

MEDJUGORJE'S EFFECTS: A HISTORY OF LOCAL, STATE AND CHURCH RESPONSE  
TO THE MEDJUGORJE PHENOMENON

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green  
State University in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2011

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the impacts of the alleged appearances of the Virgin Mary which began in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia in 1981. Through the examination of primary sources such as Catholic Church and the United States Department of State documentation and eye-witness interviews, this study creates a basic history of the events in Medjugorje and clearly defines the Catholic Church's position on these events. This thesis provides an academic history of the events surrounding Medjugorje and provides historical insight into the motivations behind the response of the local villagers and clergy members, the Yugoslavian state and the Vatican. The events studied include a carefully-documented history of the first two months of the apparitions, an account of the officially-atheistic, Yugoslavian government's response to the subsequent religious outpouring, and a history of the Catholic Church's response to the alleged apparitions up to the present day.

The dispute of the authenticity of the apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Medjugorje - which is currently under investigation by the Catholic Church - is polarizing within Catholic culture. The historiography of these events is divided into two groups of "pro-authenticity" or "anti-authenticity" authors who publish opposing and even contradictory information while using the same sources. In order to attempt to compensate for the flaws in the current historiography, the key method employed in this thesis is the use of mostly primary sources with careful documentation and citation of these sources. The primary sources were gathered from the United States Department of State Freedom of Information Act, various video and audio recordings and transcripts of eye-witness testimony, letters

and documents from the Catholic Church hierarchy, and the author's personal visits to Medjugorje and the University of Notre Dame and University of Dayton research libraries.

According to the current historiography, there are very few authors who attempt to understand the sheer complexity of the governmental, religious and cultural situation in Yugoslavia when the apparitions began in 1981. Through the study of eye-witness accounts and the U.S. State Department documents this thesis attempts a history of those complexities and insight into the motivation behind the key local and international reactors (bishop, clergy, government, police and Vatican). Finally, the Catholic media and some Medjugorje authors have led readers to believe that the local bishop of Medjugorje has officially condemned the apparitions. Through historical documentation, this thesis challenges the claim that the apparitions in Medjugorje have been officially condemned by the Catholic Church. The main objective of this thesis is to promote and to serve further research into the Medjugorje phenomenon by providing the historical groundwork for further study.

This manuscript is dedicated to Mary, the Mother of God - my mother.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to first thank God for granting me the opportunity and the resources to conduct the research necessary for the completion of this thesis. I would like to acknowledge the faculty and staff of Bowling Green State University's History Department for all of their help and support. I would like to especially thank Dr. Beth Greich-Polelle, my dedicated graduate advisor, and Dr. Gary Hess for his support in both my undergraduate and graduate studies. I would like to thank the libraries of the University of Notre Dame and the University of Dayton, whose resources were indispensable for my work. I would like to thank Congressman Bob Latta who assisted in the retrieval of the State Department documents used in this thesis. I would also like to thank my dear friend Denis Nolan for opening his archives and sharing with me his research on Medjugorje. I would like to thankfully acknowledge those who have served as proofreaders: Daniel Klimek and Jennie Lee Williams. Finally, I would like to thank my parents who never cease to support and encourage their children, my family and my dear husband, JonMarc Grodi, for his constant support and patience.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is hard to find a topic in the Catholic Church today that is more misunderstood than the alleged<sup>1</sup> apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina. This subject is shrouded in mystery to many Catholics and, yet, it is surprisingly well documented. Many Catholics - clergy and lay people, scholars and peasants, alike - have no more knowledge on the subject than the results of a Google search, a one-paragraph news article, or even worse, mere hearsay. Even those who have read a book on the events of Medjugorje are at the mercy of the un-cited, un-documented opinions of the author. Medjugorje has become a word that triggers elated excitement in some while stiffened spines and hesitant glances in others. According to fellow Medjugorje author and former *Rolling Stones Magazine* editor, Randall Sullivan, “There was no single word, I discovered, that so instantly could produce a rapturous smile, a derisive snort, or an uncomfortable silence in the Holy See as ‘Medjugorje’.”<sup>2</sup> But the odd thing is, while most Catholics have an opinion on Medjugorje, very few can actually tell you why they feel that way.

This unawareness could be explained by the fact that no disciplinary historian has ever attempted to write a history on the events in Medjugorje and its repercussions within the Catholic Church, even though neither primary source nor secondary source material on the events is scarce. In fact, ample documentation from all levels of the Catholic Church hierarchy demonstrates that the Catholic Church is still investigating the veracity of the alleged apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Medjugorje and has neither condemned nor approved them. Through the evidence that I will display in this work, I seek to rectify many of the misunderstandings surrounding Medjugorje, in order to produce a solid foundation for research into this subject.

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<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to limit verbosity and repetition in this work, for the most part, the word “alleged” will be assumed in connection to mention of the apparitions or visions at Medjugorje.

<sup>2</sup> Randall Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective: An Investigation of Holy Visions*, (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2004), 45.

Published and unpublished material on the apparitions has been circulated since the earliest years. There are three types of literature involving Medjugorje in circulation: literature by authors who believe the events in Medjugorje to be 1) truly appearances of the Virgin Mary, 2) a man-made hoax, or 3) deception of the devil. For this study, authors in category 1 will be labeled “pro-authenticity” and authors in categories 2 and 3 will be labeled “anti-authenticity”.

In June of 1981, visions of the *Gospa* (the Croatian equivalent of “Our Lady”) were reported by six children in the Herzegovina area of Yugoslavia, in Bijakovići, a hamlet of Medjugorje. The children relayed supposed messages from the Virgin characterized by themes of peace and a return to God. Since the third day of the apparitions, a constant stream of pilgrims, now coming from every inhabited continent on earth, began converging upon the tiny parish of St. James. These pilgrims (and those anxiously watching the events unfold from home) developed an insatiable desire for more information on the happenings of Medjugorje. Initially ignored by scholars, save a few theologians, the lack of published academic information was relieved by hundreds of amateur, pilgrim authors, who upon return from pilgrimage, decided to write books, pamphlets and establish websites in order to propagate the messages of Our Lady. The longer this distribution of amateur work continued, the murkier the actual events surrounding the apparitions became.

Mirjana Stanislava Vasilj-Zuccarini, a prominent Croatian author of Medjugorje, exclaimed at the beginning of her book *Our Lady’s Call from Medjugorje*, “Another book on Medjugorje! Who on earth needs it?”<sup>3</sup> At first glance, this is an excellent assessment. In Medjugorje, like many other Catholic apparition sites, the streets are lined with religious gift shops and bookstores selling every Catholic devotional item imaginable. In just the parish bookstore, run by the Franciscans of St. James, there are over one hundred books about

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<sup>3</sup> Mirjana Stanislava Vasilj-Zuccarini, *Our Lady’s Call from Medjugorje*, 12<sup>th</sup> edition, Mostar: SLA VEJ, 2006.

Medjugorje in the Croatian language alone. There are also sections for English, Italian, German, French, Polish, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Tagalog, Hungarian and Romanian; each language containing over twenty various publications.<sup>4</sup> There seems to be a plethora of information. Why publish any more?

Vasilj-Zuccarini also concedes that while the quantity of books is substantial, it is the quality that is deficient. Clarity and accuracy of information are lacking. The methodology of the amateur authors is the main problem with the accuracy of the English-language literature. In our case, amateur writers are characterized as authors with no formal background or training in journalism or other academic writing, beyond high school or general, undergraduate instruction. As a result usually peer-reviewed presses will not publish the literature by these authors and the authors seek religious or vanity presses. Academics have authored only a handful of works; none of them historians.

Many amateur Medjugorje authors do not use citations or reference where they gathered their information. The reader is left to guess whether or not the author actually heard the visionary speak the information, transcribed it from a video, plagiarized it from another book or, probably the most dangerous of all, taken it from any number of private, Internet websites. Even Vasilj-Zuccarini, while mostly accurate in her descriptions of events in Medjugorje and in her history of Herzegovina, cites nothing except for the fact that the generations of her family extend far into Medjugorje history. She quotes entire conversations without even mentioning the source.<sup>5</sup> As a result of untrained methodology, many of the accounts of Medjugorje are repetitive and accuracy is questionable, as the authors of newer books cite (or sometimes just carelessly plagiarize quotes from) earlier publications and vicious historical inaccuracies are republished over and over again. Unlike other popular

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<sup>4</sup> "Literature and Archives - Books - Other Language," *Medugorje*, available from <http://www.medjugorje.hr/en/publishing/books/croatian/> and <http://www.medjugorje.hr/en/publishing/books/other-language>, accessed 12 January 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Vasilj-Zuccarini, *Our Lady's Call from Medjugorje*, 2.

apparitions, such as Fatima, Lourdes or Guadalupe, the visionaries of Medjugorje and many of the first-hand witnesses are still alive. There is no reason why any historical fact cannot be verified.

The general structure of pilgrim accommodation in Medjugorje – or, rather, the lack thereof – lends the phenomenon of Medjugorje to be misinterpreted. Foremost, there is no official information center in which even a historical video or an informative talk can assist pilgrims in learning the parish of St. James' official account of the events in Medjugorje.<sup>6</sup> While the official Medjugorje website operated by the parish provides a brief history of the parish and apparitions, a record of concelebrated priests and “holy communions” distributed, and up-to-date news regarding Medjugorje, many pilgrims who come to Medjugorje do not even know that an official website exists (and it is certainly not the first website retrieved by a Google search).<sup>7</sup> In 2006 *Glasnik Mira*, a monthly journal published in conjunction with the parish, began to circulate; however it is only published in Croatian and serves as no help to foreign pilgrims who do not know the language.<sup>8</sup> Since 1985, in an average year, around one million practicing Catholics visit Medjugorje.<sup>9</sup> Typically a pilgrim group will only encounter one of the six visionaries during a one week stay and this will most likely occur in a crowded public audience. For example, when the apparitions first began, the Yugoslavian government sent armed police to make sure that religious violations, such as large public gatherings, were not occurring. Circumventing this restriction, the feisty, eldest visionary Vicka Ivanković would stand on the steps of her parents' house and shout out the messages of the Virgin Mary and she continues to do so weekly, drawing thousands of pilgrims.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Medjugorje information center provides local information, such as postal, telephone and Internet information and distributes local maps.

<sup>7</sup> *Medjugorje*, available from <http://medjugorje.hr/en>.

<sup>8</sup> Krešo Šego email to author, 5 January 2011.

<sup>9</sup> “The Shrine – Statistics,” *Medjugorje*, available from <http://www.medjugorje.hr/en/medjugorje-phenomenon/statistics>, accessed 12 January 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Sr. Emmanuel Mallard, *Medjugorje: The 90s*, (McKees Rock, PA: St. Andrew's Productions, 1997), 90.

Even in firsthand encounters with a visionary, few pilgrims carry tape recorders or video cameras or even pens and paper to record what the seer is saying. Memory seems to be a probable culprit in many of the cases of misinterpretation of the visionaries' comments. Even so, three of the visionaries regularly host pilgrim groups in their own homes, which provide only about 0.3 percent of pilgrims annually a chance to interact personally with a visionary. The pilgrims, even the authors, are then left in Medjugorje at the mercy (and accuracy) of their tour guide.<sup>11</sup> Many Medjugorje tour guides are not native Croats, do not speak the language and are not familiar with the general history of the Herzegovina area. Although well-intentioned, they are there primarily to spread the messages of Our Lady and run a business. This lack of organization then allows for many different renditions of the same event or even the same quote. A reader could pick up ten different accounts of the first days of the apparitions and find discrepancies in basic facts such as who was present, what they were doing, what the Madonna allegedly said, the children's ages, the time of day, to larger facts such as the reaction of the priests, bishop and government. Most authors are well intentioned, but their intention is to spread the messages of Our Lady and not to get the facts straight.

On the other hand, there are a few authors like Heather Parsons, Randall Sullivan and Sr. Emmanuel Mallard, foundress of the Beatitudes religious community in Medjugorje, who have a professional background and who have gathered research by spending months or even years living with the visionaries and learning information first hand from intimate, and in the case of Sullivan and Parsons, audio-recorded conversations.<sup>12</sup> Sullivan's book, *The Miracle Detective: Investigations of Holy Visions*, could arguably be considered the best comprehensive book on the Medjugorje phenomenon. Former editor of *Rolling Stone*

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<sup>11</sup> Since Bosnia-Herzegovina is not a common tourist destination and the Bosnia-Herzegovina-Croatian border is still difficult to cross, the majority of pilgrims come with a religious travel agency from their own nation.

<sup>12</sup> Heather Parsons, *Marija and the Mother of God*, (Ireland: Faith Publications, 1993).

*Magazine* and trained as a writer, Sullivan spent an extended period of time in Medjugorje, living with the visionary Mirjana while he was still an agnostic. In addition, Sullivan's academic references and bibliography are substantial. Heather Parsons, another trained journalist, was a Northern Ireland Protestant when she first visited Medjugorje. Her books are told in narrative, but she is careful to note that she is using a tape-recorder when quoting interviews. Sr. Emmanuel was trained in Art History at the Paris-Sorbonne University. Remaining in Medjugorje during the civil war, she kept the world abreast on the happenings in wartime Medjugorje through daily faxes to her community in France. The faxes have been collected in a marvelous book, *Medjugorje: The War Day by Day*. Not only are the faxes firsthand accounts of Medjugorje during the war, but they also serve as incredible historical sources for the recent Balkan war in general.<sup>13</sup> While lacking formal training as a writer, Denis Nolan, founder of MaryTV (a television station in Medjugorje), has worked tirelessly for decades to amass hundreds of documents and letters from within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church regarding Medjugorje. Through MaryTV, Nolan also video-records visionaries' interviews and events in Medjugorje. His books, particularly *Medjugorje and the Church*, reflect his painstaking research. *Medjugorje Today*, an impressive collected work of mostly Yugoslavian theologians and academics was published in 1990 and contains many articles on various aspects of the village of Medjugorje, including history, culture, politics and science.

Fr. Svetozar Kraljevic, a Franciscan priest from Herzegovina, involved with Medjugorje from early on, wrote the first English-language account of the apparitions in Medjugorje. Published in 1984, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje* could be considered a general history of the first three years (although Kraljevic is not a disciplinary historian). His book contains several transcribed interviews with the visionaries and priests.

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<sup>13</sup> Sr. Emmanuel Mallard, *Medjugorje: The War Day by Day*, (Miami: The Florida Center for Peace, 1993).

Like Kraljevic's work, there are dozens books and videos which contain full interviews/transcripts with visionaries, villagers and clergy, such as Fr. Janko Bubalo's *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje: The Seer Vicka Speaks of Her Experiences* and *The Maddona of Medjugorje*, an early BBC documentary.

Unfortunately, many readers interested in learning more about Medjugorje do not discern authors' methodology and ultimately adopt the view of the author of the first book or article they encounter. The most popular books on Medjugorje remain by authors Wayne Weible and Janice T. Connell, whose methodology is not nearly as transparent or reliable as Sullivan, Kraljevic or Parsons. The very few professional writers who have spent their time investigating the Medjugorje phenomenon with an academic methodology are not primarily concerned with writing a definitive history on Medjugorje, rather their interest lies in either proving or debunking the alleged apparitions. A definitive and scholarly history of Medjugorje is in dire need as the number of pilgrims steadily increases.<sup>14</sup>

These methodological problems in the pro-authenticity literature have regrettably had a major influence on those who investigate the apparitions with an unbiased or *a priori* negative aim. The majority of primary sources (such as video, audio, and interview) are gathered by those who are favorable to the apparitions. If the information in these sources is presented in out-of-context quotations or in a biased or poor summary, many readers will begin to see inconsistencies in the Medjugorje story; flaws which would have never existed if the information was handled more carefully and with discernment towards sources. In fact, most anti-authenticity authors tend to dismiss any information gathered by persons favorable to the apparitions. If a reader were to carefully check the footnotes of an anti-authenticity author, he or she would find that the author cites the same three or four anti-authenticity

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<sup>14</sup> "The Shrine – Statistics," available from <http://www.medjugorje.hr/en/medjugorje-phenomenon/statistics>.

authors, with very little other research, leaving the reader to wonder if the author had even read anything beyond those other anti-authenticity authors.

Resting mostly on the flawed and inconsistent information that is available from amateur authors, some believe that the visions have been a ruse from the start, that the economically and politically hungry Croatian Catholics fabricated the story of Mary's appearances in order to gain power and prosperity. Some authors writing from this point of view include Mart Bax, Juan A. Herrero, E. Michael Jones, and Fr. Ivo Sivrić. These authors have better histories on the Medjugorje area and ethnic tensions, than nearly all of authors in the pro-authenticity camp. Bax is a noted sociologist of the Balkan area. His history of Herzegovina and the Medjugorje area are invaluable to a scholar of Medjugorje.<sup>15</sup> Fr. Ivo Sivrić, who was born in Medjugorje and became a Franciscan priest, demonstrates a great understanding of the political, ethnic and ecclesiastical motives present in the history of Catholicism in Herzegovina. Through this knowledge, Sivrić has contributed a painstaking history of the parish of St. James, the village of Medjugorje and the ecclesiastical conflicts of the diocese and country. Leaving Medjugorje decades before the apparitions began, he emigrated to America where he remained until his death in 2002. While preparing his book on Medjugorje he made eight trips back to his hometown to gather information in the same manner any other foreign author would. While these anti-authenticity authors contribute greatly to the historiography of Medjugorje in the area history and culture, each of the aforementioned authors compromise their credibility when discussing the visionaries and alleged apparitions of Mary. It would seem to a reader carefully examining the citations, sources and methodology of these authors: when the discussion of the apparitions begins, the professional training of these authors is suspended.

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<sup>15</sup> *Medjugorje Today* would be another academic work focusing much on the history of the Balkan Catholics.

The most characteristic flaw of the anti-authenticity authors' methods is selectively publishing information. In each of the publications of the aforementioned authors, there are instances in which the author either proves he is ignorant of or carelessly omits information that, once brought to light, would nullify his negative accusations such as quoting one part of a sentence or interview and omitting the rest. While my work is not interested in proving whether or not Our Lady is actually appearing in Medjugorje, it is sobering to recognize that *any* author would either be so careless or so dishonest to omit information that would nullify their claims. After having read hundreds of interviews, seen dozens of video recordings, read nearly every account on the history of Medjugorje, it is easy for me to pick up Jones, Herrero or Sivrić's work on Medjugorje and see that many of their arguments, especially towards the credibility of the visionaries, are simple contextual misunderstandings. However, persons who have not spent years researching the events in Medjugorje would not have the luxury of recognizing such a misunderstanding.

One of dozens of examples in which an anti-authenticity author has tried to discredit one of the visionaries is the instance in which the visionaries claimed Our Lady was going to stop appearing after only nineteen visitations. After tallying up all the instances in which the Virgin appeared to them, in a tape-recorded interview the visionaries claimed that Our Lady was going to stop appearing to them after "two or three more days," a time-span that came and went while Our Lady continued to appear daily for nearly thirty years.<sup>16</sup> The anti-authenticity authors use this information to attempt to prove that the visionaries were caught in a lie and thus fabricating the entire story. In this instance, all the visionaries even to this day say they truly believed Our Lady would stop appearing after only nineteen appearances. Early on in the apparitions, a friend gave the visionary Mirjana a book about the Marian

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<sup>16</sup> E. Michael Jones, *The Medjugorje Deception: Queen of Peace, Ethnic Cleansing, Ruined Lives*, (South Bend, Fidelity Press, 1998), 79.

apparitions in Lourdes, France to Bernadette Soubirous. Mary only appeared to Bernadette nineteen times.<sup>17</sup> The children at Medjugorje had no previous knowledge of Marian apparitions, and thus naively believed that the apparitions would cease after the nineteenth day, just as they did at Lourdes. The visionaries did not gather for the apparition on the first day they thought Our Lady would no longer appear and were all surprised when Our Lady appeared to them individually, wherever they happened to be that day. The visionary Marija remembers that day: “Later, I told the others, ‘Madonna was with me.’ They had all seen her also. So Sunday [the next day], we got together and she came. We concluded this is not like Lourdes.”<sup>18</sup> While the anti-authenticity author would have his audience believe the children were intentionally deceptive and caught in a lie, further research would beg to differ. While the children may or may not be fabricating the Lourdes story as a cover-up, it is irresponsible for the anti-authenticity author not to mention that information if he was aware of it. It is not my place to say whether or not these authors omit information intentionally or simply have conducted inadequate research, but misconstrued and omitted information is a common cause for prejudice on the subject of Medjugorje.

Another deceptive fallacy prevalent in anti-authenticity publications is what David Hackett Fischer calls “the fallacy of the irrelevant proof”<sup>19</sup> in which the authors attempt to answer one question (in our case, whether or not the seers are truly experiencing visions of the Virgin Mary) by introducing all kinds of irrelevant proofs in an attempt to make these “proofs” fit the question at hand. For example, one author claims that the visions in Medjugorje must be a hoax perpetuated by Croatian Catholics and Franciscans, because both groups have a controversial past in Herzegovina with possible ties to ethnic cleansing and

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<sup>17</sup> Svetozar Kraljevic O.F.M., *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje: An Historical Account with Interviews*, edited by Michael Scanlan T.O.R., (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1984), 40. Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 72.

<sup>18</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 40.

<sup>19</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 45.

uprisings. Unfortunately, this particular theory cannot exist in light of the dozens of scientific and medical studies done on the visionaries by believers and non-believers alike claiming the visionaries could not be creating a self-induced state. Although the area surrounding Medjugorje has had a bloody past, *if* indeed the apparitions are authentic and the Mother of God is coming to earth to speak to her children (a viewpoint that the Catholic Church is obligated to investigate), then it would be an historically independent, catalyst event, which means the past would be irrelevant and inconsequential to the instigation of the event. The past, however, would play an important part in the analysis of the reactions of all parties affected. *If* the Virgin Mary is truly appearing, then the history of Medjugorje, Croatian Catholics and Yugoslavia would *only* be relevant in assessing how the visionaries, clergy, government and others involved react to the claims of apparitions. *Only if* the apparitions are false can history then offer motive for a hoax.

Another example of the “irrelevant proof” is that some authors bring to light the scandals involving people who have been to, written about or served at Medjugorje. To say that because someone, somehow connected with Medjugorje did something reproachable is proof that the apparitions are false would be similar to claiming Jesus could not have been who he claimed to be because he handpicked Judas who was a thief and ultimately betrayed him. The answer does not logically fit the question without the context of the situation. One particular justification presented by Juan A. Herrero, which was actually published in the *Research in Social Scientific Study of Religion* journal, concluded that because the visionaries of Medjugorje claimed they could not see the feet of Mary, it was not Mary, but rather the devil in disguise. “The idea from old being that the extremities (mainly the feet, but sometimes also the hands),” Herrero states, “are the only parts that the devil cannot

disguise in human form.”<sup>20</sup> Herrero presents this information as definitive; however, there is no logical connection between his “idea from old” and the modern means by which the Catholic Church investigates an apparitional claim. Although my work is not concerned with *proving* whether or not Mary is appearing in Medjugorje, many readers have dismissed any study of the events in Medjugorje after reading the selective histories presented by these two types of anti-authenticity authors.<sup>21</sup>

Medjugorje is a religious affair and as such, the motivations behind choosing to report on the events of Medjugorje are most often provoked by the personal beliefs, feelings and emotions of the authors. Since most of these authors either believe passionately in the authenticity or passionately in the inauthenticity of the apparitions, the historical recording of the events has become a subject area largely un-policed and un-moderated. Authors are free to publish any fact or opinion on the topic of Medjugorje and no response from the opposing side will ever be “good enough” to dissuade the author’s personal belief. Medjugorje is a bitter argument, not a discourse. Both sides are closed off to each other for the most part, which furthers fundamentalist polarization based on beliefs, rather than an atmosphere in which the truth is actually sought through documentation and logic. The goal of this work is not to be the all-inclusive work on Medjugorje, but to be a well-documented starting place for those investigating the claims of the visionaries.

Being a starting place, I sought to compile the vast majority of my work from primary sources. Due to the lack of citation prevalent in the Medjugorje historiography, my ultimate goal in this work has been not only to thoroughly reference my sources, but very carefully evaluate all sources, in order to only use the most credible, primary sources. My primary

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<sup>20</sup> Juan A. Herrero, “Medjugorje: Ecclesiastical Conflict, Theological Controversy, Ethnic Division,” *Research in The Social Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 10, 1999, 158.

