Marian Apparitions:
Rev. Benjamin P. Bradshaw

What is an apparition? “The sense-perceptible vision or appearance of Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the angels or saints. Many apparitions are recorded in Scripture (Tb3:16-17, Gn 26:24, Lk 1:11, 26). The authenticity of apparitions is a matter for investigation and evaluation by the Church. Church approval is always required when a popular cultus arises in response to alleged apparitions (Catholic Encyclopedia, 96).” Apparitions should be distinguished from locutions (speeches) wherein one may hear a voice and not always see a vision.

It should be noted that many have experienced visions of the Evil One as well, shrouded as an angel of light and of goodness. People may be in fact experiencing “visions” of something that they may genuinely believe to be God, but is in fact a psychological illness or ulterior motive for attention. For this reason the Church has the moral duty to be suspect of reported apparitions prior to public approval. This lack of immediate support by the local and/or Roman Magisterium is frequently perceived as arrogance, but is, in reality, a proven necessity in order to guard the faithful from falsity. That being said, nearly all the Popes of the last century, and especially JPII, consistently encouraged the presbyterate around the world to actively foster a relationship with the Mother of God. This was seen perhaps most effectively in the Consecrations of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary by Pope Pius XII and then again by Pope John Paul II in 1984, as She requested in Fatima.

Often messages are entrusted to specific persons who experience these visions. Such messages are referred to as “private revelations,” in order to accentuate their subordination to Divine Revelation, as has been handed down in the Church (Sacred Scripture & the Magisterium as interpreter of it). The belief in private revelations is optional for the faithful, whereas the belief in Divine Revelation is mandatory for the faithful in order to be Catholic and obtain salvation (Catholic Encyclopedia, 96). As Fr. Benedict Groeschel has noted, “it is important to keep in mind that private revelations (apparitions) have no significance apart from the public revelation of Sacred Scripture, interpreted by the traditional teaching of the Church” (A Still, Small
Voice, 24). In 1983 John Paul II has mentioned the following with this regard while in Fatima:

“The Church has always taught and continues to proclaim that God’s revelation was brought to completion in Jesus Christ, who is the fullness of that revelation, and that ‘no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of Our Lord’ (Dei Verbum, 4). The Church evaluates and judges private revelations by the criterion of conformity with that single revelation.”

Thus, all public revelation as we know it ended with the death of the last Apostle, John the Evangelist. It is the teaching of the Catholic Church that this public revelation is completely authentic and without error.

When dealing with a reported Apparition, the Church frequently makes one of the following claims (paraphrased from Fr. Groeschel):

I.) **Authentic Revelations:** With the permission of the local bishop, a diocesan commission is usually established (usually after the death of the visionary), wherein the facts of the case are studied in great detail. At this point the local bishop, having received the results from the commission, can publicly say that the revelations can be accepted as probable. Certainly the strongest show of support for an apparition would come with a personal visit from the bishop or, in the case of Lourdes and Fatima, a visit from the Pope.

II.) **Questionable Revelations:** Fr. P. Deletter S.J., who has wrote extensively on the issue of private revelations, notes that between 1931 and 1950 alone, there were 22 separate instances where people claimed to be receiving private revelations or visions. Of these 22, only 2 were deemed even ‘possibly’ authentic. After the apparition at Lourdes to Bernadette, no less than 200 separate apparitions were claimed to have been seen by various people in an effort to garner attention to themselves. In this instance, quite often the bishop will either express disapproval with some issues still to be investigated or simply remain quiet on the issue until the death of the visionary and a formal investigation can be initiated.

III.) **False Revelations:** In this case the visionary and the people who support the visionary may genuinely think that they are indeed receiving revelations, and they may have perfectly unselfish
motives in making known their visions to the public, but they are nonetheless false. Many times such visions can include paranoia, schizophrenia, or mental illness on the part of the visionary. Not infrequently the person may feel the need to make a name for themselves in the culture and may hallucinate in the desire to witness visions. As Fr. Benedict has noted, “frequently the greatest victims of their deceptions are themselves” (43). This is occasionally seen in Pentecostal television preachers or in very charismatic public figures capable of winning of approval of large numbers of people.

