

Must Catholics believe in Fatima? The place of private revelation in the church (excerpts from a talk given by Carmelite priest, Eamon R. Carroll, STD. Professor of theology at Loyola University of Chicago. At Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia, 1989.

“The phrase ‘private revelation’ is a technical term, it means revelations that are distinct from ‘public revelation.’ And the words ‘public revelation’ are also technical terminology for the revelation given to the Apostles (the New Testament), which closed with the death of the last Apostle in such a way that nothing can be added to it (the New Testament).

At the Second Vatican Council it was said that the full revelation of the supreme God was brought to completion in Jesus Christ. (The Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum. N.7) What is known as ‘the deposit of faith’ was complete with the death of the last apostle and is enshrined as a living inheritance in the Scriptures (Old and New Testaments) and the Tradition of the church, confided to the church for its transmission, preservation and interpretation. The Council states: *“This tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers.”* Prayer, study and meditation on the sacred Scriptures is paramount for believers.

The Council stated that the pope and the bishops “Do not accept any new public revelation as part of the divine deposit of faith.” At the same time the bishops gathered at the Council spoke also of the prophetic office of the holy people of God, the baptized. The Holy Spirit distributes special graces among the faithful- charismatic gifts. Church authorities are reminded not to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to that which is good. (1 Thessalonians 5:12; 19-21)

Apparitions and private revelations can be counted among the charismatic gifts meant for the building up of the church. Some private revelations remain totally hidden and are intended only for the individual having such a private revelation. Other ‘private’ revelations become public, known to a wide circle of people, or even as in the case of both Lourdes and Fatima, to the whole world, and for Guadalupe throughout Central and South America.

When church leadership (Bishops and theologians) is judging the authenticity of a private revelation, that judgment is based on how the private revelation corresponds to the Scriptures and the constant traditional teaching of the church (public revelation).

The local Bishop where the purported ‘private revelation’ occurred, investigates with the collaboration of medical doctors and theologians. The Bishop and the investigating committee must determine whether the revelation is in accord with the Scriptures and tradition of the church, and whether the ‘visionary’ is of sound mind. The private revelation cannot add to public revelation in Scripture and tradition, or it is judged to be false. If the results of the investigation are favorable, the church gives permission for pilgrimages and special prayers at the site of the revelation with the approval of the local Bishop.

In 1907, St. Pius X said: “Such apparitions or private revelations (Fatima, Lourdes, etc.) have neither been approved nor condemned by the apostolic see, but it has been permitted piously to believe them yearly with human faith, with due regard to the tradition they bear (worthy of belief- but not doctrine).” Some recipients of private revelation have been canonized, for example, St. Bernadette and her visions of the Blessed mother at Lourdes in France. But the canonization of saints who had apparitions was based on their *heroic virtue* - and not by the fact that they had a vision.

The church is very careful about approving claims of private revelation and apparitions. False visionaries have come forward with claims proven to have no authenticity. In the saints who had a vision and have been beatified and canonized, we find four qualities in their apparitions of our Lady: the first quality is that their experience is in complete agreement with the Gospels. The second is that it is at the service of the church. The third characteristic is the witness value of the apparition, and the fourth is the centrality of love abundantly documented in their lives. (St. Bernadette, St. Therese of the Child Jesus, many others)

Must Catholics believe that the Blessed Mother appeared at Fatima? The inquiry into the authenticity of the apparition led the church to state that the message of the Blessed Mother contained “a truth and a call whose basic content is the truth and the call of the gospel itself” (St. John Paul II) – As a result the church encourages pilgrimages to the site of about a dozen apparitions (Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe, Knock, etc.) determined by the church to be authentic.

The heart of the Fatima message is ancient. It is a call to prayer, penance, and to solidarity with the compassionate heart of Mary. All believers embrace that message whether or not they believe in the apparition. In fact, the church does not command belief in these private revelations themselves.

“These providential happenings serve as reminders to us of basic Christian themes: prayer, penance, and the necessity of the sacraments. After due investigation, the church has approved the pilgrimages and other devotions associated with certain private revelations... The church judges the devotions that have sprung from these extraordinary events in terms of its own traditional standards. Catholics are encouraged to practice such devotions when they are in conformity with authentic devotion to Mary. Even when a ‘private revelation’ has spread to the entire world, as in the case of Our Lady of Lourdes, and has been recognized in the liturgical calendar, the church does not make mandatory the acceptance either of the original story or of particular forms of piety springing from it. With the Vatican Council we remind true lovers of Our Lady of the danger of superficial sentiment and vain credulity. Our faith does not seek new Gospels, but leads us to a filial love toward our Mother and to the imitation of her virtues.” (usccb.org/Behold your Mother pastoral 1973)