

THE APPARITIONS OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY TODAY

New Revised Edition

René Laurentin

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Extracts from the above book

In this long-awaited book and important work, René Laurentin, one of the world's foremost Mariologists, delves into the many reported Marian apparitions throughout the world. He seeks to reconcile those who systematically denounce all apparitions and those who support them unconditionally. He brings to light issues which have hitherto been shrouded in prejudice, scepticism and sensationalism.

This book is the fruit of painstaking research on the part of Fr Laurentin. He has visited many of the sites of apparitions and has collected a vast amount of information. The results of his investigation and scholarship are set down in this account of extraordinary events, beginning with finca Betania in Venezuela where the apparitions have recently been recognized by the church. This recognition is a milestone - the last apparition to receive formal recognition was that of Beauraing and Banneux in 1932/33.

In this revised and considerably expanded second edition, Fr Laurentin provides the most recent information on the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin throughout the world today, and analyses the import of her messages in these troubled times.

'A welcome and timely book by one of the leading mariologists in the world' - Religious Life Review

Damascus (Syria) since 1982

It all began in November 1982. 'Myrna' (Marie Al-Akhras, eighteen) and Nicolas Nazzour (in his thirties) had been married in May 1964. Myrna had put up a small plastic-framed postcard in the courtyard of the large house they shared with the rest of the family. He had bought the cheap mass-produced postcard in Sofia, Bulgaria. On 27 November the picture began to exude oil, drop by drop, and filled an alabaster saucer. The phenomenon was repeated.

Some days previously, on 22 November, Myrna's hands began to give off oil as she was praying with a group for Nicolas' sister, Leila, who was ill.

This repeated phenomenon defies reason. Myrna accepts it graciously, simply as an incomprehensible gift connected with anointing, of which it is a sign. Might it also be an image of Our Lady? Scripture teaches us that we are images of God, images of Christ by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. A sign was given at Damascus: sick people asked to be anointed with the miraculous oil and they were cured. Samir Hanna had been paralyzed by a stroke followed by a brain hemorrhage. She was cured on 11 December 1982, as was Ghalya Armouche, also of paralysis on 17 December, and many others.

In the face of these phenomena Myrna and Nicolas ask themselves: 'What does the Lord want? Perhaps he is waiting for something?' Myrna prays thus:

- My God, what is the meaning of this oil, what is it? No doubt, your divine power. But why have you chosen me in all my weakness, when there are thousands more worthy of this grace than me? Nevertheless, thy will be done. Now I offer you everything-my actions, my chores, my sufferings and my joys - all in your honor, for no other motive. O God, I place all my hope in you. Keep me from anything that would be contrary to your will.

From 15 December onwards the Virgin appeared to Myrna. Three days later, on 18 December 1982, at 11.37 p.m., the apparition gave the following message, which appears to announce a new outpouring of the Spirit:

- *My children,*
- *Remember God, because God is with us.*
- *You know all things and yet you know nothing.*
- *Your knowledge is an incomplete knowledge.*
- *But the day will come when you will know all things the way God knows Me.*
- *Do good to those who do evil.*
- *And do not harm anyone.*
- *I have given you oil more than you have asked for, but I shall give you something much more powerful than oil.*
- *Repent and have faith, and remember Me in your joy.*

There followed a message of evangelization:

- *Announce My Son the Emmanuel.*
- *He who announces Him is saved, and he who does not announce Him, his faith is vain.*
- *Love one another.*
- *I am not asking for money to give to churches, nor for money to distribute to the poor.*
- *I am asking for love.*
- *Those who distribute their money to the poor and to churches, but have no love, those are nothing.*
- *I shall visit homes more often, because those who go to church, sometimes, do not go there to pray.*
- *I am not asking you to build Me a church, but a shrine.*
- *Give. Do not turn away anyone who asks for help.*

These final phrases seem to predict further apparitions and they seem to be aimed at those whose attendance at Mass is merely an occasion to display their finery.

At the subsequent apparition, Saturday, 8 January 1983, again at 11.37 p.m. (the fourth apparition), the Virgin used only the language of tears. The message of the fifth apparition, Monday, 21 February 1983, 9.30 p.m. was an invitation to humility, not through insulting the proud but rather through forgiveness. She invited them to memorize and repeat these words: *'God saves me, Jesus enlightens me, the Holy*

Spirit is my life. Therefore, I fear nothing.'

