

Private Revelation

ISSUE: What is the difference between private revelation and public Revelation?

RESPONSE: By divine Revelation God has communicated Himself and His will concerning our salvation (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, no. 6). The perfect Revelation of God is the Person of Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-2; *Dei Verbum*, no. 2). Public Revelation refers to the deposit of faith, entrusted to the Apostles, which includes all Church teaching (i.e., dogma and doctrine). Public Revelation ended with the death of the last apostle, St. John. As the Church reflects on the sacred deposit, her understanding can deepen, but the sacred deposit itself (i.e., what God revealed to us through His Son) does not change (Catechism, no. 66).

Private revelation is so-called not because it is only for individuals or small groups, but to distinguish it from public Revelation. Authentic private revelations, such as approved Marian apparitions, neither add to nor subtract from the deposit of faith. Rather, they call us to a greater commitment to Jesus Christ, the one Savior of the world, and the Church He founded, and draw our attention back to the content of public Revelation.

DISCUSSION: The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 67) provides the following teaching concerning private revelation:

Throughout the ages, there have been so-called “private” revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ’s definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history. Guided by the Magisterium of the Church, the *sensus fidelium* knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or His saints to the Church.

Christian faith cannot accept “revelations” that claim to surpass or correct the Revelation of which Christ is the fulfillment, as is the case in certain non-Christian religions and also in certain recent sects which base themselves on such “revelations.”

Authentic private revelations are associated with the gift of prophecy, in which God grants the bearer a special revelation in order to encourage the faithful to live the revealed truths of public Revelation. Private revelations usually exhort the faithful to a greater commitment to the Gospel by turning from sin, praying more fervently, etc. Since a private revelation does not alter public Revelation, it is not, strictly speaking, necessary. However, following that logic, we can also conclude that our children need no “reminders” to do their homework because they are already aware of the assignment. Yet we all know that such reminders are at times necessary to motivate our children to action. And the same can be said of private revelations.

What should be our attitude toward private revelation?

Open—Private revelations are precious gifts to the Church. St. Paul instructs us not to despise prophecy (1 Thess. 5:20). While many purported apparitions, visions, etc., are ultimately discredited, other private revelations, even in our time, have been approved by the Church. An attitude that systematically rejects the possibility of private revelations simply is incompatible with the mind of the Church.

Cautious—St. Paul also instructs us to “test everything; hold fast to what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). Thus, openness to private revelation, particularly when the Church has not yet passed judgment, becomes uncritical credulity unless it is tempered with caution. For example, we cannot accept any purported message of Our Lady that cannot be reconciled with public Revelation, even where the Church has not intervened. Further, seeking after extraordinary signs is disordered when such enterprise takes priority over the less glamorous daily demands of the Gospel. As Bishop Alexander J. Brunett of Helena, MT, recently wrote:

All too often the faithful are led on pilgrimages to the four corners of the world where some new sighting is claimed. Their conduct is not far removed from those who chase UFO’s, looking for secrets from some distant planet. How much they have distanced themselves from Christ, who reminds us that the “the King-

dom of God is within you.”

We should keep in mind, though, that the Church does uphold the value of pilgrimages, teaching that “pilgrimages evoke our earthly journey toward heaven and are traditionally very special occasions for renewal in prayer” (Catechism, no. 2691). And yet this must be balanced with the reality that we can **regularly** make pilgrimages to Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament in our **local** parishes.

Obedient—Until the Church renders her official judgment, the faithful are free to accept (or reject) any private revelation if nothing in the message or concurring phenomena is contrary to faith and morals. For example, the throng witnessing the miracle of the sun at Fatima in 1917 did not have to wait until final Church approval in 1930 to begin living the message of Fatima.

However, once the Church has concluded that a particular apparition is not authentic, the faithful need to walk away. Similarly, once the Church declares an apparition as “worthy of belief,” we must respect the Church’s decision and those who choose to incorporate the apparition into their life of devotion.

Private revelations such as Lourdes, Fatima, and others are yet another sign that God has not abandoned His Church, but is truly with us. They also provide an invitation to deepen our conversion to Christ, often through a heightened awareness of Mary’s spiritual motherhood. They are a gift to the Church that ought to be received soberly, but also joyfully.

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