Medjugorje, Bosnia: Does Mary Integrate or Disintegrate?

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MEDJUGORJE, BOSNIA: DOES MARY INTEGRATE OR DISINTEGRATE?

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Master of Arts in Religious Studies
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Abstract

MEDJUGORJE, BOSNIA:
DOES MARY INTEGRATE OR DISINTEGRATE?

The religious ritual of pilgrimage offers insight into the various ways in which sacred space is understood. Thinkers such as Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Mircea Eliade offer several understandings of religion and interpretations of the role of ritual and the sacred. By investigating the specific historical and cultural context of a much visited, contemporary pilgrimage site of Medjugorje, Bosnia, it becomes clear that there is a striking difference here between the popular and official understanding of the space. A study of Marian apparitional pilgrimages within the Roman Catholic tradition provides context for the on-going and tumultuous debate within both the Church and amongst the Catholic Croats, Muslim Bosnians, and Eastern Orthodox Serbs of the area. Questions of the validity of the apparitions and the role of the local religious leaders and the Franciscans come to the fore of the many contentious debates regarding Medjugorje. Amidst this extraordinary tension and, at times, brutal violence, millions claim to find peace and spiritual transformation in this small Bosnian hamlet. It remains to be seen whether the Church will officially approve or completely and finally denounce the site with regards to the validity of the apparitions and the importance of the related pilgrimages. Yet despite the controversy, this seemingly contradictory place draws pilgrims and perhaps offers something that cannot be found elsewhere.
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INTRODUCTION

Medjugorje, meaning ‘between the mountains’, has been a place caught between conflicting powers. For almost thirty years, the phenomenon of Medjugorje has captivated both the lay Catholic population and scholars of Religion alike. Much has been written about the supposed miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary since the beginning of the apparitions in 1981, but many questions about this remote Bosnian village remain. These controversies are best understood in terms of the backdrop of religious interaction between the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Muslim communities, as well as the tumultuous history of Communist and Fascist rule, civil war, and ethnic cleansing. One area of discussion concerns the scientific truth of the apparitions; as recently as 2005, testing has been done on the visionaries who claim to have seen and communicated with the Virgin Mary. Additionally there are debates focused on the
tension within the religious leadership of the local community, as well as the role of politics in the cultural understanding of the location. Religious leaders violently fought over control of their congregations, and Catholic priests were involved in the ethnic ‘cleansing’ of the Serbian Orthodox and Muslim communities. In addition, the Catholic Church has not yet officially sanctioned Medjugorje. Despite these points of controversy, tens of millions have gone and continue to visit this mountain hamlet.

This paper seeks to investigate why so many people go on pilgrimage to Medjugorje, Bosnia, especially since the Church does not approve of it. Although no formal interviews have been done, through historical and sociological research, this inquiry will focus on how pilgrims reconcile the difference between the popular understanding of the Marian pilgrimage site at Medjugorje with the official, ecclesial position on the apparitions. While this question can be applied to several sites, this particular investigation of Medjugorje will be supported by a comparison to other pilgrimages and specifically those based on Marian apparitions. The example found in Bosnia is an interesting one as it is relatively recent (beginning in the 1980s and continuing to today) and thus perhaps more telling of our contemporary culture.

The author of this paper has had the opportunity to travel to Medjugorje, during a trip to Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia in the spring of 2009, and having visited a variety of religious sites, this location was fascinating in its contradictions and rich and varied history. While other writers have attempted to disprove the validity of the visions at Medjugorje or written of personal transformative experiences, this paper will not seek

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to criticize the Church’s stance, but to simply investigate the role it plays in the popularity of the pilgrimage site. There has been much that has been written on the topic of Medjugorje, and the perspective of the sources varies widely, but nothing has yet been written solely on the larger question of why people go on pilgrimage while focusing on the site and occurrences of Medjugorje.
CHAPTER I
PILGRIMAGE AND MARIAN APPARITIONS

The Study of Pilgrimage

In order to understand the place of Medjugorje, a brief look at the general study of pilgrimage is necessary. Pilgrimage has been variously defined and analyzed. Victor and Edith Turner are perhaps the most well known thinkers in the field of pilgrimage study. While widely critiqued today, as discussed below, Victor Turner’s work, in particular, serves as the foundation for all future study. Turner uses an anthropological approach and applies the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep’s concept of the phases of rites of passage to the experience of pilgrimage. These three phases include: separation, limen, and aggregation (Turner 2).

The first phase comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group, either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from a relatively stable set of cultural conditions (a cultural ‘state’); during the intervening liminal phase, the state of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’ or ‘liminar’) becomes ambiguous, he passes through a realm or dimension that has few or none of the attributes of the past or

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coming state, he is betwixt and between all familiar lines of classification; in the third phase the passage is consummated, and the subject returns to classified secular or mundane social life. (2)

For Turner the key aspect of pilgrimage is the liminality experienced; this in-between state felt during the inner and outer journey of pilgrimage is categorized not only by transition but also potentiality (3). According to Turner, people search out this experience of liminality: “The point of it all is to get out, go forth, to a far holy place approved by all” (7). The experience of pilgrimage becomes an experience that is different from the space and time of a secular or normal experience. It is marked by a phase of changing identity. The concept of a labyrinth can serve as an example for this stepped journey and transformation, in addition to that of Turner’s liminality. Just as walking the unicursal path of a labyrinth takes one to the center and back out to the starting point; a pilgrimage consists of three phases as well. First the pilgrim separates oneself from the ordinary world and enters the path. The journey leads one to the center of the liminal experience. At the center of a labyrinth, the pilgrim is in an in-between state; the experience is truly one that does not fit within ordinary space and time. This is the experience that has potential to lead to change and spiritual transformation. It is in this in-between state, where a pilgrim is no longer within the normal structure of their lives, but not yet finished with the experience of the journey. In this liminal state where the pilgrim may discover something new about their identity or how it connects with others, a greater power, or the natural world. The journey out from the center is the continuation of the pilgrimage. Returning to the outer rings of the labyrinth or returning home after a journey to a sacred place holds meaning as well. Instead of separating from
the ordinary world, the pilgrim now re-gathers and reconnects with ordinary existence, but potentially in a new or different manner. The pilgrim’s perspective may have changed along with their sense of self. This tri-part journey, evidenced with a traditional labyrinth, can be applied to myriad pilgrimages, including those to Marian apparition sites such as Medjugorje, Bosnia. Turner’s elusive, and in some ways indescribable, concept of liminality becomes the experience sought and becomes the element of change for the pilgrim.

