

Consummatum est—all is complete, perfect—the created plan for him who is the uncreated Exemplar of all that is, has been fully worked out to its last detail—and in the process the human life of him in whom all things are life has been burnt up and consumed as a holocaust in the fire of love. Nothing more remains to be done, so with a loud cry he gave up the ghost. ‘Father into thy hands I commend my spirit.’

‘I came forth from the Father and I came into the world and now I leave the world and I go to the Father.’ *Egressus ejus a Patre; Regressus ejus ad Patrem. Sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper et in saecula saeculorum, Amen.*

PRIVATE REVELATIONS: WARP AND WOOF

BY

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AT times, reading the strange stories of the Saints, we may feel: ‘This incident cannot be true: it jars on my artistic sense; it conflicts with my knowledge of history; it is “out of keeping” with theology’. Then we may feel irreverent; that it may be we who are ‘out of tune’ with sanctity. On the one hand, ever since the future Benedict XIV’s *De . . . beatificatione* etc., ii. c. 32, it has been clear that the Church does not and cannot demand the assent of faith to any ‘private revelation’; but ecclesiastical approbation can ask our human belief in them according to the rules of prudence which offer them to us as probable and piously believable. The encyclical *Pascendi* (ASS; vol. xl; p. 649: 1907) says that the Church, when allowing the publication of such events, does not go guarantee for their truth, but simply *does not prevent* matters being published for which motives of human belief are not lacking. On the other hand, it would be rash positively to disbelieve what ecclesiastical approbation has often placed before us, such as the experiences of St Margaret Mary or St Bernadette, though even here it is the doctrine rather than the visions that is approved, as notably, too, in the case of great saints like SS. Bernard, Teresa or Catherine of Genoa. But it is not merely a question of belief or disbelief. An apparently preternatural experience may be genuinely divine in origin, yet the account of it may contain elements of purely human origin, and we are positively invited—it is a duty—to try to disentangle these. We recall a few principles admitted by all, adding illustrations that may seem to us apt.

I exclude the topic of *diabolic imitations* of divine experiences, though when St Paul says that Satan himself can be transformed into (disguised as) an angel of light (2 Cor. 11, 14) he is alluding to false doctrine plausibly preached as true, not to visions. And I exclude deliberate fabrications such as, e.g., prophecies (usually connected with something political, or wars): and also 'revelations' which are clearly due to overheated imaginations: Gerson (*De discrimine verarum visionum*) says that 'many' *holy and mortified men* were 'certain' (during the Great Schism) that they had been told *they* should be the next Pope: and Fr Poulain (*Des Grâces d'Oraison*: ed. 10; 1921, pp. 355; 360-4) adds that when the expulsion of the Congregations was being discussed in France, many pious women were 'told' that they must go to Rome about it, and that no less than 10 actually got there.

A 'revelation' may be badly reported—consciously or unconsciously—when, e.g., its recipient *dictates* his or her experience, especially if the account be rapidly spoken, or spoken during an ecstasy, maybe in disjointed sentences needing to be 'put together'. Thus St Angela of Foligno was quite angry with the poor priest who 'recorded' her: 'It wasn't at all like that!' Probably she meant that *no* human word could really correspond with the ineffable things she had 'heard'. Catherine Emmerich's visions were written down by a romantic poet, Brentano: who knows what he may have altered for the sake of 'style' or 'edification'? (Indeed, her assertion that St James the Greater was at our Lady's death was simply omitted by later editors because it cannot square with the *Acts*.) St Francis Xavier's letters were enormously amplified and his 'roughnesses' eliminated. Indeed, accurate quotation is a modern ideal and even now not universal. Thus at Fatima the Apparition emphatically said that she would reveal her identity during the last vision, and in fact then said: 'I am the Lady of the Rosary.' This is nearly always quoted as: 'I am Our Lady of the Rosary'. Bernadette, too, insisted on the strange 'abstract': 'I am the Immaculate Conception'—as though our Lord should say: 'I am the Incarnation'. More serious—some of the books before us make the Fatima Vision say that a little girl-friend of the children is in Purgatory 'till the end of the world'. These words are not in Fr De Marchi's authoritative book *Uma Senhora* (ed. 3), so either they have been added or, perhaps more probably, omitted as an 'offendiculum' (as Trent says, Sess. xxi, Decree on Purgatory).