<sup>21</sup> Recently, Catholic University of America graduate theology student Daniel Klimek wrote a response to anti-authenticity author Donald Anthony Foley titled, “Understanding Medjugorje: A Reply to Donald Anthony Foley”. In this article, Klimek systematically explains problems present in the methodology of most anti-authenticity authors and is suggested for further reading on the subject.

sources include audio, visual or transcribed interviews with the visionaries and eyewitnesses to the events being described. Due to the large number of interviews with persons whose first language is not English used in this work, many of the grammatical errors present in the primary sources have been left unaltered, unless doing so seriously compromised the comprehension of the passage. I have also reviewed dozens of United States Department of State documents detailing the U.S. embassies' in Belgrade and Sarajevo efforts to report on the happenings in Medjugorje, which include interviews with high-ranking Vatican and Yugoslavian official and reports of clandestine visits to Medjugorje from two months into the apparitions in 1981 and over the span of the next several years. These documents provide great contextual insight to the events and uninterested commentary into the motivations of the particular players in Medjugorje during the early days. I have also included some secondary sources by authors who have shown their caliber and professionalism outside the religious genre and who take great care in academically referencing their sources (such as Parsons and Sullivan, mentioned before, and Bax and Herrero, regarding the history of Herzegovina and Medjugorje).

With the substantial possibility of misinformation being published, it is difficult to decide how to begin weeding through the hundreds of secondary sources written on Medjugorje. When considering using an authored work, I determined it best to begin with establishing the author's credibility on a case by case basis. Who is the author? Where does he or she come from? Who is his or her audience? What is the author's educational background? Does he or she give full texts of messages/interviews or does the author summarize? Has he or she ever actually been to Medjugorje and under what context? Through these questions, and others like them, I was able to anticipate some of the possible faults and biases of the author's work, therefore establishing a healthy skepticism of the author's opinions. For this particular subject area, it is not uncommon for an author's

religious background to color his or her interpretation of events. Therefore, I considered it important to take into account the author's religious background, in order to be able to assess possible biases.

Much inconsistency and controversy regarding Medjugorje arises from the relative author's decision to summarize personal conclusions on the Medjugorje events. These conclusions are then stated without citation or reference (this occurs in both pro- and anti-authenticity literature). Although some may argue that my work is over-cited and riddled with quotations, it is nonetheless a response to nearly thirty years of historiography with very little direct quotations or citations. Some may even argue that the incessant quotations are the result of my inability to reason and summarize as a trained historian. However, decades of over-summarization and unsubstantiated conclusions have cost many readers a fair and unbiased understanding of the events in Medjugorje; a serious flaw causing a general ignorance about the events in Medjugorje which I am seeking to rectify with this work.

The public at large can hardly be blamed for this ignorance because the historiography on Medjugorje is incredibly polarized with little academic research on the history of the events. News is mostly spread through websites and books with very little noted citations or references. Over the duration of this research, I have been shocked to learn what polarized opinions the general Catholic public believes about Medjugorje, in contrast to what I have learned from several years of dedicated, historical research. I feel very strongly that this particular series of events – events which have affected millions of people from every part of the world over three decades – has been confusingly steeped in hearsay. With the hundreds of published (and exponentially more unpublished) works on the subject of Medjugorje, it is increasingly difficult for those casually investigating the alleged apparitions to determine which sources can be trusted. Or, worse yet, those undiscerning persons investigating Medjugorje for the first time are left at the mercy of the opinion of the first

author they read. The majority of the people who have strong feelings regarding the authenticity of the events in Medjugorje - whether belief or disbelief - are ignorant of much of the history of the apparitions and of the Church's involvement in Medjugorje. Even among academic, journal articles there are wild, unsubstantiated claims that would not be tolerated if they were written about another subject. Discourse on Medjugorje has resulted in employment terminations, lawsuits, mockery and the like. It is hard to imagine a serious scholar wanting to risk academic suicide, no matter how necessary the research.

Therefore, the goal of this work is not to produce another straw on the camel's back, but rather to present a starting point for serious research into the subject of Medjugorje. I have attempted to assemble the most reliable information to form a micro-history of the events at Medjugorje. In this work I have sought to provide a well-documented history for the most misunderstood happenings: the first few weeks of the apparitions and subsequent the response of both the government of Yugoslavia and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Both of these subjects are still presently (and sorely) debated, even though there is no lack of credible documentation. I simply seek to present this documentation in order to alleviate tensions and allow all investigative parties to move forward in search of truth.

## UNDERSTANDING THE FIRST DAYS<sup>22</sup>

*"Peace, Peace, Peace! Be reconciled! Only Peace. Make your peace with God and among yourselves. For that, it is necessary to believe, to pray, to fast, and to go to confession."*

– Our Lady of Medjugorje, 26 June 1981

The storm of June 23, 1981 was unlike any the current inhabitants of Medjugorje had experienced; only the older generations could remember a night with similar devastation. Fires caused by lightning destroyed a local dance club and nearly half of the village post office.<sup>23</sup> This had been a demoralizing issue that had plagued those settled in the valley for centuries. The dry, intense heat of the summers in Herzegovina left much of the shrubbery like crisp kindling. Severe thunderstorms rolling over the mountains, gaining strength from the coast and valleys, were often accompanied by destructive hail, which would devastate the livelihood of the rural farming community of Medjugorje.

According to visitors to the small village in 1984, Medjugorje was a place where “the Slavic soul appears untouched by the veneer of the twentieth century sophistication.”<sup>24</sup> Even though it was under the communist government of Yugoslavia, Medjugorje was far enough removed from the city centers that the people’s expression faith was less regulated than in more urban areas. In 1981, the town was almost homogenously Croatian Catholic. Over fifty years before, in pious hopes of ridding the valley of hail and lightning that would relentlessly destroy crops and cause damaging fires, a 33-foot-tall, cement cross was erected atop the highest peak in Medjugorje to commemorate the 1900th anniversary of Jesus’ death and resurrection. This task was undertaken when the former St. James parish priest, Fr. Bernardin Smoljan, persuaded his parishioners to dedicate their parish to Christ. For this occasion, the

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<sup>22</sup> There are many happenings that occurred during the first few days and months of the apparitions at Medjugorje which are not contained in this account, nor could fully be contained in any account. Rather, I have tried to compile those which would be most beneficial in understanding the reactions of all who were involved during those first days.

<sup>23</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 72. Sabrina Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, (Paris: Editions Sacramento, 2006), 52.

<sup>24</sup> Embassy of Zagreb to Secretary of State Washington, D.C. [DOS], August 1984, Zagreb 01068, p. 6.

parishioners themselves “carried bags of cement, iron bars, wooden beams and other things...to the foot of the hill which was 537 meters high.”<sup>25</sup> Relics of the true cross were brought from Rome and embedded in the cross-section of the monument. Formerly Šipovac Hill, Križevac (literally “Cross Mountain”) as it was renamed in light of the new architectural addition, was the center of Catholic devotion prior to the apparitions. Although storms would come, Ivanka Ivanković, one of the visionaries, remembers that her grandmother, “whenever the storm was approaching, would go outside and pray the Creed until the storm would pass.”<sup>26</sup> Recalling the night before the first apparition, the senior citizens of Medjugorje claim that no such destructive storm had torn through the valley since the erection of the cross.<sup>27</sup>

The proceeding day was less violent, but no less forgettable. June 24, 1981 was the feast of St. John the Baptist, the last Christian prophet who proclaimed the salvific coming of his cousin, Jesus. Work in the fields was cancelled, as it was a day of celebration for the entire village.<sup>28</sup> This day of rest was one to which sixteen-year-old Ivan Dragičević looked forward with great anticipation. Normally at five o’clock in the morning, he went to the fields with his parents to tend to the grapes and tobacco plants which were used for the government; in the afternoon he went to school. Intending to sleep as long as possible on his day off, Ivan needed a little prodding to attend the special morning Mass on the feast day: “I attended mass that morning at 11 o’clock. I was there with my body but I was not sure if I was there with my soul and my heart. I was just waiting for the mass to be over as soon as

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<sup>25</sup> Vasilj-Zuccarini, *Our Lady’s Call from Medjugorje*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Ivanka Ivanković-Elez, National Medjugorje Conference, 1993, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, video recording.

<sup>27</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 72.

<sup>28</sup> Ivanka Ivanković-Elez, “Medjugorje Visitor, Ivanka”, 12 December 2008, recorded by Alicia Bozza, available from [http://www.godtube.com/view\\_video.php?viewkey=3f754f9dc94b20937304](http://www.godtube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=3f754f9dc94b20937304); accessed at 26 February 2011.

possible.” Though surrounded by the pious Catholicism of his area of Herzegovina, Ivan professed to be a rather lukewarm Catholic before the apparitions began:

I never had any special devotion to Our Lady at that time. I was just a practical believer, I went to church regularly, I prayed with my parents every single day. So many times I was just praying with my parents and waiting for the prayer to be over as soon as possible. This is how I was as a child.<sup>29</sup>

When mass was over his family returned home and Ivan ate his lunch very quickly. His friends had been planning a game of soccer in the fields behind their houses. Following the game, around five o'clock he cleaned up and got ready to watch the first half of the basketball game at a friend's, whose household was one of the few in Bijakovići<sup>30</sup> that owned a television set. At halftime, he and his friend Ivan Ivanković<sup>31</sup> decided to return to the Dragičević household to grab a snack. It was on their way back to watch the second half of the game, that the two Ivans heard a young woman's voice calling their name.

Mirjana Dragičević who had lived in Sarajevo with her parents came back to Bijakovići, her birthplace, to visit her grandparents during the summers. Earlier that day, Mirjana and her friend Ivanka Ivanković decided they wanted to spend some time alone (one source claims they intended to sneak cigarettes<sup>32</sup>), so they went for a walk on the outskirts of the hamlet.<sup>33</sup> Ivanka, a beautiful, slender fourteen-year-old, with long brown hair and large dark eyes, lived in Mostar with her parents during the school year. Like Mirjana, during the summer,

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<sup>29</sup> Ivan Dragičević, translated by Helen Sarcevic, 25 April 2005, Lancaster, PA, (Notre Dame, IN: Mary TV), audio recording.

<sup>30</sup> Bijakovići is a hamlet of Medjugorje. The apparitions occurred first on the foot of Podbrdo, which is geographically in Bijakovići.

<sup>31</sup> No direct relation to visionary, Ivanka Ivanković, nor are visionaries Vicka Ivanković and Ivanka Ivanković. Visionaries Mirjana Dragičević and Ivan Dragičević are also unrelated in any direct way. There are many common last names within the hamlets of Medjugorje, most likely due to the isolation of the village.

<sup>32</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 72.

<sup>33</sup> Mirjana Dragičević, interviewed by Judy Pellatt, Ph.D., 5 May 2008, Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, transcription of video recording.

her family usually returned to their home in Medjugorje.<sup>34</sup> Ivanka and Mirjana looked forward to spending time together each summer. After leaving messages for other friends to come and meet them on the outskirts of town, the girls set out on the road that runs along the slope of Podbrdo.

Medjugorje was different than the big cities of Mostar and Sarajevo to which the girls were accustomed. There was less to do. Tobacco and wine grapes, the two crops that provided a living for the villagers, also comprised their recreation. Family, church, and work were elements of the cycle that summarized the centuries of history of this little Herzegovinian town. The hamlet of Bijakovići was just across the fields from the twin spires of St. James Church in Medjugorje. The two were connected by a single, circular, dirt road that ran at the base of the two hills which formed the southern (Križevac) and eastern (Crnica, the slope of which is called “Podbrdo”) boundaries of the town and then connected near the church.

As they were returning from their walk around six-thirty in the evening, the two girls sat down to rest, such that Ivanka was facing Podbrdo and Mirjana was facing the opposite direction. “And at one moment, just like that,” Mirjana describes, “[Ivanka] said to me that ‘I think Our Lady is on the hill’ ... in a little rude way I responded to her, ‘Yeah, like Our Lady has nothing else to do that she would come to the two of us!’”<sup>35</sup> Sixteen-year-old Mirjana was what the villagers refer to as “a city-girl”. Coming from the capital city of Sarajevo, she dressed and styled her blonde hair like a typical teenager emerging from the 1970s. Her urban manner seemed foreign to those in the shelter of Medjugorje. When the parish priest, Fr. Jozo Zovko, first caught wind that Mirjana was one of the teenagers claiming to see Mary, he immediately assumed that the girl from the city had brought drugs to the village

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<sup>34</sup> Ivanković-Elez, “Medjugorje Visitor, Ivanka”.

<sup>35</sup> Mirajana Dragičević, interviewed by Judy Pellatt.

and hallucinations were the result. However, after the hype of the first few days of uncertainty settled, Mirjana's metropolitan upbringing served as an asset to the visionaries. She was and still is the visionary with the most formal education and therefore has been able to articulate the events that have occurred since that day more clearly than the rest. Even today she is the most accessible visionary. Mirjana has even learned English so that the messages of Mary may be transmitted from her own mouth to avoid misrepresentation. Her friend, Ivanka—called specifically by the Virgin to pray for the families of the world—would be the first visionary to settle down and marry and, in essence, leave the spotlight of Medjugorje to devote her life to her family.

Tired of waiting for the rest of their friends to join them near the hill, Mirjana got up and began to walk back to the village without even looking toward the hill. The idea of Mary “appearing” anywhere was absolutely foreign to her imaginings—the apparitions of Lourdes or Fatima were never discussed in Mirjana's family. While religion in Medjugorje was more protected, due to its isolation and almost homogeneous Catholic population, Mirjana's experience in Sarajevo was characterized by acute paranoia:

I didn't even look [at Mary on the hill], because for me that was impossible, because we grew up under communism of the ex-Yugoslavia. Our practical faith was within our families. Every day we would pray the rosary as a family and we were allowed to go to Holy Mass on Sunday only. But our parents never talked to us about faith out of fear, because as children we could go to school and talk about that and our parents could lose their job or lose their home.<sup>36</sup>

While Mirjana professes that her parents taught her from an early age to be ready to die for her faith, *living* in the midst of the officially-atheistic government of Yugoslavia took great reserve. Even when Mirjana returned to Sarajevo while still having daily apparitions, she remained modest and did not speak about any of her experiences outside of her immediate family. Still she was disturbed mercilessly by the government, school authorities

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<sup>36</sup> Mirjana Dragičević, interviewed by Judy Pellatt.; and 1993 Medjugorje conference.

and classmates. In the first few years, Mirjana would be the visionary whose life most radically differed from the others, because she lived in the isolation of Sarajevo.

Though visibly shaken by what she had seen, Ivanka decided to remain silent as they returned back to Bijakovići. On the way home, their friend Milka Pavlović was traveling up the road towards them to let her family's sheep out to graze. She asked her friends to return back along Podbrdo to help her gather the sheep.<sup>37</sup> Ivanka remembers Milka's reaction:

And as soon as she saw my face, she saw that something was happening. She asked me, "Ivanka, you look so strange! What is going on?" And walking back towards that spot, I told her what had happened. When we came back to the spot, then Mirjana and Milka saw the same thing that I had seen.<sup>38</sup>

Before returning to Podbrdo as Ivanka desired, the girls accompanied little Milka as she tended to the sheep. It was only as they were heading back toward the village that Ivanka, no longer able to contain herself, begged Mirjana and Milka to look towards Podbrdo to see if they could see the Virgin, too. Regardless of her initial disbelief, this time Mirjana felt a deep inner desire to look towards the hill. In less than an instant, all three girls found themselves staring at a mysterious, luminescent figure of a beautiful young woman, wearing a grey dress and holding a baby in her arms. "Our Lady didn't *suddenly* appear," Milka remembers, "We just *saw* her and we didn't know who or what she was. We didn't even cross ourselves. We just didn't know what to do."<sup>39</sup> To Mirjana, the whole notion of someone being on the hill seemed very odd to her: "Everything was very strange because nobody was climbing the hill [Podbrdo]. We didn't even have a path that we have today on the hill...especially, it was hard to believe there was such a young woman in a grey dress holding a baby in her arms. Everything was very strange."<sup>40</sup> Mirjana felt as if what she was

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<sup>37</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 142.

<sup>38</sup> Ivanković-Elez, "Medjugorje Visitor, Ivanka".

<sup>39</sup> Dea Boic, *My Sweet Angels*, (Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina: Zupni Ured, 2004), video recording.

Italics added by the author to reflect Milka Pavlović's vocal inflection present in the video-recorded interview.

<sup>40</sup> Mirajana Dragičević, interviewed by Judy Pellatt.

seeing was a dream because, as she had said, no one in Medjugorje climbed that hill. The side of Podbrdo, which has now been cleared by the millions of pilgrims' feet that have trodden its side, was then crude, rugged, and a nesting spot for hornets and vipers.<sup>41</sup> Unless a sheep went astray, the inhabitants kept from climbing very high. Unable to comprehend what they were seeing, the girls stood facing the hill in disbelief.

Vicka Ivanković had returned to Bijakovići around noon from her summer math class in Mostar. She had failed math during the school year and so was forced to repeat the class in the heat of the summer. Already tired from her morning coursework and the 90-degree heat, the ride back to Medjugorje had made her a little queasy, so she decided to relax and take a nap when she arrived home. Mirjana and Ivanka had previously made plans with Vicka to go for a walk that afternoon, but, in her exhaustion, she slept longer than intended. After being awakened by her pesky sister, Vicka hurried and went to Mirjana's Aunt Jaka's house, where she thought she would surely find her friends. However, when she arrived, Jaka told her that the girls had already left toward Podbrdo.<sup>42</sup>

Sixteen-year-old Vicka is the most sanguine and intransigent of the visionaries. During the early months of the apparitions, she was publicly indignant to the government officials who attempted to terrorize the visionaries on several occasions. Although forbidden by the police, she would stand on the balcony of her parents' home and announce the latest message of the Virgin to all who could hear. Although she is now married and has become more reserved than when the apparitions began, she still addresses pilgrims weekly from her parents' balcony. Looking into a crowd of thousands, Vicka still responds to each pilgrim's shout with a blown kiss and a genuinely loving smile. Her typical peasant

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<sup>41</sup> However, since the advent of the apparitions, no vipers have been spotted on the hill.

<sup>42</sup> Paragraph summarized from Janko Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje: The Seer Vicka Speaks of Her Experiences*, (Chicago: Friends of Medjugorje, 1996), 5.

straightforwardness and humble charity has made her a favorite with pilgrims, peasants, and reporters alike.

Upon hearing Jaka's words, Vicka left the house immediately to go find them: "I went to look for Ivanka and Mirjana because every summer we are together all the time." She found the three girls staring intently up at Podbrdo on the main road of Bijakovići; she thought they were looking at a snake.<sup>43</sup> Milka was the first to see Vicka and began calling for her to come and see what they were seeing. The girls started waving at Vicka to come: "Look up there—the Madonna!" Vicka called "What do you mean the Madonna?" and then remarked sarcastically, "What is the matter with you?"<sup>44</sup> Though fronting an air of confidence, Vicka was disturbed by the assertions of her friends. She was sure they were kidding, but being a reactionary her decision was to flee. She kicked off her shoes and ran back towards the village. In her distress, she stopped behind some of the houses, and as her emotions finally set in, she began to cry. Were they making a joke about the Mother of God? Were they serious?<sup>45</sup> She did not know, but as she was deciding what to do next, she spotted the two Ivans who were returning from their dinner with a bag full of apples to watch the second half of the basketball game. Ivan Dragičević remembers hearing a voice calling his name:

At that moment I didn't see anyone in front of me, and I didn't see anyone behind me. The path that we were on was very narrow, it was all overgrown with bushes. Since we didn't see anyone we just continued to walk. But however, as we were walking, the voice was getting stronger and stronger and at one moment I turned around towards back and I saw ... Vicka. She was running after us, and she was shaking with fear. She was barefoot. And she was still calling us, "Come! Come with me! Our Lady is on the hillside!"<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 143.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Ivan Dragičević, Lancaster, PA.

Ivan could not understand what she meant, he turned to Ivan Ivanković and quipped, “Let her be. She’s daft.”<sup>47</sup> But then he began to realize how frightened she was. The two Ivans decided to return with Vicka to the spot where the other girls were still standing, and as they were walking towards Podbrdo, Ivan recalls that Vicka’s fear began to permeate through his own inhibitions.

Believing she could withstand the event if the men were there for support, Vicka returned to the site of the apparition. Once they got to the place where the girls were standing, Vicka felt the same desire as Mirjana welling up inside of her to look toward what the girls said they were seeing:

And there I was, standing in the middle of the road. I wasn’t looking at [the girls] or at the mount, but straight ahead. Dear God! I couldn’t go back or ahead. There was something stronger within me. A few minutes went by and my head lifted, not by my own will. Our Lady was beckoning us to come...<sup>48</sup>

Vicka said she saw a “shining figure of a ‘beautiful maiden’ holding a child in her arms. Continually covering and uncovering the child as if she wished [the children] to see him...”<sup>49</sup> Vicka turned to Ivan Dragičević, “Do you see anything?” But, to her surprise, he was already gone!<sup>50</sup> As soon as he caught a glimpse of what the others were seeing on the hill, he dropped the apples he was carrying, turned around and ran straight for home. While his friend was leaping over fences in order to get home as quickly as possible, the elder Ivan Ivanković saw something indistinguishable and white, rotating on the hillside. Vicka only remained for a few minutes more before she ran off toward home again. “I was extremely

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<sup>47</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Heather Parsons, *Vicka, Touched by a Mother’s Love: Conversations with a Medjugorje Visionary*, (Ireland: Faith Publications in association with St. Joseph & the Helper’s Charity, 2006), 11.

<sup>50</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 8.

happy, yet fearful also. I was afraid, and yet, I was glad,” Vicka told Fr. Janko Bubalo in an early interview. “I sat on the couch [at home] and started to cry. I just cried and cried.”<sup>51</sup>

The rest of the group stood there until the apparition slowly faded away and then the children were left to their own consciences. Mirjana remembers feeling conflicting emotions within herself: “fear, misunderstanding, admiration... everything,”<sup>52</sup> but in the end, fear won out. Mirjana turned to Ivanka and semi-dismissively quipped: “Who knows what we saw?” With that, the remaining group slowly headed back to Bijakovići. Uncertain indeed about what they had witnessed, Mirjana and Ivanka agreed not to make a big deal out of it.

On that first day, it did not occur to the group of young people that they might have been specially chosen to witness the shining woman and child. Milka remembers thinking that if “lots of people were there, we would have called all of them because we were not sure ourselves.”<sup>53</sup> The visionaries believe that if more people *had* been present that first day, they would have seen Our Lady, too. There was talk amongst themselves to return to the spot on Podbrdo the next day around the same time; if they saw the Gospa again, they could be sure enough to tell more people, but if not they would not need to speak of the experience again. Mirjana left Ivanka and went back to her grandmother’s house.

Although they initially desired to keep the matter quiet, their excitement led them to act otherwise: Mirjana, Milka and Vicka admit to discussing their vision with family members, which led to mixed feelings in the village of Bijakovići. Some were suspicious, others dismissive—certain villagers even poked fun at the children’s story. Upon hearing the news of the Virgin’s appearance, Milka’s uncle quipped, “You should have caught her!” and Vicka’s sister accused them of seeing a “flying saucer.”<sup>54</sup> Even Ivan Ivanković, who had seen

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<sup>51</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 7.

<sup>52</sup> Mirjana Soldo, “Mirjana Soldo: Marian Visionary from Medjugorje,” *IHS Special Speaker Series*, 22 April 2009, at The Sanctuary of the Divine Mercy, St. Stanislaus Kostka: Chicago, Illinois, author’s notes.

<sup>53</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>54</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 9.

a luminescent, cloudy figure of a woman, perceived what he saw with his own two eyes as superfluous—he thought it was childish to chase visions on the hillside. At the time, Vicka could not blame him: “He’s a bit older than we and what does he want to hang around with us punks?”<sup>55</sup> In the typical Croatian fashion, the news spread quickly.

Ivan Dragičević never saw the second half of the basketball game, nor did he inquire about the score; there were now larger issues pressing.<sup>56</sup> When he left the others on the side of the road, he ran straight home, did not say a word to his parents and locked himself in his room for the night. “That was a night of much fear,” Ivan recalls. “There were so many questions going through my mind. Is this possible? How can it be possible? And I was scared. What if she comes into my room? Where would I run then?”<sup>57</sup> But he *had* seen her. Over and over he played that fateful moment in his mind, like a dream: arriving at the hill and seeing Ivanka and Mirjana staring up at the hill crying, then Vicka motioning with her hand toward the hillside and saying to him, “Look up there!”; looking to the hill and seeing an outline of Our Lady; turning away and looking twice more. It was at that point that he fled. It was all he could do. Now he sat anxiously awaiting the morning. “That night was as long as a whole year to me.”<sup>58</sup>

Ivan was not alone in his thoughts that night. Although they were full of anxiety, the children recalled that the beautiful lady they saw was all they could think about. Vicka even claimed that she dreamed of the shining lady that night in her sleep.<sup>59</sup> All the visionaries wondered if they were normal, and how something of this nature could have happened to them. None of them had ever heard of other appearances of Mary, such as Lourdes or Fatima,

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<sup>55</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> Ivan Dragičević, Lancaster, PA.

