

# Private Revelations

## Private Revelations and the Discernment of Spirits

by Fr William Most

### *Private Revelations*

St. John of the Cross, a Doctor of the Church and one of the greatest of mystic theologians, who had had so many special favors himself, is very severe with persons who desire to be the recipients of visions and revelations. He never tires of repeating that the proximate means of union with God in this life is the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. True growth consists in intensified love, which is founded on faith and hope. Now although St. John encourages everyone to aim at infused contemplation, even though relatively few attain it, he strongly reprovcs anyone who desires to be the recipient of a vision or revelation. They desire to see; faith holds on without seeing.

St. Teresa of Avila, who herself had an abundance of visions, takes a similar stand. She admits that great profit can be had from such things when they are genuine and are received in the proper spirit.

Yet she says (Interior Castle 6. 9): "I will only warn you that, when you learn or hear that God is granting souls these graces, you must never beg or desire Him to lead you by this road. Even if you think it is a very good one... there are certain reasons why such a course is not wise."

She then goes on at length to explain her reasons: First, such a desire shows a lack of humility; second, one thereby leaves self open to "great peril because the devil has only to see a door left a bit ajar to enter"; third, the danger of auto-suggestion: "When a person has a great desire for something, he convinces himself that he is seeing or hearing what he desires." Fourth, it is presumption for one to want to choose his own path, as only the Lord knows which path is best for us. Fifth, very heavy trials usually go with these favors: could we be sure of being able to bear them? Sixth, "you may well find that the very thing from which you had expected gain will bring you loss."

She then adds that there are also other reasons, and continues with some wholesome advice that one can become very holy without this sort of thing: "There are many holy people who have never known what it is to receive a favor of this sort, and there are others who receive such favors even though they are not holy." We think of the frightening words of Our Lord in Mt. 7.22-23. Speaking of the last day, He said: "Many will say to me on that day: 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out devils in your name, and work many miracles in your name? And then I will tell them: I never knew you. Depart from me you workers of iniquity.'" St. Teresa adds: "It is true that to have these favors must be a very great help towards attaining a high degree of perfection in the virtues; but one who has attained the virtues at the cost of his own work has earned much more merit."

It is, then, a sad mistake to center one's spiritual life about recounting and hoping for special revelations. Yes, we do well to follow those that have been approved by the Church, such as Lourdes and Fatima (the Church does not require belief in any private revelation). But even there, they should not be the center of our spiritual

lives except in so far as they are an exhortation to what the Gospel already calls for. Thus the three requests of Fatima are all just repetitions of what general theology provides: 1) Penance: which in the Gospel sense, means moral reform and reparation for sin; 2) Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary: this is merely the natural conclusion of learning what our Father's plan is, of His approach to us in which He has given her an all-pervading role; and 3) The Rosary, consisting mostly of lines from the Gospel, plus prayers composed by the Church.

## *Discernment of Spirits*

### **Apparitions and the Spiritual Life**

Since there is today so great a number of alleged apparitions of Our Lady, and since so many become so attached to them as to almost center their spiritual lives about them, it is good to consider some principles about visions and revelations.

First, these things are definitely not part of the core of the spiritual life. St. John of the Cross, the Mystical Doctor, is very hard on these things. He goes so far as to tell souls that if a vision comes, they should at first not accept, to hold off and consider its authenticity only if it comes again. The reason he gives is this: faith holds on without seeing proof; those who want visions want to see, not to believe without seeing (cf. Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Spiritual Life II*, 575-88 and Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, 299-399).

### **Authority of the Church**

We distinguish two kinds of actions by the local bishops of places of alleged apparitions:

1) a decision that it is or is not authentic. Since the Church herself has no providential protection in the area of private revelations, the bishop could be in error. We are not obliged to believe him, or even the Pope himself in such a case.

2) an order to all not to go in pilgrimage to the place of the supposed visions. This is a different matter, it is an exercise of authority, which the local bishop does have. Therefore if there are violations of this order, and yet visions seem to continue, we may be absolutely certain that the visions are false. Our Lady or the Saints will never appear to promote disobedience. Even if there seem to be benefits to the devotion of people, we must still obey. And we need to recall how demanding the Church is of proof for alleged miracles. At Lourdes, after thousands of seeming miracles, the Church has checked and approved only a little over 60 cases since the start of that shrine.