Again, when 'seers' are questioned, there is the possibility of 'suggestion'. Thus when Canon Formigão asked Lucia how old the Child Jesus seemed in the October 13th apparition at Fatima, she said: 'Like Deolinda' (a child of two). When he asked her cousin

Francisco whether the Child was big or little, he answered: 'Little'. 'Was he as big as Deolinda?' 'Just like that!' said the small boy. This was unimportant. But when the Canon on September 27th (i.e., before the final apparition when 'the Lady' revealed her identity) interrogated the boy's sister Jacinta, he began: 'Do you consider you have been seeing Our Lady . . . since May?', she said: 'I do, Senhor'. And with Lucia he started at once: 'Is it true that Our Lady appeared to you?' 'It is true'. Twice more he uses the expression 'Our Lady', though usually he keeps to '*the* Lady'. If this is correctly reported, should he not—being a trained theologian and sent expressly to enquire into events about which the clergy were to exhibit extreme reserve—have been more circumspect? But *is* it correctly reported? For Canon Barthas in his French amplification of Fr da Fonseca's Italian book makes Lucia herself say 'the Blessed Virgin', when in the original account she always correctly says 'the Lady'.

Again, a 'seer' may misinterpret an experience owing to its intrinsic obscurity. Thus St Peter at first thought he was really meant to 'kill and eat' the animals he saw in vision (*Acts* 10, 10); St Bernadette, being told to drink 'from the water there', started off to the river Gave, knowing no other spring, and had to be called back. St Mechtildis prayed that St Gertrude might have 'patience', and our Lord told her that she possessed that virtue already and that 'patientia' was derived from 'pax' and 'scientia', which it is not. This does not militate against the genuineness of the experience, but does show that the human mind, reflecting on it, can add something of its own which it does not distinguish clearly from what was 'given'. Lucia, on October 13th 1917 itself, said that our Lady had declared that the war will finish 'today' and on the 19th she thrice repeated that our Lady had said those very words. 'How do you explain that there has been fighting ever since then?' 'I don't know. I know only that I heard her say that the war was finishing on the 13th'. 'Some people said that she said "soon"?' 'I have repeated the very words of our Lady'. Jacinta, interrogated, said that our Lady declared: 'If people correct themselves, the war will finish: if they do not, the world will come to an end'. She added that Lucia heard better than she did; also, that our Lady said the war would end when she arrived in heaven; and further: 'I think it will end on Sunday'. Lucia herself said that she heard our Lady's words interiorly and could give only their 'sense'.

The history of visions shows that when they are 'imaginative', i.e., make use of 'imagery' in any sense, the habits of mind, the mental 'furniture' of the seer, may probably provide all the imagery. Thus the elaborate visions of St Elizabeth of Schönau or St Hildegarde

reflect all the art of their period. When a 'heaven of crystal' is believed in by contemporary science, it will be seen in vision. In 'historical' visions, e.g., of the Passion, one Saint will see three nails, another, four; the cross will be carried, the spear driven in, on the right or again on the left. St John's apocalyptic visions were undoubtedly 'true', yet his imagery is hereditary or drawn from his environment, and Ezekiel himself derived the description of his cherubs from Babylonian art-forms. The biographer and successor of St Frances of Rome freely says that the Saint's ecstasies contained pious *meditations* due to her personal 'activity'.¹ A vision, moreover, may at first be obscure and clear itself up later, or the 'seer' may come to have more words at his or her disposal; thus the child Lucia began by describing her vision quite 'materialistically', but, when adult, said that our Lady was 'all of light'; that they distinguished dress from face and mantle from hands by 'variations' or 'undulations' of light; that what she apparently had called 'embroidery' must be eliminated—she had meant that, e.g., the edges of the mantle were 'brighter light', and that what she had called 'ear-rings' were also a brighter light; that our Lady's face was not 'flesh', but *carnea lux*.

This gives us a hint of 'rationalisation' due to one's reflecting on something one has seen and reducing it to normal. Thus Jacinta, I think, said when our Lady disappeared: 'The door shut so fast that we feared it would catch her feet'. The metaphor of a 'door' is quite natural (see St John, Apoc., 5, 1: 'a door was opened in heaven', and he was called up to pass through it): so when our Lady vanished 'into heaven' the children could easily think of a door opening and shutting; the naïve little sentence that followed is their no less natural reaction to the suddenness of the disappearance. Compare, perhaps, Lucia's description of her vision of hell: she says it occurred in a flash; but twenty years later she could describe it in great detail and with the 'normal' imagery of 'Hell open to Christians'—souls in human form whirled upwards by flames and demons recognisable by their 'horrible and disgusting shapes of frightful and unknown beasts'.

St Camillus de Lellis could distinguish clearly between his *sorts* of experience. Thus, in a time of stress, he *dreamed* (he is explicit about that) that his favourite crucifix said to him: 'Don't be afraid, man of small soul: go ahead, for I will help you'. He told this to all his friends. After his death, three witnesses swore that he had told them

¹ At Fatima, Lucia saw the Holy Child in St Joseph's arms; Jacinta and Francisco, standing at his side. I do not know why Mr Walsh, in his book on Fatima, says (p. 147) that St Joseph was dressed in white. The only questionnaires I can find (*Uma Senhora*, pp. 179, 190) say that both he and the Child were dressed in bright red, *encarnado*.

