

Marian Apparitions as a *Locus Theologicus*?

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Introduction

MANY different studies dedicated to Marian apparitions have been published in the last fifty years in Europe.¹ Despite a great number of works, there are very few that reflect theologically on the phenomenon of private revelations. The reasons for this situation are to be found in the scepticism of many theologians to this phenomenon. As Hans Urs von Balthasar

¹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in his theological commentary of the Message of Fatima, affirms that the concept of “private revelation” refers to “all the visions and revelations which have taken place since the completion of the New Testament. . . . The authority of private revelations is essentially different from that of the definitive public Revelation. The latter demands faith; in it in fact God himself speaks to us through human words and the mediation of the living community of the Church. . . . Private revelation is a help to this faith, and shows its credibility precisely by leading me back to the definitive public Revelation. In this regard, Cardinal Prospero Lambertini, the future Pope Benedict XIV, says in his classic treatise, which later became normative for beatifications and canonizations: “An assent of Catholic faith is not due to revelations approved in this way; it is not even possible. These revelations seek rather an assent of human faith in keeping with the requirements of prudence, which puts them before us as probable and credible to piety.” Ratzinger, *The Message of Fatima. Theological Commentary*, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000626_message-fatima_en.html.

Marian Rusecki mentions three characteristic elements of the structure of private revelations: “1) they were given to an individual as a private person or to a group of people, which is characterized by a certain unity; 2) they were given after the death of the last of the Apostles, when the public Revelation had been completed 3) they do not add anything new to Christian Revelation.” M. Rusecki, “Problem wiarygodności ‘objawień prywatnych,’” *Ateneum Kapłańskie* 78 (1986): z. 1, 35.

noted: "Today, theologians tell the faithful that the prophetic Revelations are: (1) very often uncertain or false, (2) they do not oblige anyone to accept them, (3) and that all the essential truths are included in the doctrine of the Church. However, somebody could put forward the question: if it is true, so why does God continually give them to the Church?"²

Despite the scepticism, one notes the presence of authors who consider it necessary to study Marian apparitions and private revelations. Karl Rahner affirms that Marian apparitions have a dynamic function in the life of the Church. Even if they do not contain new truths of faith, because public Revelation has been accomplished, they are new orders by which the salvific will of God is expressed in new historical situations. The Spirit of God gives a new impulse to the life of the Church, which cannot be so easily discovered by theologians from the deposit of faith.³ A similar opinion is expressed by Georg Essen, who considers that private revelations can be prophetic testimonies, since truth of faith reaches its fullness in confrontation with a historical situation. In that sense, private revelations can lead to more profound understanding of Divine Revelation in the history of Jesus Christ.⁴

In such a context the following question arises: do Marian apparitions belong to the category of *locus theologicus*? And if so, how we can classify them?

In order to answer such a question, it is necessary to recall the contribution of Melchior Cano, who in his work entitled *De locis theologicis* explores how the Church reaches her understanding of Divine Revelation. This Revelation is actualized in different places (*loci*). The most important among them are Scripture and Tradition. Moreover, there exist other sources of Revelation: (1) common faith of all believers, (2) councils and synods, (3) the Roman Church and her pastors, (4) Fathers of the Church, (5) scholastic theologians.⁵ As we may note, the above mentioned sources do not include private revelations. Cano, emphasizing their private character, expresses his doubts concerning their importance for faith. He thus denied the value of the revelations of St. Brigit of Sweden and the other

² H. Urs von Balthasar, "La vita, la missione teologia e l'opera di Adrienne von Speyr," in *Mistica oggettiva*, ed. B. Albrecht (Milano: 1989), 35.

³ K. Rahner, *Visioni e profezie* (Milano: 1954), 25.

⁴ G. Essen, "Privatoffenbarung," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 8 (Freiburg: 1999), 604.