The objection will be raised: The Church was so slow in approving Fatima, and so people lost so many graces while waiting. We reply: They lost nothing at all. Visions are not like sacraments, which produce their effect by their own power (that is, the power of Christ working through them) in those who do not place an obstacle. One of the most approved series of visions are those of the Sacred Heart to St. Margaret Mary. On one occasion, He had told her to do something, but her Superior did not approve. When He came again, she asked Him about this, and He replied: "Therefore not only do I desire that you should do what your Superior commands, but also that you should do nothing of all that I order without their consent. I love obedience, and without it no one can please me" (*Autobiography of St. Margaret Mary # 47*).

We can understand this: He Himself redeemed the world precisely by obedience (Cf. Rom 5:19). Without obedience His sacrifice would have been empty externalism, the kind God reproved in the ancient Jews in Isaiah 29:13: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." *Lumen gentium # 3* says "by His obedience He brought about redemption." So there is no grace to be had by disobeying. To wait will not entail any loss at all; rather, God's favor will be upon those who obey.

If the local bishop does not approve, it is not good to say: let us wait for Rome to speak. Normally Rome respects the local bishop, and is highly unlikely to reverse his decision. Even if Rome did reverse it, we would have no guarantee, for, as we said, the providential protection promised to the Church does not cover private revelations.

## ***PRINCIPLES FOR DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS***

What kind of Spirit is at work when someone receives a vision, a revelation, or a more routine favor? To determine this is called the discernment of spirits. It is of great importance to find the right answer. It is evident that there can be three sources: good spirit, evil spirit, auto-suggestion.

Poulain, *Graces of Interior Prayer*, p. 322, thinks that at least three fourths of the revelations given to those who have not reached high sanctity are illusions. And there are many cases known of illusions even in canonized saints. So St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross are quite prudent their advice concerning privately revelations (which we have already seen). We think also of the words of Our Lord (Jn 20:29): "More blessed are they who have not seen and have believed."

[In what follows, the numerous examples given by the author have been somewhat reduced in the interest of brevity.]

### **Five causes of error in revelations**

#### ***1. Faulty interpretation of visions by the recipient.***

St. John of the Cross warns about this in *Ascent of Mount Carmel* II. 19. Thus St. Joan of Arc in prison had a revelation that she would be delivered by a great victory--it was her martyrdom, which she did not suspect.

Prophecies of punishment, and promises of special favors should be considered as conditional. E.g., the Scapular promise should not be taken to refer to mere physical wearing of the Scapular: it must be, as Pius XII said, the outward sign of consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, that is really lived. If it is used this way then even if the vision of St. Simon Stock might not be true, the promise will be fulfilled, as we explained earlier.

#### ***2. Visions of the life and death of Christ, or other historic scenes, must be understood to be approximate only.***

Thus some saw Jesus with three nails, some with four. Blessed Veronica of Binasco saw the whole life of Christ, and so did St. Frances of Rome and Catherine Emmerich. The Bollandists, Jesuit experts in studying the lives of the Saints, tell us there are many historical errors in these.

NOTE: Pope John XXIII, ordered *The Poem of the Man God* put on the index, on Dec. 16, 1960. The Index is now abolished, but Cardinal Ratzinger in a letter of Jan 31, 1985 wrote:..."The Index of forbidden books keeps all of its moral authority and therefore the distribution and recommendation of the work is considered improper when its condemnation was not made lightly but with the most serious motivation of neutralizing the harm which such publication could inflict on the more unwary faithful." So the Pontifical Imprimatur claimed for it is bogus.

#### ***3. Human action may mingle with the divine action.***

St. Catherine Labouré foretold many events correctly, but failed on others. It is especially easy for this to happen with ideas that appeal to our own desires or fit with preconceived ideas. Benedict XIV (*Heroic Virtue* III. 14. p.

