

POLITICS AND VISIONS

By RICHARD McSORLEY

‘**W**HATEVER IS TRULY RELIGIOUS is also truly political. Anyone who does not understand that does not understand either religion or politics’, says Mohandas K. Gandhi. I agree. Both religion and politics have the same human person as their subject. The same human person lives under both the power of God and the power of the government. God’s power is supreme. The government shares that power inasmuch as it acts in accord with God’s will. When the government so acts, politics is clearly religious because it becomes the instrument of God’s will. When it acts against God’s will, it is not true politics.

It follows from this that the messages received at various Marian shrines are both political and religious. The messages call the world to prayer and penance, but they are not simply repetitive. They are given in different contexts and different places at different times to different people under different governments. These differences interpret and change both the religious and the political meaning. For instance, at Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, the messages of prayer and penance are presented in the context of their relation to peace. At Medjugorje our Lady says, ‘I wish to be known as the Queen of Peace. I come here to make known the Peace of Christ.’ Our Lady goes on to say that the way to peace is to believe what her Son says, especially, ‘Love one another, including your enemies’. This is difficult. It requires conversion to God and away from all sin. The Blessed Mother tells us we will find the energy needed for this conversion through constant prayer and regular fasting.

From this summary it is clear that peace is the focus of all the Medjugorje messages. It is the goal to be sought through everything else. Peace is presented as the goal to be sought and prayer and penance, conversion and faith as means to that goal.

The fact that the messages of Medjugorje are given in a communist country in the nuclear age adds new political meaning to them, a meaning that was not true of the 1917 appearances at Fatima. The threat of nuclear annihilation could not have been read into the Fatima messages in 1917. But in 1981 the catastrophe threatening the world might easily be seen as nuclear. Conversion in the

Medjugorje messages is not merely the conversion of Russia, because the message was being given in a communist country and being given for the world with no emphasis on any particular nation.

I did not know all this when, in 1986, the president of the Catholic Travel Agency in Washington phoned me and asked if I would like to lead a tour to Medjugorje.

'I don't know anything about it, so I can't say', I replied.

'I'll send you a videotape that will inform you about it.'

After I saw the videotape both the political and religious possibilities impressed me. The message was a message of peace and in a communist country. That combination seemed to me worth investigating. So I agreed to go.

I had been to both Fatima and Lourdes and found that they made no deep impression on me. I bathed in the water of the miraculous spring at Lourdes and prayed the rosary in candlelight processions. I visited the shrine at Fatima but the religious meaning in both places seemed nothing special or nothing new.

But the political message that I had heard there: 'Pray for the conversion of Russia', seemed to me to be needed, but it also seemed to leave out the social aspects of the faith, the works of justice and peace, and they were strongly affirmed later in Vatican II.

Books and magazine articles about Fatima deepened my sense of this absence of justice and peace issues. They never stressed or mentioned the need of conversion for the United States, which at the time of my visit to Lourdes and Fatima was in the midst of the Vietnam War, a war I considered immoral.

Even in 1980, well after Vatican II, devotees of Fatima seemed to find nothing in the Fatima message that called for racial justice, economic justice, disarmament or an end to nuclear deterrence. Yet these questions, it seemed to me, were the urgent religious and political messages of the times. Probably I missed the religious message of Fatima and Lourdes because I failed to find the political message that went with it. I wondered also if those who misinterpret the political message also misinterpret the religious message.

The emphasis I heard on prayer for the conversion of Russia while the USA so obviously needed conversion led me to find no special interest in the religious messages. Religious messages did not conflict with the gospel but they did not add any more interest than I already had. The devotees of Fatima and Lourdes showed

no public interest as far as I could see in ending the Vietnam War or the struggle for interracial justice. I did not even hear or read that they offered prayer for these intentions nor did I see that they did anything to accomplish these objectives.

My experience was quite different in Medjugorje. I first went to Medjugorje in September 1986. It was already dark when our bus stopped in the small town of Citluk, three miles from the parish church of St James. Each of the thirty-nine of us was led by various hosts to their homes. I went with two others from our group to a home nearby. Our hosts turned out to be Muslim and they could not have been more friendly.

At the parish of St James in Medjugorje our Lady was reported to appear each evening at 6.45. Preceding her arrival fifteen decades of the rosary were prayed by a church full of people with several hundred outside the window of the room where she was appearing in the rectory. In the field beside the church confessions were proceeding all day long; confessions by many priests in many languages.

After our Lady's visit, only visible to the chosen young people, mass in Croatian was to be celebrated with forty or fifty priests joining in the concelebration. Following the mass there would be an hour of healing prayers. All in all, this made up three hours of prayer. The morning hours were filled with masses in different languages every hour and the afternoons were given over to lectures in the church and prayers on the mountain.