⁵ Cf. A. Lang, *Die "loci theologici" des Melchior Cano und die Methode des dogmatischen Beweises* (München: 1925); A. Scola, "Chiesa e metodo teologico in Melchior Cano," *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa* 9 (1973): 203–34; J. Wicks, "Luoghi teologici," in *Dizionario di teologia fondamentale*, ed. R. Latourelle and R. Fisichella (Assisi: 1990), 645–47.

saints for our faith.⁶ As R. Laurentin notes, in the system of Melchior Cano, private revelations seemed to be theological *non-locus*.⁷

One of the contemporary hierarchies of the *loci theologici* has been presented by S. C. Napiórkowski, O.F.M. Conv., who mentions the category of theological non-objectivized and non-inspired sources. These are (1) the signs of the times, (2) man, (3) faith, (4) the experience of people and Christian communities.⁸ This scheme of theological sources, presented by Napiórkowski, allows for a classification of Marian apparitions in the group of non-objectivized sources.

Marian Revelations and Prophetical Revelations

Some theologians, analyzing the phenomenon of private apparitions, argue for their prophetical character. According to Johannes Linblom "prophets are entirely devoted, soul and body, to the divinity. They are inspired personalities who have the power to receive divine revelations. They act as speakers and preachers who publicly announce what they have to say. They are compelled by higher powers and kept under divine constraint."⁹ A similar opinion has been expressed by David Hill, who affirms that "[a] Christian prophet is a Christian who functions within the church, occasionally or regularly, as a divinely called and divinely inspired speaker who receives intelligible and authoritative revelations or messages which he is impelled to deliver publicly, in oral or written form, to Christian individuals and/or the Christian community."¹⁰ As Hill affirms, a prophet is aware that the message transmitted by him comes from God.

It is necessary to note that just as in the case of spiritual experience, rationalistic tendencies caused diminution of the importance of prophetical revelations.¹¹ Yet we may find some very interesting works in which theologians such as Y. M. Congar,¹² K. Rahner,¹³ L. Scheffczyk,¹⁴

⁶ M. Cano, *De locis theologicis* (Madrid: 2006).

⁷ R. Laurentin, "Fonction et status des apparitions," in *Vraies et fausses apparitions dans l'Église*, ed. B. Billet (Paris: 1976), 166.

⁸ S. C. Napiórkowski, *Jak uprawiać teologię* (Wrocław: 2002), 52.

⁹ J. Linblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: 1965), 6.

¹⁰ D. Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (Atlanta: 1979), 5.

¹¹ R. Fisichella, "Profezia," in *Dizionario di teologia fondamentale*, 867.

¹² Y. M. Congar, *La credibilità delle rivelazioni private*, in *Santa Chiesa. Saggi ecclesologici* (Brescia: 1967), 245–51. The author presents the opinions of the Dominicans St. Thomas Aquinas, Cajetan, and John of St. Thomas.

¹³ K. Rahner, *Les révélations privées: quelques remarques théologiques*, *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 25 (1949): 506–14; idem, *Visioni e profezie* (Milano: 1954).

¹⁴ L. Scheffczyk, *Privatoffenbarungen*, in *Marienlexikon*, ed. R. Baumer and L. Scheffczyk, vol. 5 (Erzabtei St. Ottilien: 1993), 318–20.

L. Volken,¹⁵ M. Rusecki,¹⁶ and A. Suh¹⁷ examine the importance of this kind of phenomena.

Rusecki asks whether private revelations are revelations of God himself or revelations of Our Lady, saints, or mystics? It seems, he replies, that in private revelations we always have to do with Divine Revelation. From a theological point of view it is absolutely understandable, because only God can intervene in the world and in human history, whereas creatures, even those who already participate in the glory of God, cannot alone, without God's permission, intervene in history or appear by themselves to reveal the will of God. In apparitions they can only play the role of mediators. God reveals himself personally in epiphanic signs or he uses mediators (Our Lady, saints, or mystics) in order to reveal his salvific will in the history of the Church."¹⁸

Essen notes that prophetic revelations play an important role in the actualisation and development of Tradition. They may become prophetic testimonies, manifesting that the truth of faith reaches its fullness in confrontation with a historical situation. In that sense, private revelations should lead to a deeper understanding of Divine Revelation.¹⁹

When considering the Marian apparitions that have been approved by the authority of the Church—La Salette (1846), Lourdes (1858), Pontmain (1871), Fatima (1917), Banneux i Beauraing (1932–33)—it is necessary to affirm that they have a prophetic dimension. Therefore it seems that it is possible to compare analogously the revelations of Our Lady with the interventions of the Old Testament prophets in the history of the People of God. Even if Israel offered sacrifices to YHWH every day, the People of God was not always faithful to the Almighty. The main aims of the prophetic interventions of Isaiah and Jeremiah were the conversion of the people of the Old Covenant to God, recuperation of fidelity to the Law, and a call to good moral conduct.