Then there was a call to '*my son, Joseph*' which those present did not understand. It touched Fr Malouli to the quick. No one knew that his name was Joseph (he proved it by showing his identity card). This reassuring call was in response to his request for a sign so that he would not commit himself foolishly.

The message of the sixth apparition, Thursday, 24 March 1983, at 9.30 p.m., is one of ecumenism and prayer for this country which is home to so many Christian persuasions:

- *The Church that Jesus adopted is One Church, because Jesus is One.*
- *The Church is the kingdom of Heaven on earth.*
- *He who has divided it has sinned.*
- *And he who has rejoiced from its division has also sinned.*
- *Jesus built it.*
- *It was small.*
- *And when it grew, it became divided.*
- *He who divided it has no love in him.*
- *Gather!*
- *I tell you: "Pray, pray, and pray again!"*
- *How beautiful are My children when they kneel down, imploring.*
- *Do not fear, I am with you.*
- *Do not be divided as the great ones are.*
- *You, yourselves, will teach the generations THE WORD of unity, love and faith.*
- *Pray for the inhabitants of earth and Heaven.*

This message of faith, prayer and confidence is an invitation to conversion which refers to Christ's sadness in the presence of sin and also to the threats that hang over the world-war, famine, unknown sicknesses (which were not revealed). It is also a message of peace set against the divisions and the dividers of the Church, a new invitation to base Christian unity on love.

Myrna received the stigmata on Friday, 25 November 1983 and on two other occasions - on the Thursday and Friday of those years on which Orthodox and Catholic Christians celebrated Easter on the same day: 1984 and 1987. This coincidence will occur only once before the end of the millennium - in 1990 and in the year 2001.

My visit to Damascus

The following are the notes which I took on the occasion of my visit to Damascus to coincide with the fifth anniversary on 26 November 1987. I arrived the previous afternoon.

Here I am at Damascus, the town on whose outskirts Paul saw the Lord. This is a live memory here.

Myrna and Nicolas' house is in the Soufanieh district. It is a house like many others, on the edge of a stream, shaded by a eucalyptus tree, not too far from a mosque. A large Boeing airplane has been transported onto the waste ground in the vicinity of the house. It was intended to convert it into a restaurant, but objections from the mosque put an end to that idea. A young family, similar to many others, resides in the house. The husband is an Orthodox Christian, the wife a Greek Catholic.

Nicolas is quite a capable person. Qualified as an upmarket ladies hairstylist in Germany, he returned home and, due as much to good fortune as to ability, set up a business operation that left him well-off financially. He reinvested in a high class restaurant at Lattakié on the coast. But he gave it all up as a result of what happened to his wife. He turned over a new leaf and sold the restaurant at a loss.

Myrna is bronzed, smiling and calm. She is bringing up their first child with remarkable care - a lively little girl named Myriam, who was born on 16 October 1986. She is expecting her second child. Who would believe that she has had apparitions and that she has had stigmata on three occasions, like St Francis of Assisi?

The family home has been turned into a sanctuary of sorts. The open courtyard where the picture was set up has been roofed. It has become the central room of the house. Pilgrims file through it calmly, praying before the miraculous image. Fr Malouli collects the oil for the treatment of the sick, who feel better on being anointed. Little Myriam also visits the sanctuary in her push-chair. Under the image there is a handwritten notice in red: 'Sorry, we do not accept gifts or money.' Myrna and Nicolas put the notice there spontaneously without even suspecting that this gesture would prove important to their credibility.

Oil flowed from the image on the night of 26 November. It filled the receptacle beneath it and was discovered later. On the other hand, I was present on two occasions when oil flowed from Myrna's hands. The first was on 25 November, on my arrival, and was unexpected. I went to the Apostolic Nuncio with Myrna, her husband and her little daughter. The child was sleeping on a couch and while we were talking, Nicolas, the husband, whispered to me: 'Look at Myrna's hands.' Oil oozed from them. A nun who was present collected it on swabs of cotton wool as a sign of blessing. Myrna remained calm and simple, the recipient of something she did not understand.

