because it can be defined with less time and can guide the pastoral decision of the bishops.

The declaration of the supernaturalness of an apparition is not ruled out altogether but left to the pope alone. Another step that seems to go in the direction of a centralised power model, with a weakening of the role of the bishops and local Churches. The document, in fact, states that "neither the Diocesan Bishop, nor the Episcopal Conferences, nor the Dicastery will declare that these phenomena are of supernatural origin, even if a *Nihil obstat* is granted. It remains true, however, that the Holy Father can authorize a special procedure in this regard".

The real novelty of the document are the six conclusions to which the discernment of alleged supernatural phenomena can lead. At a press conference, the Prefect for the Doctrine of the Faith explained that this solution was arrived at because "looking at different cases we recognise different situations that can be placed in these six.

They are the 'Nihil obstat' by which we recognise many signs of an action of the Holy Spirit 'in the midst' - a term emphasised by the cardinal at the press conference - of a given spiritual experience. In this case there is an encouragement to prudential consent, but no believer is obliged to believe.

"Prae oculis habeatur" where "important positive signs" are recognised, but at the same time "some elements of confusion or possible risks are also felt".

"Curatur" where the critical elements are "various" or "significant" but acknowledge "a wide diffusion of the phenomenon and a presence of spiritual fruits linked to it and verifiable" discouraging bishop's prohibitions but also discouraging encouragement.

'Sub-mandate', a category that includes cases in which critical issues are detected linked not to the phenomenon itself 'but to a person, family or group of people who misuse it'.

Other conclusions of the survey are the "Prohibetur et obstruatur" in which the "dicastery asks the diocesan bishop to publicly declare that adherence to this phenomenon is not permitted and at the same time to offer a catechesis that may help to understand the reasons for the decision and to redirect the legitimate spiritual concerns of that part of the People of God".

Finally, the 'Declaratio de non supernaturalitate' in which the bishop is authorised to declare a phenomenon not supernatural, for example in the case of an alleged visionary who claims to have lied.

The document speaks in general terms, but the media's interest is mainly on the repercussions in current events. For Cardinal Fernández "with these norms it will be

easier to move forward and reach a conclusion" on Medjugorje. In his answers to journalists at the conference, the prefect was unable to restrain a certain scepticism, insisting on the positive fruits, but referring, doubtfully, to dates and times that Our Lady would have given the bishop in the alleged apparitions. "Things to be seen," said the Argentinean cardinal.

With regard to the alleged Marian apparitions in Trevignano, the prefect revealed how behind the declaration of non-supernaturalness recently decreed by the bishop of Civita Castellana, Monsignor Marco Salvi, there was precisely the intervention of the dicastery he heads. Excommunication is possible, the Cardinal admitted.