Seen in that light, the messages of Our Lady show certain analogies to the Old Testament messages. Mary addresses herself to the people, asking them to convert, pray, and fast. In this light, it seems that Our Lady continues the prophetic mission within the Church.

The prophetic dimension of the Marian apparitions is connected with the ecclesiological one. These revelations are addressed not only to

¹⁵ L. Volken, *Le rivelazioni nella Chiesa* (Roma: 1963).

¹⁶ M. Rusecki, "Problem wiarygodności," 34–50.

¹⁷ A. Suh, *Le rivelazioni private nella vita della Chiesa* (Bologna: 2000).

¹⁸ M. Rusecki, "Problem wiarygodności," 36.

¹⁹ G. Essen, *Privatoffenbarung*, in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 8 (Freiburg: 1999), 604.

individuals but also to the Church. If they recommend confession or special forms of devotion, they do so with the aim of improving the spiritual life of the entire Church, not only of the individual.²⁰

Marian Revelation as a Mystical Experience

In order to answer whether Marian apparitions can be a source for theology, it is necessary to analyze this phenomenon in the light of mystical experience.

This category of experience, which is included in the conciliar constitutions *Dei Verbum* and *Gaudium et Spes* and in the encyclical letter *Redemptoris Mater*,²¹ also became the object of theological reflection of such theologians as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Heinrich Döring, Krzysztof Kowalik, Giovanni Moiola, Stanisław Celestyn Napiórkowski, Gerard O'Collins, Joseph Ratzinger, Grzegorz Strzelczyk, and Wojciech Żyćński.²²

According to Ratzinger, there is a reciprocal relation between faith and experience. Experience influences faith, and faith stimulates the dynamics of experience.²³ In order for faith to develop, the primordial experience must be continually surpassed, because divine reality is above that which is experienced.²⁴ Kowalik notes the relationship existing between revelation and experience: where there is Revelation, there is always experience. Naturally, Revelation surpasses the limits of human possibilities, as far as

²⁰ Cf. K. Rahner, *Visioni e profezie*, 23.

²¹ *Dei Verbum*, §8; *Gaudium et Spes*, §§43, 62. See John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, §48: "Marian spirituality, like its corresponding devotion, finds a very rich source in the historical experience of individuals and of the various Christian communities present among the different peoples and nations of the world."

²² B. Körner, "Mystik und Spiritualität: Ein locus theologicus? Erste Hinweise an Hand der Theologie von Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Rivista Teologica di Lugano* 1 (2001): 229–30; H. Döring, "Gotteserkenntnis oder Gotteserfahrung?" *Theologie und Glaube* 64 (1974): 89–114; K. Kowalik, *Funkcja doświadczenia w teologii* (Lublin: 2003); G. Moiola, "I mistici e la teologia spirituale," *Teologia* 7 (1982): 127–43; S. C. Napiórkowski, "Doświadczenie osób i wspólnot chrześcijańskich jako źródło teologii (Mariologia św. Maksymiliana a Redemptoris Mater nr. 48)," *Roczniki Teologiczno-Kanoniczne* 44 (1997): fasc. 2, 41–56; S. C. Napiórkowski and K. Kowalik, eds., *Doświadczam i wierzę* (Lublin: 1999); G. O'Collins, "Esperienza," in *Dizionario di teologia fondamentale*, 403–6; G. Strzelczyk, *Esperienza mistica come locus theologicus* (Lugano: 2005); idem, "L'esperienza mistica come fonte di teologia sistematica. Osservazioni metodologiche," *Rivista Teologica di Lugano* 6, no. 1 (2006), 239–52; W. Żyćński "Historyczne doświadczenie osób i wspólnot chrześcijańskich," in *Jan Paweł II. Matka Odkupiciela. Teksty i komentarze*, ed. S. C. Napiórkowski (Lublin: 1993), 81–89.