The fifth anniversary

The next day, 26 November, at the vigil of the fifth anniversary of the first apparition, a large crowd packed into the house. It overflowed onto the street. Everyone expected something to happen. I was taken to the couple's room which overlooks the courtyard. It is in this room that Myrna lies down while in ecstasy, during which she is cut off from the outside world.

It all began in darkness. There was a breakdown in the electricity supply (a frequent occurrence in Damascus) shortly before the ecstasy began. Myrna was still standing up. When the light returned we noticed that drops of oil had fallen on the bedspread. Her hands were shining. Those present mopped them up with cotton wool swabs. Myrna came out of the ecstasy after a period of less than an hour. She

had been unconscious. One of the doctors, Jamil Margi (a convert from atheism as a result of the events and the cures), who had been following the events closely, did a number of tests. He bent over the bed, examined her eyes, moved her eyeballs energetically. No reaction. He pinched her left forearm hard enough to leave a bruise. Again no reaction. But on coming out of the ecstasy, Myrna immediately rubbed her left arm with her right hand. Her sense of feeling had returned and her arm hurt her a little. But she still could not see. Her vision returned after a few minutes. It was while she was still sightless that she dictated to Fr Malouli the final message from Christ. The substance of the message was as follows:

- *I want you to join My Heart to your gentle heart so that our hearts will unite. By doing so, you will save suffering souls.*

Do not hate anyone, so that your heart not be blinded by your love of Me.

Love everyone as you have loved Me, especially those who have hated you and have spoken evil of you,

because in so doing you will obtain glory.

The words allude to a dialogue of 26 November 1985 during which Christ asked:

- *'Do you wish to be crucified or glorified?'*
- *'Glorified!', she replied naively, for this young smiling mother had no masochistic streak.*
- *The Lord smiled, she recounted, and asked again: 'From the Creator or from the creature?'*
- *'the Creator', she replied without hesitation.*
- *'Then glory comes through the crucifixion.'*

Myrna knows this full well. Two years earlier (25 November 1983) she had received the stigmata of the Passion. All of this is somewhat puzzling and clashes with the views of the wise, even with those of theologians.

What is the point of the stigmata? This phenomenon, which first occurred in the case of St Francis, was so fervently received by the Church that several popes in the thirteenth century punished preachers who spoke out against it.

For Myrna's friends and neighbors this sign is a powerful reminder of the fact that Christ has suffered for us. It has too often been forgotten. Nor is it merely a fact that belongs to the past, because the sufferings of the Son of God are forever contemporary with his eternal 'I am'. They are mysteriously perennial. They remain present. They invite us to complete in our flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the Church (Col 1:24).

Then there is the oil. It is very ordinary oil, exceptionally pure olive oil according to chemical analysis of a sample. The analysts were unaware of the origin of the sample. It is not even a scented oil, just ordinary oil. What is the point? Are your olive trees not sufficient?

The 'sensus fidelium'

The people of God who are open to signs from heaven approved, by and large, the signs at Soufanieh. In earlier times this happened with regard to the miraculous medal and also at Lourdes and Fatima ... just as, earlier still, canonization was by acclamation.

This spontaneous prayer is helped, followed, guided and oriented by two convinced priests: seventy-one-year-old Fr Malouli, a Lazarist, and Fr Zahlaoui, from Prado. They undertake the task with realistic fervor, each according to his temperament; one more enthusiastic, the other more reflective, tending more to the long-term view.

What do the authorities think?

The Episcopal hierarchy, as always, prefers to wait, not to err through haste. The problem is complicated because of the number of Christian denominations represented in this ancient city. There are three patriarchs in residence in Damascus-Orthodox, Syrian and Greek Catholic-as well as several bishops of different rites. I contacted these authorities so they would not hear from elsewhere that I had come as an expert, when in fact my visit was informal and in a private capacity.

The Syrian Patriarch seemed to be personally interested, but because Myrna and Nicolas did not belong to his flock, it was not within his jurisdiction. The Greek Catholic Patriarch, Maximos V Hakim, took no interest because of an ecumenical agreement in force in Damascus which allowed that, in the case of a mixed marriage, if the husband was Orthodox then the family came under the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Patriarch.