At the time I arrived only three of the visionaries were in town. Twenty-one year old Ivan was away doing compulsory military service. Miranja lived in Sarajevo.

Apparitions were taking place in one of the priest's rooms in the rectory: a room with bookshelves along the wall and a bed and desk in the corner. Priests were given priority entrance so I was one of about fifteen people crowded into the standing-room-only space. Outside the window the crowd swelled to hundreds as they joined in the rosary. Inside we prayed the rosary also. At about six p.m., Jakov and Marija came into the room to join us in the rosary.

Marija, dressed in an ordinary skirt and blouse, knelt on the floor by the door. Jakov sat on his heels just inside the doorway. Between them knelt Father Slavko Barbaric, O.F.M., of the parish. He began a rosary led by Marija and Jakov in alternate decades. Between every two or three decades Father Slavko would sing some

hymn and this was taken up by the crowd. At 6.45 Father Slavko told Jakov and Marija the time. They walked into the room and stood before a crucifix high up on the wall above a row of books. Together they began to say the Lord's prayer in Croatian. After a few lines they suddenly and simultaneously knelt down looking intently at the crucifix as though they saw someone. Both began to show facial expressions of talking and listening. Though they moved their lips the room was quiet, I heard nothing. While Jakov moved his lips, Marija nodded in assent, very slightly, as though they were having different conversations.

A television camera was shining in their faces. I was in front, to the side of them, beside the bookshelf. I was only a few feet from them. I could clearly see their every facial expression. They seemed to be lost in another world and talking to someone. Both kept their eyes directed toward the crucifix with rapt attention. They continued this for three minutes, then both prayed out loud. Again they were silent for a minute and again they prayed out loud. They blessed themselves and walked out of the room. The apparition was over.

This was the routine of the apparition that I was to witness on three succeeding occasions. After the first few lines of the Lord's Prayer apparently the Blessed Mother appeared to them and then at some point during her appearance to them she asked them to pray with her and they did. That accounted for their second vocal prayer. For another period of time they talked with the Blessed Mother until they both lifted their eyes up and said in Croatian, 'She is gone'. They blessed themselves and sat up and said the *Magnificat* together.

The next morning I was celebrating the English-speaking mass at 10 a.m. with full church and fourteen priests concelebrating with me. I gave my understanding of the peace message of our Lady. I began with the definition of peace where St Paul says Jesus reconciles us to the Father and to each other through his blood (Ephesians 2,14): 'Jesus is our peace'. Here Paul defines peace as a simultaneous relationship of reconciliation between God, myself and my neighbour, a triangular relationship between me, God and neighbour. I applied this definition to our Lady's call to faith which commands us to love everybody, including enemies. I noted how little this is practised or accepted. Accepting it would require that we have nothing to do with war or preparation for it, or paying taxes for it. To do this we would need total conversion to

God and away from sin including all killing. All this is very difficult so we need the divine help that is available through prayer and fasting. It is in this way that the call of our Lady to peace and reconciliation, conversion, prayer and fasting come under the peace focus which our Lady gives them.

In the afternoon of that same day we went to the home of Vicka. She lives in the village about fifteen minutes walk from the church along a winding, hilly, country lane. At the door of her home she greeted our group, shaking hands with any who offered. Our interpreter, Lillian, took our questions. She very patiently answered for twenty minutes. I asked her, 'Did any of the secrets that you received concern the danger of world destruction by nuclear war?'

'War can be avoided by prayer and fasting', she answered.

I asked 'Does the Blessed Mother implicitly approve of war by Ivan going into the military?'

(Later on I was able to speak to Ivan as part of a public interview and asked him, 'Why did Our Lady not appear to you while you were on a military base, but only after when you were off the base in the home of a friend?')

'I know the reason but I don't want to talk about it', he replied.)

'He gets out on Sunday to go to church.'

'Does the Blessed Mother approve of killing?'

Lillian, the interpreter, did not repeat my question to Vicka but said to me, 'Military service means that he is just doing his job'.

I replied, 'I want you to ask her, not answer for her'.

Lillian tried again but no clear answer appeared.

Later on I asked a close friend of Ivan why our Lady refused to visit him in the military camp. 'Was it because she did not want to appear to approve of the military life?'

'That's as good an answer as any', he replied.

When I asked Ivan the question, he replied, 'I know but I don't want to talk about it'.

The next afternoon Father Svet O.F.M. talked to a full church about the meaning of the messages.

In the question period I asked him, 'Does the threat of disaster in our Lady's peace message refer to the dangers of destruction by nuclear war?'

