

THE CHURCH'S REACTION TO MEDJUGORJE

1. Introduction

This website has a booklet on Croatia regarding the Second World War [745]. It also has one looking at the historical contexts of Marian Apparitions [A10]. So it is not surprising that questions have been asked about Medjugorje.

The following article will not enter discussions of whether Our Lady [Called 'The Gospa' by Croatians], is appearing at Medjugorje. This would not be within the aims of this website. This article will limit itself to providing an outline history of how the Church has reacted to the events.

2. Historical Background

The village of Medjugorje is located in the Hercegovina area of Bosnia, and for 400 years was under Turkish Muslim occupation. During this period the Franciscan Order, working secretly, established a close relationship with the population.

Turkey lost control of the area in 1878 and, in 1881, dioceses were re-established. One was at Mostar and included Medjugorje. As there were few secular priests, the Franciscans continue to serve the parishes.

The first secular bishop, Peter Cule, was appointed in 1942. Although he worked for the transfer of some parishes to secular priests, the popularity of the Franciscans amongst parishioners led to opposition. Dialogue took place but little progress had been made before he died in 1980.

His replacement, Bishop Pavao Zanic, concluded that dialogue would be a very long process, so on the 14th September –the day of his induction-- he used his authority to order the immediate transfer of seven rural parishes and three quarters of Mostar to secular priests.

This caused some consternation. A number of parishioners boycotted the secular priests and worshipped at the Franciscan monasteries. The Franciscans ministered to these former parishioners while taking care to avoid antagonising their bishop.

But in Mostar the critical views of two young priests, Frs. Ivica Vego and Ivan Prusina, became known. In April 1981, Bishop Zanic suspended them from the priesthood and ordered them to leave Mostar.

[1]

As this was done without judicial procedure or them being heard, they appealed through the Church's legal system. But this was slow due to the bishop's reluctance to co-operate with the process.

The both stopped offering Mass and hearing confessions, but decided they had a right to stay in Mostar until their appeal to Rome was facilitated. So Bishop Zanic ordered their superior to expel them from the Franciscans.

3. Meanwhile

Fr. Tomislav Vlastic was parish priest of Capljina, 18 miles from Medjugorje. He was keen to renew the spirituality of his flock which was being influenced by Communist teaching in the media and schools.

In May 1981 Fr. Vlastic was a delegate to the 4th International leaders conference of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, being held in Rome. At the end of his welcoming address, Pope John Paul II entrusted: "Your important work for renewal to Mary the Mother of God."

Sister Brieger McKenna, an internationally known Charismatic leader, who was present, later wrote:

"I had the privilege of praying with Fr. Tomislav Vlastic ... He had asked me to pray for his parish ministry in Yugoslavia. I received one of the images I often get. I saw a white church with twin steeples. Father was sitting in the main celebrant's chair in the sanctuary of this church and streams of living water were flowing from the altar. Many people were coming and cupping the water in their hands to drink of this water".

A Canadian leader, Fr. Emiliano Tardif, was also present and he uttered a prophecy in the name of The Lord: "Do not fear, I am going to send you My Mother." After the meeting, Fr. Vlastic returned to his parish of Capljina. [In 1985 Fr. Tardif was given permission to found: *'The Community of the Servants of the Living Christ'*. He died in 1999 and the Cardinal of Dominica has started the process for his canonisation]. Fr. Vlastic returned to his parish.

On the 24th June, a month after the Rome meeting, Fr. Jozo Zovko, parish priest of Medjugorje, was giving a retreat in Zagreb. While he was away, five teenagers and a boy of 10 years in his parish, claimed they were seeing and talking to Our Lady. By the time Fr. Zovko arrived back in the village it was alive with excitement.

[2]

Fr. Zrinko Cuvalo, the curate, had been opposing what he considered to be a fantasy. And the two priests now tried to bring the excitement under control by directing their parishioners towards services in the church. [Open-air religious events were illegal in this Communist country].

Fr. Zovko had led a 30 strong youth parish prayer group but, as none of the 'visionaries' had been members, he didn't know those making the claims very well. However, one evening he received a spiritual sign and became a firm believer of their claims.