The latter was briefly interested in the event. The image which had attracted such large crowds was transported with great pomp and ceremony to the Church of the Holy Cross on 9 January 1983. I saw the splendid film of the event. But the image no longer gave forth oil in its new location. The disappointment was bitter. After forty-three days the allegedly miraculous image was ingloriously returned wrapped in a plastic bag. The phenomenon began again.

The ordinary people had theories about this: in the church the image was surrounded by collection boxes. In one of her messages our Lady had said: *'I do not ask that you give money to the churches ... I ask for love.'* This is what had inspired Myrna and Nicolas to put up their notice forbidding all offerings.

But the actual reason is perhaps more straightforward. A similar interruption took place in Naju (Korea) in the case of Julia Kim's weeping statue. When the Catholic parish priest brought it to his presbytery to have it examined scientifically, it dried up. When it was brought back on 2 February 1987, tears began to flow again (see pp. 105-108).

Checks

In the complex situation at Damascus where the authorities are unlikely to intervene for some time it may be useful to give an initial summary of what is happening.

Strict scientific checks have been carried out - by outsiders. The police (who, in fact, damaged the image when they were removing it) checked out the walls and the surrounds. Doctors have unanimously concluded that a human body (Myrna's) could not produce oil. Yet no trickery has been discovered. If there had been fraud, then surely the perpetrators would have used scented oil to make the affair look more plausible. Nor would they have refused to accept gifts of money. In fact, indications to the contrary would not have been too subtle. These checks were necessary and should be pursued.

Myrna still resembles those of her friends who were with her during the ecstasy - charming and deep. One of her friends, a young mother, spoke perfect French. Another, a medical doctor, was studying with a view to specialization. Myrna belongs to that ancient Mediterranean race, steeped in culture and close to life. Her mystical gifts do not interfere with her natural behavior and they cause no disruption of family life. On the contrary, on 23 November 1983, the Virgin insisted: *'I have not come to divide. Your married life will remain as it is.'*

What kind of people were Myrna and her husband before the apparitions? What would be their future? I tried to understand their exceptional candor and their openness.

'Were you a devout person before the apparitions?' I asked.

'Just ordinary.' Her parents who were present confirmed this.

'Did you go to Mass every Sunday?'

'Only from time to time.'

'What is the role of prayer in your life? What time do you pray? In the morning? In the evening?'

'At no particular time, except of course for the rosary and for family prayers.' She also prays while she works. It is clear that for her prayer is a way of life, though she is shy and somewhat ill at ease in explaining this.

'Is your family more united now than before these events?'

'It is about the same - though at a deeper level.'

'Have you received messages concerning the future of the world?'

'The blessed Virgin asked me to keep that matter secret until my death-bed, when I will disclose it.'

Among the messages that have been made known, is that from Our Lord, given to her on 26 November 1985:

'Go to the land where corruption has prevailed, and remain in God's peace'

And again on 26 November 1986: *'Let not earthly matters trouble you, because through My wounds you will gain eternity.'*

Again I asked: 'At the outset you saw the Virgin, now you see Christ. How does he appear to you?'

'In a light in which he is a brighter light. I am unable to distinguish his characteristics.'

'Are the stigmata painful?'

'Yes.'

'Worse than the pains of childbirth?'

'The pains of childbirth last longer. The stigmata are more intense.'

'During the stigmata do you see the Passion of Christ?'

'No. I live it, but I do not see it.'

Myrna is an intuitive person. Her experience is deeply felt, but she has difficulty in formulating her answers. She hesitates, smiles, sometimes does not find the words and prefers to remain silent rather than give an irrelevant answer. This is in stark contrast to the crystal clarity of the messages she dictates without any hesitation. This she does immediately after the apparitions, because she forgets them as time passes. The messages are outside her capabilities. She is incapable of producing such maxims.

I also questioned her husband: 'Have these events changed your life?'

'More than one hundred per cent.'

'But in what way?'

'Firstly, my return to the faith, which was very much in the background during my studies in Germany. Then my way of thinking. I used not believe in sin. Now I understand it clearly. I fought. I was vengeful. The messages have taught me to forgive well beyond the point of an eye for an eye...'

'Has your marriage changed?'