'I'm only guessing when I say that the danger she speaks of has to do with nuclear dangers. She would like to free us from any danger. That process to free us from any danger must be very, very personal. It starts with the conversion to God and it conquers

the whole world. The presence of Mary in a communist country has special significance in this regard.'

At a second visit to Medjugorje in 1987 I was part of a public meeting with Ivan and after a prayer we were able to ask questions. I asked him, 'Is disarmament a work for peace?'

'Yes, it is one way, prayer is essential.'

I asked, 'Since it is wrong to kill, is it also wrong to pay taxes for weapons of death?'

Before translating it, Marina, an interpreter, said, 'This is a political question'.

'It's a moral question', I said. As I asked the question there was a hostile murmur from the crowd. One American yelled out, 'Next question'.

'This is my question', I replied. 'Let him answer.'

Ivan answered, 'It would be better to give to the poor of the world in need of help'. I was satisfied with that reply.

Through a townmate of Maria I was able to visit with Maria privately in her home. An American, Kathleen Martin, was there to help translate.

Maria came in from the kitchen where she was working, shook hands and said, in English, 'I have to do the cooking. Come in and we can talk while I work'.

Kathleen and Maria were working at the stove preparing food much of the time I was talking to Maria. She had her back to me and was working on the food. My first question was, 'Our Lady says that we must love our enemies as the gospel teaches. Does this mean that we must love communists?'

'Yes', was the translated answer.

My second question was, 'Does this love of enemies prohibit all killing and preparation for killing?'

Maria answered again, 'Yes'.

'Is paying taxes for nuclear weapons wrong?'

Maria answered, 'It is difficult to answer this topic. Our Lady said nothing on this point. She did say that with prayer and fasting wars can be averted'.

I explained to Kathleen that since all killing was wrong it seemed to me that if a government is going to use that money for killing, it is also wrong. I asked, 'Is there anything in the message that Maria heard from the Blessed Mother that would validate this conclusion?'

Maria replied through Kathleen, 'Jesus said "Surrender to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's"' .

I told Kathleen, 'That does not answer the question because Jesus was simply refusing to answer about taxes in general. The question to Jesus was not about war taxes. My question is limited to war taxes'. I repeated the question, 'Is it possible to conclude from the messages that you have received from the Blessed Mother that paying taxes for weapons of death is wrong?'

This time Maria answered, 'With prayer and looking into one's own conscience, each person should be able to decide'.

I was satisfied with that answer and did not pursue the question any further.

After the ten o'clock mass next morning our group gathered at the statue of our Lady outside the front of the church. I told them the questions I asked and the answers Maria had given. I went on to speak of the division in the Church in the United States between many who publicly honour Mary and do not do much for justice and peace and others who do works for justice and peace but do not publicly honour Mary.

At this point one of the group yelled out, 'You have no business talking this way to us. The Church condemns communism. You are going against Church teaching. We don't have to listen to this stuff. We have to defend ourselves against communism'.

'You are right. You don't have to listen. You can leave.'

A priest in our group, a theologian, said, 'There is a difference between loving communists and loving communism. We should love the people but not the system.'

That interruption and the discussion that followed illustrated the very division I was talking about. One of our group came up to me sarcastically and said, 'Kill all the communists', laughing at his own statement.

This incident showed me again what I already knew, that the gospel command to love our enemies is not accepted. Even good Catholics do not want to hear it. Yet I am convinced it is the quintessence of Christ's teaching. No other moral leader has taught this. Christ not only taught it but lived it.

Some time later I spoke to the man who yelled out in the crowd and he said, 'You already knew the answer before you asked the question, so why did you ask it?'

'I asked with the hope that when you heard the answers from the visionaries you might accept them.'

The appearances at Medjugorje give a gospel formula for integrating peacemaking with faith, conversion, prayer, including the rosary, and fasting. All the strengths to follow Gandhi's search for truth through non-violent action can and do flow from this foundation. Tax resistance, draft resistance, conscientious objection, opposition to the death penalty and abortion, marches, boycotts, strikes and all forms of non-violent resistance can and should be based on faith, love, conversion, prayer and fasting.

A Christian does not have to believe that the Blessed Mother is appearing daily in Medjugorje to know this, it is gospel teaching. It is also the teaching of Gandhi, Shabat and King. All three have taught what the Blessed Mother is teaching daily through six young adults in Yugoslavia. Her message indicates that there should be no division between prayer and action, between faith and practice.

Akita

Discernment of the political meaning of other apparitions could be made in the same manner as on Medjugorje.