Individuals go on pilgrimage for a variety of reasons: penance, travel, initiation, and salvation (8). Many thinkers agree with Turner’s notion that it is an intensely individual experience, but is also one that contributes to a sense of union with others, or communitas, on the pilgrimage simultaneously or throughout historical time. Turner describes this powerful sense of unity with life as something sought through the ritual of pilgrimage, but also something evident in what appears to be secular motivations: “Even when people bury themselves in anonymous crowds on beaches, they are seeking an almost sacred, often symbolic, mode of communitas, generally unavailable to them in the structured life of the office, the shop floor, or the mine” (20). Although there exists this unique and unifying experience, pilgrimage is also quite multidimensional, giving space
for a variety of voices and messages: “Pilgrimages are like cultural magnets, attracting symbols of many kinds, both verbal and nonverbal, multivocal and univocal” (26). The sacred mountain of Mount Kailash in western Tibet can be an example of this multidimensional aspect to pilgrimage. This site is considered holy by at least three major faiths: in Hinduism as an axis mundi or central pillar of the world, in Buddhism as the site where mythical meditation competitions took place, and in Jainism where kevela or nirvana has been attained. One site takes on meanings and messages from various faith traditions; it speaks to a many in a multitude of ways. Through pilgrim rituals near this mountain, individual Hindus can make spiritual progress but also connect to the community of Hindus who have traveled there in the past and will do so in the future. This bond occurs through the shared prayers and rituals but also from the experience of coming to this site. Since Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains, among others, share a similar journey this experience in Tibet becomes especially multifaceted. (Westwood 2, 79)

Pilgrimage is not a singular experience; there are many layers to the journey, to its interpretation, and in the pilgrims themselves.

Although referring to numerous critiques of Turner’s traditional definition of pilgrimage, in their introduction to Contesting the Sacred, Eade and Sallnow support this idea of the pluralistic nature of pilgrimage:

Pilgrimage is above all an arena for competing religious and secular discourses, for both the official co-optation and the non-official recovery

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of religious meanings, for conflict between orthodoxies, sects, and confessional groups, for drives towards consensus and communitas, and for counter movements towards separateness and division (2).

They argue that pilgrimages are sites that are given meaning by a variety of people and in a variety of ways. The sacred place of pilgrimages becomes the space to be filled by the pilgrims, and this ability to stand for multiple voices is what gives these sites a universal quality (15). One example of the variety of meanings given a place can be found at Lourdes, France. Pilgrims come for two reasons, highlighting two separate discourses (18). Since the apparition of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette Soubirous, in 1858, some come for miracles or a special sign from God and other pilgrims understand the pilgrimage as a sacrificial journey mirroring, on a small scale, Christ’s sacrifice.

Additionally, within these two discourses there is the interplay of the shrine officials, with their desire to support Second Vatican Council reforms, and the lay perspective, which often embraces more traditional rituals (10).

The practice of pilgrimage can also be seen through the lens of Emile Durkheim in terms of this ritual being a social bond that links people together (3). He sees religion as an expression of social values, and its function is to unite and preserve society. For Durkheim, religious rituals, including pilgrimage, are collective actions that reaffirm commitment to social values. An example of this unifying experience can be found with the often studied Muslim pilgrimage of the Hajj. The Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam, and is required of all Muslims in good health and economic standing at least once in their lifetime. Before coming to Mecca, a Muslim must spiritually prepare for this sacred experience. Upon arriving in Mecca, each pilgrim temporarily exchanges their
ordinary garb for the plain white clothing worn by all pilgrims during the Hajj. As in any ritual, a change in outward identity signals a new inner identity. This physical switch alone serves to unite the Muslims with their worldwide brother and sisterhood visible on this pilgrimage. By donning these clothes, the pilgrimage serves as a social glue and bonds all pilgrims, despite their previous socio-economic background, as they enact the series of religious rituals in and around the sacred Ka’ba.

Karl Marx can offer another interesting interpretation of the role of pilgrimage. Marx’s theory is that religion is part of the social superstructure, and its teachings only encourage passive obedience, while its practices serve as a way for the masses to release tension without advocating for change. He sees religion as oppressive, and thus a religious ritual, such as pilgrimage, is understood in that same way. Pilgrimage maintains the ideologies of the powerful (4). Looking again at the experience of Muslims on the Hajj a Marxian perspective can also be applied. For critics of religion, such as Marx, and in particular some feminist critics of the ways in which contemporary Islam is practiced in many Muslim countries, the Hajj can be seen as a method of further oppression. The Hadith, or sayings of Muhammad, limit the distance an unmarried woman can travel; thus limiting the women who can travel on the Hajj. This can be interpreted to imply that in order for a woman to go on the Hajj, she must not only be married, but must be accompanied by an appropriate guardian, such as her husband. In this way, the Hajj and its pilgrimage experience can be seen as a way for those in power to remain powerful. This view asserts that the religious rituals serve to maintain the ideology of those on top of the religious hierarchy and are thus oppressive.
A third famous giant in the field of Religious Studies, Mircea Eliade, might also add an insightful perspective. He sees religion as being rooted in our human experience of the sacred. Religious rituals are thus symbolic forms of communication that we use to approach the sacred. He sees pilgrimages as archetypes for sacred space (6). The site of a pilgrimage, for Eliade, is understood as sacred space and sacred time. The experience of being there is transformed by the utterly different definition of that holy space and the ritual time elapsed there. The Ka’ba, or black stone cube-shaped building at the center of the Great Mosque in Mecca and the direction of all Muslim prayer, can be seen to represent a sacred archetype. It is the most holy spot for Muslims. In one corner of the building is a black stone, which is possibly a meteorite. This location becomes an axis mundi or the center of the earth for Muslims. Additionally, the previous history of the spot, including other shrines prior to the Muslim period, lends itself to Eliade’s concept of symbols. He understands religious rituals to be a form of communication between humanity and the divine. (Eliade 33, 65) Humanity needs symbols and rituals to express the ineffable, and we do so through universal signs and symbols. This meteorite became an ancient focus of religious ritual and that universal characteristic continues today when Muslims physically direct their prayers towards it and circumambulate it during the Hajj. This is a way for Muslims to communicate with the divine.

Although there are a variety of interpretations of pilgrimage, many agree with Turner that there is an interesting relationship exhibited between orthodoxy and the lay population. The masses go even if the authorities are ambivalent. Turner cites an

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example of a Catholic pilgrimage in Mexico to which the people flock, despite the lack of
an official sanction; he argues “unless a pilgrimage center is systematically discredited
and destroyed, the believing masses will continue to make their way to the shrine” (29-
30).

Turner classifies pilgrimages into four groups: Prototypical (those having a
connection to the founder of a religion, such as Rome), Archaic (those with syncretic
connections to other beliefs, for example Glastonbury), Medieval (those which spring
from popular traditions in the Middle Ages, like Santiago de Compostela), and finally
Modern (those which demonstrate piousness in the increasingly challenging modern
world, such as the many apparition based sites) (17-8). While these four categories span
several centuries and the split in terms of the practical and theological differences
between Catholic and Protestant ideas of pilgrimage has a fascinating history, the focus
of this paper is on the final group of the modern pilgrimage. As Turner notes, pilgrims
often “vote with their feet” (221), and in the past two hundred years pilgrims’ feet have
taken them to the sites of apparitions, often despite a lack of official sanctioning. It is
this popular response that becomes critical in assessing the power of a pilgrimage site.