<sup>57</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>58</sup> Ivan Dragičević, Lancaster, PA.

<sup>59</sup> Parsons, *Vicka, Touched by a Mother's Love*, 11.

or even conceived that the mother of Jesus could appear along the side of the road! They thought Mary was in heaven and she was as personal to them as a statue or painting.<sup>60</sup>

Mirjana's grandmother chastised the childish stories of her granddaughter: "Take a rosary and pray. Leave Our Lady in the heavens where she belongs."<sup>61</sup> It was at that moment that Mirjana first recognized the attractiveness of prayer, "I obeyed immediately, because I felt so strange; I felt I could only have peace if I took the rosary and prayed."<sup>62</sup> In the midst of internal chaos, something inside Mirjana was telling her that the only resolution could be through prayer.

When faced with the Mother of Jesus, Ivanka's mind lingered on thoughts of her own mother. "My mother was not well and was in and out of the hospitals," Ivanka told a crowd at the University of Notre Dame in 1993. Her mother died at a hospital in Mostar in April of 1981, just two months before the apparitions began. Tragically, Jagoda Ivanković had suffered a fatal asthma attack, caused by an abundance of blooming flora that spring. Fourteen-year-old Ivanka took the loss very hard. Fr. Jozo Zovko, the parish priest who interred the girl's mother, recalled that Ivanka "only a few weeks earlier had wanted to jump into her mother's tomb."<sup>63</sup> "During the funeral, I had felt great pain, indescribable pain," Fr. Jozo continued, "I felt such compassion for these children [Ivanka and her brother and sister] who were inconsolable. We had all cried; we were all incredibly sad."<sup>64</sup>

While in mourning for her mother back in April, Ivanka experienced something that all five of the other visionaries said they could have never imagined. "The funeral was in the afternoon. After the funeral a couple of friends came to console me. We were sitting above our homes a little bit up the hill [Podbrdo]. We saw a white, illuminated image and we didn't

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<sup>60</sup> Ivan Ivanković,

<sup>61</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 54.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

know what it was, so we started running towards our homes.”<sup>65</sup> It was not until Mirjana and Ivanka went for their fateful walk a few weeks later when she would see “again that beautiful image of a lady, that was the Gospa” that this vision the day of her mother’s funeral would finally make some sense to her.<sup>66</sup> It is perhaps this occasion that prepared Ivanka to so readily recognize the image of the Virgin when the others could hardly believe.<sup>67</sup> When asked how she knew that what she was seeing was Our Lady, she simply stated, “I just knew.”

The morning of June 25th, Marija, Milka’s older sister, and Vicka discussed the appearance of Our Lady during the car ride to catch the bus in Čitluk, which would then take them to Mostar for classes. Marinko Ivanković, their driver, was a mechanic in Čitluk who was always looking for a way he could lend a hand to his fellow villagers. After listening to the girls’ peculiar conversation, when he returned home from work, he eagerly sought answers about the event that occurred the previous evening.

After the restlessness of the previous night, Ivan Dragičević thought daylight would be his only comfort. However, when he finally emerged from his room the next morning, his parents were waiting anxiously behind the door. They bombarded him with questions and expressed serious apprehensions: “Be very careful what you talk about.”<sup>68</sup> Like the rest of the seers’ families, the Dragičevićs were concerned that the Communists would catch wind of the religious rumoring that had spread like wildfire throughout Bijakovići overnight. They did not want their family to be caught in any scandal that would bring punishment from the Secret Police. Villagers were already asking questions and making intimations.

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<sup>65</sup> Ivanković-Elez, National Medjugorje Conference.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Before the 1917 apparition of Mary to three shepherd children in Fatima, Portugal, the visionaries claim that an the Archangel Gabriel – patron of Portugal – appeared to them for a year, preparing them for the coming of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

<sup>68</sup> Ivan Dragičević, 28 April 2008, Queen of Peace Parish, Uniontown, OH.

After a little while, Marinko came to talk with one of the Ivans who witnessed the event to understand better what had happened. He learned that some of the children were planning to return to the hill that night and decided to accompany them. Knowing the children's families, Marinko noted that some of their family situations were complicated, and thus they were particularly vulnerable:

[Ivanka] was the first in the group who saw the light and the Madonna. Her mother was dead and her father was in Germany. Practically, too, Jakov does not have a father; he lives in Bosnia but rarely visits here. Then Mirjana's family lives in Sarajevo. In one way or another, the children did not have parental advice or the protection of parents. So I got to know them with only one thought in mind: to give them strength, in place of their parents.<sup>69</sup>

Although his intentions were admirable, he was given incorrect information about the time when the children would meet at the mountain that night, and he arrived an hour too late. Still, Marinko would be a protector of the children for the first few months of the apparitions.

During the summers, Mirjana helped her uncles with work in the fields. Work began early for her on June 25th, so she was unable to meet up with Ivanka all day. However, she never ceased thinking about what she had experienced the preceding day. Bernadette, the visionary of Lourdes, France, described a similar experience in her meetings with Our Lady. Even though she was not certain that the luminous woman who was appearing to her was Mary the mother of Jesus until almost the last apparition, Bernadette's heart swelled with anticipation. Before each apparition, she interiorly knew that Our Lady was calling her to return to the grotto in which Mary would appear to her.<sup>70</sup> Ivanka, Mirjana and Vicka claim that they felt a similar interior pull to return to Podbrdo as the time of the apparition drew near, even though they had already discussed returning the previous day.

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<sup>69</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 152.

<sup>70</sup> *Bernadette of Lourdes*, translated by J.H. Gregory, (New York: Louché, Keane, & Fitch, Inc., 1915), 49.

In the late afternoon, as it came closer to the time when Mirjana and Ivanka had first seen Our Lady the day before, Mirjana was still working in the fields with her uncles. As time grew even nearer, the thoughts about Our Lady's visit became too intense. She excused herself, "I must go to Podbrdo—something is pulling me. I simply have to go!"<sup>71</sup> Mirjana's uncle decided to accompany her. When Mirjana arrived at the hill with Ivanka and Vicka, it seemed as if half the village had come the second day, because each visionary had brought along their own group of family and friends.<sup>72</sup>

Vicka had been at Jaka Čolo's home with Jaka's ten-year-old son, Jakov. Milka Pavlović's mother did not allow her to return to the hill the second evening.<sup>73</sup> Marija Pavlović, her fifteen-year-old sister who shared the morning commute with Vicka, would end up going in her stead and become the fifth of the six visionaries. Marija has been described as possessing "natural composure and profound spirituality... Her whole being is characterized by obedience, modesty and determination."<sup>74</sup> Although she had initial reservations about her sister's story, Marija's desire to accompany the group of adolescents to the hill was that of deep respect for Our Lady. "If you see the Madonna," Marija told the others, "I would just like to be there. I do not have to see her" and she reverently followed Vicka with little Jakov to Podbrdo.<sup>75</sup> After this day, Marija Pavlović went on to play a significant role in the propagation of the messages of the Madonna of Medjugorje as the visionary who receives the monthly messages of Mary intended for the world.

Jakov Čolo, Mirjana's ten-year-old cousin, was with Marija and Vicka at his mother's home the evening of June 25th. He was very excited at the thought of the Virgin Mary and wanted to tag along with the older girls. This day, Jakov would become the youngest of the

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<sup>71</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>72</sup> Soldo, "Mirjana Soldo: Marian Visionary from Medjugorje," St. Stanislaus Kostka: Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>73</sup> Parsons, *Vicka, Touched by a Mother's Love*, 12.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Mayr, *The Visionaries from Medjugorje: Tried by Science*, (Munich: FilmGruppeMünchen, 2004), documentary.

<sup>75</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 11.

Medjugorje seers and it would be Jakov's youth and unwavering testimony that would give much credibility to the apparitions in the early days. Friar Svetozar Kraljevic, one of the first to publish a book on the events of Medjugorje, noted that any normal 12-year-old child would soon rebel against a strict, spiritual schedule if it were all a trick, especially one as fidgety as little Jakov. However, after two years, Fr. Kraljevic observed, "Jakov is the most regular of the six in attendance at the evening service<sup>76</sup>: he has never missed one service..."<sup>77</sup> Because of their closeness, Mirjana often uses Jakov as the butt of her jokes when speaking to pilgrims: Mirjana jokes that Jakov is proof in and of himself that the visionaries are not being manipulated in their stories. She wisecracks that if you tell Jakov a secret that is just meant for him to know, in an hour the whole town will be talking about it!<sup>78</sup> It was apparent from the beginning that little Jakov was indeed the most honest and earnest of the visionaries.

Ivan Dragičević also had the strong desire to return to the apparition site, but, as Vicka remembers, "he's a shy young man, so he looked to see what we were going to do and he followed our lead."<sup>79</sup> As Mirjana, Vicka and Ivanka led the group to Podbrdo, Ivan, Marija and Jakov stayed further behind to see what the girls would find awaiting them this particular evening. As the seers and curious villagers converged upon Podbrdo, the Gospa was already there, waiting for them; Ivanka again saw the Virgin first, standing on the side of the hill. Vicka called to Marija and Jakov, as she promised, and Ivan followed as well.

Jakov remembers that as he and Marija approached the area where the others were standing, "from the road we saw a figure of a woman, who was beckoning to us with her hand to come to the Mountain of Visions [Podbrdo]."<sup>80</sup> "I saw just an outline of Our Lady,"

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<sup>76</sup> The "evening service" is the name given to the daily program instituted in Medjugorje after the apparitions began that consisted of an entire rosary, confession, mass and either adoration of the Blessed Sacrament or Veneration of the Cross.

<sup>77</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 73.

<sup>78</sup> Soldo, "Mirjana Soldo: Marian Visionary from Medjugorje," St. Stanislaus Kostka: Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>79</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 13.

<sup>80</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

Marija reminisces. “Then bit by bit, she became clearer. Then I saw her just like the others.”<sup>81</sup> As each of the children approached the hill, they saw that Our Lady was already there, as if she were waiting for them to arrive. The woman was several meters higher on the hill than she was the day before, and she was without the child in her arms. Rather, standing on what seemed to be a little wisp of cloud, she beckoned for them to come close to her. Ivan remembers having the same desire to run away as on the first day, but instead, on this day, there was something stronger inside of him that prevented him from doing so.<sup>82</sup> On June 25th, Vicka, Ivan, Ivanka, Mirjana, Marija and Jakov – without understanding why – felt as if they were being summoned up the side of the hill to where the lady was standing. To the surprise of the inquisitive crowd that had followed them, the six children did something that no one would have predicted: they went from a practically petrified state to abruptly vaulting up the side of the steep foothill.

The treacherous terrain of Podbrdo is characterized by a lack of topsoil, which is instead covered by rocks and boulders of all sizes and shapes. Thick with thorny bushes, boulders and small trees, the mountain is the ideal environment for the many viper and hornet nests.<sup>83</sup> Prior to this moment, none of the villagers climbed Podbrdo unless to chase a stray animal. The stunned villagers stood and watched the children bound up the impossible mountain side with uncanny speed and ease. Vicka describes that miraculous moment of being carried up the hill by a power both her own and that of another: “We ran directly forward. Directly through the thickets... Why, we ran forward as though something was propelling us. There was no stone nor thickets. Nothing. As though it were all of rubber or sponge, whatever. Why, it was beyond description. No one could keep up with us.”<sup>84</sup> “I felt

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<sup>81</sup> Angela Tilby, *The Madonna of Medjugorje*, Westernhanger/BBC Production (Steubenville, Ohio: Franciscan University Press, 1987), video recording.

<sup>82</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>83</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 73.

<sup>84</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 11.

this yearning to come to her as soon as possible,” Mirjana recalls in a later interview, “and we reached her much quicker than the other people from the village. And they thought it very strange.”<sup>85</sup>

“When we were about two meters away from the Madonna, we felt as if we were thrown to our knees,” Vicka stated in a tape-recorded interview just nine months after the apparitions began, “Jakov was thrown kneeling into a thorny bush, and I thought he would be injured. But he came out of it without a scratch.”<sup>86</sup> Little Jakov recalls that the first time he saw the Gospa that day, he was unaware of his surroundings, “When I first came close to Our Lady and saw her clearly with my own eyes, nothing else existed for me anymore.”<sup>87</sup> The children were with the Virgin Mary for a few minutes before the rest of the villagers could catch up with them. When they reached the woman who had been calling them closer, the six children could finally see her without any other distraction. She was wearing a seamless, grey dress with a white veil, which covered her curly, black hair, and she was smiling—radiantly.<sup>88</sup>

This first experience of being close to the Mother of God moved them profoundly.

Little Jakov remembers the intense emotion of his first day:

In my heart I felt tremendous joy and serenity. And when I first came close to Our Lady and saw her clearly with my own eyes, nothing else existed for me anymore... When you see Our Lady you feel nothing else. There is nothing else in your head. Only her great love, her goodness and the incredible joy she brings.<sup>89</sup>

Mirjana’s own experience that day mirrors that of Jakov’s:

When I first came close to Our Lady I thought, this is what it must feel like in paradise: such beauty, such love, such a feeling of being protected, of so much motherly love, that at one point I lost consciousness with all that excitement and indescribably beauty... I’m

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<sup>85</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>86</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 12.

<sup>87</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>88</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 12.

<sup>89</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

not sure if I am alive or dead—if this is really happening to me. All I wanted was to look at her—to hold that lovely feeling I felt when I was with her, because I had never experienced such beauty in all my life. I only wanted it never to stop. To be with her all the time.<sup>90</sup>

Feeling faint and not knowing what to do, Ivanka was the first to speak to Our Lady. “I asked about my mother who had died two months before,” Ivanka recalls, “I asked where my mother was and Our Lady said that she was with her.”<sup>91</sup> After this exchange the children were still at a loss, so they did what they thought would be best in this peculiar situation: they began to pray. Vicka reported, “We were praying because we did not know what else to do. We were crying a little and praying a little.”<sup>92</sup>

The children were enraptured not only by the woman’s supernatural presence, but also by her incomparable beauty. Though all of the visionaries of the many Marian apparitions throughout history have unanimously decided that the beauty of their heavenly visitor could never be adequately be described by language or replicated by any earthly material, the visionaries of Medjugorje attempt in vain to answer the question posed to them daily by enthusiastic pilgrims: “What does the Mother of God look like?” Marija makes her best endeavor when interviewed by journalist Heather Parsons: “She is so very beautiful and she smiles so much... Her hair is so black and her eyes so blue and she has such beautiful colour in her cheeks. We see her really young, perhaps 22 or 23... We asked her one day, I remember, for what reason are you so beautiful? And she smiled at us and said, ‘Because I love’.”<sup>93</sup>

After a little while, villagers started to reach the location where the children were kneeling. The villagers – like Marija and Jakov – had come to the hill that day with the children to see if the Madonna was truly appearing. However, only Vicka, Mirjana, Ivanka,

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<sup>90</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>91</sup> Mayr, *The Visionaries from Medjugorje: Tried by Science*.

<sup>92</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 13.

<sup>93</sup> Parsons, *Marija and the Mother of God*, 9.

Ivan, Jakov and Marija were able to see the apparition. Some villagers claim that during the early days of the apparition they were able to see a light when Our Lady appeared or that they were even able to reach out and touch her,<sup>94</sup> but when they reached the spot on the side of hill, all they saw were the children in a cluster, enrapt by whatever was appearing in front of them. Mirjana, finally reaching a moderately-coherent state of mind, attempted to reason with their visitor: “Dear Madonna, they will not believe us when we go home. They will tell us that we are crazy.”<sup>95</sup> Mary’s only reply was a sweet smile. One of the visionaries then asked if she would return, and the Virgin nodded her head in confirmation.<sup>96</sup> A little later, she said, “Go in God’s peace” and ascended out of sight.

After Our Lady had left, little Jakov, who had fallen kneeling into a thicket at the feet of Our Lady, wiggled his way out of the thorn bush without a single scratch on him! The rest of the children got up off their knees, and the girls started crying. According to Vicka, Jakov repeated in childlike excitement, “I can’t die now that I’ve seen the Virgin!”<sup>97</sup> The nearly fifteen villagers, who had showed up to protect the children, helped each other off the hill. It was on this second day when the children and villagers first responded to the call of Our Lady and therefore the visionaries said Mary requested June 25th to become the anniversary of the Medjugorje apparitions. From this point on, the children, who the night before had experienced fear and anxiety, would never be the same.

According to a tape-recorded interview of villager Marinko Ivanković, in February 1983, Marinko remembers arriving at Podbdro just as everyone was coming down from the mountain. Ivanka was sobbing in the arms of her grandmother, relaying to her what the Gospa had told of her mother. Still thinking logically, Marinko wanted to take the proper

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<sup>94</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>95</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 13.

<sup>96</sup> Parsons, *Marija and the Mother of God*, 13.

<sup>97</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 12.

course of action, so he decided that the priests of the parish should be informed. Marinko desperately wanted to confide first in the rector of the parish, Fr. Jozo Zovko, who unfortunately was away in Zagreb giving a retreat to a group of religious sisters. Instead Fr. Zrinko Cuvalo came to the door of the rectory. “How are you, Marinko? What’s new?” he asked. Marinko was a little bewildered by the fact that his answer to this question would not be as mundane as the priest would expect:

Father, I came to tell you that last night and this evening, some children have been saying they’ve seen the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Madonna. Now they’re crying and troubled. I think you should see them and try to console them—talk to them and find out if what they’ve been saying is true.<sup>98</sup>

Marinko, expecting a similar reaction to his own from Fr. Zrinko was shocked at his seeming apathy towards these events: “Marinko, let those who have been allowed to see it, see it; and those who have not been allowed, *not* see it.”

In a later interview, Fr. Zrinko remembered taking the news “coolly, neither contemptuously, nor enthusiastically.”<sup>99</sup> It was not until the next day that the gravity of the situation set in and the second-in-command began to wonder if he had handled things properly while Fr. Jozo was absent. Like most Yugoslav Christians, Fr. Zrinko lived in fear of persecution from the officially atheistic government. In the coming days, he would urge visiting religious donning habits or clerics to dress in civilian clothing, in order to avoid possible repercussions. He foresaw the possibility of Church trials, communist persecution and even prison. “That I call anxiety,” Fr. Zrinko stated definitively, “you see something coming, you don’t know what it is and when it comes, you don’t know whether it will crush you.”<sup>100</sup> Eventually, he would come to believe in the authenticity of the apparitions, but that

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<sup>98</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 153.

<sup>99</sup> Svetozar Kraljevic O.F.M., *In the Company of Mary: Thoughts on the Apparitions of Our Lady of Medjugorje*, (Nashville: St. Francis Press, 1988), 102.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

evening, Fr. Zrinko shooed Marinko along with, “Thank God, go about your business, we shall see...”<sup>101</sup>

And with the same casualness, the conversation ended and Marinko was alone with his thoughts on the way home. He wanted Fr. Jozo to return. “I couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t go with me,” Marinko thought, “He acted as if he couldn’t care less if the Madonna had appeared. I couldn’t understand—it didn’t seem possible.” He knew that the priests should be paying special attention to this, if not for the sake of consoling the children involved, then surely for the sake of guiding the pious people who were beginning to congregate on the hillside: “...especially a priest, because it’s connected with the faith. So the priests should be told about it,” he said. “Especially because this might *not* be true, they should investigate and warn the people.”<sup>102</sup> Frustrated and without immediate help of the clergy, Marinko did what he thought was correct: he vowed to act as the protector of the children, to keep them safe and watch what went on at each apparition, until someone from the Church would help.

The next day, June 26th, the word was out: people from the surrounding area had journeyed to Podbrdo in order to be part of history.<sup>103</sup> On the third day, the pilgrims numbered in the thousands and the local inhabitants scrambled to provide for the needs of their unfamiliar guests. Many of the sojourners left home without any food or water, let alone a place to stay. Medjugorje had no hotels or restaurants, so the locals shared everything they could spare at no charge. Due to the relative chaos of the day, Marinko decided to organize the children before they went towards the hill so they would not be swallowed up by the crowd.

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<sup>101</sup> Kraljevic, *In the Company of Mary*, 102.

<sup>102</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 153.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 15. Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 16.

The children, on the other hand, now certain of what they had seen, hurried through the day about their chores in anticipation of another possible meeting with Our Lady. In contrast to the anxiety of the night before, Vicka remembers the jubilation the third day brought, “We could hardly wait until it was six o’clock in the evening. We did our daily chores as fast as we could so that we might go all the more quickly.”<sup>104</sup> Mirjana was so taken with the Gospa that she confessed, “I didn’t notice the people. I didn’t think about them; I was with Our Lady,” in regards to the ever-growing crowds. “And when I was not with her, she was always in my thoughts. When will I see her again? Will I have that joy again? I preferred being alone and praying.”<sup>105</sup>

While the visionaries had found a new type of peace, their families were still very confused and anxious. Some of the older women of the community directed Vicka to sprinkle the apparition with holy water.<sup>106</sup> According to Catholic belief, holy water dispels the presence of any unseen evil. The women of the village believed that if the apparition was truly from God, then it could withstand being sprinkled with holy water, and if it was of the devil, it would surely flee. Apparent from her writings, Bernadette, the visionary of the Virgin’s appearances at Lourdes felt the same way. On the second day of the French apparitions in 1858, Bernadette brought a bottle of holy water with her to the grotto. When the Lady appeared, Bernadette sprinkled her a little bit with water and said, “If you are from God stay, but if not, go away.” When she saw that the Lady’s only reply was a smile and a nod, Bernadette was “overcome by fear, so she hurriedly splashed her until the bottle was empty.”<sup>107</sup> Our Lady’s smile only grew, according to Bernadette. Most likely imitating the story of Lourdes, Vicka’s mother took blessed salt and added it to a container of water while

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<sup>104</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 15.

<sup>105</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>106</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 17.

<sup>107</sup> Patricia A. McEachern, *A Holy Life: St. Bernadette of Lourdes*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 206.

praying the Apostles Creed<sup>108</sup> (as has been the custom for making holy water in the homes of Catholics in this region in times when priests could not be present) and gave it to Marinko, who was taking the children to Podbrdo.<sup>109</sup>

Since Our Lady appeared in different places on the two days before and to Marija off the hill, no one was sure where to go, so when the time was drawing near, the children, along with Marinko, took the path behind the houses which lined Podbrdo until they saw a flash of light.<sup>110</sup> Many present said they also saw a flash of light on the hill that day. Instinctively, the visionaries dashed towards the light in the same fashion as the night before. Just a few days later, little Jakov was asked in an interview how he could tell where the Gospa was standing. Jakov said, “I wouldn’t be able to find the spot on my own. We see a light that surrounds the Madonna, and follow wherever the light and the Madonna move.”<sup>111</sup>

After the burst of light that he and others present witnessed, Marinko began to lead the children towards the light: “This third evening, the Madonna was about 300 meters farther away from the place where she had appeared the first two evenings... The children told me where to go... and we climbed higher on the hill.”<sup>112</sup> Ivan reached the spot and knelt first; the others followed. Marinko asked where Our Lady was and the children replied that “she was floating on a cloud of light. Not touching the ground.”<sup>113</sup> Vicka, who had never heard of any Marian apparition—let alone the actions of Bernadette at Lourdes—following the advice of her elders, sprinkled the holy water at the Madonna, saying, “If you are Our Lady, stay. If you are not, go!”<sup>114</sup> In response, the apparition smiled like a mother pleased

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<sup>108</sup> This method of “making” holy water – remarkably – has been one of the most debated aspects of the apparitions for those who attribute the happenings at Medjugorje to the work of the devil. However, blessed salt, according to the Church, also has the same effect in the expulsion of evil. According to Croatian, Maria Paulic, this is a common way to procure holy water in rural Herzegovina.

<sup>109</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 17.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>111</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 15.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>113</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

with the obedience of her children. Vicka remembers that she could see the drops of water hit the Madonna and then slowly drip down until they were gone.

Ivanka, grasping at the idea of being able to now communicate with her deceased mother, asked Our Lady if her mother had a message for her. The Gospa positively replied: "Obey your grandmother and be good to her because she is old and cannot work."<sup>115</sup> Someone from the crowd shouted to the children, "Ask Our Lady to give us a sign, too, so we could see that she was here." The children responded together, "Blessed are they who do not see, but still believe." The crowd was astonished at their response. Marinko stated, "We all wondered where they got it from. They couldn't have heard it before."<sup>116</sup> Mirjana asked the woman who she was; "the Blessed Virgin Mary" was her response.