—under pressure—that on a different occasion when he was this time awake, he had seen this crucifix reach its arms lovingly towards him and say almost the same words. Assuming the witnesses to have been accurate, what really happened? The possibilities are fully discussed by the Camillan Fr Dalla Giacomo in *Domesticum*, July, 1922. Did God cause the wooden figure physically to move? Did he act directly on the saint's physical organs of sight and hearing so that he *thought* the figure moved and spoke though in reality it did not? (Would this not have been generating an illusion?) Or did God act so strongly on his mind, making him feel so intensely the love of our Lord for him, and the certainty that his vocation was from God, that this flooded *outward* through his whole being, from an innermost knowledge, to ideas, imagination and even senses?² This would be the inversion of a normal visual or auditory experience, in which an external shock is given to the nerves, this is carried up to the brain, the sight is seen or the sound heard, and then the mind forms an idea. But psychologically I see no reason at all against the 'shock' being administered first to the mind (in the case of many a divine communication, to what they call the 'fine point' of the soul, or again, its 'innermost'), after which, as I suggested, the *whole human mechanism* would be set vibrating, till an external vision or voice was experienced. Far from diminishing the reality of the divine communication, it would, to my thinking, make it much more certain and reliable.

From this it will be seen how far we are from wishing to 'minimise' the reality of 'private revelation' in general or in particular, and certainly St John of the Cross was so, yet he insists that we ought to be 'detached' from all 'images' (and here even an 'idea' counts as an image)—not only because they are not God³, but because by means of them human misinterpretations can quite innocently enter in. And if I have rather often mentioned Fatima, that is because, having recently been there, I am very interested in it.⁴

2 Compare St John Gualbert who, having made (on Good Friday) a tremendous act of sacrifice for the love of Christ, knelt before a crucifix and felt it lean forward and embrace him. But in this instance the crucifix was a painted icon.

3 Or even a pure spirit. I do not think that modern writers are inclined to say that e.g. angels invest themselves with a 'body of air' to make themselves visible, as medieval writers frequently suggested.

4 Fr E. Dhanis, S.J., of Louvain published a discussion of the events there as recorded in the contemporary interrogations (1917) and much amplified by Lucia in 1936 and 1941, in the Dutch review *Streven*, and has kindly communicated to me his French version of his notes. He alludes to two points which had specially puzzled me. In 1941 Lucia wrote that the three children had had a triple vision of an Angel in 1916. Her mother told Canon Formigão (October, 1917) that about that time (September or October, 1916) the children had seen a sort of sheeted form or 'silhouette'. The Canon asked Lucia why, when he interrogated her, she had not mentioned that. No answer. 'That time you ran away?' 'I think I ran away'.

It remains that the immediate change in the children, due to the Apparitions, was so amazing and the penitential and mystical life of the two younger ones and their early and heroic death so overwhelmingly impressive; and that the world-wide spread of the devotion to our Lady of Fatima is so startling; and that the ecclesiastical approbations are so weighty, that it would be rash in the extreme to doubt that a divine communication was made by God, through our Lady, at Cova da Iria. None the less, we are *obliged* out of sheer reverence to that divine message to seek to disentangle 'warp and woof'.

WHAT I SAW AT KONNERSREUTH

BY

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AVE the courage of your own convictions': this is the sense of the above maxim. From it follows logically the duty of expressing one's own opinion even if it differs fundamentally from 'official medicine'. For there are situations in which silence does not represent a virtue

but a fault.

The judgment upon Theresa Neumann of Konnersreuth (Bavaria,

Now Fr de Fonseca says that in 1915 Lucia and four little girl friends (not Jacinta or Francisco) saw a dazzling vague diaphanous apparition apparently human in form. This apparition was twice repeated during the following weeks. Now Lucia was to say (1941) that the angelic apparition impressed them so much because it was the first vision to be so distinct (*assim manifesta*). We seem free to accept one of three views—either the children saw the 'sheeted form' when Lucia's mother said they did—in which case it is odd that they told her about that and not about the Angel; or, that she was wrong in her dates and that had been a sort of preliminary vision a year earlier—a faceless form which the child described as best she could as a 'man in a sheet'—and then it is odd that no record exists of the fuss that parents surely made about such a story (for the children had been frightened); or, we might take the purely rationalist view that Lucia, brooding over this event, had transformed it in the course of years into the angelic 'clear' (also triple) apparition, which the children mentioned to no one. But this would imply an enormous mental 'development' of the original experience which we could hardly accept. For the angelic apparitions were related in minute detail. The other problem is, that when Lucia after long years in her convent began to reveal the second part of the 'secret' confided to her by the Apparition (i.e. the spread of the devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary) she says that the Lady often spoke (as from July) of 'my Immaculate Heart' and indeed showed it to her wreathed with thorns, so that she could have had no doubt as to who the Apparition was, though the Lady had emphasised that she would not reveal who she was or what she wanted till October 13th. I form no opinion about this; it must be left to the study of theological experts and psychologists.