It is into this modern pilgrimage category, which Marian apparitions fit. These
sites have anti-structural and anti-authority characteristics about them, perhaps explaining
why those in positions of authority or representing orthodoxy are often ambivalent to
pilgrimages. This disparity between the orthodoxy and the masses can be seen in
numerous examples. There is tension between shrine officials and the desires of lay
pilgrims with regards to the ritual bathing process at Lourdes, between the official
Catholic devotions at a shrine in the Andes and the popular practices exhibited there with
regards to self-flagellation, and also at a Sri Lankan site where trance and possession are used by the people, even though the Church denounces such practices (Eade and Sallnow 11-2, 23). A pilgrimage site in Brazil, Joaseiro, supports a great number of pilgrims coming to see the spot where the host turned to blood, even though the Church tried to censure it (Turner 210). Additionally, the Church has been hesitant about charismatic people during their lives, but taken a stronger stance on the meaning of the person’s life after their death, such as with Padre Pio (Eade and Sallnow 14). Yet, despite the lack of structure and official approval, such sites have gained much popularity. The face of the modern pilgrimage site is one marked not by tradition and organization, but instead by the will of the masses.
Marian Apparitions and Pilgrimage

While the study of pilgrimages covers all religious traditions, and the location and background of Bosnia does display a plethora of cultural influences, including Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Islam, this example of Medjugorje does fall squarely into the category of Marian apparitions. Thus is it beneficial to begin the investigation with a cursory look at other Marian sites and any possible similarities. Pilgrimage to Marian sites has seen a resurgence since the mid-19th century; many call this recent period “The Age of Mary” due to the increase in popularity of Marian devotions. This increase in popularity can have many causes, but one trait that draws the masses to Mary is their perception of her role as defender and reliever. While discouraging excessive Marian cult following, the Second Vatican Council in 1965 supported the importance of Mary by emphasizing her sinless conception and role in salvation; she was seen as the motherly protector and personal advocate in times of trouble, an intercessor who offers motherly love and guidance. This is supported by earlier doctrines dating back to 1854 and 1950 such as the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, respectively. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception claims that the conception of Mary within the womb of her mother was without sin. This allows for the Son of God to be born of a purely sinless woman. This is explained in the Catholic Catechism:  

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7 Catechism of the Catholic Church. 2nd ed. Web. 4 Nov. 2009.
Through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, ‘full of grace’ through, was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses, as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854: ‘The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin.’ (#491)

In addition to Mary’s life beginning without original sin, Mary’s life also ended in a unique manner. The teaching of the Assumption is that instead of dying a natural death and later being ascended into heaven, Mary immediately ascended into heaven, body and soul. The following is also from the Catholic Catechism:

‘Finally the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death.’ (#966)

Although both relatively recent, these changes in dogma solidify Mary’s heightened role in relationship to humanity. Mary’s conception, life, and death were special, and thus she alone has a special relationship with Jesus and God the Father. She is the mother of all but is set apart and above from the rest of the world’s mothers. Her relationship to the divine is unique and one to be sought for comfort. These two doctrines in particular serve to highlight Mary’s unique role that many turned to and emphasized during the 19th and 20th centuries. Perhaps this speaks to a popular need for a feminine power, a
compliment to the traditionally male dominated trinity. Mary’s feminine identity serves as a counterpart to the masculine figures who are sought out for support and love. The Virgin Mary offers another path to God that, although none can emulate her role perfectly, can provide a more personal connection for those whose prayers seek another listener and comforter.

Mary is seen as a universal symbol of love and hope; she is a protector and supporter in times of crisis, and her appearance often heightens this symbolism. There are numerous sites that proclaim an appearance of Mary, including: Guadalupe, Mexico (in 1531), La Salette, France (in 1846), Lourdes, France (in 1858), Pontmain, France (in 1871), Pellovoisin, France (in 1876), Knock, Ireland (in 1879), Fatima, Portugal (in 1917), Beauraing, Belgium (in 1932), and Tre Fontane, Rome (in 1947). Yet not all sites and apparitions are recognized by the Church. While there have been hundreds of reported apparitions, roughly a dozen were officially approved by the Congregation for the Faith and interestingly none in the last seventy years. Additionally, for those sites which are officially approved by the Church, the recognition is only that the visionaries are not lying, the reports are not manipulated, and there is no demonic influence, not that the apparitions are in fact real (6). Even the few sites that are “approved” are still understood within a very limited context and not as an all-embracing acceptance of the miraculous. The approval process by the Catholic Church of pilgrimage sites will be discussed in greater detail below, but it is interesting to note that the lack of official sanction often does not deter pilgrims from traveling to such sites. During this Age of

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Mary, visiting a site where it is believed she has appeared may connect the faithful to God in a more powerful way. Catholics often understand prayers to Mary at a site of an apparition to be more likely to be heard and acted upon (Turner 204-6). Because of this heightened connection with Mary at such locations and the feeling of a closeness or presence of the divine, these locations continue to be immensely popular.

It is important to note that there are many similarities among the Marian apparitions and while there are those that do not fit [such as American ‘back-yard’ apparitions condemning “rock music, television, abortion and homosexuality” or an image in a bathroom stall in Nigeria9] there is often a pattern, described by Perry and Echeverria, to the vision event. These seven points of comparison listed and described below can be supported with a variety of examples.

The first point of similarity is the background of the event; often there is a conflict in the region or a fear of future suffering. The conflict between Serbs and Croats during the beginning of the collapse of Yugoslavia, which was to later explode in terrible violence, served as the backdrop for Medjugorje. The appearance of the Virgin to Bernadette Soubirous, in Lourdes, came on the heels of French revolutionary turmoil, and with regards to Fatima, Lucia Santos and Jacinta and Francisco Marto lived in a Portugal on the verge of totalitarianism.10 This points to the common background of geo-political turmoil, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

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The second point is the identity of the visionaries; they often suffer from poor health, low socio-economic class, or a lack of education and are aware of the Marian cult. While it is unclear whether the six Bosnian visionaries were aware of other Marian apparitions, a few had been exposed to the concept of special prayer and devotion to the Virgin. The children involved in the events at Fatima, Lourdes, and Medjugorje all came from rural, low socio-economic backgrounds, thus sharing a common background with the six visionaries.

The third point of similarity is that of the actual vision; Mary is seen as a beautiful, glowing and floating lady. Kozlowski explains the Bosnian vision: “It was a young woman, dressed in a grey gown and with a pleasant, smiling face” (139). Similarly, reports of the Marian apparition at Pontmain, France in 1871, by ten-year-old Eugene Cesar cite a familiar description of Mary: “As he looked at the star-studded sky Eugene noticed one area practically free of stars above a neighboring house. This puzzled him; but, as he gazed at it, suddenly he saw an apparition of a beautiful woman smiling at him; she was wearing a blue gown covered with golden stars, and a black veil under a golden crown.”\footnote{Donal Anthony Foley, \textit{Marian Apparitions, the Bible, and the Modern World}. Herefordshire, England: Gracewing Publishing, 2002. 187. Web. 7 February 2010.} In the case of the apparitions at Beauraing, Belgium in 1932 and 1933 the Virgin is similarly described: “The girls looked and could see the luminous figure of a lady dressed in white walking in midair, her feet hidden by a little cloud” (278).