Bishop Zanic of Mostar questioned the children under oath and, in a sermon on 25th July, he said: "*It's certain: the children are not lying*". He repeated this in writing in a letter published in Glas Koncila on the 16th August 1981. He added: "*the children are not being urged by anyone*".

By now the Communist authorities had arrested Fr. Zovko and, accusing him of fomenting anti-Socialist views, imprisoned him.

As could be expected, Fr. Vlastic took a particular interest when he heard of the claims being made at Medjugorje. So, when Fr. Zovko was imprisoned, their superior transferred Fr. Vlastic to Medjugorje as a replacement for Fr. Zovko.

As parish priest it was his responsibility, with others, to guide the visionaries and the growing numbers of pilgrims arriving from nearby and abroad. In this position he became the focus of attacks by those who opposed the Charismatic Movement and the acceptance that Our Lady was appearing in the village.

At the end of four years Fr. Vlastic was appointed to Vitina as parish priest. While there he started a project unconnected with Medjugorje and, in 1988, his superiors agreed to him moving to Italy to develop it. In 1992 he transferred to the Italian Province of the Franciscans.

4. The Problem Of The Parishes Continues

The two suspended priests visited Medjugorje and heard that, according to the children, Our Lady was not merely giving messages but conversing with them. So they persuaded the children to ask Our Lady regarding their situation.

[3]

Vicka, the eldest of the children, wrote down on sheets of paper what she claimed was Our Lady's reply. The two priests made copies. Vicka didn't claim the replies had been dictated to her. She was reporting the sense in her own words from memory.

As the reply was favourable to the priests, Vicka feared telling it to the bishop. But in her attempt to avoid doing so she raised suspicions in the bishop's mind that she was not answering his questions fully, and was therefore part of a fraud.

About this time, Fr. Grafenauer, S.J. travelled from Ljubjana to Mostar and was persuaded by the bishop that the children were taking part in a fraud. But on visiting Medjugorje and interviewing the children he became convinced that something supernatural was taking place.

While there he saw the alleged replies given to the two priests. So he returned to Bishop Zanic and told him he had seen them. As the children had been keeping diaries recording the messages, the bishop demanded to see 'the diary' in which he presumed the words about him were written.

But the children and clergy said such a diary did not exist. It appears they had not considered the Gospa's response to a question from a couple of individuals, to be part of the messages meant for all mankind. So they were not written in a diary but on separate sheets of paper.

Bishop Zanic repeatedly demanded to see 'the diary' and, when the children and clergy repeatedly denied one existed, he called them liars. When Fr. Vlastic denied its existence on oath, the bishop accused him of perjury.

Hearing of the dispute, Fr. Grafenauer wrote to Bishop Zanic and to Rome stating that he had only seen pieces of paper and had not spoken of a diary. But the bishop would not now accept Grafenauer's word.

The exact wording of the Gospa's alleged reply is not known. Grafenauer said it certainly was not word for word [i.e. dictated] by Our Lady. The sense of the message was made known as a person would recall a conversation. The version in the parish records reads as follows:

The Gospa [Our Lady] wants it said to the bishop that he has made a premature decision. Let him reflect again, and listen well to both parties. He must be just and patient. She says that both priests are not guilty.

[4]

Bishop Zanic said that Our Lady would never criticise the action of a bishop. So the visions could not be of the Virgin. But supporters of the visions pointed out that in the past mystics, who had later been canonised, had criticised bishops and individual Popes.

But from this time, Bishop Zanic saw the apparitions as an evil fraud arranged by Franciscan priests to undermine his authority in his battle with the parishes. Bishop Zanic launched a campaign throughout the world exposing the apparitions as a fraudulent plot. He attempted to closely link the events at Medjugorje with parishioners and rebel priests, elsewhere in the diocese, who were blocking entrances to churches.

5. Commissions

When someone claims to be seeing visions, the local bishop has the duty to make careful enquiries and judge whether it is supernatural or not. So when Bishop Zanic condemned the events as a fraud, many took his statement as the final word of the Church.