For example, in Akita, Japan, the messages given by our Lady to Sister Agnes Sasgawa in 1971-82 are much like the messages of Medjugorje. They tell of the dangers to the human family unless we turn away from sin and towards God. Bishop Ito, who approved the messages as miraculous, said that the message is the same as at Fatima. But the context of the message gives it political meaning not present at Fatima.

Akita is in Japan near Hiroshima, in the only land where two entire cities were incinerated by nuclear bombs. At Akita the message was given to a Japanese adult not to Portuguese children. The Akita messages are accompanied dramatically by the weeping of the wooden image of our Lady. The statue shed tears 101 times, tears seen by hundreds of people, meant to represent the suffering of our Lady over the sins of the world. There is no call to pray for Russia to be converted, but for the conversion of the world.

At Akita our Lady said, 'If mankind does not repent and amend their lives the heavenly Father will send a supreme chastisement . . . worse than the deluge. Fire will plunge from the sky.'¹ To the people of Japan this would remind them of Hiroshima and

Nagasaki. In Akita there is no vision of our Lady, only 101 episodes of tears from a wooden statue and bleeding from a wooden image of our Lady and bleeding of the right palm of the wooden statue. Many victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki saw tears and wept themselves when the bombs struck.

The people of Japan know what a nuclear bomb can do better than any other group on earth. The rest of the world, understanding that the message was given in Japan, can more easily interpret its meaning than if it were given elsewhere.

Hrushiv

Like Akita, the messages of coming danger are given in a city close to a place of nuclear disaster, Chernobyl, where the world experienced its worst nuclear plant disaster. In Hrushiv, as at Akita, the population know well the horror of nuclear explosion and its aftermath of radioactive fallout. In Hrushiv, our Lady appears in a communist country on the balcony of a church closed long before by the government. Even though the message of repentance, prayer, and conversion is much the same, the context adds new meaning.

Hrushiv is in the Ukraine, part of the USSR, a place where the Catholic faith was started in A.D. 908, before Moscow existed. Ukraine was the first nation in Europe to be consecrated to our Lady. Ukrainians suffered much because of their loyalty to their faith. In 1946 the Kremlin imprisoned the entire Catholic Ukrainian hierarchy and forbade the exercise of the Catholic religion.

Early in the morning of 26 April 1987, the Sunday after Easter, one year to the day and the hour of the catastrophe of the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl, only 300 miles away, a strange light appeared over the church. The first people who saw it paid little attention to it.

Near the church is the home of the Kyzyms. Norina, their twelve-year-old daughter, was getting ready to go to school. As she left the house she saw the strange light over the church and went closer to the light. In the balcony she saw a woman holding a baby. Frightened, she went back into the house and told her mother, Miroslava, 'I see a woman with a child above the church'. Her mother did not believe her, thinking Norina was making up stories not to go to school. She went out into the yard to see for herself and also saw, in the light, a woman with an infant. She fell to her knees saying, 'Kneel down child and pray. Here is our Lady.'

Within one week people from all over the Soviet Union were coming to Hrushiv. The Sunday following, a hundred thousand people gathered to witness the apparition of our Lady. It is estimated that from 26 April to 15 August over 500,000 people witnessed the apparition. Tens of thousands also heard our Lady speak to them.

Our Lady said, 'Teach the children to pray. Teach the children to live in truth and live yourselves in truth. Forgive nations who have harmed you'. This statement has a different meaning inside of Ukraine than it does in any other place in the world. 'Do not forget those who have died in the Chernobyl disaster. Chernobyl is a reminder and a sign for the whole world. Constantly say the rosary.'

This message is being given at a time and a place where public prayer was not allowed but the rosary is private and can be public. It cannot very easily be stopped by regulation because it requires no church, no particular place.

'Repent and love one another.'

In Hrushiv the messages, pray and forgive, take on political meaning from the circumstances of the long years of suffering of the Ukrainian people. The nearness of these people to Chernobyl may be the reason why the Blessed Mother appeared in a bright light; this light precedes her appearances as the light of the explosion of Chernobyl preceded the disaster. For these people the threat of disaster is easily identified with Chernobyl.

Conclusion

Not only is the religious message of an apparition fused with the political meaning but where the political implication is not heard or understood, the religious message will probably either be distorted or not heard at all. I think this applies not only to Marian messages but to all religious truths. 'Whatever is received is received according to the capacity of the receiver', as St Thomas Aquinas says. The capacity of the receiver is determined by culture, geography, history. It seems that our Lady takes all this into account when she gives messages to her children.

NOTES

¹ Hoffert, John: *The meaning of Akita* (101 Foundation, Brunswick, NJ, 1989), p 45.