Fourthly, the messages themselves have an apocalyptic tone and are spread out over a period of time. At Medjugorje, Mary is said to have given the children ten secrets.
to be revealed at a certain time and has pleaded with the children to spread the message of faith: “If the world keeps on going in this way, it will soon find itself on the edge of ruin. It will find salvation only in peace, which it can have only if it will find God. God exists! Tell that to everyone. Those who listen to God will possess peace with themselves and with others, and they will have life.”

At Fatima, one revelation proclaimed “worldwide disaster unless people turned to the Catholic Faith” (Eve 24). At Pellovoisin, France, the Virgin told a young maidservant, Estelle Faguette, that “France will suffer much”; these visions took place from February 13th to December 8th in 1876 (Turner 212). These apocalyptic messages will be revisited below.

A fifth point in this pattern is the accompanying miracles, such as a bouncing sun or the smell of roses. A female pilgrim is cited in Copp’s “Pilgrims’ Pride: Medjugorje”: “She breathlessly described other pilgrims’ reports of images in the sky and a spinning sun. She was certain these things were true. She herself saw some lights in the church during the evening prayer service. ‘Lights?’ ‘They’re sent from the Virgin’” (376). At Fatima, Portugal, there were reports of the sun dancing and spinning in the sky as well. It is interesting to note the similarity in reported miracles and their connection to the natural world and heavenly ascension.

Next is the reaction of the people; first there is doubt and sometimes persecution, then believers rally around the visionaries. Fr. Jozo, a local priest, was highly skeptical at first but later, having seen a vision himself, became an adamant supporter of the children.

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At Fatima, the three children were arrested, jailed, and threatened with a death sentence before the site was validated (Eve 24).

Lastly, there is often a similarity in the ecclesiastical response; the local bishop will become involved, and eventually, with the help of the Vatican, will investigate the authenticity of the visionaries’ claims. The visionaries of Medjugorje were submitted to a series of investigations by several committees, from 1984 to 1998, and the Vatican has yet to make a final pronouncement. In 1947, with the case of Tre Fontane, near Rome, Bruno Cornacchiola claimed to have seen and spoken with the Virgin Mary along with several children. “He and the children were even questioned separately, at length, by the police, but they were unable to find any significant differences in their accounts. … The local church authorities also carried out an investigation, and the cult of the Virgin of Revelation was approved with unusual speed by the Vicariate of Rome” (Foley 323). Late that same year, this event was blessed by Pope Pius XII (323).

There are such similarities between Medjugorje and La Salette, a poor region in the south of France. At both places the messages center on repentance, prayer, and attending Mass and the visionaries were children. Melanie Mathieu Calvat, age 15, and Maximin Giraud, age 11, saw a bright light and then a woman in a field (Turner 25). She spoke of coming doom and in particular a famine. In both locations, there was initial doubt, tension with the clergy, an investigation, and considerable controversy. In France, local priests tried to end the devotions, a holy man claimed that the young boy had confided in him that he had not in fact seen the Virgin, and one of the priests was involved in a sex scandal (219). There were books written denouncing the vision and claimed instead that it was a local, wealthy lady seen in a similar outfit who was traveling
in the area (this claim was not corroborated) (219). The key difference between Medjugorje and La Salette is that Pope Pius IX, the leader who defined Immaculate Conception and recognized Bernadette’s claims in support of the dogma at Lourdes, also at least privately, amidst public controversy within the church in opposition to the devotions, accepted La Salette in 1851 (218).

There are also similarities between Medjugorje and Lourdes and Fatima. Giuriati and Gioia wrote an interesting report, “Pilgrims to Fatima as Compared to Lourdes and Medjugorje”\(^\text{14}\), based on a study in Fatima in 1986, Lourdes in 1982 and 1984, and Medjugorje in 1985. While they note that some have understood pilgrimage to be a “rediscovery of folk religion or a reconquest of one’s lost identity” and others, like Turner, see pilgrimage as connected to a conversion experience, they, in a more theological construct, see pilgrimage as a place where pilgrims encounter a sacred message (57, 58). Through interviews, questionnaires, videotape of pilgrim behavior, recordings of oral histories, prayer intentions, choices in souvenir purchases and votive objects they studied the ways in which the pilgrims valued and experienced the site (59). They concluded that there were similar messages; for example both Lourdes and Medjugorje advocate peace and reconciliation in times of political upheaval (60).

They also noted there were similarities in the ways in which the sites were structured; a sacred building is the reference point for all three locations, there are towers visible from a great distance, and there is a particular path to follow to where the event occurred (62). Reminiscent of Eliade’s argument that there are universal symbols and

archetypes for religious experiences, these similarities in the design and utilization of the space are significant. At all locations, pilgrims reported an intense individual experience (63). Pilgrims also give similar reasons for going on pilgrimage, including: spiritual-ascetic reasons (for example to connect with God or Mary) and practical reasons (for example health or tourism) (64). Mary was understood to have a similar role in all three locations: Heavenly Mother, Mother of God, our role model; but at Medjugorje the role as Queen of Peace was emphasized (64-5). Also at all three locations the following were cited as possible life changes: the pilgrim “believes he received help to pray better, to be closer to God, become a better person; help to find the strength to go on living and to find a meaning to life; help to have a greater devotion to the Virgin” (66). This increased dedication to Mary was especially reported at Medjugorje. The conclusion of the study highlights a unique characteristic of Medjugorje:

The less institutional the holy place proves to be and the less structured the route of the pilgrim, the more he is convinced that he is in a place where one encounters God, where one decides to become a better person, where one rediscovers a sense of others, and a more secure foundation of existential and Christian values (68).

At Lourdes there is much more structure and institutional presence and thus less of a personally intense experience. Yet, Medjugorje is a place where millions feel they have encountered God and recommit to their personal faith and values. Its rituals are not fully routinized and an individual experience can be uniquely created. One can follow one’s own path, literally, and avoid being corralled through the site by pilgrimage officials. This can allow for a more personal experience and possibly one through which a deeper
truth could be found. Perhaps it is this lack of institutionalization that draws the crowds to such a controversial location.

Tom Junod writes, in his article in *Life* titled “A miracle of faith”, about the story of Carol’s journey to Medjugorje:15

She would board the plane in Albuquerque, although she knew that doing so could kill her. She would fly to New York and then to Belgrade and Sarajevo, where she would get on a bus. Thirty-five hours it was supposed to take Carol Lynn Leland to complete her journey. Eight days she was scheduled to stay in Yugoslavia, in a mountain town where people depend more on miracles than they do on medicine. At any time she could get sick, dangerously sick. And yet as she got on the plane, she was strangely fearless, somehow certain she could only die as she had always imagined herself dying, at home, alone, her cats the only witnesses. She would not die, she thought, on an airplane. And she would not die, she believed, in Medjugorje, the Yugoslavian village where the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, has revealed herself to the world. (1)

Carol had emphysema, epilepsy, diabetes, arthritis, and thyroid cancer; she suffered two heart attacks, a broken back, and an unsuccessful marriage. At thirty-seven, she took sixty-seven pills daily (1). She traveled with her mother and other members of her church to what is now called Bosnia in 1991. Her mother, Shirley, claimed to have seen a glowing cross on Apparition Hill, and Carol had a personal meeting with Vicka, one of the visionaries (3, 6). Later Carol saw a vision of pink, yellow, and blue lights glittering

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on the walls of her plain room (6). After collapsing during one of the masses, a priest came to give Carol her last rites (8). Carol was taken by ambulance to Mostar and made it back all the way to Albuquerque (9). This one example serves to illustrate the deep personal faith that moves people to go to Medjugorje and that can transform their lives while there. This report, while being unique to Carol, is similar to many personal stories told about Medjugorje.