The apparition that night lasted half an hour. June in Herzegovina gets very hot and that day was no exception. The children were sweating after climbing up the hill at a hurried pace. The spectators were pressing upon them, which thickened the air. Witnesses say that Ivanka and Mirjana fainted briefly; however, after about ten minutes, the Gospa said to the children "Stand. Do not kneel anymore."<sup>117</sup> The children claimed on this third day, Our Lady announced herself as "the Queen of Peace" and told the children "have no fear of me."<sup>118</sup>

Exhausted, the children headed to their homes after Our Lady left only to find throngs of villagers and pilgrims waiting for them in order to ask them questions and learn every detail. On the way down from the hill, Marija Pavlović walked alone and to the side, away from the others. Our Lady spontaneously appeared to her with a giant cross behind her and seemingly begged Marija: "Peace, peace, peace and only peace! Peace must reign between

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<sup>115</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 13.

<sup>116</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>117</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 16-17.

<sup>118</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

God and man and also between men.”<sup>119</sup> This was the first indication that at least one of the visionaries was being called to a special mission. The children continued to meet the Virgin for the next few evenings on the hillside and the curious crowds grew daily, reaching thousands within the first week. It was only a matter of time before the officially atheistic government was to catch word of the unsanctioned religious gatherings happening in Bijakovići.

Initial reactions to the Virgin Mary appearing on a hillside of rural Herzegovina were varied depending on each party's predisposition and proximity. The children were terribly frightened and anxious at first, but the quantity of the alleged meetings with Mary allayed their fears and, according to several, later medical evaluations, allowed them to maintain a healthy psychological state, even though their situation was exceedingly stressful. Their parents were troubled, not out of the sense that the children were lying, but more so out of concern for what could befall their family if word reached the wrong parties. Some villagers thought it was tomfoolery, while others believed in the authenticity of the children's claims instantly and led others in religious devotions. The friars at the local parish were skeptical and concerned about preventing their flock from being led astray. A few people felt the burning desire to protect the visionaries and most others spread the story like wildfire.

However, the probability of a harsh reaction from the government was the concern that was looming in everyone's thoughts. Yugoslavia was an officially atheistic state and in the not-too-distant past had sent armed teams to threaten or murder numerous Christian believers of the nation. Villagers knew that even receiving the Sacraments of the Church often cost citizens high-ranking jobs in Yugoslavia. Surely, the repercussions for claiming to

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<sup>119</sup> Steve Shawl and Anna Shawl, “Medjugorje Information”, *Medjugorje Web*, available from <http://www.medjugorje.org/medinfo.htm>, accessed 30 October 2010.

see the Virgin Mary, especially as the crowds began to form, could be harsh. The people of Medjugorje did not have to wait long before the government found out. Within a week of the first reports, the children became a target for almost daily threats and abductions, not to mention that guards were posted in their neighborhoods to make sure the visionaries did not interact with anyone, especially the Virgin Mary.

The local authority's immediate reaction was to prove that the visionaries' story was the result of mental illness at the recommendation of a government-employed, medical professional. On Saturday, June 27th, 1981, the children were taken by the police to the nearby Čitluk Healthcare Center to be examined by doctors with the expectation that they would be labeled as "insane".<sup>120</sup> Dr. Ante Bosnjak, the head of the healthcare center, was on call that day and was summoned to join Dr. Dara Glamuzina, the doctor on duty, when the children were brought in. Dr. Glamuzina admits that when the clinic had first been notified that children from Medjugorje had seen visions of the Virgin Mary, as a "self-proclaimed atheist"<sup>121</sup> she immediately dismissed it as a waste of her time. However, during the interrogation, her assessment of the children's story changed. "I remember thinking," she reported in a recent interview, "these are ordinary village kids of modest education and modest experience of life, to say nothing of science. But it was all very interesting, because they were all saying the same things."<sup>122</sup>

A concerned crowd greeted Dr. Bosnjak when he arrived. Taken aback by the paranormal situation that he was asked to address, he recalls his apprehension in a video-recorded interview: "I felt that a duty to examine the children was beyond my field of competence. I didn't even know which questions to ask them! So I asked them general

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<sup>120</sup> Mayr, *The Visionaries from Medjugorje: Tried by Science*.

<sup>121</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 21.

<sup>122</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

questions in order to discern if they were normal.”<sup>123</sup> Doctors Bosnjak and Glamuzina interrogated the children for hours about their experiences. The interviews allowed Dr. Bosnjak to conclude that the children were psychologically normal: “I spent hours and hours with them and never sensed a lie in them.”<sup>124</sup> In another interview he stated that the first assessment of the visionaries at the healthcare center, “enabled me to determine that their perception of space and time were completely intact... There was no delirium there was no hallucination, either auditory or visual. They described the events. I asked them if they had taken drugs. They denied it. They were absolutely convinced about what they had seen.”<sup>125</sup>

Even though Dr. Glamuzina felt as though her time was being wasted in this frivolous affair, she sensed that the children sincerely believed what they were saying (at one point she quipped that the children were not insane, but whoever it was who sent them to her was).<sup>126</sup> She felt that if the children were unknowingly being manipulated into thinking they were seeing the Virgin Mary, then maybe she could get to the bottom of it. Still not believing that the children were encountering the mother of Jesus, she thought maybe it was hypnosis or “some extraterrestrial, cosmic phenomena interesting in its own self.”<sup>127</sup> She decided that if it were this type of phenomena, only an empirical study could determine its true nature. Convinced that the mass of piously curious people emerging on the hill every day were too biased to give an accurate report, she decided that the empirical study must be done by herself and Dr. Bosnjak.

On June 29th, doctors Bosnjak and Glamuzina met at Vicka’s home to accompany the children to an apparition. The house was in turmoil. The police had been threatening the children for the last few nights. Vicka’s mother was afraid of the new attention that was

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<sup>123</sup> Mayr, *The Visionaries from Medjugorje: Tried by Science*.

<sup>124</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>125</sup> Mayr, *The Visionaries from Medjugorje: Tried by Science*.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

being brought to her family, because Vicka's father was laboring in West Germany and the police were threatening to take away his passport.<sup>128</sup> The economic hardships for Yugoslavians forced many young men to get jobs in Western European factories. Since the 1970s many rural Yugoslavians had been supporting their families by sending their wages back home.<sup>129</sup> Vicka's mother was terrified of the repercussions of her husband losing his passport and begging her daughter to change her story so the authorities would no longer harass them.

In this instance both doctors felt they were able to observe the visionaries in a situation in which it was wholly in the children's best interest to deny their story. However, to their surprise, that never happened. Rather, as the time of the previous days' apparitions drew near, Vicka and Jakov (who had been at Vicka's house that afternoon) left the house to head towards Podbrdo with the doctors following close behind. All the visionaries met near the hill and just before they felt the inspiration to once again dash up the slope one of the children handed Dr. Glamuzina a rosary. She thought to herself while rushing after the children, "How arrogant can persons of that age be? Thinking they know it all!...It will take me only a few minutes to assess this phenomenon."<sup>130</sup> Little did she know, she was about to have an encounter that would change the course of her life.

When they reached a spot high up on the hill, the children began to pray while the crowds gathered and sang hymns. A villager, Grgo Kozina, began an audio recording of the events that night. After a few minutes, at 6:26 pm all of the people that had gathered near the spot saw a flash light and the children knelt, instantly, and began to talk attentively to their heavenly visitor: "Dear Madonna! Are you glad the people are here?" The visionaries said the Gospa began to smile, which they interpreted as an affirmative answer. "Dear Madonna!

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<sup>128</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*. Joseph A. Pelletier, A.A., *The Queen of Peace Visits Medjugorje*, (Worcester, MA: Assumption Publications, 1985), 42.

<sup>129</sup> Embassy of Zagreb to Department of State [DOS], August 1984, Zagreb 01068, p. 3.

<sup>130</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

How many days will you stay with us?” Mary answered, “As long as you wish.” “Dear Madonna! What do you wish that these people do?” “There is only one God and one faith,” she stated, “Believe firmly!”<sup>131</sup>

Dr. Glamuzina was shocked. She still did not know what to think. She wondered why the apparition was occurring there, on that mountainside, rather than in a church or a notable, Christian location. As if she were speaking these thoughts allowed, the children spoke the words of Our Lady regarding her choice of the village: “There are enough people here who believe.”<sup>132</sup> In a later interview, Dr. Glamuzina recalled the impact that those words had on her assessment of the situation: “it was the ‘enough’ that disturbed me, because the children are too naïve to be able to put it so beautifully.”<sup>133</sup> Sensing the children were indeed being fed lines that she felt they were incapable of generating, she intuited that there was in fact a tangible phenomena occurring. Therefore, she theorized that if these children could sense whatever it was, so could she. She asked the children if she could touch the spot where they alleged the Virgin stood. Vicka promptly asked Mary, “Could this lady touch you?” Mary replied, “Let her come.”<sup>134</sup>

Dr. Bosnjak, who was watching all of this unfold, saw Vicka take his colleague’s arm and move her forward on her knees towards the spot where Mary allegedly stood. Suddenly, Dr. Glamuzina stopped, flabbergasted: when she had stretched her arm out to touch that which the children were seeing, her arm instantly began to tingle, as if it were going numb. This, however, was not the most amazing part of this experience for Dr. Glamuzina. Right at the moment she was feeling that sensation in her arm, Dr. Glamuzina “had a terrible feeling that [Our Lady] disappeared in that direction upwards and to the right. I can’t explain it.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 31.

<sup>132</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 31. Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>135</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

At that moment, the children shouted that Mary had indeed just disappeared – upward, as Dr. Glamuzina felt. The crowd rumbled in confusion.

Dr. Glamuzina had experienced something that she could not understand, quantify or explain rationally to another person. She claims in later interviews that this experience left her feeling humble and shaken and, ultimately, changed her paradigm. Suddenly the children shouted that the Lady was coming back. When the Gospa returned, the visionaries asked her why she had disappeared. Our Lady replied simply, “There have always been the faithful, the unfaithful and the Judas.”<sup>136</sup> These words altered Dr. Glamuzina’s life – she came down the hill visibly shocked, according to witnesses.<sup>137</sup> She has since converted to Catholicism based on the awakening that occurred that day. “I have no rational explanation for that. It cannot be explained logically.” Dr. Glamuzina said in the documentary *My Sweet Angels*. “Scientists always seek concrete answers which fit in to their way of thinking. This simply doesn’t fit and it cannot be proved. How can you prove that you have had a vision?”<sup>138</sup>

Dr. Bosnjak was not only stunned by his colleague’s experience, but when he and the rest of the crowd finally made their way down the hill, the visionaries, who had been so enrapt and intriguing to behold in ecstasy, were already at the bottom, “laughing, joking, waving, as if nothing had happened.”<sup>139</sup> Even today, Dr. Bosnjak speaks of this event with absolute bewilderment. From that day, both the doctors refused to continue with the investigation of the children.<sup>140</sup>

This first stumbling block did not deter the authorities who wished to put an end to the stories of Mary appearing on the side of Podbrdo. Rather than brand the children crazy, the next move was to simply remove them. On June 30th around two o’clock in the

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<sup>136</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>137</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 21-22.

<sup>138</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 22.

afternoon, two female social workers, Ljubica Vasilj and Mirjana Ivanković, came to take the children for a car ride to surrounding areas, in hopes that the children would forget about returning at the time of the daily apparition. The advances of the social workers made Ivan uncomfortable, so he did not join them on the ride. They drove the children to Čitluk, Žitomislić, and Počitelje for a walking break. In Capljine, Vicka states the two young women “treated us to some kind of juices and cakes there, and then off again...” to see a waterfall at Kravica.<sup>141</sup>

As they were passing through Cerno, which is northwest of Medjugorje, the children started to get anxious as the time of their normal apparition was coming close. They could now see apparition hill in the distance from where they were and they regretted consenting to the trip at all. The children began to beg the social workers to stop the car. “They were somewhat reluctant to stop,” Vicka said in a later interview with Fr. Janko Bubalo, “They pretended not to hear us. But, when we said we would jump out of the car if they didn’t stop, they stopped.”<sup>142</sup>

The car pulled off to the right a couple hundred meters before Kusina’s café in a place called Bandurica in Cerno.<sup>143</sup> Once the car stopped, the children scrambled out and knelt in a grassy area to the side of the road. “First, we prayed our usual prayers,” Ivanka recalls, “I looked up [at] the hill and saw a light and the light was coming towards us.”<sup>144</sup> The two social workers also saw the “cloud-like” light moving from the place where the people were gathered on Podbrdo across the hills and towards the place the car had stopped. It became apparent to the children that the light was the Blessed Mother: “We quickly saw her clearly. She was floating in the air...her garments were swaying. Floating, floating, it seemed toward

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<sup>141</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 37.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>144</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 35.

us. It was beautiful. It can't be described."<sup>145</sup> Our Lady appeared to the five children there on the side of the road. The children had been given a written list of questions by the parish priests to ask Our Lady during this day's apparition, but the haste by which they were asked to leave their homes by the social worker caused them to forget the piece of paper.

Mirjana instinctively asked, "Were you annoyed that we weren't at the hill?"<sup>146</sup> Our Lady said that it was not important. Mirjana then asked if she would mind appearing daily to them in the church instead. The Blessed Mother hesitated and finally said, "I will not, my angels."<sup>147</sup> After this day, the apparitions no longer regularly occurred on Podbrdo, but in other locations. That day Our Lady prayed and sang with the children and then, leaving, said, "Go in the peace of God."<sup>148</sup> The visionaries say that when the Blessed Mother left them that evening she floated back to Podbrdo and "descended upon the people waiting there, and disappeared."<sup>149</sup>

Mirjana remembers noticing that Ljubica Vasilj, one of the social workers, "was very shaken and she wouldn't say anything."<sup>150</sup> Back at home, Ivan saw the crowd of thousands swarming the hill near his house. The thought of going up Podbrdo alone made him uneasy, so he went outside where he could be away from the pilgrims and began to pray. It was there that Our Lady appeared to Ivan alone. After leaving a mark to remember where they had stopped, the children got back in the car and were dropped off at the parish office in order to avoid the crowds on Podbrdo. The parish priest was waiting to perform tape-recorded

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<sup>145</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 38.

<sup>146</sup> René Laurentin and Ljudevit Rupčić, *Is the Virgin Mary Appearing at Medjugorje? An Urgent Message for the World Giving in a Marxist Country*, (Washington, D.C.: The Word Among Us Press, 1984), 29.

<sup>147</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 36.

<sup>148</sup> Laurentin and Ljudevit Rupčić, *Is the Virgin Mary Appearing at Medjugorje*, 29.

<sup>149</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 39.

<sup>150</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*. Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 40.

interviews of the events of that day. Ljubica and Mirjana, the two social workers, would return to Čitluk, tender their resignations and leave town.<sup>151</sup>

That night, when they returned home, the children heard that their dear protector Marinko had been detained by the police in Čitluk on charges of encouraging religious gatherings.<sup>152</sup> “I came home from work and found a summons from the police to come to the jail to be questioned,” Markino remembers. “They accused me of manipulating the children, of starting it with the children. That there was no lady or appearances.”<sup>153</sup> Upon hearing the news, the visionaries took a taxi to Čitluk to testify on Marinko’s behalf. According to author and former *Rolling Stone Magazine* editor Randall Sullivan, Vicka’s tenacity led the group straight to the police chief where she defended Marinko’s innocence. They remained there along with Marinko’s wife Dragica, until he was released, not arriving home until after 2:00 am.<sup>154</sup>

Undoubtedly leading to Marinko’s arrest, the night before, as if afraid of nothing, the children had announced the messages they had received from the Gospa from Marinko’s terrace until 11 o’clock.<sup>155</sup> The pilgrims could not be satiated. According to the visionaries, that day Our Lady was urging all people to reconcile themselves with God and with each other. Throughout the years at Medjugorje, Mary’s messages as relayed by the visionaries have had similar themes: conversion, reconciliation and peace. The Gospa offers five “little stones” to help those who are open to her call experience conversion: prayer (especially the Rosary), attending Mass with the heart, reading the bible, going to Confession at least once a

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<sup>151</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 41. Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 40

<sup>152</sup> Pelletier, *The Queen of Peace Visits Medjugorje*, 37. Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 40. Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 100.

<sup>153</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>154</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 101.

<sup>155</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 38.

month, and fasting on bread and water on Wednesdays and Fridays as a means of purification, offering and discipline.<sup>156</sup>

After the healing of a little neighborhood boy, Daniel Setka, the national and international media learned of Medjugorje. Sullivan describes in his book *The Miracle Detective: An Investigation of Holy Visions* that the three-year-old had been through much medical testing in his short life. A medical school in Sarajevo diagnosed Daniel with “a combination of spastic hemiparesis and epilepsy...unable to speak or to walk, he could barely hold his head up.” His parents brought him to the apparition on June 28th at which one of the visionaries recommended Daniel to the Virgin. The children said the Blessed Mother looked at him for a long time and told his parents to have faith and pray that he will be healed. The next day, Daniel was brought back again to the Hill of Apparitions (which Podbrdo was now affectionately being termed), took his first step and stoutheartedly said, “Mama, look, I’m walking!”<sup>157</sup>

The attention drawn by Daniel’s story meant Medjugorje was no longer locally bothersome, but a national embarrassment. Rather than remaining secret, the police overtly sent armed guards into Medjugorje and established checkpoints leading up to the town.<sup>158</sup> The children were under incredible pressure and were frequently chased by police. As a consequence, when police blocked the children’s access to the church, many apparitions happened in neighbors homes and even fields, as the children were hiding. From this point on other villagers and visitors began to be harassed, threatened and even arrested on a regular basis.

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<sup>156</sup> Steve and Anna Shawl, “Overview of Medjugorje”, *Medjugorje Web*, available from <http://www.medjugorje.org/overview.htm>, accessed 30 October 2010.

<sup>157</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 102.

<sup>158</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-146, p. 3.

## A MAN NAMED JOZO

During the first three days of the apparitions, Fr. Jozo Zovko, the parish priest, was away in Kloštar Ivanić near Zagreb leading a retreat for Franciscan sisters who were preparing to take their final vows.<sup>159</sup> On his way home, he stopped at a hospital in Mostar to visit his mother who had fallen ill. In front of the hospital he met Medjugorje parishioner Draga Ivanković, Marinko's wife, whose hand and leg had been crushed at work by a heavy piece of metal. The concerned pastor inquired as to how she had been hurt, but Draga waved away his concern and began telling him about the more important issue: Our Lady's apparitions. "But where have you been?" Draga exclaimed, "You should be in Medjugorje! The Madonna has appeared... The children—five or six of them—who've seen the Madonna for the last two evenings! [Fr.] Zrinko doesn't seem to believe it; so you should go and see for yourself!"<sup>160</sup> Staring in disbelief, Jozo remembered thinking to himself, "This woman has been struck in the head and it's her arm that has been put in a sling!"<sup>161</sup> His next impulse was concentrating on how he could get back to Medjugorje as quickly as possible without causing "panic in the streets!"<sup>162</sup>

Jozo had not been able to contact Medjugorje since the day of the apparitions, because the telephones had been wiped out from the lightning of the storm the night before. In an ironic twist of events, Fr. Jozo was delayed in his return to Medjugorje on the most pivotal day in the town's history: "I planned to return to Medjugorje on the 25th, but found myself stuck in Posušje due to the late arrival of the plane flying me from Zagreb to Split."<sup>163</sup> He took a bus from Split to Posušje, but when he arrived two hours late, Fr. Zrinko (who was supposed to take him to visit his mother) had already left. Jozo stayed overnight at a Catholic

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<sup>159</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 51. Vasilj-Zuccarini, *Our Lady's Call from Medjugorje*, 37.

<sup>160</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 154.

<sup>161</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 53.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>163</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 52.

presbytery in Posušje and was taken by one of the priests to the hospital in Mostar on the 25th, who then drove him home to Medjugorje.

With Draga's testimony that Mary had been appearing to children in his parish, the thoughts in Jozo's head on the drive home amounted to chaos: "I said to myself: 'You leave your parish just a short while, and the communists move in with a dirty trick.' They wanted to hold the Church up to ridicule...I thought they had drugged the children or something like that."<sup>164</sup>

Fr. Jozo recognized that it was just something like this that could discredit all of his hard work at St. James Parish. He had just recently been transferred to Mejdugorje from Posušje in November of 1980, due to a fear that his exceptional catechism of children would undermine the atheistic, communist party in Posušje. By spreading the Catholic faith, he was taking members away from the communist party. "Throughout the time I was posted in Posusje," Jozo stated, "not one of the parents whose children went to my catechism classes signed up for the communist party!"<sup>165</sup>

The evangelical work of the priests like Fr. Jozo had not gone unnoticed by the government in Yugoslavia. In 1984, Yugoslavian Defense Secretary Branko Mamula briefed communist politicians and officials on the threat that religion posed to the youth of Yugoslavia. In his address, he noticed that the youth were being engaged by ideologies other than communism:

Part of the younger generation is under the influence of unspecified clerics...over the past two years, Croatian officials have moved against alleged growing Catholic Church activities among students...In addition, the alleged appearance of the Virgin Mary to several young people in a small village in nearby Hercegovina has apparently had a strong impact on ethnic Croatian youth there and on the Dalmatian littoral.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 53.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>166</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Secretary of State [DOS], February 1984, Belgra00908, p. 4

In the same address, Mamula noted that he sees “little real danger of nuclear conflict” but rather the “special warfare” will come via “unspecified powers” that would “work their will on their parties by propaganda, covert action and even limited war.”<sup>167</sup> Both Mamula and Fr. Jozo recognized that the youth of Yugoslavia were beginning to turn away from the communist ideology in search of something else. Jozo’s charisma, deep spirituality and ability to logically and attractively teach the Catholic faith allowed him to portray an ideology which seemed more appealing and more rational to the community at Posušje than the credo that the Yugoslavian state was insisting they believe.

As the visionary Mirjana described, people in Yugoslavia did not practice their faith out loud, for fear of repercussions from the atheistic government. Fr. Jozo, however, did not want people to shirk their faith for the sake of their status or career; he did not allow secret marriages or baptisms. Jozo grew up in a small village near Široki Brijeg, just about fifteen miles from Medjugorje. In the 1940s, there was a communist campaign raging in which the faith of the people of Yugoslavia was to be extinguished. Government soldiers went from parish to parish telling those who had made religious vows, “God is dead, there is no God, there is no Pope, there is no Church, there is no need of you, you also go out in the world and work.”<sup>168</sup>

In 1945, the communist soldiers made their way to Široki Brijeg. On February 7th, they ravaged the city and killed 758 Catholic parishioners.<sup>169</sup> Later, they took thirty of the Franciscan priests and brothers living there and brought them into the main body of the church. They ordered them to take off their habits. Furious that the friars would not comply, the soldiers threw the church’s large crucifix on the floor and told them, “you can now choose either life or death.” Individually, each of the Franciscans bent down and kissed the

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<sup>167</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Secretary of State [DOS], February 1984, Belgra00908, p. 5.

<sup>168</sup> Jozo Zovko O.F.M., *Novena to the Široki Brijeg Martyrs*, (Široki Brijeg: Medunarodno Kumstvo Djetetu), 11-13.

<sup>169</sup> Sr. Emmanuel, *Medjugorje: The War Day by Day*, 50.

crucifix, uttering “my God and my all,” and one by one they were taken outside and killed within earshot of the others.<sup>170</sup> Growing up in this time of purgation, Jozo knew that faith came at a price and challenged his parishioners not to live their faith secretly, but to remain firm, even in the face of worldly repercussions.

He was no hypocrite, though, for it was his own outward practice of the faith that led to his removal from Posušje. A woman from his parish admitted that she had been telling the secret police everything that he had been doing at the parish.<sup>171</sup> At Posušje, Jozo began several projects aimed at renewal in prayer and catechetical formation, which he was heartbroken to leave for his new assignment at Medjugorje. Medjugorje, however, was not a difficult assignment; it was a place where the faith of the people had been practically untouched by atheistic Yugoslavia. “More than forty friars and sisters had taken their vows there,” one source on Medjugorje maintains, describing the state of the parish when Jozo was given his new assignment, “so according to the authorities nothing worse than that could happen!”<sup>172</sup>

Rather than sulk, he embraced his new (albeit much smaller) flock wholeheartedly and went about creating the same types of programs that he had started in Posušje. He organized a prayer group for the youth (of which none of the six visionaries were a part)<sup>173</sup> and invited people to stay a little longer after mass so that he could guide them in meditation to help them understand just how close Jesus could be to them in the Sacrament of Communion. Jozo was a man of great faith and of much learning and many people of St. James benefited from his leadership; yet, there were others who were disgruntled by the extra time they had to spend at mass due to Jozo’s lengthy homilies.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Zovko, *Novena to the Široki Brijeg Martyrs*, 11-13.