IV.) Fraudulent Revelations: We are told in the Acts of the Apostles (8:9) about Simon Magus who publicly deceived many people, but who was ultimately brought to face his deception. Such people, “knowingly fabricate revelations and exploit paranormal phenomenon” (45). They can do great harm within a Diocese and within a local parish. Frequently such people can aptly be categorized as “exceptionally dangerous,” because they have often lied so much that they have even convinced themselves of their lies. Often such people try to use their influence on others to their own selfish end. It is for this reason that local ecclesiastical authorities are often quite slow and exceptionally cautious in the approval of an apparition.

Pope John Paul II: Redemptoris Mater (R.M.)/The Mother of the Redeemer:

- After the Protestant Reformation and immediately following the Second Vatican Council there was a very large degree of confusion regarding the Church’s devotion to the Mother of God.
- The encyclical reaffirms the pivotal role of Mary in the economy of salvation.
- In the encyclical JPII declares 1988 to be a Marian Year to her role as Mother of the Redeemer. This was also to prepare for the rapidly approaching Jubilee Year of 2000.
- JPII quotes the Second Vatican Council in R.M. over 100 times.
- Pope Benedict XVI said of Redemptoris Mater: “The encyclical is not just a catechesis on Mary, it turns into a catechesis about faith.”
- 2 Spouses of Mary: Obviously, St. Joseph was her spouse on earth and likewise, in the Tradition of the faith, the Holy Spirit has been referred to as the Holy Spouse of Mary (Mt1:18-19, Lk 1:27, 2:5). JPII mentions this connection between Mary and the Holy Spirit in R.M. over 40 times.
• Preliminary Points of the Encyclical:
  1.) Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Redeemer of mankind, and he was born of the Virgin Mother.
  2.) The Virgin Mary was totally human, while her son was true God and true man (i.e., not 50% God & 50% man) composing the Second Person in the Holy Trinity.
  3.) It is not by necessity, but by divine choice that God allows a human being, namely Mary, to participate in salvation history.
  4.) Marian devotion is not worship or adoration.

• 3 parts of the Encyclical:
  1.) Mary in the Mystery of Christ:
  2.) Mary at the center of the pilgrim Church.
  3.) Mary’s maternal intercession.

• JPII Explains True and Authentic Marian Devotion:
  (see also: Marialis Cultus – Pope Paul VI – Feb.1974)
  1.) True Marian Devotion must be Christocentric & always focused on Christ.
  2.) True Marian Devotion is never equivalent to worship.

• JPII: Mary is the Mother of Humanity
  In # 23 and #45, JPII points out that Mary is the Mother of every human person, not just Catholics. In John 19:26-27 the Crucified Jesus tells the Apostle John, “ behold your mother.” To Mary he says, “Behold your son.” St. Paul uses the analogy of a body describing the Church in relation to Jesus (Ephesians 4:4-13). If Christ is the Head of the body, which is the Church, then Mary is, of sorts, the neck interceding for us to the Head (analogy of Dr. Mark Miravalle).
  This intercessory and motherly role of all of humanity is emphasized in Pope Pius XII’s encyclical Mystici Corporis Christi (The Mystical Body of Christ) promulgated on June 29, 1943. The Church is ‘mystical’ because of its intimate union with Jesus Christ. Mary brings us deeper and deeper into this mystical union. Because we are indeed one body, our sufferings, when offered up, enrich and strengthen the lives of other people throughout the world and those in purgatory. St. Paul says, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church” (Colossians 1:24). Mary teaches us that our suffering is not in vain and will not only be vindicated; it will serve to unite many as well.
Spiritual Significance of the Apparitions of the Virgin Mary:

1.) Mary mediates for us as Mediatrix, Help, Benefactress, and Advocate of all graces (*Lumen Gentium*, Ch.8). This means that she is the dispensor of all graces that emanate from the Trinity.

2.) Mary generally chooses the poor and children to underscore the need for humility. This thought is seen clearly in her Magnificat: “God has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly (Lk 1:52)…”

3.) Mary’s physical body is not bound by time/space. She shows us what our bodies and souls will be like at the Resurrection of the dead.