But thousands, including bishops, priests and theologians had visited Medjugorje. They had experienced deep spiritual benefits. They asserted that Bishop Zanic was too personally involved to make a reliable judgement and called for a widely based unbiased Commission.

Bishop Zanic formed a Commission in January 1982. It consisted of four theologians and four priests with himself as chairman. To many, it didn't appear to be making serious enquiries but merely issuing repeats of the bishop's demands for people to stay away from Medjugorje.

In 1984, following continuing international criticisms, Bishop Zanic formed a larger Commission of 15 members. Critics again saw its membership as biased and said little research was being done.

Its communiqués called repeatedly for **official** pilgrimages to be banned and stated that it did not approve of priests and lay people organising pilgrimages (i.e. private pilgrimages). It said it had noticed some difficulties of a **disciplinary** and theological nature in the messages.

On March 8th, 1985 it announced that: “The Commission feels that the most difficult question arising from the events regards the ecclesiastical **disobedience of two former chaplains** of Mostar, who refused to be transferred, appealing to the messages of Medjugorje”. [Emphasis added].

Later that year, in response to questions, both the Yugoslav Bishop's Conference and the Congregation for Defence of Faith (CDF) confirmed that **official** pilgrimages should not be organised.

On 31st of May 1985 the Commission said it was comparing the concept of conversion in the Gospels with that at Medjugorje, problems of **discipline regarding two former chaplains** of Mostar who appeal to the messages of Medjugorje, theological problems and insufficient documentation regarding supposed miracles. [Emphasis added].

During 1986 criticism of the workings of the Commission continued to grow. Then in January 1987, Cardinal Ratzinger intervened as head of the CDF. The responsibility for making a judgment, regarding the events at Medjugorje, was transferred from Bishop Zanic to the Yugoslav Bishop's Conference.

After three years of intensive study the Conference made a decision in November 1990. It was not published immediately, but a partial version was leaked via a schismatic group. It implied the Commission had rejected the events as non-supernatural.

This was a distortion of the Conference's decision. So on 8th January 1991 Archbishop Perko of Belgrade explained that the Conference had left a final judgement open till the future.

6. The Aim Of A Commission

A Commission has to choose one of three options:

- (1) Constat de supernaturalitate [A supernatural origin is proved]
- (2) Non-constat de supernaturalitate [A supernatural origin has not been proved]
- (3) Constat de non supernaturalitate [A non-supernatural origin is proved]

The children said the visions were still in process and their authenticity would be confirmed by a miracle when complete. So choosing option (1) was not possible.

Bishop Zanic, as a member of the Commission, was in an excellent position to explain why he wanted the Commission to choose option (3).

But the bishops, meeting at Zadar, after examining the alleged spiritual 'good fruits' of Medjugorje and testing Bishop Zanic's contrary evidence, rejected option (3) by 19 votes to one.

[6]

So they chose option (2) which left a final decision to the future.
The key sentence of the first section of the Declaration by the Bishops dated, April 10th reads :

*On the base of the investigations **so far**, it cannot be affirmed that one is dealing with supernatural apparitions or revelations.* [Emphasis added].

Before looking at the next part of the statement, which deals with the bishops' pastoral response to the events, it is interesting to consider a key aspect of the above.

If the investigations had found evidence of diabolical influence, fraud, disobedience to rightful authority, immoral leadership, or heresy, the Commission would have condemned the events. But as it left the decision open, it must have judged these accusations not proven or irrelevant.

So the Commission had judged all the Pre-April 10th 1991 accusations to be unsubstantiated or irrelevant.

We need to bear this in mind when individuals in the West, who have often never been to the village or interviewed those claiming to be visionaries, write sensational books repeating the accusations examined by the bishops.

7. Reactions To The Findings Of The Commission

Bishop Zanic publicly stated that he disagreed with the findings of the Commission. [The decision of the Commission was not infallible, so he had the right to hold this personal opinion].

He was consoled the Commission had not chosen option (1). He could still say the existence of supernatural events had not been established.

It may be noted that when Bishop Zanic's Diocesan Commissions went through the process of closing down, they had both also chosen option(2).