<sup>171</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 51.

<sup>172</sup> Vasilj-Zuccarini, *Our Lady’s Call from Medjugorje*, 35.

<sup>173</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 51.

<sup>174</sup> Vasilj-Zuccarini, *Our Lady’s Call from Medjugorje*, 37.

On the 26th of June, however, *all* of the villagers were yearning for the return of their shepherd. Sr. Marcelina Sušac, one of the religious stationed at St. James, remembers, “We waited for him impatiently. Strange goings-on in the parish and the house chief is not at home!”<sup>175</sup> Many were waiting around the presbytery when he returned, particularly excited to tell him all about their experiences. Jozo got an earful of stories, supposed-miracles and the like. Just as he had heard enough second-hand and was preparing to send for the visionaries in order to talk to them himself, a van dropped the children off at the church.<sup>176</sup>

As soon as they arrived, Jozo remembers that the children were at his feet, skipping, full of enthusiasm, asking him where he had been. Jozo, bewildered by the state of his parish, did not prove to be at all receptive to their accounts. Immediately, before they could tell him any more of their stories, he told the children that he would speak with them each individually.<sup>177</sup> He did not know any of them particularly well and wanted to get a sense of who may have started the rumor that the Virgin had been appearing. From the beginning, Jozo thought the apparitions were a hoax; “All this seemed to me too incredible...I wanted to be realistic, I wanted to be prudent. I imagined it was my responsibility.”<sup>178</sup>

Fr. Jozo wanted to be certain that he was proceeding in the most cautious and responsible manner possible. He asked a local youth, Grgo Kozina, to audio-tape the interviews he conducted with each of the alleged visionaries. Mirjana was the first to be interrogated that day. However, she responded “in a quite normal way. I felt I was talking with an intelligent and very practical young woman...she didn’t give the impression of inventing what she was saying.” He spent about an hour with Mirjana and gave her a book on

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<sup>175</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>176</sup> Vasilj-Zuccarini, *Our Lady’s Call from Medjugorje*, 55-57.

<sup>177</sup> This began a series of interviews hosted by Fr. Jozo and the friars of St. James. These audio recorded interviews are some of the best examples of the children’s mental state during the first months. Some records of these inquiries have been preserved; others were taken by the police during Jozo’s arrest. Full texts of these surviving interviews can be found in *The Apparitions of Our Lady of Medjugorje* by Kraljevic Svetozar.

<sup>178</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 56.

other apparitions of Mary (something which he regretted almost immediately; he was worried it would influence their storytelling further).<sup>179</sup>

Then he interviewed Ivanka, a girl whom he remembered “only a few weeks earlier had wanted to jump into her mother’s tomb.”<sup>180</sup> He was very curious as to what part her mourning played in the fabrication of these stories. Jozo asked her, “Ivanka, did you ask Our Lady for news of your mother?” Ivanka said yes and that she had even asked the Virgin to show her mother to her – a request which the Virgin denied. As Ivanka went on Jozo thought to himself, “This young girl is so desirous of seeing her mother whom she loved so dearly, that her imagination has created visions... Then, she managed to persuade the others and they all now say they’ve seen the Virgin Mary.”<sup>181</sup> Feeling certain now that it was this young girl longing for her mother, who allowed her imagination to create heavenly fantasies. However, as Jozo spoke with each of the children, new theories flew through his head. He thought perhaps that Mirjana, the girl from Sarajevo had used her city wiles to play a trick on the poor peasant children.

Vicka and Ivan did not make matters any easier for Jozo to decipher. Vicka was so talkative; Jozo could not get her to talk about anything else other than her meetings with the Virgin, about which “she reiterated what she had seen, what she had said. Over and again, she brought the conversation back to the encounter.”<sup>182</sup> When he tried to ask her a question about anything else, “she only answered briefly, said a few words and immediately led on...to Our Lady.”<sup>183</sup> Vicka was just as frustrated by Jozo! In a later interview she remembers, “We so hoped he would give us some support, a friendly ear. And when we

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<sup>179</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 54.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

came to [Fr.] Jozo he was worse than the police.”<sup>184</sup> Ivan on the other hand allowed Fr. Jozo to talk, but was comparably frustrating. Even before the apparitions, Ivan had been a shy and introverted young man who had yet to come out of his shell. Jozo began by posing him similar questions as the other children, only to find that he spoke his answers with the “greatest of difficulties.” Jozo did not suspect that Ivan was stalling to create answers or even incapacitated by substance abuse, but rather that his questions were just plainly confusing Ivan. Jozo relays in a later interview:

To give you an image...it was as though I were stupidly raising dust around us, running ahead while he lagged far behind...or rather, it was I who completely lost sight of him! All I got was “yes” or “no”...One question kept running through my mind; how was it possible to manipulate these children, some of whom were unable to utter even one word?

Finally Jozo moved on to little Jakov, hoping to outwit him. As an adult Jakov still remembers that day: “It could be they were pressurizing me a bit because I was the smallest: ten years old. And perhaps they thought they would get something else out of Jakov—Jakov is a child.”<sup>185</sup> Jozo asked Jakov what language the Gospa spoke, he answered, “Ours, Croatian, like me.”<sup>186</sup> Trying to lead Jakov, Jozo said that he must have seen angels with Our Lady. Jakov replied, “No, I did not see angels, just Our Lady.” “Strange, Our Lady is always with angels!” Confused Jakov confirmed, “I saw only Our Lady.” Jozo was surprised at the certainty of Jakov’s responses, which puzzled him because he was such a young child. Pushing further, Jozo asked if anyone was telling him what to say to Our Lady. Jakov replied staunchly, “No one needs to tell me what to say! As if I don’t know how to ask by myself!”<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Vasilj-Zuccarini, *Our Lady’s Call from Medjugorje*, 58.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 59.

Fr. Jozo continued to call the children in for questioning frequently. “He asked me the same thing a hundred times.” Mirjana remembers, jokingly, “I told him, ‘I don’t know who’s worse, you or the communists!’”<sup>188</sup> He always audio-recorded their encounters and sent Fr. Zrinko to Podbrdo to record interviews immediately after the supposed apparition. Later, Jozo would immerse himself in the interviews, searching for something that would crack the visionaries’ stories and lead to a greater understanding of their motives:

The answers given by the children were simple. And they did not convey any mystery...the intensity, the gravity of those conversations with the children...and then the listening and re-listening to the tapes...the more I listened to them the more I would think, no child would speak like that. And then I thought perhaps the communist cooked it up. The moment you leave the parish, they’re up to something. Just to compromise our faith and our devotion to Our Lady.<sup>189</sup>

He could not bring himself to go to Podbrdo for the apparitions with the rest of his congregation and never actually witnessed the first apparitions on the hill. In a later interview, Jozo described how important it was for him to be able to present an unbiased report on the developments of the alleged apparitions. Therefore, he chose not to participate in the devotions of the pilgrims until he was able to make a coherent analysis of the events. “I wanted to be as objective as possible so that nothing would influence me,” Jozo stated, “so that I could judge things better for myself, alone. I feared that these enthusiastic beings might be under the influence of someone or something, that they might be being manipulated.”<sup>190</sup>

The parishioners were getting frustrated with Jozo’s skepticism. “My God!” one courageous woman cried out in a loud voice so he could hear, “Our priest is the only one who doesn’t believe!”<sup>191</sup> On the contrary, Jozo was a man of great belief, of great faith. As a Catholic priest he believed with his entire being the dogma of the real presence of Jesus’

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<sup>188</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 56.

<sup>191</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

body and blood in the Eucharist. He believed that the real person of Jesus Christ was present in the tabernacle of his church in the same exact nature as he was present on earth 2000 years ago. Jozo could not understand why so many people of his own parish were chasing the mystic stories on the side of the mountain, instead of worshipping the real, loving God who was always there for them in under the guise of the little, white host.<sup>192</sup>

In his sermon on the 28th of June, Fr. Jozo expressed his disdain towards the particular devotion displayed over the course of his absence: “Yes, it is true that God can reveal Himself to man and He has done so. Our Lady can appear and She has appeared. But we don’t need this because we have the Eucharist, the Bible, the Church. Jesus is present here!”<sup>193</sup> In his mind, he could already see what he thought of as “bad fruits” of the apparition, demonstrated by the superficiality of the masses gathered in hopes to see a glimpse of heaven: “All were talking about signs, lights, alleged miracles... They were on the look out for signs.”<sup>194</sup> Jozo was also concerned that his flock may be led astray by a faux shepherd. In the same homily, he warned those gathered: “We are weak beings and can be easily manipulated. We must be very prudent. The times we are living in are very demanding and we must pray a great deal to Our Lord.”<sup>195</sup>

Jozo was distraught. Certainly with his background of education he was frustrated with his parishioners who seemed to lack discernment. He sat in the St. James Church alone that afternoon, lifting his suffering heart up to God, as everyone else was going to Podbrdo to see the apparition. Only the day before the pilgrims had been angered that the visionaries did not join them on the hill for the apparition, yet still the crowds were back and in even greater numbers, taking their chance climbing Podbrdo. In the following excerpt, taken from a tape-

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<sup>192</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1997), 1337.

<sup>193</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 57.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 57.

recorded interview with Fr. Jozo in 2005 by Sabrina Covic, the priest discusses the internal turmoil he struggled with that evening:

And soon, there was nobody left in the church. I remained alone with such pain in my heart! Everyone, a stream of people had flowed towards the hill... Why hadn't they obeyed me? I would have obeyed them! Why couldn't they see I was suffering and full of doubt? ...I again asked, "Oh, God, why are my poor parishioners so easily influenced? Anyone can say what they like and they believe it, without thinking! Why are my people like that?"<sup>196</sup>

Jozo opened his bible and found the story of Moses – full of signs, wonders and miracles. He envied the simplicity and clarity of Moses' situation; after all, Moses had no doubts that it was really God speaking to him:

I felt, it was easy for Moses, he knew You were with him... here we know nothing we live in anxiety. We don't know what is on Podbrdo or what the children are carrying in their hearts... The children would come to me with joy and I would feel anxiety in my heart. This was the conflict between light and darkness... To them [Our Lady] was alive, real. Only to me she was not. And that is why it was a dead word, because I was dead in my beliefs without faith. I took it as a mere item of information. I recorded it on cassettes. Later on it all changed.<sup>197</sup>

Jozo's prayer was intense; from the deepest part of his heart he was begging God for answers and guidance. At that moment, he heard a soft, sweet, feminine voice: "Go out and protect the children."<sup>198</sup> When asked if he heard the voice with his ears or his heart, he replied, "I am convinced it was an 'acoustic' voice, a voice anyone could have heard had they been with me."<sup>199</sup> With the command of the heavenly voice ringing in his mind, he intuitively got up and opened the middle doors of the church. To his great surprise, "with my foot still in the air and the door handle in my hand," he saw Mirjana, Ivanka, Vicka and Vicka's sister, Ana, who was caught in the fray, running towards him.<sup>200</sup> When they saw him

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>197</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>198</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 60. Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>199</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 61.

<sup>200</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 42.

at the opened door, they yelled, “Protect us, the police are after us!” and “clung to [him] like bees.”<sup>201</sup>

Earlier that day, the police were so angered by the fact that the two social workers had resigned without fixing the Medjugorje problem that this time they sent police officers armed with billy clubs to detain the children. Ivanka, Vicka and Mirjana were tricked into climbing into the officers’ van, but escaped after Our Lady appeared to the visionaries in the van and the petrified look on the girls’ faces startled the police.<sup>202</sup> The girls then ran through the fields trying to hide among the trees and vineyards, heading toward the church in Medjugorje. Fr. Jozo took them to the rectory near the church, told them not to talk and locked the children in his upstairs room. Jozo came outside and stood in the plaza near the church, looking across the valley at the people climbing Podbrdo. When the police spotted him, they approached and asked, “Have you seen the children?” Jozo replied plainly, “Yes, I’ve seen them.”<sup>203</sup> And without another word, the police took off in the direction of the hill.

Jozo went to inform the children that the police were gone, but encouraged them to stay a while just to be safe. However, the children had some information to pass on to Jozo as well: Our Lady would be appearing right in that room of the rectory. At this point the children had become accustomed to Mary appearing where they were and could simply feel she would soon come.

After a while, the people on Podbrdo got wind that the visionaries were at the church and that there was going to be a service. At this time, Marija, Ivan and Jakov had made their way to the rectory to join the other girls. The children remained in the room of the rectory and Our Lady appeared to them there. At 5:00 pm the associate pastor led the prayer of the

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<sup>201</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 61. Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>202</sup> Bubalo, *A Thousand Encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Medjugorje*, 46-47.

<sup>203</sup> Paragraph in formation paraphrased from Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 61.

rosary and at 6:00, they celebrated the Mass.<sup>204</sup> In subsequent days, the children would have their daily apparition together (all except Mirjana who would return to Sarajevo at the end of summer) in a side room to the right of the altar in St. James. This routine – rosary, apparition and Mass – has not stopped even to this day.

Jozo felt God's mercy in a number of ways that night: the same river of pilgrims that he watched flow away from the church to the apparition site was now flowing back! "There is nothing to which I can compare the number of people in the church," Jozo stated, "It was so crowded that I found it impossible to extend my hands and say, 'The Lord be with you.'"<sup>205</sup> So many pilgrims were coming daily that the priests began offering confession during the recitation of the rosary every day. According to Jozo, "I remember people just wouldn't go home. They wanted to pray for each person individually... sometimes it would last until midnight."<sup>206</sup> Due to this desirous need of the pilgrims, most nights, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament begins after mass and on Fridays, the veneration of the cross. Most summer nights, it is dark before the services in the church are finished. It was in this "evening program" that, according to Jozo, the mass caused pilgrims "to cease being spectators and become participants in the events."<sup>207</sup>

From July 1st, the parishioners of St. James Parish heaved a sigh of relief: their priest, Fr. Jozo, was at their side. Jozo was now with the children every day as they continued to have their apparitions in the church or other locations (as the police continued to chase the visionaries). He became their mentor and their sincerest advocate. Instead of lamenting over an empty church, Jozo now did not have a free moment from ministry:

I preached, spoke, prayed, did what Our Lady asked... I spent my days and nights in the church. There was so much to do with the pilgrims, the confessions. So many people came, the church was

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<sup>204</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 43.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>207</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 43.

always open, there was no night, no day...The Rosary was recited a hundred times, it was recited continuously!...And in the evening before celebrating Mass, one confessed ones faith, one renewed one's baptismal promises.<sup>208</sup>

Fr. Jozo began inviting fellow priests from around the area to help with the administration of the Sacraments, particularly that of Confession.<sup>209</sup> The actions of the pilgrims, visionaries and local clergy were now united and were all under Jozo's guidance.

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<sup>208</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 63-64.

<sup>209</sup> Vasilj-Zuccarini, *Our Lady's Call from Medjugorje*, 103.

## THE COMMUNIST GOVERNMENT (OVER-) REACTS

If the government was concerned about the level of attention the events were gaining, with the charismatic Jozo's conversion, its problem just became far worse. Jozo's no-nonsense appeal had gotten him in trouble in Posušje, but now he was the pastor of an endless mass of people who would risk anything to follow. A particularly hard blow to the government was the conversion and resignation of many of its own members. Vicka remembers being accosted by a police officer when being denied access to Podbrdo: "The people are walking off their jobs," he said. "Nobody wants to do anything. Everyone thinks only of seeing you."<sup>210</sup> Government employees, Drs. Bosnjak and Glamuzina, had refused to further investigate the children and the two social workers who had been assigned to remove the visionaries from the apparition site by taking them for a drive had resigned and reawakened to their faith.<sup>211</sup> Jozo remembers even the head of the "secret police" of Split came and was converted.<sup>212</sup>

From the beginning, Jozo understood that this story of the children, whether true or false, was going to have unfavorable consequences in an officially, atheistic state. Guards were posted in Bijakovići near the visionaries' houses and at the foot of Podbrdo, where people were gathering in hoards to venerate the location of the purported apparitions. Check points were set up on all the roads connecting Bijakovići and Medjugorje and leading up to St. James.<sup>213</sup> The more pilgrims that came each day to venerate the Virgin, the more tension would inevitably ensue.

The religious history in the area of Bosnia-Herzegovina is complicated and tense, characterized by oppression, infighting and genocide. The history of the ethnic groups that

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<sup>210</sup> Kraljevic, *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje*, 38.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>212</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 63.

<sup>213</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-146, p. 3.

comprised the former Yugoslavia is an incredibly complicated one, steeped in much controversy. In the 1990s, during the war after Yugoslavia's disintegration, Fr. Franjo Radman a Franciscan gave an insight into the labyrinth that is Herzegovinian culture, in a tape-recorded interview by Heather Parsons:

It is so difficult for anybody to understand what is happening here. I have been speaking with what you might call experts from Eastern Europe, from the various State departments, and even they could not understand the complexities of the situation here. What is the difference between Bosnian Croats and Croats from Croatia? What is the difference in Bosnian Moslems and Moslems from Turkey?...What does each one believe in and fight for? And it goes on and on. In each case I tried to explain, for hours and hours, but could see that I was getting nowhere. It is a complex history with which we have grown up, but it is almost impossible for others to understand.<sup>214</sup>

Reaching far into history, the Brotnjo area of Herzegovina where Medjugorje lies was populated by Illyrian tribes, Romans, and eventually Croats, who came as hired warriors for the Byzantine Empire and who adopted Christianity “around the middle of the seventh century” through the influence of Charlemagne's Franks.<sup>215</sup> Eventually an independent Croatian state was established in 879 and Christianity visibly flourished. During a time of political turmoil in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Croatia united with Hungary; however a small section called Hum remained independent for this alliance and became the part of Bosnia that would eventually become known as Herzegovina in 1448.

However, Herzegovina's independence was short lived. Bosnia was soon invaded by the Turks and after just four decades, Herzegovina was under Turkish domination. Christianity was persecuted by the new Muslim rulers and many of the churches were completely destroyed and clergymen were killed. The Catholic Church's jurisdiction was cut off from the Balkan area and the only lifeline Bosnian-Herzegovinian Catholics had were the Franciscans “who came to Herzegovina at the beginning of the fifteenth century and who

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<sup>214</sup> Parsons, *Marija and the Mother of God*, 74-75.

<sup>215</sup> Jelenko Rastić, ed., “There, Where Our Lady Speaks Croatian” by Dubravko Horvatić, *Mudugorje Today*, (Kranj, Yugoslavia: Medjugorje Publishing Group, 1990), 9. Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 109.

shared with their people four centuries of Turkish tyranny.”<sup>216</sup> Watching their Franciscans risk everything to bring the Sacraments and catechesis to generation after generation left “a deeply entrenched faith in the hearts of the common people.”<sup>217</sup> After the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the reemergence of Austro-Hungarian rule in Herzegovina, did the Catholic Church once again have jurisdiction, if only for a brief time. Churches and monasteries were being rebuilt and it seemed Christian suffering was coming to an end.

However, several Balkan ethnic groups that had been suppressed for centuries by the Hungarian and Turkish rule of the Middle Ages. Due to the years of political vulnerability under the diminishing Ottomans and instability during the subsequent Austro-Hungarian umbrella, these ethnic groups were able to gain structure for the first time in several hundred years.<sup>218</sup> By the beginning of World War I, the Balkans had already seen two recent wars amongst ethnic groups vying for power and, thus, by the end of the First World War, the first Yugoslavian state had been tentatively formed from the various ethnic groups occupying the Balkan territories. However, unification arguments continued for nearly a decade, until finally a Serbian authoritarian state ensued in 1928, reigning until 1941 when “the Nazi-led dismemberment of the first Yugoslavia destroyed virtually all institutions.” After the governing institutions were gone, the Balkans once again became a battleground for power, paving the way for Tito’s communist takeover.<sup>219</sup>

Between World War I and World War II, former Croatian Parliament member Ante Pavelić fled to Italy during the Croatian and Serbian suppression of King Alexander I in 1929. During this time, Pavelić developed the Ustaša movement for Croatian independence, whose members “modeled themselves on the Italian Fascists and founded terrorist training

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<sup>216</sup> Rastić, ed., “There, Where Our Lady Speaks Croatian” by Dubravko Horvatić, *Mudugorje Today*, 10.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country*, (New York: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge), 9 and 87-89.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 197.

centers in Italy and Hungary.”<sup>220</sup> During World War II, Pavelić returned to Yugoslavia, sponsored by the Italians and began the extermination of Serbian, Jewish and Gypsy citizens. Many Croatian Catholics were part of this Ustasa terror, including many from Medjugorje. Due to the barbaric nature of the Ustaša's genocidal practices, eventually the Italians intervened and after the war, Pavelić fled from the nation again.<sup>221</sup>

Both World War I and World War II were incredibly hard on the people of Herzegovina (World War I led to a famine in the Brotnjo plain), in Medjugorje alone 650 men were lost between the two wars.<sup>222</sup> The new communist regime began the 1940s anti-Catholic campaign that would murder, defrock, and subsequently force underground, Catholic clergy. Fr. Jozo's story about the thirty Franciscan priests shot to death in Široki Brijeg occurred during this era. According to sociologist Mart Bax, the close ties between religious affiliation and ethnicity caused continuous tribal wars between neighboring clans in the 20th century, many of which resulted in murders and even exterminations of entire villages.<sup>223</sup> Culprits were representative of every religion and ethnicity. Herzegovina's ethnic complexities, fierce loyalties and cycles of revenge, as Fr. Franjo Radman stated, are almost impossible to comprehend unless lived.<sup>224</sup>

In 1966 Yugoslavia signed a protocol agreement with the Vatican State in which “the Catholic Church is guaranteed the right to carry out religious activities in Yugoslavia.”<sup>225</sup> However, both Yugoslavia and the Church reserved the right to “raise matters” in situations which the other seemingly oversteps its bounds. This protocol allowed Catholicism to once

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<sup>220</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Ustaša", available from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/620426/Ustasa>; accessed 20 March 2011.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Rastić, ed., “There, Where Our Lady Speaks Croatian” by Dubravko Horvatić, *Mudugorje Today*, 10.

<sup>223</sup> Mart Bax, “Warlords, priests and the politics of ethnic cleansing: a case-study from rural Bosnia Hercegovina”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, January 2000, 16-36.

<sup>224</sup> Eerily similar to the history of another 20th-century, Marian apparition site, Kibeho, Rwanda, the area in which Medjugorje is situated has given rise to bloodshed, even before the infamously brutal war the captured world headlines for most of the early 1990s. Both apparitions began in the same year (1981) and both incidents of horrendous genocide began in the early 1990s (Bosnia in 1992 and Rwanda in 1994).

<sup>225</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-146, p. 3-4.

again be practiced in theory (Catholics were allowed to attend church only one day a week), but in reality, pressure came down upon Catholics – and other religious – through the many channels of governmental control. This is apparent in the situation raised in Medjugorje – continuous armed, harassment of the visionaries, villagers and clergy; confiscation of passports; automobile checkpoints; and the discontinuation of municipal bus service to Medjugorje, are all examples. The visionary Mirjana suffered incredible harassment when she returned to her home in Sarajevo. The police would pick her up on a daily basis, interrogate her and drop her off at school hours late. The government even refused to allow her to take her final exams.<sup>226</sup> Vicka was threatened that her father's passport would be revoked if she did not rescind her story.<sup>227</sup> Although the Catholic Church was allowed to “carry out religious activities,” the Catholics of Yugoslavia could not expect to practice their religion without consequences. While government employees could lose their jobs for practicing their religion beyond Sunday mass (public Catholic marriages, baptisms, etc.), in the more remote, homogeneously Catholic regions, like Medjugorje, people still attended daily Mass and celebrated feast days.

As previously mentioned, the immediate reaction of the authorities was to take the children to medical doctors in order to have them labeled insane. However, when doctor after doctor were unwilling to claim that the children were crazy, hallucinating or on drugs, the authorities began to get very anxious and their desire to silence the religious fervor (which was now amounting to thousands of pilgrims daily) grew intense. The new approach, while much more strict (and albeit more motivationally honest), was to suppress the religious revival by accusing alleged apparitions of being part of a subversive Ustaša plot to overthrow

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<sup>226</sup> Janice T. Connell, *The Visions of the Children: The Apparitions of the Blessed Mother at Medjugorje*, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 58-59.

<sup>227</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*. Pelletier, *The Queen of Peace Visits Medjugorje*, 42.

the government. Claiming a threat of national security would allow the government to act in any manner they saw fit. Soon after word of the apparitions reached higher levels in the Yugoslav government, American embassy officers were ordered to keep an eye on the unfolding events of Medjugorje to gain a better understanding of the situation with the ultimate goal of learning whether or not Medjugorje was going to be the spark that would ignite the powder keg that is the Balkans.