4.) She constantly calls humanity back to fasting, penance, and personal conversion. Similarly, she asks that we make repartition for all offenses and blasphemies against God.

- Just as the visionaries have been completely absorbed in their visions (unaffected by even physical stimuli/pain), so too will we be completely absorbed in the Beatific Vision of the Trinity (see: St. Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision).

*Key Marian Apparitions in Church History:*

1.) **Our Lady of Knock:** Our Lady, St. Joseph, and the Apostle John appeared to 15 very humble and simple workers of varied ages. The village where she appeared was in County Mayo in the west of Ireland. About 8:00pm on August 21, 1879, on a very rainy evening, over a dozen people (aged 6 to 75) stated that they saw the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph, and St. John standing about 2 feet above the ground and against the wall of the parish church. Beside St. John was a lamb standing on an altar. The group received no messages, but the vision lasted more than 90 minutes. Under the Archbishop of Tuam a commission was established to investigate the apparition and examine the witnesses. The first commission declared the visions to be “trustworthy and satisfactory.” A second commission established in 1936 released its findings to the Congregation for the Sacred Rites in Rome but these findings have not yet been released. That being said, the Shrine has been visited by many bishops of the years, in addition to John Paul II. Many pilgrims have experienced healings at Knock.
2.) **Our Lady of La Salette:** In the French countryside a young girl named Melanie and a boy named Maximin saw the Blessed Mother weeping profusely in 1846. She was weeping for the atrocities that mankind has and would committed against her Son. She told the children of the great need for prayer, penance, and fasting.

3.) **Our Lady of Lourdes:** *(150th Anniversary this year)* In a series of 18 apparitions, Our Lady appeared to St. Bernadette of Soubirous at Lourdes, France. These apparitions occurred from February 11 to July 16, 1858 within the rock cave of Massabielle near the Gave River. Bernadette was only 14 at the time of the apparitions. She was later canonized on December 5, 1933 by Pope Pius XI. The Blessed Mother instructed her to drink from a spring beneath the rocks of Massabielle. As she dug there water began to come forth and the water ultimately lead to the healings of countless pilgrims over the years. In her final apparition Mary declared, “I am the Immaculate Conception,” underscoring the Proclamation of the Immaculate Conception of Mary by Pius IX only 4 years prior in 1854.

   In fulfilling the requests of Mary, a chapel was built at the site of the apparitions that ultimately became a basilica in 1901, along with a crypt in 1958. Today roughly 6 million pilgrims visit Lourdes each year. The Church officially approved of Lourdes as a pilgrimage site in 1862 and established the feast of the apparitions on February 11. It is now an optional memorial on the Roman Calendar.

4.) **Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal:** In 1830 the Blessed Mother appeared to St. Catherine Laboure’ (canonized in 1947) on three separate instances at the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity in Paris. The first of these apparitions occurred on July 18 and the second on November 27, and the third shortly thereafter. During the apparition St. Catherine saw the Blessed Mother standing on a globe, with a globe also in her hand (see also: Our Lady of all Nations). Beautiful rays of light flashed from her fingers. Around the image of the Blessed Mother appeared the words, “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.” There also appeared an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary sitting next to one another. The Sacred Heart was surrounded by a crown of thorns and the Immaculate Heart was pierced by a sword. At the second apparition the Blessed Mother requested that a medal be struck the image and then given to all. She promised great graces to all who wear it. After an investigation by Archbishop Hyacinth Louis de Quelen from Paris, approval was finally granted to the apparitions of
Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. On June 30, 1832 the first medals were struck. So many cures were attributed to the medals that they soon became known as “miraculous” among the people.