'It has become holy, sacred. When I met Myrna I said, "What is the point of getting married in church? What good will that do?" However, she insisted and so did our families. I agreed because it was the conventional thing to do, but not out of conviction. And when the oil began to flow I asked Myrna not to talk about it, on the grounds that it would make life too complicated. Myrna obeyed me, but she remained puzzled. Then at the subsequent apparition the Virgin said to her, "*Do not be afraid, open your doors. Do not deprive anyone from My sight.*"

What Nicolas foresaw was, in fact, what came to pass. Their comfortable family home is full of visitors coming and going. They can no longer call it their own. It has made life difficult: their privacy is gone, their work hampered and even their rest is interrupted.

At that time the 'Muslim Brotherhood' was on the rampage. There was the danger of reprisal from that quarter and also from the Churches because of their mixed marriage. They embarked on this unusual adventure with calm self-denial. Nicolas' mother spends her time cleaning the courtyard so that it may be worthy of Our Lady.

The house itself is being altered constantly in order to adapt it to the new needs. The barrier of the balcony has been raised and reinforced, as it was in danger of collapsing under pressure from the crowds. I asked Nicolas: 'Are you happier now than you were before?' 'We have lost financially. But in my heart of hearts I am happier. We have lost the earth but gained heaven.'

Fruits

Above and beyond the scientific investigations and the police inspections we are invited by the gospel to

judge these events according to the simple criterion: 'A tree is judged by its fruit.' In Myrna's family and among the many visitors, the fruit is remarkable.

This is the substance of the message given to Myrna during an ecstasy on Ascension Thursday, 31 May 1984:

- *My daughter,*
- *I am the Beginning and the End.*
- *I am Truth, Freedom and Peace.*
- *My Peace, I give you.*
- *Your peace shall not depend on what people say, be it good or bad, and think little of yourself.*
- *He who does not seek people's approval, and does not fear their disapproval, enjoys true peace.*
- *And this is achieved through Me.*
- *Live your life, contented and independent.*
- *The pains you have incurred for Me shall not break you.*
- *Rather, rejoice. I am capable of rewarding you.*
- *Your hardships will not be prolonged, and your pains will not last.*
- *Pray with adoration, because Eternal life is worth these sufferings.*
- *Pray for God's will to be done in you.*

In March 1988 Myrna and Nicolas were invited to the USA for six months by Dr Antoine Mansour of Los Angeles, one of President Ronald Reagan's doctors, to spread their message. Nicolas' mother continues to welcome visitors and to clean the courtyard where the little image of Our Lady still hangs.

Dr Philippe Loron, a hospital doctor in Paris (Salpêtrière), did a study of Myrna's ecstasies and of the outpourings of oil. It was the first outpouring from the icon in this century but Myrna continues to have outpourings of oil during her visits to the prayer groups which were set up under the inspiration of Soufanieh. Both she and her husband are self-effacing, attributing all to the grace of our Lord. They live out a spirit of poverty, prayer and self-giving.

During her visit to Belgium (9 August to 2 September 1990) Myrna received the following message on 15 August: *'My children, pray for peace, especially in the East, because you are all brothers in Christ'*.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE MESSAGE

The prophetic impact of the messages associated with recent apparitions is new when compared to rue du Bac, La Salette, Lourdes, etc. They underline evangelization and ecumenism and remind us of the priority to be given to the poor.

Evangelization

The message of a return to God, repeated in a number of apparitions (most explicitly at Cuapa, Kibeho, Damascus and Schio), takes the form of an invitation to evangelization which is characterized by a dynamic and joyful urgency. This evangelization radiates to millions of pilgrims who visit the parish of Medjugorje. Segatasha radiates the same evangelization into the neighboring areas of Rwanda. Our Lady of Damascus invites us to proclaim 'my Son, Emmanuel' (God with us). This teaching confirms the urgency of the evangelization of which the Church has become conscious through other means since the fourth Synod in 1974. It has been and is still being put into practice by Popes Paul VI and John Paul II.

Ecumenism

Certain apparitions approve and encourage ecumenism. One such instance is the apparitions in Egypt where Our Lady appeared to a fraternal gathering of Catholic and Coptic Christians and Muslims, who actually recognize Our Lady in the Koran. The convergence between Damascus and Medjugorje rests on the fact that they both deal with an ecumenism based on love, without which smiles, dialogue and negotiation would be in vain. This particular angle of the message is somewhat disconcerting and at the same time far-reaching (René Laurentin, *Messages et Pédagogie de Marie à Medjugorje*, pp. 317-322).