404) said: "The revelations of some holy women canonized by the Apostolic See whose saying and writings in rapture and derived from rapture are filled with errors."

#### ***4. A true revelation may later be altered involuntarily by the recipient.***

This happens especially with intellectual locutions which need to be translated into words. Again, God may seem to promise a cure without saying if it is total or partial, sudden or slow, or even physical or moral. Again if a revelation is received in an instant, but it takes long to write it all down. St. Bridget admits such a thing in her own case.

#### ***5. Secretaries may alter without intending to do so.***

The accuracy of the text is disputed in the works of Mary of Agreda, Catherine Emmerich, and Mary Lataste. It has been shown that 32 passages from the latter have been taken word for word from St. Thomas' Summa Theologiae.

Similarly, compilers sometimes modify them. The first edition of Catherine Emmerich had St. James the Elder present at the death of the Blessed Virgin. When it was seen that this was incompatible with Acts of Apostles, it was dropped from later editions.

### **Five Causes of False Revelations**

#### ***1. Pure bad faith, fakery.***

Magdalen of the Cross was a Franciscan of Cordova, born in 1487, who entered a convent at age of 17. From the age of 5 the devil appeared to her as various Saints, led her to desire to be considered a saint. At 13 he said who he was, offered an agreement: he would spread her reputation for holiness, and give her at least 30 years of pleasures. She agreed, and it all came true--ecstasies, levitation, prophecies, simulated stigmata. At door of death she confessed. Exorcism was needed.

#### ***2. Overactive imagination.***

We said above that human faculties may mingle with the divine action. Someone may imagine a saint is near him. He may imagine intellectual locutions. Cf. St. John of Cross, Ascent II. 29. St. Teresa said (Interior Castle 6.6) that if one has once had a real vision, he will recognize the deception.

Hallucinations can come from excess in abstinence, fasting, and vigils.

#### ***3. Illusion in thinking one remembers things that never happened.***

Some may imagine they have had visions. Some invent stories and convince themselves--in good faith. Some relate trips to far lands where they have never been. The line between imagination and reality is dim in young children--something similar can happen later too. This is not rare. If a spiritual director finds his advice has little effect, there is reason for seeing illusion. Some make false charges in courts in this way.

#### ***4. The Devil may give false visions or revelations.***

We saw this in the case of Magdalen of the Cross.

## *5. Predictions by falsifiers.*

Some make these at first for their own amusement, then find they have a tiger by the tail. St. Bonaventure (*De profectu religiosorum* III. 76) said he was fed up with such things, on the troubles of the Church and the end of the world. During the great Western Schism at end of 14th century, there were many holy mortified men who had false revelations, and even thought they would be the pope. At fifth Lateran Council in 1516 Leo X had to publish an order prohibiting preachers from giving public prophecies. There were many during the French Revolution, clear and in detail on the past, vague on the future.

In 19th century there was an epidemic of prophecy especially on "the great Pope and the great King" inspired by the 17th century commentary on the Apocalypse by Ven. Holzhauser. Pius IX in an Allocution of April 9, 1872 said: "I do not give much belief to prophecies, because those especially that have come recently do not deserve to be read."

What degree of certainty or probability is possible?

1. When God so wills, He can give full certainty to the recipient. We who are not the recipients can also be sure of revelations given to another, e.g. , the OT prophets, for they furnished certain signs of their mission. This can be done by miracles worked in a framework in which a tie is made between the miracle and the claim.
2. Beyond this area, probability is the most that is attainable. We need then to work with various signs. We should: (a) Get detailed information on the person to whom the revelation seems to have been made; and on what facts seem to have been revealed.

Often we must work by exclusion, i.e. , show that it comes not from the devil, nor from the human mind. But psychology still cannot give full replies on some things that seem supernormal operations of the human mind: hypnotism, somnambulism, telepathy, thought-reading, etc. For data on the uncertainties of psychology see Richard M. Restak, [Neurologist in Washington D. C. ] "See no Evil. The Neurological defense would blame violence on the damaged brain" in *The Sciences*, July/August 1992, pp. 16- 21.