Medjugorje is not an institutionalized place. The route is less formal and it is not an officially sanctioned site. The controversy continues to swirl around the mountains of this location and it is not the institution that people are seeking; instead it is the personal transformation and faith experience that is the most powerful. Carol’s faith experience is one among many with regards to those transformed at Medjugorje. What is most fascinating about this place is not why such experiences occur, but perhaps, in the end, that they do.
CHAPTER II

THE PILGRIMAGE

The Site of Medjugorje

Medjugorje is located in southwestern Bosnia, an hour bus ride from Mostar, which is situated between Sarajevo, in central Bosnia, and Dubrovnik, Croatia, on the coast of the Adriatic Sea. The village of Medjugorje is surrounded by grape vineyards and rolling mountains. The fields lead up to the boundary of town. While it is clear the
town has grown in fits and bursts to accommodate the masses of tourists, the streets remain curbless and unmarred by traffic lines. Yet the bus stops and tourist centers are clearly marked and show signs of popular use. The outskirts of town are marked by hotel after hotel; the pink and grey hues of the exteriors blend with the dusty hills. These hotels, while not glittering, are relatively new, yet some are missing a sign here or a light there. They are not squat, homey, mom-and-pop establishments; instead multi-story high-rises dominate the skyline. The majority of these businesses cater to the pilgrim. The lobby opens onto a gift shop and at the front desk, maps, guides, and various brochures can be found. Each room is simple and sparsely decorated. There is a small bathroom, closet and bed, and the only décor consists of an image of the Virgin and a crucifix.

The traditional route for pilgrims includes a stop at each of the following: Apparition Hill, previously known as Podbrdo Hill, Cross Mountain, or Mount Krizevac, and finally St. James’ Church. The walk from the outlying hotels to Apparition Hill is a meandering one past residences and finally a row of gift shops. From the shops, merchants smile or call out softly a welcoming greeting to lure potential buyers. Much
quieter than other Bosnian markets, these stalls sell an impressive array of trinkets and souvenirs. Purchases could include rosaries, statues, prayer books, candles, and jewelry. Priestly vestments, religious pens and snow globes, lighters with an image of Mary, and DVDs are among the myriad additional offerings. Sellers will negotiate the “best” price and often add on an extra parting gift.

As the gift shops end, the rocky path up the hill begins. The stone under foot is rough and crumbles easily. The pilgrims walking the path vary in gender, age, and country of origin, but are few in number. Most are in pairs or small groups. Large plaques mark the path; they are molded from thick sheets of metal and depict the Joyous and Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary. First are the Joyous Mysteries: the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Birth, the Presentation, and Finding in the Temple. Further up the hill and circling back are the Sorrowful Mysteries: Agony in the Garden, Scourging at the Pillar, the Crown of Thorns, the Trial, and the Crucifixion. Pilgrims move slowly and quietly through the stations, praying in groups, individually, or silently.
At the crest of the hill, stands a white stone statue of the Virgin Mary. Pines line the background and as pilgrims stand or kneel in prayer before her, the hill drops off, descending steeply to the town below. Skirting out behind the statue and filling in the space before the line of trees is a field of memorials, small crosses, and little notes of prayer all left by the faithful to commemorate the experience. The hushed tone of the place is underscored by the chilled wind blowing up the hill, past the stones, and through the pines.
The trip from the base of Apparition Hill to the start of the climb on Cross Mountain is a long walk or a short taxi ride back through town, past restaurants, bars, hotels, more gift shops, and then homes. A few establishments can be found as the road levels off to mark the start of the hike up Cross Mountain. Their signs offer Coke and snacks, but in the late March afternoon, they are closed. Already high above the town, the start of the hike is signaled by a large sign proclaiming the rules for pilgrims on this climb. It is printed in several languages, including English. The hike starts off gradually, but quickly increases in grade and is quite uneven. A late spring hail storm quickly diminishes visibility and makes climbing slippery on the rugged terrain. As the clouds roll through and the wind picks up, progress on this strenuous hike becomes the sole focus. Zigzagging up the mountain, the trees become fewer and further between and the number of fellow pilgrims has dropped off significantly. Only a handful of others share the mountain.
Just as with Apparition Hill, here Stations of the Cross lead the pilgrim towards the top. The pilgrim passes each and can stop for prayer: Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is Condemned to Death, Jesus Receives the Cross, Jesus Falls for First Time, Jesus Meets His Mother, Simon of Cyrene Helps, Veronica Offers Veil, Jesus Falls for Second Time, Jesus Consoles Women of Jerusalem, Jesus Falls for Third Time, Jesus is Stripped of Garments, Jesus is Nailed to Cross, Jesus Dies on Cross, Jesus is Taken Down from Cross, Jesus is Placed in Tomb, and finally the Resurrection.

As the top of the mountain comes into view, the large cross is finally visible. Chilled winds swirl around its base, and the historic pairings of religious experiences and
mountains become clear. The concrete cross looms high above the pilgrim and the village appears in miniature from below. The distant mountains are visible, but nothing captures the attention like the great cross.

Images #16 & 17: Top of Cross Mountain

Back down in the village the final stop on the pilgrimage rests with the church of St. James. Its twin clock towers draw the eye once again upward, and the large plaza leading up to its doors could welcome hundreds. To the sides and behind the relatively small church, are rows and rows of benches. In nicer weather and on particular holidays, crowds fill every last seat. Inside the church, the warm lighting and simple design are reminiscent of modern churches around the world. Though the walls are smoothly plastered and the stained glass speaks to a contemporary sensibility, the sturdy arches and oval apse surrounding the altar enclose the parishioners. Despite the extremely low numbers of pilgrims on the hill and mountain, this church is filled, and Catholics stand shoulder to shoulder in the vestibule. The evening mass is mostly in Bosnian and cannot be understood by an American pilgrim, save for the universal rituals and rites of mass that need no language. Everyone is rapt throughout the mass, and there are almost ten priests serving. The literal warmth and unity felt in the church become symbolic
experiences for the climax of the pilgrimage. The coming together of so many, in such a rural and rough place is moving, no matter one’s faith perspective.