²³ J. Ratzinger, *Elementi di teologia fondamentale. Saggi sulla fede e sul mistero* (Brescia: 2005), 85.

²⁴ Ibid.

its existence and its reception are concerned. However, Revelation must be received by man, and that happens within experience.²⁵

In order that experience might become a part of Christian existence, it must be in direct relationship with God. Moreover, it must be characterized by the dynamism of the theological virtues, and union with God should be experienced in a conscious way.²⁶ The difference between an experience of faith and a mystical experience consists in the modality of experience of the mystery by a faithful person.²⁷ A person who lives a mystical experience is passive. This kind of experience is not the fruit of his efforts, but it is given to him by God.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his reflection on the question whether a particular mystical experience could be a *locus theologicus*, states that this category could more appropriately be applied to the authority of the Saints.²⁸ Saints indicate directions for improvement and renewal of faith and theology. They give us evidence of how faith can be expressed and lived in different periods of time. They remind us that the transmission of faith is not only a transmission of truths but it is also a Christian testimony lived and experienced in faith.²⁹ Therefore it must be affirmed that Saints create a certain hermeneutical perspective for theology, which emphasizes the role of the subject who lives his faith.³⁰

For Giovanni Moiola, theologians should take into consideration the experiences of the mystics in their research.³¹ All mystics are witnesses of their faith lived within the Church; therefore those who reflect on the experience of mystics not only discover how certain truths of faith are lived by concrete persons, but they also find new themes that are even sometimes difficult to elaborate on the basis of speculative-theological reflection.

Napiórkowski draws our attention to the difficulty concerning objectivization of subjective data of experience: How is it possible to move from a subjective experience of a single person or group of persons to objective data that could be verifiable?³² An answer to this question has

²⁵ K. Kowalik, *Funkcja doświadczenia w teologii* (Lublin: 2003), 204.

²⁶ G. Moiola, "Mistica cristiana," in *Nuovo dizionario di spiritualità*, ed. S. De Fiores and T. Goffi (Roma: 1979), 985.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 986.

²⁸ B. Körner, "Mystik und Spiritualität: Ein locus theologicus? Erste Hinweise an Hand der Theologie von Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Rivista Teologica di Lugano* 1 (2001): 229–30.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 230–35.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 235–36.

³¹ G. Moiola, "I mistici e la teologia spirituale," *Teologia* 7 (1982), 138–40.

³² S. C. Napiórkowski, "Doświadczenie osób i wspólnot chrześcijańskich jako źródło teologii, (mariologia św. Maksymiliana a Redemptoris Mater nr. 48)," *Roczniki*, 53.

been given by Heinrich Döring. In his opinion, society collects individual experiences, formulates them into adequate models, and through a certain language communicates them to the individual.³³ By emphasizing the social dimension of experience, Döring affirms that it is possible to talk about objectivization of what has a subjective character. It seems that an example of this kind of objectivization of subjective data included in Marian revelations could be the experiences of Lourdes and Fatima, which became one of the criteria in a negative evaluation of the Marian apparitions in Medjugorje by two independent theological commissions.³⁴ Another example is the experiences of saints—chosen by Christ to be his secretaries (for example St. Faustina Kowalski)—who have a mission to transmit his divine will to the entire world. The elaborated criteria were very helpful for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in a negative evaluation of the phenomenon of the so-called “automatic writing” by Vasula Rydan.³⁵

The Visionary as a *locus theologicus*?

The subjective character of a mystical experience requires us to ask about the credibility of data obtained from this kind of cognition. Analysis of the descriptions of mystical experiences and the expressions included in them leads us to suppose that the cognition of mystics crosses the threshold of transcendence and touches the reality of God himself, who allows them to understand mysteries inaccessible in any other way. These persons are conscious of their own cognitive limitations and the absolute transcendence of God. Sometimes they emphasize the inadequacy of their description in comparison with the experienced reality. However, this experience, in order to be understood by others, must be communicated by means of accessible expressions. Therefore mystics, narrating their own experiences, *nolens volens* make certain interpretations.