Moreover it is in this same spirit that the apparitions invite evangelization: an evangelization without aggression, proselytism or recourse to the techniques of the media (because media techniques usually treat evangelization in a superficial manner), but one using the power of God and the super-abundant gift of prayer. This type of evangelization is self-disseminating where it is based not on the psychological sciences (which belong to the surface), but on God himself who goes to the heart of the matter and confounds the wisdom of the wise.

The priority of the poor

Current apparitions underline to various degrees a priority of the poor which was already indicated at Lourdes, rediscovered by the Council and is being further emphasized by Pope John Paul II.

In the first place this is indicated by the choice of visionaries. Ordinarily they are from a simple, usually agricultural background, close to the nature which inspires many of the gospel parables.

We use the word 'poor' in the gospel sense: stripping oneself of the goods and possessions of this world. We often find in the visionaries and in their families an '*aurea mediocritas*'. They are content with their meager lot. The peasant workers in Medjugorje lead a hard life which alternates between the tobacco fields and the vineyards. This does not always provide a good living and Vicka's father had to emigrate to Germany to find work and support his family. This was a tragic solution to the problem but the family accepted it with resignation. Because of a disease in the plant, the tobacco crop is in trouble and is almost at an end. This is not the place to go into the economic consequences of this for the village. The arrival of the pilgrims and the building of house extensions to accommodate them has taken up the slack left by the demise of the tobacco trade.

Thus the visionaries live in poverty but not necessarily in misery. The visionary of Escorial experienced the most tragic circumstances. What is remarkable about her is that even in these tragic conditions she was able to maintain the spirit of the poor according to the gospel. The modest condition of the visionaries has done nothing to raise the prestige of the apparitions in the eyes of the important people of the Church or the state. They tend to look down on the naivety of the visionaries and on their rustic background and the lack of precision in their language which has none of the rigor of theology or the human sciences. They are not aware that these poor people often have a nobility which is due to the quality of their lives and their humanity.

But heaven gives us the same message that it had already given at Lourdes. In 1858 the miserable condition of the Soubirous family and the disdain in which they were held did nothing to facilitate the acceptance of the apparitions. Peyramale reacted badly to Bernadette's first visit. She was accompanied by two aunts who had been dismissed from the Children of Mary for having conceived before their marriages. The other visionaries, who came from better backgrounds and were in fact Children of Mary, were given a much better welcome. But it was quickly seen where God's choice lay. Antoinette Tardhivail, a young woman from Lourdes, was already writing on 29 March 1858: 'Bernadette is very poor; she is as poor as was Our Lord when he was on earth. But it is on this young girl that Our Lady has looked favorably in preference to so many other rich people who at this moment envy the lot of someone whom they would have despised but are now happy to embrace her or even touch her hand'. (René Laurentin, *Lourdes. Récit authentique, Paris, 1966, pp. 255-256*). Four years later the magisterium in the person of the bishop drew the same conclusion, quoting from St Paul: ' "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (I Co 1:27): a fourteen-year-old born of very poor parents' (Episcopal mandate of 18 January 1862).

The lesson which seemed so evident then is far from being understood in our time. We tend to look down on the visionaries, and the extraordinary sanctity which is evident, both in them and in their families, is looked on as weakness. As a means of overcoming the embarrassment they caused there was little hesitation in labeling them as hallucinating or hysterical. Any theologian who pretends to find some light in this kind of nonsense would himself be despicable. Those who follow the apparitions closely are impressed by the sanctity of the poor and by their fruits among the people of God.

THE DEEP MEANING OF THE MESSAGE

While alerting a world in danger the multiple messages from Our Lady remind us that God is the final solution to all our problems; the apparitions remind us of the simultaneous familiarity and transcendence of God and of his indispensable presence.

In the first instance they remind us of God the creator and of our often forgotten condition as creatures. Creation is not something that happened in the past, an act by which God projected the world into existence. Creation is the permanent act by which God gives existence to everything at every moment of

its being. Thus he has a more intimate relationship with us than we have with ourselves.