*Images # 18, 19, 20, & 21: St. James’ Church, outside benches, nave, and altar*
The Apparitions

Although the contradictions and controversy of Bosnia’s history can be traced back throughout the area’s turbulent history, the most critical event for Medjugorje began in 1981. Numerous authors, both popular and academic, have detailed the happenings at Medjugorje, Bosnia. While the validity of the apparitions will be analyzed below, a basic understanding of the popular understanding of the events of Medjugorje is beneficial in a comprehension of the space and its history. In the late afternoon of Wednesday, June 24, the Feast of John the Baptist, Ivanka Ivankovic and Mirjana Dragicevic were climbing the hill in Medjugorje previously known as Podbrdo Hill. These two girls, age fifteen and sixteen respectively, were visiting the area, but had grown up in a nearby village. Ivanka saw the Virgin Mary appear on the mountain before them. A few moments later, Mirjana also saw the apparition of a beautiful young woman. Afraid, the two girls ran back down the mountain. That same day, later in the evening, they returned to the spot with several of their friends. Ivanka’s cousin Vicka Ivankovic (age seventeen), Ivan Dragicevic (age sixteen), Ivan Soznakovic (age twenty), and Milka Pavlovic (age thirteen) all claimed to have seen the apparition, but once again ran away out of fear. The apparition of the Virgin Mary held a small child in her arms

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16 The material in this section is taken from various sources, which can be found in the bibliography. Where discrepancies appear in the texts, the particular sources have been noted.
and had silently gestured for them to come closer. Reportedly the children told their families but none believed them.

On the next day, Mirjana, Ivanka, Vicka, and Ivan Dragicevic were joined by two more children: Marija Pavlovic, the sister of Milka (age sixteen) and Jakov Colo, a relative of Mirjana (age ten). Two children from the previous day, Ivan Ivankovic and Milka were not at the mountain, and they have never seen the apparition since. On this second day, at around 6 p.m., all six children saw the apparition, and when she beckoned for them to come closer, they did and began to pray. This time the children spoke with the Virgin Mary. Ivanka asked about her mother, who had died three months prior, and Mirjana asked for a sign. When asked if she would return, the Virgin Mary nodded to the children.

On the third day, again at 6 p.m., a large crowd of thousands followed the six children to the hill. The children ran up the steep and rocky path to meet the Virgin Mary. The whole group saw three flashes of light, but only the children saw the apparition. Vicka had brought a bottle of holy water due to worries from her grandmother that the children had seen Satan. She threw the water in the direction of the apparition, asking the vision to stay if it was really the Virgin Mary. The woman smiled and when asked about her identity, answered, “I am the Blessed Virgin Mary.” The children described her as wearing a grey dress and a white veil. She stood on a cloud, clothed in light, and radiated beauty.

On the fourth day, June 27, the children saw the Virgin Mary several times, and then on Sunday, June 28, a crowd of ten to fifteen thousand people gathered on the hill. The Virgin Mary appeared again several times to the children, and they asked for signs
and messages for the people and the priests. The parish priest of St. James’ Church, Father Jozo Zovko, had been away on the first day of the apparitions, but upon his return, he had begun to investigate the claims of the children. On June 29, the children had been taken to a doctor in the nearby city of Mostar for psychological testing. They were deemed mentally stable.

The next day, perhaps as a test of the visions, the children were taken by car to a location outside of Medjugorje, but within sight of Podbrdo Hill. There along the highway, when they began to pray, the Virgin Mary appeared once again to them. Soon after, local police closed off Podbrdo Hill and prohibited the children and other locals from climbing the hills. The children continued to receive visions and messages from the Virgin Mary in other private locations until January 15, 1982.

After the apparitions, conflicts immediately arose and continued to abound in Medjugorje. From the beginning, tension within the priestly leadership existed. Early on Fr. Jozo was skeptical of the apparitions and the children’s reports; he doubted the validity of the reports and the honesty of the children. He had recently been positioned at the parish of Medjugorje and did not know any of the children. He vehemently opposed the fervor that arose as a result of the visions, but continued to serve Mass and offered a daily service with Communio and rosary prayers. During one of those services, he reported experiencing a vision of the Virgin Mary; immediately he began to sing a popular hymn: “O how beautiful you are Most Blessed Virgin Mary!” From then on he was an adamant supporter of the children, even to the point of being imprisoned and

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tortured by local police who wished to suppress the increased religious activity. The curate, Fr. Zvinko Czvale, also an initial skeptic, continued to question the authenticity of the apparitions, and he asked for a transfer to another parish. Fr. Tomislav Pervan and Fr. Tomislav Vlasic continued the pastoral work of attending to the great numbers of pilgrims.\textsuperscript{18}

Along with the early conflict within the Church, the question of miracles did not end when the first days of the apparitions were over. Although the six children claimed to have no knowledge of other miraculous appearances of the Virgin Mary, there are similarities to other well-known events, for example at Lourdes, France in 1858 and Fatima, Portugal in 1917, mentioned earlier. In these two cases, the Virgin Mary appeared to Bernadette Soubirous, age fourteen, in France and Lucia Santos, age ten, and her cousins, Francisco and Jacinta Marto, age nine and seven, in Portugal. In addition to this similarity of the Virgin Mary appearing to young children, there was another miraculous occurrence at Fatima. There it was reported that the sun was seen to spin and dance. In Medjugorje, it was reported that later in that first summer, on August 2, 1981, a group of several hundred saw the sun dance. Others claimed to have seen the large cross, erected in 1933 on what became Cross Mountain, previously Krizevac Hill, blaze with light. Just as healings are said to occur at Lourdes where the Virgin Mary appeared, there are hundreds of reported cases of cures and healings in the parish of Medjugorje.

(Kozlowski 140) Much like the secrets revealed at Fatima, these visionaries have

received secrets to be revealed at a divinely selected time. The spinning sun, healings, and secrets all serve as examples of curious events and messages that were reported at Medjugorje; the occurrences there were not totally unique, but there is much disagreement as to their significance and validity. Some strongly believe that crowds have witnessed the solar miracles, while others deny the occurrence completely.

In March of 1984, the children began to report weekly messages they had received to the St. James’ parish and on January 25, 1987, the messages became monthly. Presently Marija, Vicka, and Ivan continue to have daily messages at 5:40 p.m. during daylight savings time and 6:40 pm the rest of the year. These three have received nine of the promised ten secrets and say that they will continue to receive the messages until all ten of the secrets have been revealed. Ivanka, Jakov, and Mirjana have received all ten secrets and now receive apparitions or locutions, an oral message without a visual component, once a year. Ivanka receives it on the anniversary of the first apparition since 1985, for Jakov, since 1998, it is on Christmas, and, since 1982, on her birthday Mirjana receives her message. When the ten secrets have been revealed to all six visionaries, Mirjana will communicate with a self-chosen priest, Fr. Petar Ljubicic, and he will reveal the secrets after warnings are proclaimed to the world, and the Virgin Mary will give a permanent sign to call the entire world to conversion. Only bits and pieces of the secrets have been revealed as of this 2008.19

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Sources and Commentary on Medjugorje

Throughout the decades, the messages from the Virgin Mary have focused on prayer, fasting, conversion and peace. These messages can be found in a variety of sources. Within these relevant sources there is a range of authorship from lay spiritual seeker to Catholic priest as well as a range of media from DVDs providing background and travel information to Catholic doctrine on the role of revelation and pilgrimage. Many of the texts are authored by individuals who have had a powerful or transforming personal experience in connection with Medjugorje. One such source is that of Janice T. Connell’s *The Visions of the Children: The Apparitions of the Blessed Mother at Medjugorje*. This book gives very detailed accounts of interviews with the six children and provides a basic background and early context for the visions. In addition to Catholic accounts, such as Svetozar Kraljević’s *The Apparitions of Our Lady at Medjugorje: An Historical Account with Interview* and Michael O’Carroll’s *Medjugorje: Facts, Documents, Theology*, there are also authors of other religious traditions, including Sharon E. Cheston’s *Mary the Mother of All: Protestant Perspectives and*

