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## **Our Lady in Yugoslavia? By Theresa Burke, Ph.D.**

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Events of the past 27 Months in a tiny village in the southwestern part of Yugoslavia are changing thousands of lives and making the Communist government nervous.

The name of the village is Medjugorje, which means "between the mountains". It is an agricultural community of some 300 souls, mostly Croatian in nationality, and strongly catholic.

Almost every night since June 24, 1981, if one accepts the reports coming out of Medjugorje, the Blessed Virgin has been appearing to six young people from the area. The youngsters, four girls and two boys, ranged in age from 10 to 17 at the time of the first claims appearance of the Blessing Virgin.

The Church has thus far refrained from any official pronouncement on the authenticity of the claimed appearances of the Mother of Jesus. Local clergy and the people of the area, have no doubt that the apparitions are factual, and they are responding with an inspiring demonstration of faith.

I had been working abroad throughout the winter of 1982-1983, and I decided to take advantage of the opportunity to make a backpacking pilgrimage to Marian shrines and Catholic sites in Europe. In Rome, I became aware of reports that the Blessed Virgin had been appearing in Yugoslavia, it seemed natural to cross the Adriatic to see what I could learn.

Religion is a touchy subject in Communist countries. The incidents in Medjugorje, in particular, have been causing great headaches for government officials. So, before entering the country, I had been wisely advised not to reveal to border authorities my destination or the purpose of my visit. Otherwise I might well have been denied entry.

Since the apparitions began, there have been reports of miraculous cures similar to those at Lourdes and Fatima. Claims of miracles were quickly followed by an increase of interest and devotion. People from other areas began visiting the mountain where thousands claim to have witnessed mystical phenomena.

In August 1981, people at the site reported that the sun began to spin and move toward them as the earth began to darken. On another occasion, a fire blazed on the mountain. When police rushed up, they could find no sign of anything burning. All who were there saw the word MIR (“PEACE”), written across the evening sky in the letters of light.

On other occasions, a brilliant light appeared around a huge stone cross that had been erected on the mountain peak. This cross is said to have been spinning in rainbows of light almost every day, and these reports were confirmed by parish priests and nuns of Medjugorje.

Communist officials are extremely alarmed over the vast numbers, both young and old, who are demonstrating their faith. All this in a country in which hundreds of churches have been turned in historical museums that school children are taught to regard as relics of previous “dark ages.”

Any revival of interest in religion is looked upon as a threat to state security. Persecution of the Catholic Church is part of Yugoslavia’s national tradition, and there is always the possibility of more.

The local government’s response to the rekindling of interest in religion has been to offer a program of evening entertainments, movies, and dances, to woo young people from their devotions. The young people of Medjugorje, however, are opting for religious services and Bible studies instead.

In utter frustration, the government’s next move was to discourage pilgrimage by cutting off public transportation, blocking roadways, preventing motor vehicles from entering the area. Yet crowds continue to flock to the site on foot through the rugged, mountainous terrain. Government officials have used barbed wire to fence off the mountain where the Blessed Virgin first appeared to the village children. Anyone who ventures into the fenced-off area is subject to arrest.

The local police have forbidden the pastor to conduct any religious assembly except within the church building. Since that time, prayer meetings as well as apparitions have been taking place *inside* St. James Parish. One of the Religious, with some irony, remarked: “We have the best government in the world: they tell our people to go to church.”

Shortly after the mountain was declared off limits, the Communist government increased its repressive tactics. The parish’s former pastor, Fr Jozo Zovko, OFM, was arrested. He was offered a choice; admit to fabricating stories of apparitions and persuading the children to go along with them in order to embarrass Communist authorities and promote Croatian nationalism, or be sent to prison.

Father Zovko answered that he would stop the apparitions if he could, but he had no control over heaven. On October 23, 1981, Fr. Jozo Zovko was sentenced to three-and-a-

half-year term for “acts of hostile propaganda which attacked the security and unity of the country.”

The young visionaries were picked up by the police and severely threatened. Authorities tried without success to make them deny the apparitions. The children were unafraid. They said that Mary was right there and that the police could do with them as they wish.

More than 50 others have been imprisoned on charges relating to the apparitions at Medjugorje. During my visit, one of the priests had to leave for an interrogation that lasted nearly six hours. Nuns of the area are subject to similar treatment. Yet the Religious continue their work in a peaceful spirit. They confine their activities to religion, staying strictly away from politics.

All the government’s efforts to cool the religious fervor have failed. The apparitions have continued, and thousands are being converted. This year, some 300,000 pilgrims traveled to Medjugorje on June 25, the date the Madonna of the apparition reportedly requested to be set aside as a new feast day honoring her as the “Queen of Peace.”

The virgin’s messages to the faithful, as relayed through the children, are always Christ-centered. She urges reconciliation and conversion. She promises peace for those with faith. She begs for our sacrifices and prayers. She asks us to read the Gospel and live according to its message. She reminds us, as she did at Fatima, to pray the Rosary and to receive the sacraments.

The Blessed Mother has reportedly revealed ten secrets to the children. These are to be disclosed to the Holy Father at some future date.

