

It's a miracle! Oh no, it's not

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As the recession deepens, religious observers are braced for an upturn in visions and apparitions of the Virgin Mary and other supernatural Catholic phenomena.

Stigmata, the strange bodily marks resembling the wounds of the crucified Jesus, may again start to appear regularly.

Statues and icons are expected to bleed, weep and move around, as the world faces its greatest economic crisis since the 1930s.

In the depths of the recession of the 1980s, with unemployment rising in Ireland and a prevailing mood of hopelessness, statues began to shift mysteriously.

Devotion to icons that come alive may be a comfort in insecure times, but the current Pope would prefer Catholics to remain silent about these alleged miracles after they have witnessed them.

Pope Benedict was this week reported to be deeply concerned by the explosion in the number of "pseudo-mystics" who claim a hotline to God. Like many within the traditional hierarchy, he is afraid that these witnesses end up in conflict with the Church and lure the Catholic faithful out of the pews and into cult-like groups.

In a bid to halt the apparition boom, the Pope has ordered a thorough investigation to be carried out into the visionaries and their sponsors.

New guidelines are being drawn up for local bishops on how to tackle them. It is the biggest clampdown on phoney apparitions and their associated industries for decades.

Pope John Paul II was sometimes criticised for his love of miracles, and the outpourings of popular devotion that come with them.

Detractors suggested that a credulous Pontiff put would-be miracle workers on the fast track to sainthood much too easily. His adherence to the supernatural fringe of Catholic mysticism was demonstrated in his devotion to Padre Pio, the revered Catholic monk with stigmata on his hands. In 1947, as a young Polish priest, John Paul II made his own pilgrimage to Puglia in Italy to have his confession heard by Padre Pio.

It was this meeting -- along with the Pope's belief that a prayer by the Capuchin monk had cured a friend's cancer -- that helps to explain why Padre Pio was bound for sainthood once the Polish cleric had risen to the papacy.

"The approach of Pope Benedict is very different," said former Vatican official Michael Kelly, currently deputy editor of the Irish Catholic. "He is much more of a rationalist. He believes that any miracles must be backed up by firm evidence."

The Pope is reportedly hoping to cut down the number of bogus heavenly apparitions.

Colm Keane, author of Padre Pio -- The Irish Connection, says the Church has traditionally been uncomfortable with miracles: "Many priests do not want to have much to do with them. I think it is because these events can show up their own inadequacies. People are looking for miracles and cures and really there is little that priests can do for them."

Apparitions have been a feature of spiritual life for centuries. Some observers have suggested that the special messages relayed by the Virgin, almost always to women or children, were frequently in direct conflict with Church authorities.

Eugene Hynes, an associate Professor of Sociology at Kettering University, Michigan, has argued that in the past an apparition might be seen to carry a "could-do-better" message for the clergy.

At times, the voluble Virgin was perceived to be on the side of the ordinary people, and not on the side of a complacent and comfortable hierarchy.

Michael Kelly says: "It is noteworthy that apparitions always happen with women and children. This could be because they feel disempowered."

Clerics may scoff at the wild superstitions of visionaries -- the bleeding and weeping of statues, and things that go bump in the night. Visionaries who receive divine messages can queer the priests' pitch, but it is hard for the Church to ignore them.

"Generally the approach of the Church to shrines and miracles is to close them down or to take them over," says Michael Kelly. It took many decades for shrines such as Lourdes and Knock, famed as centres of miraculous healing, to be officially sanctioned. Visionaries are only officially endorsed if they have toed the Church line.

The most controversial shrine of the present era is the shrine at Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which has attracted tens of thousands of Irish pilgrims. The phenomenon began in 1981 after six children told a priest of their visions of the Virgin. Since then, there have been over 40,000 reports of sightings, but the Vatican has never given the shrine the green light.

The claims of the Medjugorje Six were not helped when it was revealed that a priest who had acted as a "spiritual director" to the visionaries had fathered a child with a nun.

Father Tomislav Vlasic has been suspended by the Church and is facing a raft of charges. These include "the diffusion of dubious doctrine, manipulation of consciences, suspicious mysticism, disobedience toward legitimately issued orders", and allegations that he breached the sixth commandment ("Thou shalt not commit adultery").

As part of his new clampdown, the Pope reportedly plans to publish criteria to help investigators to distinguish between true and false claims of visions of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, messages, stigmata, weeping and bleeding statues and Eucharistic miracles.

The guidelines will come in a "vademecum", or handbook, which will be published soon by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, formerly known as the Inquisition. When a claim of heavenly apparitions occurs, the local bishop will need to set up a commission of psychiatrists, psychologists, theologians and priests who will investigate the claims systematically.

The first step will be to impose silence on the alleged visionaries. If they refuse to obey, this will be taken as a sign that their claims are false.

The visionaries will next be visited by psychiatrists to certify their mental health and to verify whether they are suffering from conditions of a hysterical or hallucinatory character or from delusions of leadership.

The new document will also instruct the bishops to check if the visionaries and their associates are profiting financially from their claims.

The content of any heavenly messages will also be scrutinised to see if they are in harmony with the Church teachings.

If the visionary is considered credible, they will ultimately be questioned by one or more demonologists and exorcists to exclude the possibility that Satan is hiding behind the apparitions in order to deceive the faithful.

With the number of apparitions continuing to grow, the Church investigators clearly have their work cut out. In an era of soaring unemployment, it is comforting to note that the in-depth investigation of miracles is a growth area.

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