3. Inquiries to be made about the alleged recipient:

- (1) If the person is canonized, the Church has already checked--but canonization does not guarantee the truth of any supposed revelation given to the Saint.
- (2) If not canonized: (a) What are the natural qualities or defects, physical, intellectual, and moral. Is he sincere, cool-headed, of sound judgment, of perfect mental equilibrium. Or is his mind weakened by poor health, vigils, fasts etc.  
(b) Degree of education of the recipient--what books he has read, what information he may have picked up from other more learned persons.

Much care is needed. Some say that Mary of Agreda was an ignorant girl. But she could read, knew the Bible well, and Cardinal Gotti showed several of her revelations were borrowed from a 15th century book, *The Raptures of Blessed Amadeus*. And she admits the help of theologians. Yet she said, in exaggeration: "No human mind could have imagined this work" (III, # 789).

(c) What virtues does the person have? What was his general level before and after the alleged revelation? If a great advance in holiness is seen, and it seems to have come from the revelation, there is good probability for the revelations. We think of the Fatima children. But if the seer has stayed at the ordinary level of virtue, the visions come under some suspicion, for would God use extraordinary means to lead to a merely ordinary state of holiness? Exception: God might use an ordinary person to help others. The message of Fatima for example would

have ample justification even if the children had not become holy: this message God wanted given to the world. And the three things asked for are theologically sound and called for independently of any revelation.

(d) We need to watch out for the work of satan--he may really promote good things for a while, provided that in the long run he gains. The revelations of Necedah, Wi. seemed to have good fruits, yet were false. Rosaries were said to change to gold. Similarly for Bayside. But disobedience showed them false. St. Margaret Mary was told by Our Lord: (Autobiography, #57): "Listen, My Daughter, and do not lightly believe and trust every spirit, for satan is angry and will try to deceive you. So do nothing without the approval of those who guide you. Being thus under the authority of obedience, his efforts against you will be in vain, for he has no power over the obedient."

Sometimes satan urges people to immoderate penances, so that they will in time give up. He may make contemplatives desire the active life, or vice versa. Blessed Jordan of Saxony, second General of the Dominicans, contracted a high fever. He had a prior skilled in medicine who told him to sleep on a soft bed. But satan appeared to Jordan in the night and rebuked his self-indulgence. Jordan gave into this two nights. But the third night Jordan saw that he should obey his doctor, and so did. Jordan had previously put himself under obedience to the doctor.

(e) Humility is a major key. Satan has the greatest horror of it. (Cf. the above words of Our Lord to St. Margaret Mary.) Yet satan can lead a person to false humility. Pride shows in contempt for others, in an independent spirit as to the Superior and the spiritual director, in obstinacy in opinions, in refusal to submit to examinations (cf. Teresa Neumann), in anger. It shows too in desiring to publish the graces the person thinks he has received--when it is not necessary. Humility leads to wanting to hide them, except in cases of real usefulness.

(f) Has the person claimed revelations before? Made predictions that were not fulfilled? If there was no reason to suppose the failed predictions were conditional, then they will seem not of divine origin.

(g) Has the recipient suffered great trials before or after the revelation, such as sicknesses, contradictions, lack of success. Extraordinary graces are very likely to bring great trials, as St. Teresa of Avila remarked, (cited above), in Interior Castle 6. 9. It is specially likely that the recipient will encounter skepticism or hostility. Bl. Juliana of Liege was chosen by God to establish the Feast of the Blessed Sacrament. Visions on it began two years after her entering the novitiate at age 16 in 1208. Only 22 years later did she dare to submit her project to some learned theologians, who approved it, but her enemies got revenge by pillaging her convent. In 1256 the Bishop of Liege established the Feast in one parish in his diocese, but died the same year. The convent was again pillaged. She was calumniated, forced to leave the convent, wandered during the last 20 years of her life, and died at age 66 after fruitless work for 50 years. Finally Pope Urban IV established the feast a century after the start of the revelations.

Yet not always do such things happen. St. Catherine Labouré had early success with the Miraculous Medal.