Bishop Zanic made statements stressing that the commissions had not chosen option (1). His words implied they had thereby supported option (3). But the commissions had refused to support option (3).

The pro-Apparitions party was not disappointed. They were not expecting a vote for option (1). The miracle to confirm the authenticity of the messages had been promised to occur **after the end** of the apparitions.

[7].

Pastoral Provision

In the second part of its 10th April 1991 statement, the Yugoslav Bishop's Commission reads:

*However, the numerous gatherings of the faithful from different parts of the world, who come to Medjugorje, prompted both by motives of belief and various other motives, require the attention and pastoral care in the first place of the diocesan bishop and with him of the other bishops also, so **that in Medjugorje and everything connected with it, a healthy devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary may be promoted in accordance with the teaching of the Church. For this purpose the bishops will issue specially suitable liturgical-pastoral directives.** [Emphasis added].*

To provide leadership by example, most of the bishops then individually visited Medjugorje to offer pastoral care to the pilgrims. The Yugoslav bishops formed a pastoral Commission to assist the clergy in Medjugorje but, two days before its planned first meeting, civil war broke out.

However at all times since then, numerous priests have been present in the village to hear confessions and provide spiritual advice to the pilgrims

The statement closed with the words:

*Likewise, through their Commission they will **continue to keep up with and investigate the entire event in Medjugorje.** [Emphasis added].*

When Yugoslavia collapsed, responsibility for judging the events at Medjugorje was transferred to the bishops of Bosnia-Herzegovina and, by 2008, it became widely accepted that responsibility to initiate further pronouncements rested with Rome.

As the children grew up, they were invited to many countries. Some Cardinals and bishops, keen to start a spiritual renewal in their dioceses, placed their cathedrals and halls at the disposal of the visionaries – while making it clear that the church had not passed a final decision on the supernaturality of the apparitions.

Others did not permit this assistance because they feared their flocks would think the presence of the visionaries in their cathedrals would imply that the Church had **officially** accepted the apparitions.

This was not a serious division amongst the bishops, but different assessments as to their flock's ability to understand the situation.

9, The Two Suspended Priests

On 27th March 1993, the Apostolic Signatura Tribunal, the highest legal authority in the Church issued document No. 17907/86CA.

It stated that Bishop Zanic had acted prematurely. His expulsion of the priests, and his declaration "ad statem laicalem" [to the lay state] against them, was declared unjust and illegal.

Fr, Vego had accepted laicisation in 1988 and had married within the Church. He now lived with his family in Italy. Fr. Prusina was free to continue his vocation as a priest and did so outside the diocese of Mostar.

10. Disobedience

Much has been made of the alleged disobedience of the supporters of Medjugorje. Bishop Zanic repeatedly demanded that people stop coming to Medjugorje and stop encouraging others.

Those who disregarded his demands asserted that, while he had the authority to ban **official** pilgrimages to Medjugorje, he did not have the authority to stop people visiting the village, making known what they accepted and encouraging others to visit.

The best-organised and prominent organisations that did not accept Zanic's words were: *The Children of Medjugorje* and *The Community of the Beatitudes*. But there were many others.

The President of *The Children of Medjugorje* was a layman in America while its Vice-President was Sister Emmanuel, living in Medjugorje

For many years the headed notepaper of the organization listed as advisors two Cardinals, two Archbishops, 4 bishops, a priest and a layman (the membership changed slightly over time).

One of these Archbishops was Frane Franic of Split who, prior to his retirement in 1988, had been President of the Theological Committee of the Croatian Bishop's Conference. Many pilgrims had passed through his diocese on their way to Medjugorje, so he was well informed of events.

[9]

The Community of the Beatitudes had been founded during 1974 and granted provisional status in 1983. During a visit by its leaders to Medjugorje, they claimed that Mary had given them a specific instruction to propagate her messages.