5.) Our Lady of Guadalupe: In a series of four apparitions in Guadalupe, Mexico, the Blessed Mother appeared to St. Juan Diego (canonized in 2002 on J P2’s 6th pastoral visit to the United States). She first appeared at Tepeyac on December 12, 1531 on a small hill on the outskirts of Mexico City. The Blessed Mother told him to go to the local bishop, Juan de Zumarraga, and to tell him that she desired that a church be built on the that site in order that the people may worship God. The bishop was, at first, very reluctant to accept the request of the Blessed Mother and thus asked for a sign of confirmation from Mary. The BVM told Juan Diego to go and gather the roses, even though it as clearly not the season of roses in this region of Mexico. Surprised, Juan Diego found some and gathered them into his tilma. He then returned to the BVM who organized them into his cloak/tilma. He then returned the bishop, careful to not disturb the order in which the BVM had arranged the flowers. Once again in the presence of the bishop, Juan opened the tilma exposing the flowers, but also the beautiful image of Our Lady of Guadalupe for the bishop to see. The image of Mary was exactly as Juan Diego had described her, it was lifesize, and was miraculously imprinted upon the tilma. Later, bishop Zumarraga erected a church on this spot and the tilma similarly became an object of profound veneration among the native Indian population, converting huge numbers of the Indians in the process.

In 1754 Pope Benedict XIV named December 12 a special Feast Day in honor of the BVM of Guadalupe. In 1910, Pope St. Pius X, announced that she was the patroness of Latin America. Later in 1945, Pope Pius XII named her patroness of all the Americas. In 1988 Pope John Paul II raised the Liturgical celebration on December 12, to a Feast Day throughout every parish in the world.

The actual tilma is composed of two strips of coarsely woven fabric made from cactus fiber. The strips are roughly 70 inches long and 18 inches wide. The BVM is depicted with the sun, moon, and stars and with the moon at her feet. The chief colors are gold, blue-green, and red.

The tilma was recently reexamined in 1977 with infrared photography and digital enhancement methods. The scientists who studied the tilma acknowledged at the time they had no way to explain how the image appeared on the tilma, as nothing like it has ever been seen during the time of Juan Diego or now. The tilma shows no sign of sketching or an outline, which an artist of the time would have normally used. Similarly, the image retained its luminous
color in spite of more than one hundred years of being completely exposed to the elements. The cactus material of the tilma usually lasts, at the most, 60-70 years prior to rapidly deteriorating. The scientists could also find no evidence of paint or dye on the image. Likewise, in 1921 a Freemason exploded a bomb directly in front of the image, severely twisting a cast iron crucifix (which is still on display in the southwest wall of the basilica), though the image was completely unharmed.

Even more remarkable was the image found within the pupils of the BVM on the image. Magnified many times over, scientists and ophthalmologists, have concurred that there is a “triple-reflection” (aka the Samson-Purkinje effect) of a bearded man looking up at her image, most notably that of St. Juan Diego. The Catholic Didiche Series on Church History notes the following:

“In 1979 Dr. Jose Aste Tonsmann took high resolution photographs from the original image, and, after filtering and processing the digitalized image, not only saw with astonishing clarity the same human image in both eyes (of Mary), but also a group of Indians and Franciscans (looking up at her, 569).”

6.) Our Lady of the Snows:

August 3rd celebrates the feast day of the 3rd of the great Roman patriarchal Basilicas St. Maria Maggiore (St. Mary Major), which is sometimes referred to the Liberian Basilica, because it was founded at the time of Pope Liberius. It was, however, restored and consecrated by Pope Sixtus III about 435 in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary (who was just proclaimed the Mother of God at the Council of Ephesus only four years prior). The Church is stationed in Rome on the Esquiline Hill and it is the oldest Church in the west dedicated to the Blessed Mother. The Church is frequently referred to as Our Lady (or Our Mother) of the Snows. It was reported that she appeared to “several prayerful people” one evening and showed them a vision of a miraculous snow falling on the same hill (many people believe that the vision was also seen by Pope Liberius). The Church has similarly been known at times as St. Mary of the Crib because of the relics of the crib of Jesus which are kept within a crystal reliquary beneath the high altar.

This Basilica has been particularly inspiring for countless artists and artisans over the centuries and has had a profound impact on many key pastors in the Church, most notably Popes Pius XII, John XXIII, John Paul II, and likewise Archbishop Fulton Sheen.
7.) **Our Lady of the Scapular:** Scapula = shoulder (Latin) According to the Carmelite Order, the BVM appeared to St. Simon Stock in England on July 16, 1251, showed him the scapular, and said:

> “Dear Son, take this scapular of your Order as a sign of my motherhood and a special sign of grace for you and for all Carmelites. Whoever dies in this garment will not suffer everlasting fire. It is a token of salvation and a safeguard in danger, a pledge of peace and of the covenant.”