(h) Has the recipient been fearful of deception, open to Superiors or Director, and never desired revelations? St. Teresa of Avila was told in a vision to found a reformed Carmelite house, but yet did nothing until she had consulted four advisors (Autobiography 32). Mary of Agreda is quite the opposite. St. Ignatius in his rules for first Week, 13, says satan tries to keep the person from being open. St. Monica as St. Augustine reports desired revelations about his coming marriage; they were false (Confessions 6. 13). So if a revelation has been desired that alone makes it doubtful. This is especially so if answers of pure curiosity are desired or answers to scholastic questions. Mary of Agreda was imprudent here, and was encouraged in imprudence by her confessors.

(i) It is probably good to employ the testimony of expert psychologists as to ecstatic states etc. However, psychology is not so solid and exact a science that absolute trust should be placed in their results.

## **Further Points to be Checked**

1. Do we have an entirely authentic text? Some things have been suppressed or corrected in some cases. There may also have been additions.

2. Is the teaching in full accord with the teachings of the Church and with the certain conclusions of history and of science? If free from all errors, this need not prove it is of divine origin. But also, since there can be mixtures in private revelations, one false teaching need not lead us to conclude that all points are false.

3. Is there a revelation of the vices and sins of others? This does not always prove a revelation is false, but calls for careful checking. Some Saints have had a knowledge of the secrets of hearts, which helped in reforming souls: St. Joseph of Cupertino, St. Catherine of Siena, St. John Vianney. St. John of the Cross, in Ascent II. 26 warns that satan at times will make false revelations of the sins of others. Further, sometimes seeming knowledge is only the result of imagination.

4. Is the information useful for salvation of souls? If it is merely to satisfy curiosity it is unlikely to be of divine origin. Some seeming seers act like mediums, give information on births, marriages, legal processes, diseases, political events etc. God does not run an Inquiry Office. Some are very clever at observing and can work with little things. Seances often push furniture about and cause vibrations in musical instruments etc. God does not do these things. Also suspect are revelations that merely give truisms.

A large abundance of revelations taken alone does not disprove. We have cases like this in St. Bridget, St. Gertrude, St. Frances of Rome, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Margaret Mary, St. Ignatius and others.

5. Is all in accord with the dignity and gravity of the Divine Majesty? Some alleged revelations descend into vulgar speech. If there is neurotic exaltation and crowds weeping over their sins as at revivals, it is at least suspect. Satan at times appears taking repulsive shapes. On the other hand, St. Frances of Rome once saw 6 devils in the form of 6 beautiful doves--when she saw through it, they changed to crows and tried to harm her. Satan at times takes on the appearance of Christ Himself.

6. Are there sentiments or peace of disquiet? St. Ignatius considers this sign important. The good Spirit may cause momentary disquiet, but then brings peace. It is the opposite with satan. But the peace alone will not prove the words are divine.

7. Revelations to direct princes or clergy are suspect: Mary of Agreda kept up correspondence with Philip IV of Spain for 20 years. The King divided his sheets of paper into two columns so she could comment in the opposite column. But the comments are mostly commonplace, with general advice anyone could have given. She had no comments on the King's relaxed morality and his culpable carelessness on things for which he was responsible.

## Summary

We might sum up the characteristics thus:

1) Signs of the spirit of God: fits with teaching of Church; serious; gives light to the soul, docility, discretion: no hurriedness or exaggerations; humble thoughts; confidence in God, rightness of intention, patience in suffering, self-denial, sincerity and simplicity in conduct, no attachments not even to the gifts, great desire to imitate Christ in all things (a very strong sign), gentleness, kindness;

2) Signs of the evil spirit: (the opposite of the above--spirit of falseness or lie, suggestion of useless things, curious things, impertinent things, darkness, restlessness in the soul, a bold, obstinate spirit, many indiscretions, pride, lack of hope, disobedience, vanity, self-satisfaction, impatience, rebellion of the passions, hypocrisy, pretense, attachment to earthly things, forgetfulness of Christ and of imitating him, a false charity including bitter zeal, indiscretion.