As Ratzinger notes, “the subject, the visionary, is still more powerfully involved. He sees insofar as he is able, in the modes of representation and consciousness available to him. In the case of interior vision, the process of translation is even more extensive than in exterior vision, for the subject shares in an essential way in the formation of the image of what appears. He can arrive at the image only within the bounds of his capacities and possibilities. Such visions therefore are never simple ‘photographs’ of the

³³ K. Kowalik, *Funkcja doświadczenia w teologii* (Lublin: 2003), 198. Por. H. Döring, “Gotteserkenntnis oder Gotteserfahrung?” *Theologie und Glaube* 64 (1974): 97.

³⁴ R. Pindel, *Proroctwa nie lekceważcie, wszystko badajcie. Objawienia prywatne w świetle Bożego* (Kraków: 1998), 174–79.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 169–71.

other world, but are influenced by the potentialities and limitations of the perceiving subject.”³⁶ The way in which a mystical vision and experience comes to be expressed depends also on the visionary, his sensibility, education, and the environment in which he lives. Even if he strives to transmit faithfully the content of his mystical experience, it always remains to a greater or lesser extent his own interpretation. Therefore mystics, being aware that their cognition is of a subjective character, want to submit their mystical experience to the objective data expressed by the *Magisterium Ecclesiae*. This kind of attitude is a *sine qua non* condition in order that the experience may be considered as authentically Christian and become a contribution to the understanding of the Christian mystery.

Yet can the visionaries who receive revelations be considered a source of theology? Is it possible to apply this conclusion to St. Bernadette Soubirou or to the children of Fatima?

Marian Revelations and the Signs of the Times

We should also ask whether we can consider Marian revelations as the signs of the times.

In order to answer this question we should describe this category.³⁷ According to A. L. Szafrński, besides the divine Revelation included in the Tradition (oral and written), there is a second source of the cognition of the will of God in a particular period of time and in a particular historical situation. Even if public Revelation has been offered to all mankind once and forever, it requires explanation and indication to man of the will of God in a concrete time.³⁸ Within such a context, a sign becomes an event that addresses us to an invisible reality, which refers to what existed in the past or will exist in the future.³⁹ Because time is a gift of God, conferred to people in order that they may cooperate with God’s grace and in this way grow in their union with Christ, the Church is called to investigate

³⁶ J. Ratzinger, *The Message of Fatima. Theological Commentary*, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000626_message-fatima_en.html.

³⁷ This expression is also included in the documents of Pope John XXIII: *Humanae Salutis, Pacem in Terris, Ecclesiam Suam*. See M.-D. Chenu, “Les signes des temps. Reflexion théologique,” in *L’Église dans le monde de ce temps. Constitution pastorale Gaudium et spes*, ed. Y. M. Congar and M. Peuchmaurd, vol. 2 (Paris: 1967), 206–7. In *Mater et Magistra* Pope John XXIII affirms that “the signs of the times” are to be seen in the profound transformations in contemporary science, in social life, and in politics. Cf. A. L. Szafrński, *Kairologia. Zarys nauki o Kościele w świecie współczesnym* (Lublin: 1990), 110.

³⁸ A. Szafrński, *Kairologia*, 110.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

and explain the signs of the times. This task consists in discovering the acts of God and deriving from them concrete duties for the faithful.⁴⁰

In this perspective, the signs of the times are defined as those events which are related to the “salvific initiative of God towards man, which develops in the world and is the initiative of the Holy Spirit, allowing us to understand what God expects from man and from people living in specific economic, social and political circumstances.”⁴¹ These phenomena which occur at a particular moment of time should be confronted with the Gospel and should stimulate Christians to undertake concrete initiatives in different areas of social life.⁴² Given this definition, Marian revelations seem to be signs of the times. As M. Rusecki affirms, for M.-D. Chenu “events of this kind, which very often take place in times of crisis, not only social, but also moral or religious, are the signs of the times, and through their “here” and “now” God wants to communicate with us.”⁴³ The Church is obliged to investigate these phenomena and to interpret them in the light of the Gospel.⁴⁴ According to Rahner, even when there is a lack of official approval of concrete Marian revelations on the part of the Church, theologians should investigate the circumstances and sense of these events.⁴⁵

The Role of Marian Revelations in the Church

Theologians such as Essen, Rahner, and Rusecki note that private revelations do not concern only individuals, but refer first of all to the Church. Therefore even if public Revelation is closed and private revelations cannot add any new content, it is necessary to investigate their role within the Christian community.