So in 1989, the Community established an advice centre under one of their members, Sister Emmanuel, in the village to welcome pilgrims. It was through her that the ‘messages’, were transmitted to the world. She became a central figure in a worldwide Medjugorje movement

Bishop Zanic condemned her for being disobedient to the Church, (By which he meant, disobedient to himself). He also said that as she was not a nun, she had no right to call herself ‘Sister’. [According to the Constitution of the Community, the female members are called: “Sister”].

Rome did nothing to undermine or disapprove of *The Children of Medjugorje* or Sister’s work. Praising *The Community of the Beatitudes* as a product of the Charismatic Movement, the Pope elevated it to full recognition by Rome in 2002.

So Rome’s view of what constituted, ‘disobedience’, was not the same as that claimed by Bishop Zanic.

In 1999 leaders of *The Community of the Beatitudes* visited Archbishop Bertone, secretary to the CDF. The Archbishop replied to a question by saying: “You must remain in Medjugorje at the service of the pilgrims” and “It is necessary to accompany private pilgrimages”. “For the moment one should consider Medjugorje as a Sanctuary, a Marian shrine, in the same way as Czestochkova”.

11. The Present bishop Of Mostar

Bishop Zanic retired in 1992 and was replaced by Ratko Peric. As he does not believe in the visions and considers the decision of the Yugoslav Bishop’s Commission and its acceptance by Rome to be an error, some people have been puzzled as to why Bishop Peric was appointed.

Bishop Peric was co-adjuter bishop, so had the right to automatically succeed Bishop Zanic. Rome had removed all responsibility for judging the Medjugorje events from the diocese. The new bishop was willing to obey the Yugoslav Bishops’ decision and Rome’s policy, whatever his personal views. So there was no reason to overrule his right to succeed.

[10]

He accepts that organisers of unofficial pilgrimages are not disobedient. He has also written that it is official pilgrimages that are banned.

It is false to portray Bishop Peric and the clergy of the parish of Medjugorje as being bitterly opposed to one another. The parish has never been out of communion with the bishop.

When administrating Confirmation in the village during 2001 Bishop Peric used his sermon to declare his personal disbelief in the apparitions, but also to emphasised his satisfaction at the way the parish was being administered. A press release spoke of the bishop enjoying a small social gathering with the priests afterwards.

12. The Problem of The Parishes Continues

The dispute between some Franciscans and the bishop has not been fully resolved. As of February 2008 nine priests have been laicised, 25 suspended because of a refusal to sign a document regarding obedience, and 90 (including those at Medjugorje) have a normal relationship with their bishop.

13. Personal Opinions

This article has concentrated on establishing the official policy of the Church. But those opposed to this position argue that the personal negative opinion of the Bishop of Mostar should be noted. This is reasonable and has been carried out above. But, to keep a balance, it is necessary to note the personal opinions of other leaders in the Church.

In the early years, rumours spread widely and some enthusiastic provisionary writers blindly accepted and repeated unsubstantiated alleged words uttered by Cardinal Ratzinger and John Paul II. The main pro-Medjugorje groups did not endorse these rumours and, when an anti-Charismatic periodical presented fourteen instances to Cardinal Ratzinger, he confirmed that these fourteen had no basis in fact.

Pope Benedict XVI is very open in his support of the New Ecclesial Communities that have developed out of the Charismatic Movement, but he keeps his personal views regarding Medjugorje to himself.

Pope John Paul II was not reticent. Some of his actions spoke louder than words. In 1987 the Pope spent 20 minutes in private conversation with the visionary Mirjana. In 1988 he sent six rosaries to the children via Archbishop Gaetano Allibrandi, the Papal Nuncio to Ireland.

[11]

In 1992, he welcomed Fr.Jozo Zovko with: “I am with you, protect Medjugorje, protect the messages”. In November 1996 he had a private meeting with Sister Emmanuel to hear of her work. On January 26th 2002 he welcomed and blessed the newly weds: Vicka Ivankovic (a visionary) and Mario Mijatovic.

Four letters, which had been addressed by the Pope to Zofia and Marek Skwarniczy, his personal friends, were published in October 2005. Marek was also a member of the Pontifical Council for the Laity. The letters contained very positive references to Medjugorje.