The children explained that when the Madonna speaks of peace, she refers primarily to an inner peace that is the result of personal conversion. She has also told the visionaries that the world is on the brink of a major catastrophe. This catastrophe, caused by sin, cannot be avoided, but its duration may be shortened. For this reason, the Blessed Mother urges daily prayer, monthly confession, sacrifice, and fasting.

At one point, she is reported to have said, “Christians have forgotten that they can stop wars and even natural calamities with prayer and fasting.” Yet, say the children, some calamities will be unavoidable because so many people have hardened their hearts to God.

The assistant pastor of St. James Parish, Fr. Tomislav Vlastic, OFM, told me that serious sin has been virtually eliminated from his parish. Many people in the community fast on bread and water every Friday. Daily masses are well attended, and there are many who wish to visit the Blessed Sacrament frequently. On an average Sunday, 35 to 40 priests are needed to hear confessions between morning and evening masses.

Local teenagers I spoke with told me they like to go to church, and that since they apparitions began, they have been “good.”

Without a doubt, a religious revival of great intensity is sweeping the area. One must wait for the Church's decision as to the authenticity of these claimed apparitions in Yugoslavia. I can attest, however, that something tremendous is taking place.

Fr. John Bertolucci, director of the St. Francis Association for the Catholic Evangelization, was requested by Rome to prepare a television documentary about the occurrences at Medjugorje. After his first visit, he said, "I experienced a religious phenomenon that brought me to my knees in absolute humility, unable to click my 35mm camera, knowing that I was in a heavenly presence."

The pattern of apparitions has repeated itself with little variation in the months since June 1981. At 5:30 each evening, the youngsters to whom the Blessed Virgin appeared lead the congregation in the Rosary. Each word is said, in Croatian, deliberately and thoughtfully, and the congregation answers with great sincerity. When the Rosary is finished, the priest begins the Litany of the Saints. At this time, the children enter a small room off the sanctuary.

I was privileged to be one of the 18 people allowed to observe the children during the time of the apparitions. They entered the room, stood facing a crucifix on the wall and began praying an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be, as if on signal, the children feel to their knees.

Beautiful expressions playing on their young faces as they smiles and nodded to someone the rest of us could not see. All of us observers sensed that a supernatural event was taking place. What peace and tranquility I felt as I knelt less than three feet away from the spot where the Blessed Mother was "allegedly" appearing!

It is during these times that the Madonna teaches the children how to pray, talking to them like a loving mother. Sometimes the children speak to her about the ordinary events of the day. At other times they ask questions about her life or relay questions suggested by others.

While watching the vision, the youngsters seem completely unaware of their surroundings. Flashbulbs go off unnoticed by them, and nothing can disturb them from their enraptured gaze.

Once, I was told, the children asked her how long she would continue to appear. Our Lady responded with a smile, "Why? Am I already growing boring for you?"

The children describe our Lady wearing a brilliant white veil and an ankle-length, grayish-white dress. A lock of curly hair is visible on the left side of her face. Her rosy-cheeked, olive complexion is typical of the country girls of the area. A brilliant crown of stars surrounds her head. She is usually smiling, and her hands are lifted up from her sides toward heaven. On some occasions though she becomes very serious and falls on her knees and prays, "My beloved Son, forgive the world for so many sins."

After the visitation, the children return to the main body of the church, where they join the congregation for Mass.

Never have I seen such fervor as I witnessed that evening in Medjugorje. Young and old, men and women, religious and lay – all joined in prayer, adoration and thanksgiving. Their impressive devotion to the Blessed Sacrament was carried with the utmost respect.

The complete service lasting close to three hours was characterized by an atmosphere of indescribable love and reverence. After Mass and prayers for healing, the people slowly filed out into the chilly night. Because of government's restrictions on automobile travel, many had to walk several miles to their homes. Others lingered in the church.

Every night this small mountain parish is filled to capacity – about 1,600 in a village of only 300. On weekends, overflow crowds come to pray the Rosary, attend Mass, go to confession, and participate in other devotions.

Government officials are frustrated and angry over their inability to stifle religious fervor in the area. Given the history of repression of the church in Yugoslavia, further and more painful measures may yet be taken. Nonetheless, Religious and lay alike have expressed their willingness to die for Jesus Christ if need be. This kind of passionate devotion fans the fire of hope for the prophecy Mary gave at Fatima: "In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph, Russia will be converted, and an era of peace will be given to the world."

Mary has promised us peace before, and the Church may someday decide that, in Medjugorje, she has done it again. The renewal of faith in this small mountain village may be what God has in store for his entire church.

The people who worship at Medjugorje share the same Catholic faith that is ours. We are free in the United States, to practice our belief; yet, at most daily Masses only a handful of believers are present to receive the Bread of Life.

The first apparition at Medjugorje occurred on the feast of St. John the Baptist, a man sent to bear witness to Jesus and to prepare the people for the coming of the Savior. The message of Medjugorje echoes the voice of St. John, challenging us to repentance and pointing the way to the Lord.



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