The “post/Tito insecurity” of the 1981 Yugoslav government feared “a resurgence of Croatian nationalism,” according to Cardinal Franjo Šeper, who was commenting on the repercussions of the alleged apparitions in Medjugorje two months before he would be replaced by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.<sup>228</sup> This insecurity caused the reaction of the authorities to religious revival in Medjugorje to be swift and harsh. While the powers-that-be were waiting for the doctors to pronounce the children insane, they employed armed units to Medjugorje to discourage the ever-growing throng of pilgrims. Through intimidation, they wished to cause the thoughts of the Virgin appearing to fade away quietly. Armed guards with dogs were placed at the foot of the hill of apparitions, as well as near the children’s homes. Checkpoints were established on the roads coming into the village and visitors coming by automobile were forced to walk “the last half mile on foot.”<sup>229</sup> Ultimately, this did not stop the deluge of pilgrims that began camping on any available land.

Within a month, it became apparent that the numbers gathering for religious services were growing into the thousands with each passing day, regardless of the threats and checkpoints. The local government felt the need to increase the level of fear being instilled in the pilgrims in order to shake their faith and keep them away. The national government was

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<sup>228</sup> Embassy of Rome to Secretary of State [DOS], September 1981, 1981ROME22832, p. 1-2

<sup>229</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-146, p. 3.

becoming uneasy, as well. One BBC documentary, in which high levels of the Yugoslavian government were interviewed, claims that one Yugoslavian official asked during a discussion what would happen if a bomb were to be detonated on the Hill of Apparitions where the faithful were gathering almost nonstop for devotions.<sup>230</sup> According to the reports of the American embassy officers who visited Medjugorje within the first few months of the apparitions, militiamen “harass prospective pilgrims wishing to visit the site by asking for identification and threatening to take away their passports.”<sup>231</sup> The embassy officers gave a ride to a few hitchhikers who “became visibly nervous when driving by the checkpoint.”<sup>232</sup> At the point this statement was given, already ninety people had had their passports confiscated. Only “local herdsmen” were allowed in the area where Our Lady first appeared, the rest of those daring enough to proceed to Podbrdo were ordered to pay fines. The authorities also attempted to stifle mass attendance by “failing to provide regular municipal bus service during hours when Masses are scheduled.”<sup>233</sup>

When news of the alleged appearances of Mary reached the desk of the local bishop of Mostar, Pavao Žanić was not unfamiliar with historical Marian apparitions that the Church had blessed such as Guadalupe, Fatima or Lourdes (the latter of which he was formerly a tour guide). However, he was also aware of hundreds of other occurrences of delusions and fakes in which thousands of the faithful have been deceived. In a 1980s interview with Bishop Žanić, he summed up his initial concern with such alleged instances of private revelation: “All right! Miracles happen, but you have to watch these pious women who say they’ve seen this or experienced that. A lot of it is pure fantasy or even hallucination and that

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<sup>230</sup> Tilby, *The Madonna of Medjugorje*.

<sup>231</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 18 November 1982, Belgrade A-72, p. 4.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

casts doubt on Fatima, Lourdes, and even Jesus Christ...and then our critics say, 'Look, your faith is groundless.'”<sup>234</sup>

The American embassy officers recorded the sentiments of the “senior clergymen” who were “inclined to treat the Medjugorje events as a product of the region’s socio-economic backwardness and the attraction of the mystical and the supernatural for the pious and simple people of this poor mountainous backwater.”<sup>235</sup> Even so the embassy officers concluded that “we see no indication at this time that the continuation of the alleged visions in the small village above Mostar foreshadows political disturbances in Hercegovina.”

As parish priest, Fr. Jozo Zovko was summoned many times by the communist party in Mostar and told to stop the crowds from gathering in Medjugorje and on Podbrdo, even if that meant discontinuing the daily mass.<sup>236</sup> Every time he was summoned, the police would increase their scare tactics: helicopters swooping to scare the pilgrims, more barking guard dogs.<sup>237</sup> Members of the secret police were sent to the daily masses at St. James. Dressing normally to hide in the crowd, they waited for something – anything – that they could use to rationalize retribution against a mass of religious persons who were proving to be irritatingly peaceful, yet incredibly determined to touch a piece of heaven. During the first half of August, Jozo was summoned frequently by the government and threatened to end the talk of apparitions. “Every day they attacked me,” Jozo remembered. “Every day, there were new attacks in the newspapers. Every day I was summoned to Citluk... Every day, every day!”<sup>238</sup> On August 11th, he was given a “final warning” by the authorities in Citluk. That night, he returned home to celebrate mass. His homily that night would be cause for his arrest in the days to come.

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<sup>234</sup> Tilby, *The Madonna of Medjugorje*.

<sup>235</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 18 November 1982, Belgrade A-72, p. 5.

<sup>236</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 116-117.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 68.

The universal, Catholic mass readings for August 11th laid the ground work for Fr. Jozo's entrapment. August 11th was the feast day of St. Clare, virgin, companion of the famed St. Francis of Assisi and foundress of the religious order of Poor Clares. The biblical readings for the mass celebrating this feast are the same at every single Catholic mass in the entire world on that day.<sup>239</sup> The first reading from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy was of Moses speaking to the Israelites during the 40 years they were wandering in the desert. Moses, who lay dying, is instructing his people to march into the land of the Philistines:

...the LORD has told me that I shall not cross this Jordan. It is the LORD, your God, who will cross before you; he will destroy these nations before you, that you may supplant them... The LORD will deal with them just as he dealt with Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites whom he destroyed, and with their country. When, therefore, the LORD delivers them up to you, you must deal with them exactly as I have ordered you. Be brave and steadfast; have no fear or dread of them, for it is the LORD, your God, who marches with you... (Deuteronomy 31: 2-6)<sup>240</sup>

In the chapters immediately preceding this reading from Deuteronomy, the people were grumbling against Moses, because they had been wandering in the desert for forty years, waiting for God to lead them to their promised land. Moses reminded the Israelites of the 400 years of oppression and subjugation that their people experienced in the land of Egypt.

August 15th, 1981 was the feast of the Assumption of Mary. An annual celebration which celebrates the moment when Catholics believe the mother of Jesus was taken into heaven body and soul. Like certain prophets of the Old Testament, having your body, not only your soul taken into heaven, was a reward for living a singularly faithful life. The Assumption, for the Church, is a moment when God rewards patient and humble endurance by exalting the lowly above those who hold power in the world. The readings for the day characterized God's superiority over the rulers of the world and that by being faithful and

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<sup>239</sup> This is the case for the scripture readings for all masses, whether ordinary or feast.

<sup>240</sup> *The Lectionary for Mass*, Year A, Cycle I, 11 August 1981.

humble, God would one day overthrow the rulers of this world and replace them with those same faithful:

The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him. He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. (Luke 1: 49-52)

After this I heard what sounded like the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying: "Alleluia! Salvation, glory, and might belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her harlotry. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants... Alleluia! The Lord has established his reign, (our) God, the almighty." (Revelations 19: 1-6)

...then comes the end, when [Jesus Christ] hands over the kingdom to his God and Father, when he has destroyed every sovereignty and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death... (1 Corinthians 15: 24-26)<sup>241</sup>

After the proclamation of scripture at mass, the priest gives a homily based on the content of the readings, which Fr. Jozo aptly did on both days and it was the content of those homilies that broke the camel's back.

According to an American embassy investigation into Medjugorje, Fr. Jozo, during the week before his arrest, "spoke of Christ liberating man from the oppression of this world, sin, poverty, etc., but also made a reference to '40 years of oppression'," a statement to which Fr. Jozo's lawyer admits.<sup>242</sup> The forty years is not only significant because it was the length of time the Israelites wandered in the desert, but as the communist authorities and the media reports surround Medjugorje note, 1981 was the year that the Yugoslavian nation was

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<sup>241</sup> *The Lectionary for Mass.*

<sup>242</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-146, p. 2.

celebrating the 40th anniversary of the socialist revolution in Yugoslavia.<sup>243</sup> Regardless of the correlation to the universal scripture readings for the liturgy, the secret police in the crowd thought this statement was enough to intervene. Fr. Jozo was arrested two days later on charges of “spreading false information that provokes national hatreds.”<sup>244</sup> This charge stemmed from Article 133 of the Yugoslav Criminal codes, which criminalized any person who “maliciously and falsely represents the socio-political conditions of the country.”<sup>245</sup>

Early the morning of August 17th, the police arrived at the rectory and informed Fr. Jozo that he must go with them. He left dressed in civilian clothes after the guards told him not to wear his Franciscan habit. The police drove him in a four-car procession to Tromedja, just a ways outside of Medjugorje, to a transfer point covered with police and soldiers because, assuming that he was a Croatian revolutionary, they thought he would try to escape. They took him to a place of interrogation and meanwhile they searched the rectory.<sup>246</sup> In addition to strip-searching two nuns (the State Department documents clarify that the nuns were forced to remove their clothing only in the presence of a female police officer),<sup>247</sup> the police seized all documentation regarding the apparitions of Medjugorje, including audio tapes made of the children’s interviews and the money from the church collection, the equivalent of two thousand American dollars. The police were unable to find anything that linked Jozo to a conspiracy and he received a three and one-half year jail sentence (of which he only served eighteen months).

After his arrest, Fr. Jozo’s family was told nothing of his whereabouts or condition – they did not even know if he was still alive. His sister, Fabijana – also a Franciscan religious, sat outside the prison until she was permitted to see that her brother was indeed alive. The

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<sup>243</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A -147, Enclosure 3, p. 1

<sup>244</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A -146, p. 2.

<sup>245</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 29 October 1981, Belgrade A -152, Enclosure p. 2.

<sup>246</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 75-76.

<sup>247</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A -146, p. 2. The State Department documents repeatedly use the figure \$2000; however, another source states around \$4000.

police interrogated Jozo persistently during his detention, sometimes violently, bringing in “witnesses” who they threatened would testify against him. Some of the witnesses, however, knew Fr. Jozo and either refused to testify or testified in his favor, putting their well-being on the line.<sup>248</sup>

Even through all this, Jozo was at peace. He and some witnesses at the prison attest to certain events that occurred during his imprisonment which lifted his spirits. His cell door would sometimes be found unlocked and open. The guards would lock it and leave and upon their return, they would find their prisoner sitting quietly in his cell with the door unlocked and open!<sup>249</sup> The most precious miracle, he would tell you, mysteriously appeared in his pocket. Jozo had been searched, deprived of every possession, given the normal garb of an inmate, and placed in solitary confinement, but one day he inexplicably found a rosary in his pocket:

They placed me in solitary confinement, where I could not see whether it was day or night. It was always dark. I lost all orientation; I didn't know what day it was or what was happening. And then they took me for questioning... they had taken absolutely everything from me. And then I had the rosary again. That is something I do not understand to this day. It was something so powerful and so merciful. I just found it in my pocket in my hands, when I thought I had nothing that they had taken everything from me, I had it all.<sup>250</sup>

Jozo even admits that the Virgin Mary appeared to him in prison. The visionaries corroborate his claim by saying that one day Our Lady failed to appear to them at the normal time. When she finally did, she apologized and said that she was “with Jozo.”<sup>251</sup>

Although Fr. Jozo had lost all connection with the outside world and was unaware of even the date or time, one day he was given an understanding of why he was still imprisoned and the hope to continue. Months into his imprisonment, a warden was locking his cell and

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<sup>248</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 76-77.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>250</sup> Boic, *My Sweet Angels*.

<sup>251</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 82.

stopped to murmur, “My mother has been on a pilgrimage to Medjugorje!”<sup>252</sup> Jozo was startled at the thought that “pilgrimages” were being organized to his poor, rural parish. At that moment, Fr. Jozo was granted a glimpse of what was continuing at his parish, the reason why he was still incarcerated, and the vast reality that was becoming the Medjugorje movement. When he was arrested, he had no idea what was to happen to his parish. He just remembered the plethora of soldiers, dogs and helicopters surrounding the area of St. James. He did not know if they had closed up his church, or if the police had barred access to the town, or even if violence had been used against the people who had so faithfully gathered. The pilgrimages did not stop; the people continued gathering. Religious revival was occurring centered around his little parish. This religious fervor was why he was being treated so harshly. This one sentence uttered by a guard (who he would later bring into the Church through baptism<sup>253</sup>) provided him with an abundance of hope that God was still with his little parish.

Shortly after Jozo was arrested, villagers awoke to the news that there would be no mass and unsuspecting pilgrims began to converge upon the church. Fr. Jozo Jolić, a Franciscan priest coming from another town, approached Medjugorje. He had heard rumors about what was occurring at Medjugorje and wanted to have a look for himself.<sup>254</sup> He was told on the road approaching the church that the parish priest had been arrested, the church had been locked up and there was to be no mass. Upset by the actions of the police, Fr. Jolić continued along the road to Medjugorje with one thought in mind: the Holy Mass must be celebrated! When he approached the church, Fr. Jolić found it surrounded by armed guards who were keeping the people away from the doors. The faithful were gathered – some anxious, some peaceful – and were not budging. Fr. Jolić pestered the guards for the key to

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<sup>252</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 76.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>254</sup> Tilby, *The Madonna of Medjugorje*.

the church, until they finally relented. He opened the doors to the church and rang the bells. The people flooded in and Fr. Stanko Dodig, another priest at the parish, prayed the mass.<sup>255</sup>

It was a small victory, but the battle for the permission to gather in Medjugorje was far from over. While Fr. Jozo suffered in prison, his flock suffered without him. Because the police were keeping the visionaries from getting to the church, the children met in other clandestine areas, which varied from day to day. The day Jozo was taken, the children were distraught; this subject was their first line of business to discuss when the Madonna appeared that evening. Vicka remembers the Gospa's words of comfort: "Do not be afraid. I wish that you would be filled with joy, and that the joy could be seen on your faces. I will protect Father [Jozo] Zovko."<sup>256</sup> Three days before his trial, Mary asked the children to "fast for a solid week on bread and water, and to pray as often as they could for Zovko" and they allegedly were given a vision of Jozo in his jail cell.<sup>257</sup>

Jozo's one-day trial was held on October 21st in the "local Circuit Court." Jozo's lawyer "sought support from the Papal Nuncio on the grounds that the authorities violated the 1966 Protocol interfering with the priest's right to religion;" those inquired "declined to give such an endorsement."<sup>258</sup> The embassy officers noted in their October 22nd report that in the matter of Medjugorje "the officials at republican and national levels have given serious backing to local authorities." Jozo was sentenced to jail time, but whether or not Jozo was actually convicted is unclear. According to the Embassy officers' report of October 29th, 1981, the circuit court did not convict him "under the provision of the statute pertaining the hostile propaganda acts" nor did they find him acting as a "part of a conspiracy inspired by Croatian emigres."<sup>259</sup> Some awaiting his sentencing were calling for the death penalty.<sup>260</sup> The

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<sup>255</sup> Tilby, *The Madonna of Medjugorje*.

<sup>256</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 117.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>258</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-146, p. 4.

<sup>259</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 29 October 1981, Belgrade A-152, p. 1.

whole village of Medjugorje, however, was earnestly praying for him. The Virgin again urged the children to be joyful, and told them that his punishment would not be “severe.”<sup>261</sup> Confused, but obedient, they urged everyone in the village to pray and fast for Fr. Jozo. By October 29th, news spread that he received a “relatively moderate and about average” sentence of only three and a half years, which was eventually reduced to eighteen months.<sup>262</sup> The village saw this as a miracle.

Before his early release, Jozo was sent to a hard-labor detention center to work alongside assassins, pedophiles, murderers, drug addicts, and other dangerous criminals. However, to the dismay of the guards, Jozo began to minister to the felons. He listened to people talk for hours; he sensed their need for consolation and forgiveness. He began to speak to them of Jesus and St. Francis of Assisi and eventually started hearing confessions and even baptizing!<sup>263</sup>

Meanwhile, similar spiritual fruits were occurring a thousand fold in Medjugorje. Bishop Žanić became interested in the visionaries. According to *Miracle Detective* by Randall Sullivan, former *Rolling Stone Magazine* editor, and many of the inhabitants of Medjugorje, the Bishop – a former tour guide at Lourdes – when first faced with the news of Mary’s appearance in Medjugorje, was enthusiastically intrigued.<sup>264</sup> He visited Medjugorje to speak with the visionaries in July of 1981. After reaching the same conclusion as the majority of psychologists and theologians who had spent time with the six seers, Bishop Žanić declared, “I am firmly convinced that no one has influenced them...Six innocent, simple

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<sup>260</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 84.

<sup>261</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 119.

<sup>262</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Secretary of State [DOS], 29 October 1981, Belgrade A-152, p. 1.

<sup>263</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 79-82.

<sup>264</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 122.

children like these would have told all in a half hour if anybody had been manipulating them... And I am equally convinced that the children are not lying.”<sup>265</sup>

Throughout the first half of August, just like Fr. Jozo, Bishop Žanić was summoned to Sarajevo by the police to give answers about Medjugorje, however, when he arrived (as he most likely expected) the police urged him to disavow the apparitions and put an end to the religious gatherings. In a recorded statement, transcribed in the book, *Encounters with Fr. Jozo*, Jozo makes reference to a meeting with the bishop before August 17th. Fr. Jozo claims that during Žanić’s encounter in Sarajevo, the police “harshly accused” him. Jozo, who claimed that he had a good relationship with Bishop Žanić prior to the events of Medjugorje, explains his meeting with the bishop in August:

The bishop wanted to see me alone. He took me to the window of the drawing room and, with tears in his eyes, he said: “Father Jozo, today I have been summoned to Sarajevo... They told me that if I protected Medjugorje, if I stood by Medjugorje, they would lock me up. I cannot go to prison for Medjugorje. I’m a bishop!” I remained speechless...dumbfounded... Later, a dozen priests, among whom two were Franciscans, came to put pressure on him and threatened to take action to have the diocese withdrawn from him.<sup>266</sup>

The U.S. State Department documents, accounts from the visionaries, villagers and pilgrims affirm that the government and police used harassment and terrorism to attempt to frighten people away from religiously gathering in Medjugorje. This conversation with the bishop could have sparked a suspicion in Jozo that his own actions could lead to imprisonment. Cryptically, two days before his arrest, he contacted Fr. Tomislav Vlasić, a young priest in a nearby parish, and informed him to “be ready” because he would be taking over Jozo’s duties soon.<sup>267</sup> Pavao Žanić later testified at Jozo’s trial that he did not remember making any of the earlier statements to the Medjugorje priest. Bishop Žanić and Fr. Jozo had a long history. Jozo was a member of the Episcopal Council Commission of Yugoslavia for

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<sup>265</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 122.

<sup>266</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 65.

<sup>267</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 120.

fifteen years while Žanić was co-judge of the same council.<sup>268</sup> Žanić even rewarded Jozo for his work by sending him to an audience with Pope Paul VI. With a long friendship with Žanić as a background for the subsequent meeting in August 1981, when asked about the denial of Medjugorje, Fr. Jozo explained that it was not that Bishop Žanić disappointed *him*, but it was rather that he betrayed what he knew was good about Medjugorje:

I have always had a great respect for the bishop. These were human weaknesses and I would never wish to use them to judge anyone.... That is of a lesser importance. What upset me was the way in which he made an about-turn, and the refusal to admit his profound conviction. He does not base his opposition to Medjugorje on solid arguments... That's what hurts... The bishop began to criticize the events of Medjugorje to defend his own position, his interests.<sup>269</sup>

While this “about-turn” regarding Medjugorje would only be privately known to Jozo and felt by the visionaries and priests of Medjugorje, publically Bishop Žanić had a much larger issue to deal with. Stories began surfacing in the communist newspapers about a Catholic-led, Ustaši plot to undermine the government. In the August 19th, 1981 *Borba* article entitled, “Resolute Resistance by Inhabitants of Citluk to Clericalists’ Manipulations,” Peter Segivic, a member of Citluk’s Municipal Conference of the Social Alliance Party, paints Medjugorje as an Ustaša gathering point where Fr. Jozo “calls upon his audience ‘even to shed blood’ for the sake of religion.”<sup>270</sup> He accuses Jozo of “the launching of the Virgin” in attempts to bring about “Yugoslavia’s destabilization” through the endangerment of the “brotherhood and unity of all our nations and nationalities.”<sup>271</sup>

While Segivic singles out Jozo’s as the “outstanding role in that from the pulpit he sowed the poisonous seed of discord and dissatisfaction,” the journalist then goes on the offensive and attempts to use peer-pressure to bully other Catholic clergy members into silence over their beliefs: “Certain representatives of the Catholic Church have formerly

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<sup>268</sup> Covic, *Encounters with Father Jozo*, 66.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

<sup>270</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-147, Enclosure 1, p. 1.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

disassociated themselves from the event of the Virgin's vision, denying a place for such an act in the official Church teachings..." Immediately after this statement he publicizes the fact that Bishop Žanić had already made three visits to Medjugorje. In another article published almost immediately after, the author specifically names Jozo and Žanić as "clerical nationalists" which have been "snapping at the achievements of the revolution, at the constitutional systems, at the socialist self-management, and this in essence is the most brutal case of use of the people's religious feelings."<sup>272</sup>

These accusations could not have come at a worse time for the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia. The government of Yugoslavia was launching a "hostile campaign against Stepinac," a prominent Yugoslav, Catholic cardinal who denounced both the Nazi/Ustaša regime in Yugoslavia and the following, Communist state.<sup>273</sup> His imprisonment by the Yugoslav state for his protest was embarrassing during Yugoslavia's campaign to improve relations with the West. The Yugoslavian state in 1981 was trying to paint a picture in which Stepinac was a threat to national security, largely pro-Nazi and pro-fascist and willingly turned a blind eye to Croatian Catholic killing of Serbs and Jews during his reign as archbishop. Regardless of whether or not he was ultimately innocent, the propagandized villainy of Cardinal Stepinac would affirm the authorities' right to come down harshly upon Croatian Catholics.

Due to the tension the situation in Medjugorje was creating for the Catholic Church, Bishop Žanić responded quickly to the articles in *Borba* and the bombardment of "Yugoslav media attacks on [Jozo] and other members of the clergy in Yugoslavia."<sup>274</sup> He wrote a public letter to the President of Yugoslavia on September 1, 1981, stating:

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<sup>272</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-147, Enclosure 2, p. 1

<sup>273</sup> "Alojzije Stepinac," *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2004, Encyclopedia.com, (February 24, 2010), <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3404706136.html>.

<sup>274</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Secretary of State [DOS], 29 October 1981, Belgrade A-152, p. 1.

As a Catholic Bishop and the Responsible Chancellor at the Mostar Bishopric I refute from myself and the aforementioned priests under my administration those irresponsible libels and attacks whose tastelessness does not by any means mark a contribution to a sober view of the developments in the parish of Medjugorje. With such insulting gestures the fundamental civil and human rights are being violated.<sup>275</sup>

He then kindly tasked the President with “undertak[ing] the most energetic steps against similar irresponsible excesses.”<sup>276</sup>

This open letter became a focal point of the local media and it was not long before a response was published. Beginning on September 24th, *Borba* printed a brutal three-day, seven-page response to the events at Medjugorje written by Petar Segivic. The articles began with a critique of Bishop Žanić’s capabilities: “What happened that is so important in Medjugorje that the bishop of Mostar cannot straighten out things with the people there and solve them with [the local] socio-political organizations, but rather calls in the President of the SFRY Presidency and protests with him?”

Segivic cuts to the case and unabashedly reminds the readers that just on the other side of Podbrdo (the mountain on which Our Lady first appeared) in 1941, the culturally-Catholic Ustaša drove 2,500 people to the edge of the cliff and threw them over. “It is said,” states the *Borba* article, “that they threw them down with a cut throat, wounded or shot, and then dismembered the bodies by means of hand-grenades...and now, the Virgin appeared right here, where the Ustashi atrocity took place...In that environment friar Jozo Zovko delivers his sermon to believers.”<sup>277</sup> In attempts to prove that Jozo is indeed a part of a Ustaša plot to overthrow the government, the article’s author allegedly quotes a line from the sermon for which the priest was arrested: “Christ has arrived in to this world to liberate me

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<sup>275</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-147, Enclosure 2, p. 1

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., Enclosure 2, p. 2

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., Enclosure 3, p. 1

and you, prisoners, who have been imprisoned for 40 years, telling us: ‘Open the chains, the knots that have enchained my life, for I have been iron-bound, chained by malicious sin.’”<sup>278</sup>

Next Segivic makes an argument that the Franciscan friars are too powerful for the bishop to handle and this is why he is impotently seeking the President’s help. The article systematically explains that the Franciscan friars of Medjugorje “programmed” the appearance of Mary in order to win the long-standing battle between the secular clergy of the diocese and the Franciscans.