Kerygmatic-Apologetic Aspect

It seems that Marian apparitions are instruments through which supernatural reality is manifested. God bestows signs in order to deepen human faith. Faith is nourished by extraordinary signs, which can confirm it.⁴⁶ Thanks to these signs, Christians can more easily discover God’s activity in history. Therefore Marian revelations in Lourdes or in Fatima are of an

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ A. Szafrąński, *Kairologia*, 111. Cf. J. Majka, “Sens ‘znaków czasu,’” *Chrześcijańin w świecie* 5 (1973): 3–12.

⁴² A. Szafrąński, *Kairologia*, 111.

⁴³ M. Rusecki, “Problem wiarygodności,” 35.

⁴⁴ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §4.

⁴⁵ K. Rahner, “Les révélations privées: quelques remarques théologiques,” *Revue d’ascétique et de mystique* 25 (1949): 512–13.

⁴⁶ A. Suh, *Le rivelazioni private nella vita della Chiesa* (Bologna: 2000), 169.

apologetic character, because they emphasize the supernatural dimension of events, confirm faith, and lead to the cognition of truths revealed by Jesus Christ. As Ratzinger notes, "The criterion for the truth and value of a private revelation is therefore its orientation to Christ himself. When it leads us away from him, when it becomes independent of him or even presents itself as another and better plan of salvation, more important than the Gospel, then it certainly does not come from the Holy Spirit, who guides us more deeply into the Gospel and not away from it."⁴⁷

As we already mentioned above, Marian revelations serve as confirmation of our faith. The Marian apparitions in Lourdes, which took place four years after the solemn proclamation of the dogma on the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, helped to confirm and deepen our understanding of this truth of faith. Pope Pius XII remarks that "it seems that the Blessed Virgin Mary herself wished to confirm by some special sign the definition, which the Vicar of her Divine Son on earth had pronounced amidst the applause of the whole Church."⁴⁸

The history of Marian apparitions shows that some of them express certain truths contained implicitly within Tradition, which had not been the object of consideration for centuries. The apparition of Our Lord Jesus Christ to St. Faustina Kowalski and the Devotion to Divine Mercy can serve as a very good example of such a situation.

The Marian messages contain some information on heaven, hell, and the necessity of prayer and penitence, truths that are often absent in pastoral practice. The apparition of Our Lady of Fatima seems to confirm our opinion.

Moreover, Marian apparitions also remind us about and confirm the teaching of the Church concerning morality. In the particular situation of our times, when the teaching of the Church is rejected by many, when traditional values are replaced by anti-values, when human dignity and freedom are being diminished, when moral relativism is promoted, the messages of Our Lady remind people about the immutability of the teaching of Christ Jesus.

Finally, it is necessary to emphasize that the apparitions of Our Lady are useful in the process of a deeper reception of public Revelation. Even

⁴⁷ J. Ratzinger, *The Message of Fatima. Theological Commentary*, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000626_message-fatima_en.html.

⁴⁸ Pius XII, encyclical letter *Fulgens Corona* (8 September 1953), §3, www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_08091953_fulgens-corona_en.html.

if private revelations do not belong to the deposit of faith, they still update certain truths which are already present within the Church, even though they remain in the shadows. In this way, they are an impulse for the actualization of public Revelation. They do not import any new ideas, but recall the content of public Revelation, allowing the faithful to reflect on them in a new light.⁴⁹

Prophetical Aspect

Private revelations very often make us aware of the most urgent challenges that the Church must meet. Hence the incentive to prayer, penance, and expiation for sins, which are the responsibility of the Church in difficult times. The messages of Fatima could be a good example of this. As Suh notes, "The Holy Spirit, as conscience and memory of Christ's Revelation, consoles and teaches the Church through the ages. In such a context, private revelations are an activity of the Holy Spirit, who manifests negligences of the People of God concerning certain salvific aspects of the revealed truth. . . . Novelty of the private revelation does not consist in presentation of a new object of faith, but in emphasizing certain aspects of the revealed truth: these revelations become a prophetical imperative which facilitate a dynamic actualisation of Christ's message."⁵⁰

Pastoral Aspect

It must be noted that Marian revelations influence the development of certain forms of devotion: liturgical memories of Our Lady of Lourdes, of Fatima, and the Rosary of Fatima have a definite influence on the improvement of understanding the fundamental truths of faith, and the mode of living them by the faithful. According to Congar, private revelations are not limited to making a certain decision or to obtaining answers which are sought for, but first of all, they refer to the relationship between the soul and God, to communion.⁵¹ Therefore it is necessary to say that Marian apparitions have meaning if they encourage and call for a more profound life lived according to the Gospel and in close union with Christ.