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Experiences of Medjugorje and several titles by Wayne Weible, a Lutheran journalist who learned of Medjugorje and became fascinated with the story. He first heard of the events at a Sunday school class he was teaching and was directed by a friend to a book and video about the occurrences. He writes the following of his transformation:

After obtaining the materials and reading the book, I still felt nothing other than curiosity. Several nights later after getting our two young children to bed, my wife, Terri, and I settled down to watch the video tape. What happened during the viewing of that video changed my life completely. About midway through watching the film, I suddenly “felt” a strong message within myself. I really don’t know how to explain it. I heard no audible voice, but the message was there just as clear as though I had actually heard it. In essence it said, “You are my son, and you are to do my Son’s work. Write about the events in Medjugorje. Afterwards you will no longer be in the work (newspapers), for your life will be devoted to the spreading of the message.” (A Reporters Accounts 3)

After this experience, Weible was inspired to immerse himself in the study and proclamation of the message of Medjugorje; several years later, he and his wife converted to Catholicism. He has written seven books and travels the world lecturing about his connection to Medjugorje.


Not only have authors of various religious background written extensively on this site, but there are a variety of media utilized in communicating the message of Medjugorje. An interesting modern repository of these messages has developed in the form of various websites. A Google search of ‘Medjugorje’ turns up 233,000 hits. The top sites focusing on the Virgin Mary’s apparitions are: www.Medjugorje.org, www.Medjugorje.net, and www.Medjugorje.com. The first, titled “The Medjugorje Web—Apparitions of the Virgin Mary Medjugorje,” offers week-long pilgrimage packages, ranging in price from $1,500 to $2,000, online shopping for religious items, and links to send prayer petitions and make monetary donations. This site also gives a very thorough and detailed list of links and background information. There are downloads, available in six different languages, of the messages from the visionaries from 1984 to the present. “The authentic Medjugorje site—straight out of Medjugorje”, www.medjugorje.net, offers similar prayer resources but an even more detailed account of the first days and background on the visionaries. There is an online calendar of upcoming apparitions, an interactive map of the town, and photo gallery. The third site similarly offers the ‘Mej mart’ for shopping, resources for pilgrimage, and downloads including audio of interviews and screensavers. Requests for lit candles and roses can be made, and there are links to various media coverage including 20/20 with Stone Philips.

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(Medjugorje: Apparitions of Mary Queen of Peace) The coverage of information is extensive as are background materials answering critics and skeptics.

These sites are quite detailed and kept up to date, with edits in the recent months. Medjugorje has an extensive presence in academic journals, faith-based texts, popular news media, as well as the web. YouTube, an online database of user-shared video clips, offers almost 3,000 videos pertaining to Medjugorje, including video of recent apparitions. There are 226 groups on facebook, an online social networking site, the largest of these, “Medjugorje, I am the Queen of Peace, the King of Peace has sent Me to help you,” boasts over 4,000 members. As a member of that group, the author of this paper receives messages from the visionaries on the 2nd and 25th of each month. The following are two recent posts emphasizing personal faith development and conversion, two common themes, from January 25, 2010 and February 2, 2010:

Dear children! May this time be a time of personal prayer for you, so that the seed of faith may grow in your hearts; and may it grow into a joyful witness to others. I am with you and I desire to inspire you all: grow and rejoice in the Lord Who has created you. Thank you for having responded to my call. … Dear children, with motherly love, today I call you to be a lighthouse to all souls who wander in the darkness of ignorance of God’s love. That you may shine all the brighter and draw all the more souls, do not permit the untruths which come out of your mouth to silence your conscience. Be perfect. I am leading you with my motherly hand—a hand of love. Thank you.
While a full analysis of the web presence of Medjugorje is not within the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note that it is through a Google search that this author first came across the details of this site, and it is these and other travel websites that were used to plan the personal travel to Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia to witness the interaction of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, and Islam. This speaks to the contemporary identity of this particular Marian apparition as well as its popular and unofficial nature. While some may see this web identity as a sign of Medjugorje’s inauthenticity and a testament to its lack of spiritual seriousness or depth of meaning, others can understand the internet is a natural way for the faithful or would-be pilgrims to make connections to one another and to a location on the other side of the world. Since the Middle Ages, pilgrimage has been connected to tourism and this connection can still be found especially through these examples of websites. They offer tour packages and testimonies from past pilgrims. But not only is this venue a beneficial way to advertise the business of pilgrimage, it is also a critical method of communication for this contemporary generation. The ever-presence of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, wikis, and vlogs demonstrate web 2.0 interactive technology is no longer a superficial fad or intellectual trend, it is a nearly indispensable mode of communication. These Medjugorje sites demonstrate yet another unique aspect to its pilgrimage site and followers. Although other pilgrimage sites now have websites as well, the relative newness and contemporary nature of the site, since its beginning less than three decades ago, lends itself to this current mode of connection. Although this author had known of the name ‘Medjugorje’ previously, it was the extensive on-line community of fervent supporters that drew initial attention.
For some sources there is no question of why millions flock to this location; people come because the Mother of God has appeared there. As to be expected, many authors are more sympathetic to the validity of the visions than others. One such author is Maciej Kozlowski who wrote a detailed account of the manifestations, shortly after the first apparition, in *Religion in Communist Dominated Areas*. While Kozlowski claims to solely “present to the Polish reader an account of the facts on the basis of the numerous publications on this theme, as well as the testimony of those who have personally visited the Yugoslavian parish” (139), his final comments point to the mystery of the on-going event. After a detailed account of the first apparitions to six children on June 24, 1981 and several references to documents published in 1981 from the Bishop of Mostar, Kozlowski goes on to analyze and explain the content of the messages. This author is also representative in the way he concludes his essay:

Marlene Tuininga, the author of a long report on the subject of the manifestations in the French monthly *L’Actualite religieuse*, has written: “no one today can say with full assurance that the Virgin Mary has really appeared to the children in Medjugorje. One can, however, without any risk of error declare that, among the crowds gathering every day in that hamlet, Her Son and She are always present” (142).

The details of the experience of the six visionaries, Vicka, Mirjana, Ivan, Ivanka, Maria, and Jakov, over the first three days of apparitions are included in many texts, and, demonstrating a continued fascination within the first decade, the retellings of the on-
going visions appear in many sources as well. (Connell, Laurentin,27 O’Carroll) The numerous sources that narrate the visions and the popular, local response speak to the spiritual power of Medjugorje. Despite the questions and controversies, writers are drawn to the story.