The Franciscans, a religious order founded on the virtue of poverty by the legendary St. Francis of Assisi, settled among the Croats in the Herzegovina area around the 13th century. During the Turkish domination beginning a century and a half later, Christianity was severely persecuted and many Franciscan clergymen were martyred. Those who were not served the people clandestinely. “[The Franciscans of Bosnia and Herzegovina] were nearly forgotten by the Catholic world and left to themselves and their own ingenuity for saving the Church amid incredible circumstances,” fellow Franciscan and Medjugorje native Fr. Ivo Sivrić states. “Despite everything, they remained faithful to God, to Christ, the Church and the Pope, and understandably, to the Franciscan order.”<sup>279</sup> The Franciscan order became Catholicism to Herzegovina. After the Ottoman Empire receded, the Franciscan order made the first initiative to reestablish Catholicism in Herzegovina in the 19th century. They rebuilt churches, monasteries and seminaries and again became the icon for Catholicism among Croats.<sup>280</sup> The parish of Medjugorje was founded by Franciscans in 1897 and after two failed structure attempts at building a church, St. James Church of Medjugorje today was completed in 1969.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-147, Enclosure 3, p. 2

<sup>279</sup> Ivo Sivrić, O.F.M., *The Hidden Side of Medjugorje*, vol. I, (Saint-Francios-du-Lac, Quebec: Les Editions Psilog Inc., 1989), 118.

<sup>280</sup> Rastić, ed., “The Church in Herzegovina” by Jakov Bubalo, *Mudugorje Today*, 70 & 74.

<sup>281</sup> Rastić, ed., “There, Where Our Lady Speaks Croatian” by Dubravko Horvatić, *Mudugorje Today*, 10.

It was during this time that the Vatican decided to extend diocesan authority to the now-freed parts of the Balkans. Over a period of several years, the Franciscans were to turn their parishes over to secular clergy. However, the Croatian parishioners, along with the Friars, took this change hard, to say the least. Parishioners barred the doors to their churches to prevent the diocesan priests from entering the buildings and, in some cases even refused to receive the Sacraments from them<sup>282</sup> "...so [the priests] had to go back without performing their job."<sup>283</sup> By 1956, the Franciscans still had control of "sixty-three of the seventy-nine parishes in Bosnia and Herzegovina."<sup>284</sup> When Pavao Žanić became bishop of Mostar in 1980, the issue of jurisdiction in Herzegovina was coming to a head. During the previous bishop's reign, with the consent of the Vatican, thirty-three of the sixty-three Franciscan parishes were turned over to diocesan control. This caused an uproar among the local Catholics who, again, went to great lengths to ensure the new secular priests were not welcome in their culturally Franciscan parishes. Sivrić, with great praise for the Franciscans of the Balkans notes that "the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina consider the Franciscans to be living cells of their own bodies. The Franciscans share the peoples' joys and sorrows, and the people call them their 'uncles'".<sup>285</sup>

According to the *Borba* article in 1981, "by this physical challenge of the friars, the church hierarchy was very embittered, which entailed a still more insistent struggle to square accounts with the friars."<sup>286</sup> Bishop Žanić further fueled the flames by making one of his first actions in office to divide the city of Mostar into three-quarters diocesan and one-quarter Franciscan, with the new cathedral parish "under the direct authority of the bishop" and "to

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<sup>282</sup> Herrero, "Medjugorje: Ecclesiastical Conflict, Theological Controversy, Ethnic Division", 144. Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 69.

<sup>283</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-147, Enclosure 3, p. 2

<sup>284</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 69.

<sup>285</sup> Sivrić, *The Hidden Side of Medjugorje*, 118.

<sup>286</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-147, Enclosure 3, p. 2

be ministered only by diocesan clergy.”<sup>287</sup> The weekend after the announcement, the majority of Mostar’s Catholic population attended mass at one of the four remaining Franciscan parishes, leaving the newly secularized parishes empty and outraging the bishop and diocesan clergy.<sup>288</sup> The “disobedience” of the Catholic faithful during the is seemingly hard to understand for people who were not surrounded by the culture from the time of their birth. It seems as though each ethnic divide had severe tensions brewing within itself right underneath the surface. Each culture seemed to be always ready to defend itself. A general misunderstanding and mistrust of either parties’ motives was most likely was the root of the Herzegovina Case. The claims of Our Lady appearing in a Franciscan parish only one year later rang suspicious in the ears of an already paranoid diocese.

When the Virgin Mary began appearing in St. James Parish, some members of the diocese immediately pegged the Franciscans as orchestrators. In a video-recorded interview, a secular pastor from the Diocese of Mostar, Fr. Petar Vulevic, stated his opinion of the Medjugorje matter: “My view is that the Franciscans in this diocese have used Medjugorje to force a confrontation with the bishop...about the Herzegovina parishes: ‘the Herzegovina Case.’ I’m sure that’s what they’re up to in Mejdugorje. Strengthening their cause so that the people will say, ‘Even Our Lady backs the Franciscans!’” Crossing his arms and rolling his eyes, Fr. Petar continues, “It’s very impressive. The priests have done a good job with the liturgy, the chanting, the sermons, but Our Lady is no more present in Medjugorje than she is here in my parish.”<sup>289</sup>

With both the communists and his own diocesan priests united in the claim that the Franciscans were fabricating the apparitions of the Virgin Mary, Bishop Žanić recognized that he could not afford to wait for authorities to step in and mediate. He issued a statement

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<sup>287</sup> Herrero, “Medjugorje: Ecclesiastical Conflict, Theological Controversy, Ethnic Division”, 144.

<sup>288</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 70.

<sup>289</sup> Tilby, *The Madonna of Medjugorje*.

entitled “In the Face of Responsibility” which ran in issues 9-10 of Mostar’s monthly Catholic journal *The Church on the Rock*. This statement described the Church’s official stance on mystical visions. Contrary to Petar Segivic’s argument which denied “a place for such an act in the official Church teachings,”<sup>290</sup> Bishop Žanić assures the readers that “the faith of the Church also embraces special gifts, visions, announced to individuals who possess that charisma.”<sup>291</sup> Even though the bishop recognized that the Church believes in mystical encounters, he did warn the faithful that the Church must move slowly and carefully, as in the case of recently authenticated visionaries Gemma Galgani and Padre Pio. “The Bishops of Lourdes and Tarbes,” said Žanić, moving his attention to Marian visions in particular, “respectfully formed 16-member commissions to investigate into the visions at Lourdes five months following the beginning of the visions, and only thereafter issued judgment after four years’ work of the commission. Fatima waited for its recognition even for full 13 years.”<sup>292</sup> He then mentions the plethora of reported mystic visions over Europe that have skyrocketed in the last fifty years and that the Church must be very careful in authenticating alleged messages from God. In March of 1982, the American embassy officers from Belgrade commented that “the Church, at least in the 20th Century, approaches reports of alleged miraculous events with extreme caution. There is no evidence the Church in Yugoslavia is addressing these politically sensitive events any less responsibly.”<sup>293</sup>

Although this “responsibility” was a way for Bishop Žanić to keep himself and his diocese out of the hot seat, the bishop had much political maneuvering to do and unfortunately the legitimacy of the visionaries’ claims was put on the back burner. Cardinal Franjo Šeper, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, met with an American friend while on a visit to Rome in September of 1981. During the meeting, their

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<sup>290</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-147, Enclosure 1, p. 1

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., Enclosure 4, p. 1

<sup>292</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 15 March 1982, Belgrade A-33, p. 7

<sup>293</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Department of State [DOS], 22 October 1981, Belgrade A-147, Enclosure 4, p. 1

discourse turned towards the repercussions of the Medjugorje events. A summary of the content of their conversation was recorded in a U.S. Department of State document from September 1981. Although Cardinal Šeper received very positive information from an Australian priest who witnessed the children's ecstasy on three occasions and vouched for the supernaturalism of the event, he was very concerned about the increase of Church/State tensions and that both he and the Government of Yugoslavia were concerned that there may be a revival of the Croatian nationalism that shamed Yugoslavian Catholics during World War II.<sup>294</sup> Cardinal Šeper believed that the government authorities "reacted harshly and stupidly" with the arrest of Fr. Jozo, the search and seizure of some parish property, the armed guards stationed all over Medjugorje and the harassment of pilgrims traveling to the parish.<sup>295</sup>

Furthermore, he told his American friend that he, as prefect of the CDF with authority to intervene in the matter, "will not comment or investigate the reported appearances of the Virgin Mary" and deferred to the bishop of Mostar. In probably the most important statement of the document that aids in understanding the bishop of Mostar's sentiments toward the Medjugorje events, Cardinal Šeper stated the he believed the local bishop was "afraid of a punitive GOY [Government of Yugoslavia] reaction and will do nothing."<sup>296</sup> This remark paints a picture of a clergy in Yugoslavia that is already being threatened by the government to not exacerbate the desire of pilgrims to gather in Medjugorje by drawing positive attention to the matter, a belief which would be validated by later State Department documents. Cardinal Šeper believed that the "post Tito insecurity" warranted attention and could cause a "serious deterioration in Church/State relations,"<sup>297</sup> which is why he believed the Bishops of Herzegovina, particularly Bishop Žanić, would remain silent for fear of government

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<sup>294</sup> Embassy of Rome to Secretary of State [DOS], September 1981, Rome 22832, p. 1-2.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

repercussions. At this point, it was perceivable that Bishop Žanić was being pressured and that claiming Medjugorje to be authentic would only paint a target on his diocese.

It was against this backdrop that the bishop of Mostar most likely changed his stance regarding Medjugorje. As shown by the State Department documents, corroborating the statements made by Fr. Jozo, Bishop Žanić was under severe pressure from the government of Yugoslavia because of the events in Medjugorje. The government was pressuring him and his clergymen to stop the influx of pilgrims, moreover to dismiss the notion that it was possible for the mother of Jesus to appear at all! Bishop Žanić certainly could not publically swear that he did not believe Mary could appear on earth, after all, he was a tour guide at Lourdes – it would be impossible to convince the people of that belief. He could not attest that the children were crazy or hallucinating, because many people – Communist doctors included – had already examined the children and deemed them healthy. The rivalry of the diocesan and Franciscan priests showcased in the Herzegovina Case became a real solution to a seemingly impossible situation. By allowing the belief to circulate that the friars of St. James Parish orchestrated the apparitions, Bishop Žanić could appease the government, be saved from incarceration, and skirt the issue of Medjugorje indefinitely.

After Bishop Žanić's final statement in *The Church on the Rock* on the matters of Medjugorje, he waited only a few months to choose a commission to formally investigate the claims. Previously, according to Randall Sullivan, the bishop had visited Medjugorje and had favorable interviews with the young visionaries. With the turmoil of Jozo's incarceration the people of Medjugorje were hoping for help and protection from the diocese. However, after a few months people began to recognize, according to Randall Sullivan, "that his position [regarding Medjugorje] had been reversed was not revealed until January 1982, when Bishop

Žanić formed the first episcopal commission assigned to investigate the apparitions in Medjugorje.”<sup>298</sup>

Most people in the diocese, especially in Medjugorje, were well aware that three out of four of the members of the bishop’s commission had already spoken out publically against Medjugorje and the villagers were understandably concerned about the objectivity of the commission. In March 1982, the Embassy of Belgrade sent information regarding this commission to the U.S. State Department. The first member of the commission was a Franciscan priest, Fr. Ivan Dugandžić, who obtained his doctorate in biblical theology in Würzburg, Germany and continued to teach biblical theology in Zagreb.<sup>299</sup> He was the only member of the commission who even traveled to Medjugorje to speak with the visionaries and, as a result, he was the only member to believe in the authenticity of the apparitions.<sup>300</sup> Of the three who were openly opposed to Medjugorje, there was the “rector of the Catholic seminary in Sarajevo, a psychologist who is a professor at the Seminary in Sarajevo,” both secular clergy members, “and the legal counsel of the Mostar Archdiocese.”<sup>301</sup>

Fr. Ivan Dugandžić, the only member of the commission to discuss publically the nature of their investigation described their meetings as such: “Some of them were just dismissive; they were so prejudiced – some members of the commission – that they went on and on about the Herzegovinian Case and hadn’t the time to discuss the Medjugorje phenomenon. These two issues must be kept completely separate.”<sup>302</sup> This statement suggests that the Bishop’s commission went into the situation believing that the Franciscans were in some sense the motivators behind the events at Medjugorje as retribution for the secularization of the diocese and *a priori* assuming the apparitions were false.

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<sup>298</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 122.

<sup>299</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to the Department of State [DOS], 15 March 1982, Belgrade A-33, p. 6.

<sup>300</sup> Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective*, 120.

<sup>301</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to the Department of State [DOS], 15 March 1982, Belgrade A-33, p. 7.

<sup>302</sup> Tilby, *The Madonna of Medjugorje*.

## THE VATICAN AND MEDJUGORJE

The bishop's commission took its time in making any of their decisions public. In fact, no findings were ever officially published in the matter of Medjugorje. This is most likely due to the fact that early on in the apparitions the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith intervened.<sup>303</sup> According to the 1988 document *Pastor Bonus*, it is the duty of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) "to promote and safeguard the doctrine on faith and morals in the whole Catholic world,"<sup>304</sup> which includes reviewing Catholic writings, statements, opinions, pastoral behaviors, celebrations of the liturgy, etc.; in essence this congregation oversees the behaviors of the Catholic world to ensure that Catholicism is promoted accurately. In certain situations it is necessary for the CDF to intercede in special issues to "[help] the bishops, individually or in groups, in carrying out their office as authentic teachers and doctors of the faith."<sup>305</sup> In November of 1981, Cardinal Šeper retired from his position as prefect of the CDF and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was appointed his replacement. Soon after, Pope John Paul II requested that Cardinal Ratzinger

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<sup>303</sup> Many authors have debated whether or not this intervention actually occurred or whether or not the CDF had the authority to make a statement regarding Medjugorje; however, in the hierarchy of the Church the CDF has the authority to intervene in diocesan and even national bishop's conferences if its members deem necessary. As Bishop Žanić recognized in his 1981 statement in *The Church on the Rock* that his commission's decision, would it have been published, "is more of a disciplinary nature, to maintain peace and order," than a necessity. Žanić stated "the bishops' judgment or that of his commission is not infallible" and while the public is not obliged to believe the bishop's statement "nevertheless, the faithful show religious obedience in accepting their bishop's judgment." Just as the faithful are under obedience to him, he is under obedience to the next in the chain of command – and unlike the faithful, he has sworn a vow of obedience to that command. However, even though Bishop Žanić has made many statements regarding Medjugorje, and all have indicated that he does not believe the apparitions are authentic, out of obedience, he has never made an official statement on the events. According to the 1978 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith document on Apparition Discernment, the CDF may intervene in three instances: when their help is requested by the bishop, when their help is requested by a "qualified group of the faithful", and of their own accord, when the private revelation in question affects "a broad portion of the Church." Although it is not known which reason caused the intervention of the CDF, each of these reasons are possible in the Medjugorje situation. In addition, each level of the Church is subject and subordinate to its higher authority in the chain of command; therefore, if the Holy See wanted to intervene, it would have every right and authority to do so. It would then, according to Catholic Church standards, be the lower bishops acting in disobedience.

<sup>304</sup> John Paul II, "*Pastor Bonus*", Apostolic Constitution, 28 June 1988, *The Holy See*, available from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apc\\_19880628\\_pastor-bonus-index\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_19880628_pastor-bonus-index_en.html); accessed 24 February 2010.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

travel to Medjugorje in order to undertake a private investigation for His Holiness, for the pope “to know the theological position”<sup>306</sup> of the apparitions.

It was most likely the involvement of the Vatican that accounts for the unusual silence of the bishopric of Mostar. Even though Bishop Žanić’s commission met and investigated for several months, none of their findings were ever published and the bishop began reporting to the Bishops’ Conference of Yugoslavia regularly on the matter of Medjugorje. He never attempted to make an official statement, nor did anyone from the commission ever publish their findings. Although Bishop Žanić made many personal remarks in private, as well as to the media, of his own negative opinions toward Medjugorje, none of which take the form of an official declaration, which seems to imply that the bishop understood his authority had been removed. The removal of authority from the bishopric of Mostar was later confirmed by the CDF, which began deferring to the Bishops’ Congress of Yugoslavia to manage Medjugorje.

While some see the removal of this authority as the Holy Spirit moving the leaders of the Church to protect the truth from scandal, in light of the turmoil Medjugorje was causing within the government of Yugoslavia, the decision was strategic as well. Fr. Jozo had already been imprisoned, the bishop was coming under attack, armed guards were interfering in the parish of St. James, and the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia was being publicly ridiculed and threatened. At this moment in time Bishop Žanić had a large target painted on his back – along with the rest of the members of his diocese. It seemed only a matter of time before something else unfortunate happened to a clergy member or worshiper in Herzegovina. The intervention of the CDF – which resulted in the removal of the bishop’s authority over the discernment of Medjugorje – eased the tensions significantly. It was only a matter of months

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<sup>306</sup> Stanislaw Cardinal Dziwisz letter to Denis Nolan, 13 August 2008.

after authority was placed in the hands of the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia that the government lost interest in patrolling Medjugorje.<sup>307</sup>

The Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia stated in April 1991 that it had kept its eye on Medjugorje since the beginning. Several bishops from the surrounding area visited Medjugorje and reported back to the Conference in order to assist understanding in the matter. The late Archbishop of Split and Makarska in neighboring Croatia, Frane Franić, made a report to the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia on April 15th, 1985 regarding his personal investigation into Medjugorje:

I went back to the place in order to be able to tell my faithful whether or not I approved of what one takes away from a pilgrimage to Medjugorje. I assisted at the celebrations, I spoke with the visionaries, I saw the pilgrims. Medjugorje has borne the fruits of prayer, of fasting, of conversion, all fruits which are abundant and evident. Recently Cardinal Kuharić said that one could not interdict private pilgrimages. One can freely discuss the facts regarding Medjugorje and each one is free to accept them or not. For my part, I consider that here we are dealing with supernatural events.<sup>308</sup>

Cardinal Franjo Kuharić, mentioned in Franić's statement, was the archbishop of Zagreb, member of the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia and close friend of Pope John Paul II. Also in the interview, Archbishop Franić stated that "one can freely discuss the facts regarding Medjugorje and each one is free to accept them or not." Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith also affirmed Cardinal Kuharić's position in 1998, by stating "as regards pilgrimages to Medjugorje, which are conducted privately, this Congregation points out that they are permitted on condition that they are not regarded as an authentication of events still taking place and which still call for an examination by the Church."<sup>309</sup> In other words, pilgrimages have been, as long as they are not organized at the diocesan level (the level of the bishop), as this would be seen as an

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<sup>307</sup> Secretary of State [DOS] to Embassy of Belgrade, February 1987, State 031836, p. 13.

<sup>308</sup> Bertonecello Artigrafiche, *Medjugorje – A Portfolio of Images*, (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1987), 19.

<sup>309</sup> Tarcisio Bertone, *The Last Secret of Fatima*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 2008), 93.

official endorsement of the Church. Cardinals, bishops and priests are similarly free to make private pilgrimages to Medjugorje. Bishop Franjo Komarica presented the decision of the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia regarding pilgrimages to Medjugorje: "All Bishops should visit Medjugorje and personally witness what is happening there, so they can bring a decision that will be based not only on reading reports and hearing witnesses but on our own experience."<sup>310</sup> The book *Medjugorje and the Church* carefully lists all cardinals and bishops who have openly traveled to Medjugorje on pilgrimage and records many documented, personal opinions of John Paul II, cardinals and bishops regarding Medjugorje.

After a decade of overseeing the events at Medjugorje, the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia made the official statement on April 10th, 1991, which the Catholic Church as a whole currently recognizes as the official position on Medjugorje:

On the basis of the investigations, so far it cannot be affirmed that one is dealing with supernatural apparitions and revelations. 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 in 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 especially suitable liturgical-pastoral directives. Likewise, through their Commission they will continue to keep up with and investigate the entire event in Medjugorje.<sup>311</sup>

This statement became known as the Zadar Declaration. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, the authority to continue with the investigation into Medjugorje fell into the hands of the local bishops' conference in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Two letters from the CDF surfaced after the new Bishop of Mostar, Ratko Perić, "made some pretty negative remarks about the presumed supernatural character of the

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<sup>310</sup> Denis Nolan, *Medjugorje and the Church*, (Goleta, CA: Queenship Publishing Company, 2007), x.

<sup>311</sup> Yugoslavian Bishops' Council, "Zadar Declaration", 9 April 1991, *Medjugorje.hr*, available from <http://www.medjugorje.hr/en/medjugorje-phenomenon/guide/zadar-declaration>; accessed 24 February 2010.

apparitions and revelations at Medjugorje” which were published in a French magazine.<sup>312</sup> Distraught French bishops contacted the CDF, while Cardinal Ratzinger was prefect, and asked for the Church’s official standing on Medjugorje. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone was the secretary for the CDF at the time and replied to the letters. His replies surfaced among Medjugorje believers as proof that Medjugorje had not been condemned. Although there has been much controversy surrounding the letters’ authenticity, Cardinal Bertone cleared up the doubt with his 2008 book *The Last Secret of Fatima* (forwarded by Pope Benedict XVI). Written just after he served as Camerlengo of the Holy Roman Church,<sup>313</sup> one chapter of the book is a transcribed interview regarding the Church’s position on Medjugorje.

Although his interview lends towards skepticism, not only does he claim the controversial letters as his own, but Cardinal Bertone expounds on the reason why the CDF decided to remove the authority from the bishopric of Mostar and subsequently place it in the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia. Since the contents of this letter are so often misrepresented, it is of much value to reproduce it entirely for clarity (italics added by the author):

May 26, 1998

To His Excellency Mons. Gilbert Aubry,  
Bishop of Saint-Denis de la Reunion

Excellency:

In your letter of January 1, 1998, you submitted to this Dicastery several questions about the position of the Holy See and of the Bishop of Mostar in regard to the so called apparitions of Medjugorje, private pilgrimages and the pastoral care of the faithful who go there.

In regard to this matter, I think it is impossible to reply to each of the questions posed by Your Excellency. The main thing I would like to point out is that the Holy See does not ordinarily take a position of its own regarding supposed supernatural phenomena as a court of first instance. As for the credibility of the “apparitions” in question, this *Dicastery respects what was decided by the bishops of the former*

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<sup>312</sup> Bertone, *The Last Secret of Fatima*, 93.

<sup>313</sup> Camerlengo is the position of power in charge of the Catholic Church during the interim period between a pope’s death and the election of a new pontiff.

*Yugoslavia in the Declaration of Zadar*, April 10, 1991: “On the basis of the investigations so far, it can not be affirmed that one is dealing with supernatural apparitions and revelations.” Since the division of Yugoslavia into different independent nations it would now pertain to the members of the Episcopal Conference of Bosnia-Herzegovina to eventually reopen the examination of this case, and to make any new pronouncements that might be called for.

What Bishop Peric said in his letter to the Secretary General of “Famille Chretienne”, declaring: “My conviction and my position is not only ‘non constat de supernaturalitate,’ but likewise, ‘constat de non supernaturalitate’ of the apparitions or revelations in Medjugorje”, should be considered the expression of the personal conviction of the Bishop of Mostar which he has the right to express as Ordinary of the place, *but which is and remains his personal opinion*.

Finally, as regards pilgrimages to Medjugorje, which are conducted privately, this Congregation points out that they are permitted on condition that they are not regarded as an authentication of events still taking place and which still call for an examination by the Church.

I hope that I have replied satisfactorily at least to the principal questions that you have presented to this Dicastery and I beg Your Excellency to accept the expression of my devoted sentiments.

Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone  
Secretary<sup>314</sup>

In his reply to the concerned French, Monsignor Gilbert Aubry, Cardinal Bertone is careful to demonstrate that the Vatican not only recognizes the Zadar Declaration as valid and legitimate, but that it quickly defers to the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia's decisions to address the problem at hand. The Zadar Declaration is neither a negative or positive ruling in the authenticity of the apparitions. The statement to which Cardinal Bertone refers: “not possible to affirm that this is a case of supernatural apparitions or revelations” means there is not enough information at the time to make definitive assessment; the apparitions are neither confirmed nor condemned but still under investigation.

Some Catholics argue that since neither the CDF's decision to remove the Bishop of Mostar's authority nor the Zadar Declaration were ever officially made public they are either hoaxes or not binding. However, the CDF does not make it a habit to publish findings on

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<sup>314</sup> Nolan, *Medjugorje and the Church*, 19-20.

cases reviewed. The CDF most often informs the shepherds of the Church (the cardinals and bishops) who have a responsibility to then lead their own diocese through the priests. Rarely does the Congregation make a public statement. The correspondence of Cardinal Bertone as the secretary for the CDF is a common method of communicating the Congregation's findings.