In one, dated December 1992, he mentions their plans to visit Medjugorje and wrote: “I am also going there every day in prayer. I join everyone who is praying there or who derives the call to prayer from there.”

Responsible sites are able to provide lists of Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops who have publicly stated that John Paul II encouraged them to go to Medjugorje.

Blessed Mother Teresa wrote: “We are all praying one Hail Mary before each Mass to Our Lady of Medjugorje.”

In 1997 Archbishop Schönborn of Vienna invited one of the visionaries to preach in his Cathedral. Six months later the archbishop was made a Cardinal and appointed editor of: *The Catechism of The Catholic Church* In September 2008 a visionary was invited back to the cathedral.

For details and pictures of the visit see last paragraph of this article.

Since the 1991 Statement

Over thirty million people, including a large number of bishops and clergy have been to the shrine. Repeated attempts have been made to accuse the visionaries and their supporters of all sorts of evil. Yet there has not been one word from JP II or B 16 to discourage pilgrimages.

A new argument used by those opposed to Medjugorje, is that people should not go to an ‘unapproved’ shrine when ‘approved’ ones already exist. Yet by the same criteria, pilgrimages to Fatima were ‘unapproved’ till October 1930.

So the great miracle of 13th October 1917 was in front of 70 000 people on pilgrimage to an: ‘unapproved’ place. Prior to October 1930, the bishop of Leria, the competent authority, did not allow official pilgrimages but arranged for pastoral provision. This is what the Yugoslav Bishops’ Conference, the competent authority, arranged for Medjugorje.

Rome’s policy remains constant. In early 2008 Cardinal Bertone of the CDF published: *The Last Secret of Fatima*, which had an introduction by Pope Benedict XVI. On page 94 the Cardinal commented:

Bishop Peric’s statement expresses a personal opinion of his own. It is not a definitive official judgment on the part of the Church, The Church defers to the Zadar statement issued on 10th April 1991 by the bishops of the former Yugoslavia and the statement leaves the door open to further investigations of the affair. So the process of verification needs to move forward

15. Further information

Several web sites that condemn Medjugorje, are sponsored by people who reject the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. They see Rome’s refusal to condemn the events at Medjugorje as part of her support for the Charismatic Movement, of which they do not approve.

Some individuals accept the Second Vatican Council but reject the 1991 judgement of the Yugoslav Bishops Conference and its endorsement by Rome. They promote the alternative personal view of Bishop Peric. Although they are free to do so, it is not our policy to recommend sites that reject the advice provided by Rome.

Several other sites report news of ongoing events at Medjugorje. But they often add personal speculations mixed with alleged events elsewhere. They are therefore also often unreliable. The following sites, we list on page 14, appear to be the most reliable. [Note: If users of the html version have any difficulty with page 14, see our pdf version].

[13]

The following appear to be the most reliable:

www.medjugorje.org Their 'About Us' section reads:

“We work directly with the parish of Medjugorje and do our best to offer only accurate information that is in accordance with the desires and directives of the pastor there. All of our work is also in strict accordance and obedience to the Holy See.”

www.medjugorje.hr is the website of the parish of Medjugorje.
www.childrenofmedjugorje.com. is produced by Sister Emmanuel.

In 2002, The Catholic Truth Society, 40 Harleyford Road, London, SE11 5AY published the booklet: 'Medjugorje' Email: info@cts-online.org.uk

Rome has not objected to the building of a radio and TV station at Medjugorje. It is dedicated to spreading the: 'Message of Medjugorje'. It does so 24/7, and may be accessed on our LIVE page [item L345].

The alleged visionaries are now in middle age and readers may be interested in a short history of their lives since 1981. This is available from: <http://www.medjugorje.org.uk> Click on their pictures.

For details and photos of Ivan's September 2008 visit to Vienna see:

<http://www.gebetsaktion.at/>

Click on Aktuelles

Scroll to (19.09.2008) and click

Scroll to near foot of page and click on: Schauen Sie weitere Fotos

Click each picture to enlarge.

For English translation of Vienna events click below

<http://www.churchinhistory.org/pages/booklets/medjugorje/ivan.htm>

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[14]