But our condition is not one of dependence alone because God has created us autonomous and free. Our condition is not one of subjection, because God is our Father. He created us from love and destined us for love. The God whom we have forgotten is therefore the Good News.

While our condition reminds us of the transcendence of God, it is also a sign of his immanence and closeness. Between the creator and the creature is an indissoluble bond. We should not forget the very real familiarity which characterises our relationship with God: from Abraham through the prophets to Mary; from Francis of Assisi to Thérèse of Lisieux and the visionaries who have this experience which, far from being frightening or destructive, is simple and gratifying.

Mary too is a creature like ourselves made in the image of God. She is the most beautiful human image of God. It is an image of God in his mercy, a feminine image which is as like to God as a masculine image, for God is neither male nor female. In him these images harmonize concretely.

God commissioned Mary to his Son so that she might familiarize him with humankind. He then sent her to us so that she would familiarize us with God. She is a privileged manifestation of the mercy of God among us. For this purpose, she was given her vocation as mother of humanity at the foot of the cross. Let us listen to her as she reminds us ceaselessly of what we have forgotten to read in the gospel.

As St Catherine Labouré has said, the Virgin of the Incarnation leaning over the crib, the Virgin of Cana and the Virgin of the apparitions is one and the same. She continues to intercede for us before Christ saying: 'They have no wine'. They have exhausted the wellsprings of joy for which they were made. She continues to repeat to us what she said to the servants of Cana when she pointed to Christ: 'Do whatever he tells you' (Jn 2:5).

Appendix 7

OUTPOURINGS OF TEARS, BLOOD AND OIL

This book does not propose a systematic study of the phenomenon of exudation of tears, blood, perspiration or oil. Its main object is the study of apparitions and we are interested in exudation only to the extent that it is connected with apparitions or verbal inspirations (Damascus, p. 73f; Akita, p. 106ff; Naju, p. 108ff; Paris, Bassam Assaf p. 209).

These phenomena would in fact merit a specific study and scientific tests like those undertaken by Dr Loron at Damascus.

A disconcerting irrationality

The language of exudation causes intellectuals to bristle because of its non-rational nature. The man in the street is more at home with this language and is edified by it. How are we to explain this contrast?

Many liturgists went out of their way to strip the liturgy of those signs which they considered outdated- the salt at baptism and gestures of adoration such as the genuflection during the Credo. But these signs spoke to people. Too often, precisely because they have been over-verbalized, our liturgies no longer speak.

Exudation is the language of blood, it is the language of tears. It signifies something extremely simple: God's suffering (a God whom we univocally declare impassive to the sin of the world). Ordinary people spontaneously understand that his love is not an abstraction. Neither is the love of Mary, our Mother. Many people rediscover their faith and change their lives on witnessing these phenomena.

As to the outpourings of oil, they signify the sweetness of God, the manner in which he penetrates our hearts and his power of healing. Their sweet odor is the overflowing of God's love and gentleness. Is it forbidden to God to make himself understood through the language of sweet-smelling perfume?

We must learn to look at spiritual realities from the inside and not from the outside. A visitor from another planet would find our behavior as rational animals quite bizarre- we laugh, we cry, we shake hands, we embrace each other, we eat and then eliminate what we have eaten! All of these irrational activities are the very web of our humanity and the mainstay of our mental health. The web of our interior life has elements which are no less healthy, no less reasonable. It is not forbidden to God to use tangible signs to awaken faith, hope and a sense of his presence.

Of what use is olive oil?

Given that there are so many objections how is it that so many people spontaneously accept the phenomenon? It is as if Our Lady were once more challenging the wisdom of the wise (even if these are theologians), who are unable to deal with the religious questions without the language of science and mathematics. just as in the case of apparitions the language of signs and of festivity is given a new lease of life and, against all expectations, so-called modern man understands and acclaims.

Symbolism which is outdated

Is this an outdated symbolism? Not at all. Many oil-based creams are still manufactured and sell well. In August 1982 a worker who had broken his leg in his garden came to see my brother who is a doctor.

'You must go to the hospital immediately', my brother said.

'No', said the worker, 'I will go on 1 September and I can claim that it was an accident at work'.