Marian messages very often contain a call to penance. Messages from Lourdes and Fatima are excellent illustrations of this truth. It seems that the call to penance, contained in the apparitions of Our Lady, manifests the inspiration of the Holy Spirit towards a spiritual renewal of the Church. As Suh affirms, "the calling of the Mother of Jesus to penance is

⁴⁹ See A. Suh, *Le rivelazioni private*, 196.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁵¹ Y. M. Congar, *Santa Chiesa. Saggi ecclesiologici* (Brescia: 1967), 345–61.

closely linked with the prophetic function of the Holy Spirit, who convinces people about sin.”⁵²

In different messages the Mother of God encourages the faithful to pray, particularly to recite the Rosary. She teaches Bernadette Soubirous how to recite the Rosary, she asks the children of Fatima to say the Rosary prayer, she encourages this prayer during her apparitions in Beauregard and Banneaux.

Marian Revelations as a *locus theologicus*

Can we then consider Marian revelations as a source of theology? The distinction made by Napiórkowski, even if it does not mention these mystical phenomena, allows us to consider them as a non-inspired and non-objectivized *locus theologicus*.

Ratzinger considers Marian revelations as a kind of prophecy. These prophecies are not referred to the future, “but their essence is to explain the will of God for the present . . . the actualization of the definitive Revelation.”⁵³ In this light, the charisma of prophecy is linked with the term “the signs of the times.” “To interpret the signs of the times in the light of faith means to recognize the presence of Christ in every age. In the private revelations approved by the Church—and therefore also in Fatima—this is the point: they help us to understand the signs of the times and to respond to them rightly in faith.”⁵⁴ This category underscores the historical-salvific aspect of a particular event rooted in the time of its occurrence, but Marian revelations are not only events that happen in history. They are also a specific experience of the individual or a Christian community. Therefore it seems that they also belong to the category of the experience of the individual and Christian communities. However, it is necessary to add that prophetic revelations also do not completely belong. Even if they have a subjective dimension, however, they certainly are not limited exclusively to the sphere of the mystical experience of the visionary. They are addressed to the Church, and therefore must be expressed in human words.

In short, we affirm that Marian revelations are prophetic revelations. Moreover, they share many common characteristics with the category of

⁵² A. Suh, *Le rivelazioni private*, 217.

⁵³ J. Ratzinger, *The Message of Fatima. Theological commentary*, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/re_con_cfaith_doc_20000626_message_fatima_en.html.

⁵⁴ J. Ratzinger, *The Message of Fatima. Theological commentary*, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000626_message-fatima_en.html.

the signs of the times and with the category of the experience of individuals and Christian communities, which are *loci theologici*.

Conclusion

Marian revelations manifest a certain supernatural reality that until then had been concealed and invisible. By contrast, the term “mystical experience” emphasizes the mystic’s activity and his perception, whereas the expression “the signs of the times” brings to the foreground the historical-salvific dimension of the event.

When analyzing each of the above mentioned categories, it is necessary to bear in mind that private revelations have much in common with all of them. Thus, when we take into consideration the revealing subject who orders the visionary to transmit a message, we can say that these are prophetic revelations. In turn, when the perspective of the experience of the visionary is given priority, Marian revelations belong to the category of the experience of individuals and Christian communities. Then again, bearing in mind that Marian revelations also have their social aspect, they can be classified in the category of “the signs of the times.”

Prophetic revelation cannot be fully confined to any of these categories. It shares certain features of each, but at the same time exceeds their bounds. Therefore it would perhaps be proper to add a new category of non-inspired and non-objectivized theological sources, namely the category of prophetic revelation.