In his letter, Cardinal Bertone also clarifies something that is lacking in most Medjugorje historiography: although both bishops of Mostar have made many negative public comments regarding Medjugorje over the last three decades, the comments cannot be construed as official statements or decisions made by the Church. It is clear from Cardinal Bertone's letter and the comments made in his book that the CDF acknowledges that the authority to authenticate the Medjugorje apparitions has been removed from the Bishop of Mostar and placed in the national bishops' council. However, Bishop Žanić still frequently reported to the bishops' council as an active member before it made the Zadar Declaration, thus remaining involved in a way. Many of the vehement anti-Medjugorje critics make use of the few negative comments that the bishops of Mostar have made over the last three decades which have reached the media, claiming them as official statements of the Catholic Church. However, Cardinal Bertone dismisses those statements of the bishops of Mostar and blatantly states they are only to be regarded as personal opinion. Further into the interview the cardinal reiterates that "the Church defers to the Zadar [Zadar] statement issued on April 10, 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."<sup>315</sup>

The Church indeed continues to move forward. On April 2nd, 2005, Pope John Paul II died from complications resulting in septic shock. As unmatched crowds flocked to the Vatican to mourn the loss of their beloved shepherd, Cardinal Ratzinger was elected to the

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<sup>315</sup> Bertone, *The Last Secret of Fatima*, 94-95.

Papal Office and took the name Pope Benedict XVI. A little over a year after become Pope, it became apparent that the former prefect of the CDF who investigated Medjugorje on behalf of John Paul II was again moving along investigations into the apparitions. On July 15, 2006, the president of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Bishops' Conference announced that "The Catholic Church is starting a new commission that will look into the Medjugorje events."<sup>316</sup>

According to Archbishop Alessandro D'Errico, who is the Papal Nuncio to Bosnia-Herzegovina:

Whenever I would meet with the Holy Father [Pope Benedict XVI], he was always very much interested in Medjugorje. He was involved in everything, starting with the time when he was Head of Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith... That is why he wanted to establish this Commission that is on really high level. He wanted to establish this Commission in order for him to have broad picture about this matter, but according to people who have highest qualities and skills. That is why he invited Cardinals, Bishops and experts from different parts of the world to be a part of this Commission.<sup>317</sup>

Archbishop D'Errico also stated that the Pope is aware of the "huge amount of positive and good influence" of Medjugorje that the Holy Father does not understand how there can be "opposing information" on the matter. The Vatican announced the members of the new commission on April 13th, 2010. Cardinal Camillo Ruini of Italy will serve as the chairman of this commission loaded with some of the highest officials in the Catholic Church, including cardinals, archbishops, those who specialize in psychology and psychiatry, theologians and Mariologists (many of whom teach at the top Catholic universities of the world) and selected members from Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>318</sup> The current Bishop of Mostar, Ratko Perić, was not included in the commission. While the public is anticipating every

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<sup>316</sup> Nolan, *Medjugorje and the Church*, 3.

<sup>317</sup> Originally aired on Radio Maria as a live statement by Alessandro D'Errico. "Statement of Apostolic Nuncio to Bosnia and Herzegovina about International Commission for Medjugorje", 20 March 2010, *Medjugorje.hr*, available from <http://www.medjugorje.hr/en/news>; accessed 3 December 2010. The authenticity of this statement was verified by a personal email from Archbishop Alessandro D'Errico to the author, 13 January 2011.

<sup>318</sup> "Vatican announces members of Medjugorje commission", *Catholic News Agency*, 13 April 2010, available from [http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/vatican\\_announces\\_members\\_of\\_medjugorje\\_commission](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/vatican_announces_members_of_medjugorje_commission); accessed 14 December 2010.

move of the commission, the Vatican spokesman commented that the commission will decide whether or not to publish any findings and that it is likely to be “very discreet.”<sup>319</sup>

This historically unprecedented removal of the local bishop’s authority and the Vatican’s active role in discernment at Medjugorje has led followers of other unapproved Marian apparition sites around the world to claim or seek the same treatment from the Vatican. Although many rumor that the Vatican’s removal of authority for the bishopric of Mostar was a hoax propagated by the pro-Medjugorje side, as demonstrated, the Vatican exercised its rightful authority in the realm of Medjugorje. However, the Vatican has recently intervened in a very different way in two modern-day alleged apparitions, in both of which similar rumors arose. In the case of the alleged Marian apparitions to Maureen Sweeney Kyle in Elyria, Ohio, the Bishop Anthony Pilla of Cleveland cautioned the Catholic faithful about the apparition site in 1999 after many ethical and financial controversies arose regarding the group surrounding Sweeney Kyle. Holy Love Ministries quickly hired a lawyer and officially became a non-Catholic, “ecumenical ministry”, which took the apparitions out from underneath the authority of the Catholic Church. Attendance at the “non-Catholic” shrine continued to grow over the next two decades with alleged apparitions of Mary, Jesus and a plethora of Saints and Angels (all speaking messages to Sweeney Kyle) until November 2009 when the Vatican requested the Bishop of Cleveland “to examine and make a judgment on the activities of Holy Love Ministries,”<sup>320</sup> even though the alleged apparitions are still ongoing. On November 11th, 2009, Bishop Richard Lennon issued a decree to the diocese of Cleveland that “the alleged apparitions and locutions to Maureen Sweeney Kyle are not

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<sup>319</sup> “Vatican announces members of Medjugorje commission”, *Catholic News Agency*, 13 April 2010, available from [http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/vatican\\_announces\\_members\\_of\\_medjugorje\\_commission](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/vatican_announces_members_of_medjugorje_commission); accessed 14 December 2010.

<sup>320</sup> <sup>320</sup> Bishop Richard Lennon, “Letter” to the Diocese of Cleveland, 11 November 2009, available from <http://dioceseofcleveland.org/news/2009/Holy%20Love%20-%20Letter%20in%20English%20-%202009-11-11.pdf>; accessed on 20 January 2011.

supernatural in origin.”<sup>321</sup> In the same decree, the lay faithful were forbidden from gathering at Holy Love and the clergy were forbidden to celebrate any Sacraments on its property. In this case, after over twenty years, the Vatican urged the diocese of Cleveland to make a decision although the apparitions had not ended.

Another alleged site of Marian apparitions, Garabandal, Spain, has been ridden with controversy since its beginning. Four young girls claiming to see Mary from 1961 to 1965 have never ceased to draw both positive and negative attention. In this case, even though the bishop of the diocese of Santander, Monsignor Jose Vilaplaua, sought guidance from the Vatican in discernment of the alleged apparitions, the CDF, “despite requests from various Bishops and faithful has always refused to define the supernatural character of the events in Garabandal.”<sup>322</sup> The CDF then stated that the authority to determine the authenticity of the apparitions still rested in the bishop of Santander. In both the instances of Holy Love Ministries and Garabandal, the Vatican had the opportunity to address the possibility of removal of authority from the bishopric of the diocese in question or to take on an investigation itself. However, this was not the case with either Holy Love or Garabandal; this has only been seen with Medjugorje.

Even now after nearly thirty years, pilgrimages to Medjugorje still soar in the millions every year!<sup>323</sup> Nearly 25 million pilgrims have been recorded in Medjugorje. According to Cardinal Bertone’s letter on behalf of the CDF, private pilgrimages to Medjugorje are not discouraged, but allowed so long as they are not regarded as an authentication of the apparitions. It is merely a place of Marian devotion, not yet achieving official “shrine” status.

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<sup>321</sup> Bishop Richard Lennon, “Decree” to the Diocese of Cleveland, 11 November 2009, available from <http://dioceseofcleveland.org/news/2009/Holy%20Love%20-%20Decree%20in%20English%20-%202009-11-11.pdf>; accessed on 20 January 2011.

<sup>322</sup> Francis Cardinal Seper letter to Archbishop Philip M. Hannan, 21 April 1970, University of Dayton Marian Library, available at [http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/garabandal\\_letters.html](http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/garabandal_letters.html); accessed on 20 January 2011. Msgr. Jose Vilaplaua, “Statement by Bishop Msgr. Jose Vilaplaua of Santander on alleged apparitions at Garabandal”, 11 October 1996, University of Dayton Marian Library, available at [http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/garabandal\\_letters.html](http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/garabandal_letters.html); accessed on 20 January 2011.

<sup>323</sup> “Statistics”, *Medjugorje.hr*, available from <http://www.medjugorje.org/stats.htm>.

Cardinal Bertone makes the distinction that “it’s one thing not to organize pilgrimages, and it’s another to discourage them,” the latter, according to his statements in *The Last Secret of Fatima*, is not the position of the Vatican.

What do the visionaries think about all the controversy in the Church? When Vicka was asked in a recent interview she responded that when it comes to the Church authorities and the question of authenticity, Vicka says “let *Her* take care of that!”<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Eamonn Devlin and Gerard Stratton, *Pilgrims*, BBC TV Northern Ireland, 23 November 2009, television documentary.

## COMMUNIST TENSIONS EASE WHILE OTHERS IGNITE

Fr. Jozo was finally released on February 17th, 1983, and forbidden to return to St. James Parish in Medjugorje by Bishop Žanić. He instead was sent to St. Elias church in Tihaljina<sup>325</sup> where he served until he was finally placed in Široki Brijeg. Over the last century, Široki Brijeg has been a stronghold for Catholics in Herzegovina. At the turn of the twentieth century, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, an incredible Catholic basilica was built overlooking the city. The location of the thirty Franciscan martyrs which inspired Fr. Jozo in his youth has become his home. Over the last decades, pilgrims have made the trip to Široki Brijeg to hear Fr. Jozo speak, participate in a healing service and even attend retreats under his leadership.

At the time of Jozo's release, the episode in Medjugorje was not attracting so much drama. When an American embassy officer visited Medjugorje in 1984, he noted that the militia "is no longer stationed in the street to intimidate the faithful" and that foreign pilgrimages are a most regular occurrence in that area of Herzegovina (he mentions that masses are already being said in languages other than Croatian – French, German, Italian and English).<sup>326</sup> Fr. Zrinko remembers that "when these events became known everyone began coming: politicians, the police, priests, doctors."<sup>327</sup> Medjugorje's diverse patrons vary from President Reagan's cabinet and United States Congress members, to hundreds of doctors, psychologists and scientists to an assortment of entertainers and journalists.

Once the events at Medjugorje were no longer seen as a threat, the economy of rural Herzegovina was happy to oblige all the foreign tourists willing to spend their money. In March of 1982, the Yugoslavian government was thrilled that its Adriatic coast was a hotspot

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<sup>325</sup> Carlos Legcevic email to author, Croatian Mir Center, 20 December 2010. The most famous image of Our Lady of Medjugorje is actually a photograph of a statue of Our Lady of Grace in Tihaljina.

<sup>326</sup> Embassy of Zagreb to Secretary of State [DOS], August 1984, Zagreb 01068, p. 6-7.

<sup>327</sup> Kraljevic, *In the Company of Mary*, 109.

for European nudists, a total of 13 million “tourist days.”<sup>328</sup> In February of 1987, the United States Department of State produced a document summarizing the economy of Yugoslavia in which it mentioned that “authorities continue to tolerate large-scale pilgrimages by domestic and foreign Catholics to Medjugorje...and relaxed earlier restrictions on building facilities at Medjugorje”<sup>329</sup> – undoubtedly to allow the influx of the foreign money to continue. Ten million foreign tourists had already crossed the borders with the sole purpose of going to Medjugorje, most foreign tour groups arrange for their pilgrims to stay at least one week.

It is the topic of the commercialization of Medjugorje that is at the root of many objections to the authenticity of the visionaries’ claims. Many anti-Medjugorje commentators claim that Medjugorje is a cash cow and that the visionaries as well as the villagers are cashing in. While modern-day religious kitsch boutiques, malls, arcades, hotels and restaurants in approved apparition sites such as Lourdes, France and Fatima, Portugal, seem more scandalous than the half-rural, half-tourist Medjugorje, still many traveling “gypsies” and merchants moved into Medjugorje selling cheap religious articles to the visitors. However, most of the indigenous inhabitants of Medjugorje did not even comprehend charging pilgrims for using their water, eating their food or even sleeping in their homes! In reality, when the apparitions began, the people of Medjugorje were housing pilgrims for free. The first Westerners who came to offer them checks as compensation, were shocked to realize that they were never cashed. The people of Medjugorje did not even know what checks were and were simply throwing them away.<sup>330</sup> It was not until more and more people descended upon the village that the villagers realized the flow was never going to stop.

Reggie Donnelly is a Northern Ireland pilgrimage leader who has been bringing pilgrims to Medjugorje for over twenty years. He gives testimony to a phenomenon –

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<sup>328</sup> Embassy of Belgrade to Secretary of State [DOS], 15 March 1982, A-33, p. 7.

<sup>329</sup> Secretary of State [DOS] to Embassy of Belgrade, February 1987, State 031836, p. 13.

<sup>330</sup> Personal communication with Maria Paulic, Croatian Mir Center, June 2006.

interesting in and of itself – to which many people who visit Medjugorje attest: “The moment you get off the bus, everyone says the same thing: it’s a peace they cannot explain. It’s a peace that comes over them and all their problems and difficulties they don’t seem to worry about.” Pilgrims have been known to return to Medjugorje two, three, five, twenty times. Traveling across the world to a yet-developing nation has become for some like taking a road trip to the beach! Donnelly claims that the recurrence of pilgrims is because at Medjugorje “they find something that the world cannot give.”<sup>331</sup> Six years after the apparitions began, he was leading one of his first groups to Medjugorje. Donnelly describes the unusual circumstances pilgrims were happy to deal with in 1987:

The houses [of Medjugorje] were little small hamlets. The families would let you sleep in their beds and they slept on the floor. I had 30 people and it took me from 2 o’clock in the morning to 6 o’clock in the morning to get them accommodations. I had to go and rap on doors and some were saying ‘I can take two.’ ‘I can take one.’ And that’s the way we done it. And you’d see people in that church at 5 o’clock in the morning...the church never closed.<sup>332</sup>

In a 1987 *New York Times* question and answer article written by Stanley Carr, a reader asks about the logistics of traveling to Medjugorje. “Pilgrims who spend the night in Medjugorje stay in private homes,” Carr answers, “which are the only accommodations, but a Yugoslav tour company, Kompas, says it is opening the first hotel in the village this winter. It will consist of bungalow units for 300 guests and include a restaurant, bar and chapel.”<sup>333</sup> Six years after the apparitions began the village, comprised of no more than 250 families – those of whom critics like Juan A. Herrero and E. Michael Jones, claim fabricated the apparitions in order to milk the rich tourists – had failed to grasp the idea of making a profit

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<sup>331</sup> Devlin and Gerard Stratton, *Pilgrims*.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Stanley Carr, “Q AND A”, *New York Times*, October 18, 1987, Travel section, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/18/travel/q-and-a-566187.html?pagewanted=all>; accessed on 16 September 2010.

off of the apparitions.<sup>334</sup> Furthermore, when attacking the people of Medjugorje, Herrero claims that one of the visionaries drives “an expensive BMW model”<sup>335</sup> (a quotation which he cites from a “confidential source”). This claim is true, and other opponents of Medjugorje – to their embarrassment – have made the same claim about both the visionaries’ cars and the town’s taxis. The taxis in Medjugorje are twenty-plus-year-old Mercedes or BMW models, which are comparable to an old Ford in the United States, with absolutely no furnishings, amenities, or even air conditioning or power windows.<sup>336</sup> The idea that the people of Medjugorje are becoming so rich that they are all driving BMWs is propaganda that is carelessly tossed about by those sorely opposed to the apparition, and sadly believed by just about anyone who is terrified of believing a falsehood.

Regardless, when people travel to Medjugorje presently, like Fatima and Lourdes, they are stunned by shop after shop of religious articles; some articles are cheap and available at every store (plastic rosaries, medals of various saints, or holy water bottles) and others are extremely expensive and rare (liturgical chasubles or life-sized statues). Most of the owners and workers of these shops will tell you that they live a bus ride away from Medjugorje and only come here for the job. As a Westerner, it could be easy to mistake ethnically-Croatian people for those indigenous to Medjugorje. Nearly every family in Medjugorje is now connected with tourism. Before the first hotel was built in 1987, pilgrims were sleeping in villagers homes, camping on any available land and drawing water from the single public well in Medjugorje; either the villagers had to continue to accommodate the pilgrims for free in their own homes, or they had to come to terms with the realization that the visitors were never going away. According to historian David Hackett Fischer’s “fallacy of irrelevant proof,” even if every single person in all of Yugoslavia were greedily taking

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<sup>334</sup> Mart Bax, *Medjugorje: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Rural Bosnia*, (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995). Herrero, “Medjugorje: Ecclesiastical Conflict, Theological Controversy, Ethnic Division”, 140 & 154.

<sup>335</sup> Herrero, “Medjugorje: Ecclesiastical Conflict, Theological Controversy, Ethnic Division”, 154.

<sup>336</sup> Author’s personal observance.

advantage of the apparitions of Mary, it is not relevant proof that Mary did not actually appear. It is merely an irrelevant answer that does not fit the original question.<sup>337</sup>

Many anti-Medjugorje articles and books accuse the people of Herzegovina of orchestrating the apparitions of Mary to give a boost to their economy.<sup>338</sup> Those critics fail to acknowledge the accumulation medical and scientific data that conclude the visionaries are not and could not be faking or causing their state of ecstasy. After studying the scientific data, those who claim the events in Medjugorje are fabricated in order to reap economic benefits would have to credit the children visionaries for developing a particular mastery of their brain function, nervous system and vision in order to play along with this ploy.

Such was the case with mystic and stigmatist Padre Pio of Pietrelcina in the 1940s. People flocked from all over the world to stand at the window of his monastery. Peddlers, looking to improve their state in life sold photographs and statues of the suffering man. Many within the Church were extremely skeptical of his authenticity, due to his followers. However, during the official Church investigation for the cause of his beatification, Padre Pio was found to be a very holy man who lived a modest life, regardless of his fame outside the monastery walls. He was canonized a Saint of the Catholic Church in 2002 by Pope John Paul II.

What is most detrimental to the historical accuracy of the events surrounding the Medjugorje apparitions is not the official Church position, as most opponents of Medjugorje would have their audiences believe, but rather unsubstantiated disinformation propagated by a few authors and the paranoia which has ensued. Good Catholics, worried that they may be disobeying the Church fail to learn the facts and are seduced by half-truths.

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<sup>337</sup> Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 45

<sup>338</sup> Mart Bax, *Medjugorje: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Rural Bosnia*. Herrero, "Medjugorje: Ecclesiastical Conflict, Theological Controversy, Ethnic Division", 154.

## CONCLUSION

The deep pursuit of the truth in the events of Medjugorje is most often polarizing. Looking at the either end of the Medjugorje spectrum of belief, extremism taints the pursuit of truth. Some portray anyone who has not yet come to believe that Mary is appearing in Medjugorje as traitors to the Virgin Mary and puppets of the devil. Others' first impressions of Medjugorje are characterized by a predisposition to skepticism. When hearing that the children claim to be seeing the Virgin Mary, their minds automatically revert to tails of statues that cry blood, stigmatists and all types of extremist-religious piety; they believe the claims of Medjugorje to be no different. They are harshly and sometimes unreasonably critical of sources that promote Medjugorje and ignore blatant biases, sloppy methodology and extremism in sources that claim Medjugorje is fakery, demonic or both.

Sometimes – on either side – pride takes over and pursuing Medjugorje is no longer about finding the truth, but a crusade to show that the other side is wrong. Now this is a look at both the extremes; the majority of those open to Medjugorje are just that: open. They are devoted to the Blessed Mother, open to her messages, and living lives of peace, prayer and conversion. Some have even devoted a portion of their lives (or their whole life) to spreading the “miracle” of Medjugorje.

During my study of Medjugorje I have found truth on both sides of the argument, but, like all extremism, there are deadly mistakes present, as well. Part of my methodology has been a commitment to reading particular primary or secondary source in context – aware of particular biases, yet able to harvest usable facts from each source; in essence, not throwing the baby out with the bath water. After studying Department of State documentation investigating the religious revival of Medjugorje, two things became very clear to the U.S. embassy officers in regards to the events in Medjugorje:

1. The Franciscans of St. James Parish in Medjugorje did not seem to be manipulating the apparitions of pilgrims for nationalistic gains.  
  
Although the initial government reaction was harsh, the Medjugorje movement became seen as peaceful and, ultimately, lucrative. The religious pilgrimages, demonstrations and gatherings were tolerated by the local and national authorities of Yugoslavia during the remainder of the nation's existence.
2. The Bishop of Mostar, Pavao Žanić, was acting against a background of extreme tension and harsh repercussions. His actions according to the embassy officers were "responsible" – relative to his situation – and that he strove towards the logical best interest of Catholicism in Bosnia-Herzegovina, even if it meant willingly ignoring or denying the truth.

After reviewing the reports of the embassy officers and the accounts of the events that occurred within the first year of the apparitions, it seems as though Bishop Žanić initially made a secularly logical and understandable decision by adopting a neutral or negative stance toward the apparitions at Medjugorje. Feeling the pressure from the government of Yugoslavia threatening his position as bishop and aware of the harsh and impulsive way that the communist authorities had reacted at the outset of the events, the bishop responded by taking a stance that would ensure that the practice of Catholicism would continue to be tolerated by the Yugoslavian government – a stance that would also keep him out of jail.

While the bishop's actions may seem understandable from a secular point of view, persons in the history of the Catholic Church have placed their lives on the line for far less in order to preserve the integrity of the Faith. The practice and belief of Catholicism is that truth be pursued and adhered to regardless of contextual complications. By taking an *a priori*

negative stance towards the apparitions due to his political situation, Bishop Žanić did not allow room for the truth. As the situation further progressed, he became more entrenched in his position and eventually it was no longer about the truth of Medjugorje, it became an issue of “us” versus “them”. Now his stance – taken out of context – serves as a stumbling block for many who are trying to gather unbiased information about Medjugorje and a tool of chicanery for those who wish all to believe that Medjugorje is false. Those earnestly searching for truth are presented with two very convincing, yet conflicting, arguments from both sides and are left with what seems like an unsolvable a conundrum. However, when Bishop Žanić’s actions are put into proper context and chronology, his decisions become very human and very fallible.

Given the pressure that he was under, it is very clear why he reached his decision and very clear why the Vatican saw it necessary to intervene. When the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) under Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger removed the authority from the bishop, essentially, it removed the target from him as well. By alleviating some of the pressure from the bishop, the CDF also ensured that his current predicament would not scandalize the Church by resulting in a premature, condemnation of the apparitions. The CDF placed the authority in the Bishops Conference of Yugoslavia which meant that the government of Yugoslavia would no longer be able to threaten an individual to achieve its means, rather an entire group with equal ties to the Yugoslavian nation and to the international entity of the Vatican. Neither Bishop Zanić nor his successor Bishop Perić ever made public objections to the removal of their authority and continued to report to the Bishops Conference of Yugoslavia regarding Medjugorje. The findings of the first investigative commission on Medjugorje organized by Zanić were never published, even though the bishop made many personal remarks about the apparitions which led to further confusion among the laity.

After the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent war, the Vatican placed the authority in the new Bishops Conference of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which continued to leave the Medjugorje question unanswered. It was not until the spring of 2006 that the Vatican, under Pope Benedict XVI (formerly Cardinal Ratzinger, the Prefect of the CDF, who initiated the removal of authority from the Bishop of Mostar) rested the final authority of the apparitions at Medjugorje in the new Vatican commission which he established. It seems that the question of the authenticity of Medjugorje – whether coincidentally or consequentially – has followed Joseph Ratzinger through the last three decades of his ministry.

Over the last 30 years, tens of millions have traveled to Medjugorje from all over the world without one single admonishment from the Holy See. Many people claim the events in Medjugorje have been condemned and yet millions of people still travel to Medjugorje each year, some of whom include priests, bishops and cardinals. No apparition site in history would have been approved – or even investigated – had the believing faithful not spearheaded pilgrimages, prayers and pious devotions to the miracle-in-question.

Again, my goal is not to conclude that the alleged apparitions at Medjugorje should be approved nor am I have I attempted to prove or disprove that Mary is appearing to the six visionaries. What I am concluding – which I have demonstrated through ample proof – is that the Catholic Church is still investigating the veracity of these claims and has neither condemned nor approved them. Through the evidence that I have displayed in this work, I have sought to rectify many of the misunderstandings surrounding Medjugorje, in order to allow serious research on the subject by Church authorities and laymen through means of a solid foundation of facts.

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