'In that case I can do nothing for you!'

'But you can, Doctor, you can give me an ointment!'

'It would be like cauterizing a wooden leg', came the scientific response.

But the man in question went to the pharmacy and got himself an ointment. He was happy. Which Just goes to show the importance of signs.

An what are we to think of the fashion of perfumes?

Natural symbolism

Above and beyond the purely human meanings (food, remedy, beauty-care) oil is a symbol of God. It was always part of the choice offerings and libations offered to God.

It is also a sign of God's blessings descending on man. The verdant olive tree is the symbol of the just man blessed with God (Pss 52: 10; 128:3; cf Sirach 50: 10) and of divine wisdom which reveals the way of justice and happiness (Sirach 24:14, 19-23).

In Zech 4:11,14 the two olive trees which provided the oil for the lamps represented the 'two sons of oil', the 'two anointed of God': the king and the high priest whose job was to teach the people. Oil was used to anoint the king: oil of joy (Ps 45) and sign of divine election which accompanies the outpouring of the Spirit (I Sam 10:1-10;16,13).

Sacramental symbolism

Christian sacraments use the symbolism of oil in reference to the Holy spirit whom a Pentecost hymn calls 'Spiritual unction'

- Oil of Catechumens: Sign of strength, of healing and of exorcism.
- Oil of the Sick: sign of healing
- Oil of Chrism: sign of priesthood given to the baptized, to the confirmed and to ordinands.

Oil is the vehicle of the multiple graces and gifts of the Spirit to Christians. And Jesus is the Anointed par excellence (Heb 1:9, repeating Ps5:8) signifying and proclaiming the unity of Christ.

Notes:

1. There was no serious challenge at Damascus or at Toulouse where the scientific tests undertaken by Dr Philippe Loron are even now being carried out. The story was different in Paris. The illusionist Majax concluded on TF1 that there was some form of trickery. The commentator was surprised that Bassam requested to be left alone with the exudation and when he came on the scene the televised image of the statue displayed a bright spot between shoulder and breast. TF1 concluded that this was a capsule which Bassam Assaf used to cause the exudation. But this bright spot could have been anything and Bassam was never taken up on this point. Neither did he ever make an admission.

I asked a member of the commission if he agreed with this interpretation. The substance of his reply was that he had not seen the transmission. On the other hand we in the orthodox faith do not like polemics; we stand above these things. They are matters relating to another order of reality. On the other hand M. Michel Merhej's conception of his 'mission' is somewhat problematic.

The commission therefore holds conclusions which are based on observations and tests to which detractors or others are not privy. The question remains open.

2. While the Bible denounces false prophets it also denounces the systematic suppression of prophetism (Am 2:11-12; Is 30: 10; cf. jr 11:21; Zc 1:5; Ne 9:30) which, to the detriment of the people of God, has the effect of extinguishing the prophetic vision and function (Lm 2:9-10; cf. Ezk 3:26; Ps 74:9; cf. 77:9; Dn 3:38). It would appear that in the Bible and in the Church suppression of prophets and visionaries persisted until it succeeded and then the tone changed to a lament that visions and prophecy no longer occurred (I S 3: 1; 1 M 9:27). The reappearance of the gift of prophecy is among the promises made in respect of the restoration of Israel (Is 59:2 1; Ho 12: 10-11; Jl 2:28-32); this situation continues in the New Testament (Mt 23:37; Ac 2:16-18). See W. Vogels, 'Il n'y aura plus de prophètes!' Nouvelle Revue Théologique, 1979, pp. 844-859).

3. Briefly, where apparitions are concerned, personal certainty may co-exist with an absence of official certainty even when there is official recognition. Some theologians were of the view that Lourdes was infallibly recognized, not as dogma but as a dogmatic fact. But the very idea of 'dogmatic fact' is itself ambivalent and widely discussed. The view proposed at the International Meteorological Congress in Lourdes in 1958 has not gained ground (René Laurentin in *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 48, 1964, pp. 115-120 and *Sur les routes de Dieu*, Oeil, 1984, pp. 125-127).

Minor corrections to the text applied by Association Notre-Dame de Soufanieh à Montréal (Canada).
The text of the messages now reflects the final version of October 1996. [29/6/2000]