The question has been repeatedly asked if one who is in a state of mortal sin, and who dies wearing the scapular would enter into hell. One should remember that the Church can never claim categorically that anyone specifically is in hell. While the Church’s normal prescriptions regarding the culpability for sin still apply here (This was discussed in the classes on Morality. Such conditions take into account the knowledge of the acting person, the circumstances surrounding the sin, and the objective nature of the sin committed. There is no doubt that the one wearing the scapular at the moment of death will not only be open to receive extraordinary graces from Mary, they will receive them, and, most believe, that she will likewise bring great comfort to them should they be purified further in purgatory (*Dictionary of Mary*, 264). It should be stated clearly, however, that the wearing of the scapular must be accompanied by true faith and a genuine effort to grow in holiness. Pope Pius XII, writing on the Brown Scapular, stated:

> “The sacred scapular, which may be called the habit or dress of Mary, is a sign or pledge of the protection of the Mother of God. But this does not mean that they who wear it are free to think that they can gain eternal salvation while yet being slothful and negligent of spirit, for the Apostle warns us to ‘work out your salvation with fear and trembling (Phil.2:12).’”

Pius XII commends the use of the scapular and emphasizes that it is a form of consecration to the BVM. To ‘consecrate’ means simply to set something aside specifically in the service of God. This has a very old tradition both in Catholicism and Judaism. For instance, new churches, altars, chalices, and other articles are always consecrated to God prior to usage. With regards to Marian Devotion, St. Louis Marie Grignion de Monfort described the importance of consecrating ourselves to the BVM. Consecration was later asked for specifically by Mary at Fatima, carried out by Popes Pius XII and John Paul II. JPII himself referred to a consecration as an “entrustment” to the
Mother of God and prescribed that every Christian Family should dedicate their families to Mary (see: *Familiaris Consortio*).

**8.) Our Lady of Częstochowa:** The image of Our Lady of Częstochowa is believed to have been painted by St. Luke himself on a piece of the original table used at the Last Supper (though he himself was not there). The image eventually made its way to Częstochowa in Poland, where it has been enshrined since the 14th century. In 1382 the image was entrusted to the monks of St. Paul the Hermit. Częstochowa is a city about 140 miles southwest of Warsaw and is the site of the most popular of all Marian devotions and pilgrimage sites for the Polish and Ukrainian peoples. The image of Our Lady of Częstochowa is no less as important to the Poles as the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is to the Latino/Hispanics. Pope John Paul II always kept two images on the table next to his bed: one of his parents Captain Wojtyła and his mother Emilia, and one of Our Lady of Częstochowa. Of his childhood devotion to Mary he writes in *Gift & Mystery*:

“When I was in Cracow, in Debniki, I joined the ‘Living Rosary’ group in the Salesian parish. There was a special devotion there to Mary, Help of Christians…I was already convinced that Mary leads us to Christ, but at the time also I began to realize that Christ leads us to his Mother. At one point I began to question my devotion to Mary, believing that, if it became too great, it might end up compromising the supremacy of the worship owed to Christ. At the time, I was greatly helped by a book by St. Louis Marie Grignion de Monfort entitled *Treatise of the True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*. There I found the answers to my questions. Yes, Mary does bring us closer to Christ; she does lead us to him, provided that we live her mystery in Christ…This is the origin of the (Papal) motto *Totus Tuus*. The phrase comes from St. Louis Marie Grignion de Monfort...And so, thanks to St. Louis, I began to discover the immense riches of Marian devotion from new perspectives (29-30).”

**9.) Our Lady of La Vang:** The oldest and the best known of the Marian Shrines in Vietnam. It was established in the year 1800 after the apparition of Mary to a group of the faithful in 1798 while hiding from those persecuting the Christians at the time in Vietnam. A church was later built on the site of the apparition. The sanctuary is in Hue, which attracts huge numbers of Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Cardinal Spellman, former archbishop of New York, had a large devotion to Our Lady of La Vang and he visited there in 1954.
10.) **Our Lady of Fatima:** Just north of Lisbon, Portugal, is the town of Fatima, where the BVM appeared a total of six times between May 13 and October 13, 1917. She appeared before three children, Lucia dos Santos and her cousins Francisco Marto and Jacinta (both now beatified) in a field near the town of Fatima known as Cova da Iria. During the apparitions Mary told the children to begin processions in honor of her Immaculate Conception and to promote frequent recitation of the rosary. The BVM also requested to the children that the faithful do penance for all offenses against God, pray for the conversion of Russia specifically, a Holy Communion of reparation be made on the first Saturday of each month, that the world should be consecrated to her Immaculate Heart, and that a Church be built in her honor (no small undertaking for 3 young children). During her last appearance, on October 13, she referred to herself as Our Lady of the Rosary before a crowd of roughly fifty to seventy thousand people. The people there that day experienced a vision known as the miracle of the sun, wherein the sun began to spin and appeared to come closer to the earth (thus drying the clothes of those who had been standing in the rain). The BVM promised that should her requests be followed Russia would be converted (1917 was the same year as the Bolshevik revolution of Lenin in Russia), a great war would be avoided, many people would be saved, and world peace would be achieved. Francisco died in 1919, followed by Jacinta one year later. Lucia would later become a Carmelite nun, friend of the popes, and would receive another vision of the BVM on June 18, 1921.

In 1930, after a seven year investigation, the bishops of Portugal declared the apparitions to be authentic and approval to give devotion to Our Lady of Fatima and Our Lady of the Rosary was given. In 1942 Pope Pius XII consecrated the world to Russia in union with the world’s bishops. Pope Paul VI visited the Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in 1967 on the fiftieth anniversary of the apparitions. During the apparitions at Fatima Mary revealed to the children three “secrets.” The last of which was that the Pope (or the “man dressed in white” leading the Church) would be struck (see also the vision of St. John Bosco). On May 13, 1981, the Feast day of Our Lady of Fatima, Pope John Paul II was struck by a bullet fired by Mehmet Ali Agca. Most evidence points to the fact that Agca was hired by the KGB, and perhaps Yuri Andropov as its head, in order to eliminate John Paul II at the same time when Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, Primate of Poland and close friend of JPII, was dying. Loenid Brezhnev was, at this point, consumed by drug use and delusion, thus Yuri Andropov was likely the instigator of the plot. It is widely held that the double-blow to Poland would have killed the *Solidarity/Solidarnosc* movement lead by Lech Welesa and would have restored the Communist stronghold within
Poland. For his part, JPII was never interested in a definitive answer and he saw the assassination attempt as “a desperate attempt at power by a crumbling regime” (*Witness to Hope*, Weigel). Agca had a previously cleared passport out of Italy and a car waiting. While these were undoubtedly arranged for him, most believe that it is far more likely that the KGB would have later arranged his “disposal” as well. On the one year anniversary of the attempt on his life, JPII returned to Fatima, on the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima, to whom he credited with saving his life. He placed the bullet that entered his body into the crown of the Blessed Mother there, where it remains to this day. The day of his attack John Paul II was to dedicate a new Pontifical Institute for the study of Marriage and the Family. He later opened this Institute (now with affiliates all over the world) and placed it under the patronage of Our Lady of Fatima. The man in charge of revealing this third and last secret to the public was and is our present Pope, Benedict XVI. Cardinal Ratzinger and Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, now Secretary of State for the Holy See, acknowledged the following in 2000:

“The decision of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to make public the third part of the ‘secret’ of Fatima brings to an end a period of history marked by tragic human lust for power and evil, yet pervaded by the merciful love of God and the watchful care of the Mother of Jesus and of the Church.”

Thus, the entire episode and events surrounding the apparitions of Our Lady of Fatima are an apt example of the battle between the Light of Truth and of Good and the Evil One that is Satan. Evil has lost the battle. This will be taken up in greater detail in the next class.