Amidst the fascination there are also authors who take a more critical approach to presenting the apparitions and events that followed. Denis R. Janz, writing for Christian Century, explores the early years after the apparitions and the effect on the community and beyond.28 As early as 1987, he cites 7 to 8 million pilgrims as having visited Medjugorje (724). He explains that a political theologian, professor at the Theological Faculty in Sarajevo and general secretary for the Council of Priests and Religions in Yugoslavia, understood the initial apparition “as a joke” (724). He believed the children were initially playing a prank, but when they witnessed the resulting fervor, they felt as though they could not retract their claims. Within the first six years, the ‘miracle’ had begun to be questioned. This article gives an unusual hypothesis as to why the children continued to report visions: “they were psychologically trapped” (724). He argues that the local pastor coached the children in their responses, molding the supposed visions to fit certain theological concepts (724). Like many editorials, this piece superficially attempts an explanation of why so many, including “the maimed, the blind, the infirm, the elderly, middle-aged American housewives, professionals, students, and even a few yuppies in designer jogging suits” (724), flock to Medjugorje. Demonstrating the

contention within the perspectives of relevant authors, instead of faith, Janz argues that it is a tenet of modernity, a result of the crisis of doubt plaguing the 20th century world that brings people to Medjugorje (725). This argument seems to take as its starting point the assumption of doubt; criticism is the initial reaction to a possibly religious experience. When faced with a question of the miraculous, it is on the believer that the burden of proof rests. Since Sigmund Freud’s influential work “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices,”29 where he argued by use of “clinical experiences” that religious patients were acting on nothing but a universal obsessive neurosis, the contemporary understanding of the religious experience has been altered. If one claims a religious experience, it is that individual who must provide some semblance of “scientific” proof in order to be heard. This attitude of post-Freudian thought influences such contemporary thinkers as Bill Maher in his film Religulous and Sam Harris’ book The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason and in addition colors many accounts of the events of Medjugorje.30 While this line of inquiry into the motivation of the faithful is thought provoking, this paper seeks to move the discussion beyond a debate over the mental stability or psychological wellbeing of the faithful. The popularity of Medjugorje cannot be reduced to the mental depravity of millions.

CHAPTER III
DEBATES AND CONTROVERSY

There is much disagreement about what happened, how it was received, and how the events fit into the larger cultural context of the area. While many details of the early visions, atop Podbrdo Mountain and later in the local church of St. James, and the reception of the children by the Medjugorje community have been recorded and commented on, there remains much discord. Controversy has swirled around this site through the brutal civil war of the early 1990s and beyond. Three areas of interrelated debate and discussion emerge from the variety of written commentary: the validity of the apparitions, the role of religious leaders, and the historical and cultural context of the events.

Validity of Apparitions

Serious questions have arisen with regards to the validity of the apparitions. Investigation focuses on whether the visions can be proven to be real, if the visionaries are telling the truth, and if Mary has indeed appeared at Medjugorje. Hector Avalos’ “Mary at Medjugorje: A Critical Inquiry” gives an interesting discussion of attempts to debunk the concept that the apparitions are miracles. The local bishop in Mostar, Pavao Zanic, also highlighting the tension within the religious leadership, was adamantly
against the visions: “In my opinion Medjugorje is the greatest deceit and swindle in the history of the Church” (Avalos 1). Against this backdrop, Avalos investigates whether “normal” people can report seeing or hearing things that do not exist. He cites a study that argues, “perception always involves interpretations and inferences” (Avalos 3). Perhaps these six children were adding on bits of meaning to something that they experienced. An interesting set of experiments by Barber and Calverley show that 33% of people without pathology can report non-occurring events. Another possible argument focuses on the “subculture” of Medjugorje; perhaps the children were living in an environment that would encourage sightings of Mary that could bring about the desired behavior (Avalos 3). The local priest had recently returned from a meeting on the topic of charismatic renewal movement and began to hold classes for the women and children in the parish about the “special grace” to be revealed at Medjugorje.31 Perhaps it was this new focus for the local priests that encouraged reports of Marian apparitions from children who saw themselves as special.

Avalos goes on to investigate the work of a French doctor, Henri Joyeux, and Marian scholar, Fr. Rene Laurentin, compiled in their Scientific and Medical Studies on the Apparitions at Medjugorje.32 They conclude that the visionaries were neither mentally ill nor deceptive, thus the miraculous apparitions were genuine:

In sum, Laurentin and Joyeux conclude that there is no scientific or natural explanation available to account for the reports of the visionaries. More

important, they conclude that the absence of any condition labeled as ‘pathological’ is evidence that the reported experience of the visionaries is authentically supernatural. (Avalos 2)

Avalos goes through each point of support for the miraculous nature of the apparitions and argues a natural explanation for each. For example, the recorded simultaneity of eye and body movements could be conditioning, response to a cue during prayers, or merely peripheral vision (5). He critiques Henri Joyeux’s famous experiments on the visionaries, in 1984, as flawed and highly subjective; instead of a purely scientific approach, the tests reveal the theology of the tester (7). Avalos does not respond to the reports of diminished response of the six children to light and sound during their apparitions; nor does he comment on the electroencephalographic (EEG) findings. As for the spinning sun and solar miracles, Avalos argues that the group need not be lying; instead it could be a group delusion (8). He notes that Stone Philips, reporting for 20/20, did not see any sun movement (8). He claims that the crying icons are “selective seeing” or mental transformation and that the healings have been “poorly investigated” (8). Avalos’ argument can be summarized with the following: “A supernatural explanation for reports of Marian apparitions is unnecessary, unverifiable, and ultimately self-defeating for believers” (9). The tests proving that the six children are without pathology means nothing since other “normal” people report experiencing events that did not occur. We cannot scientifically verify those first reports and, Avalos claims, these reports are self-defeating for Christians because they cannot refute claims of miracles by non-Christians. Avalos concludes: “It is no miracle that a supernatural explanation for the Medjugorje apparition reports has been rejected by both a Catholic bishop and secular humanists” (9).
Since Avalos’ article, there has been one additional study completed in 1998 by fourteen Italian doctors.\(^{33}\) It is interesting to note that in spite or perhaps because of the studies being inconclusive or contradictory people continue to go to this site. One could argue that the validity of the visions does not matter; scientific proof is inconsequential. Instead what is most important is the faith perspective. It is not only the scientific community that insists against the authenticity of the site, the religious leaders at Medjugorje are also passionately divided when it comes to the significance of the local events.

Role of Religious Leaders

Alongside the controversy over the validity of the apparitions there is a second topic of discussion, which centers on religious leadership. Doubts as to the role of the local diocesan leaders as compared to that of the Franciscans in perpetuating, sensationalizing, or denouncing the occurrences at Medjugorje have also come to the fore of the discussion. Mart Bax gives a thorough account of this tension in his “The Madonna of Medjugorje: Religious Rivalry and the Formation of a devotional Movement in Yugoslavia.” The bishop of Mostar and the diocesan priests do not support the validity of the apparitions and the Franciscan priests do. Thus it is the Franciscans who give pastoral care to the pilgrims and the local supporters. The bishop of Mostar forbade potential pilgrims from going to Medjugorje and taking part in the “theatrical practices,” while the Franciscans claimed the bishop was “debasing … God and His people” and he acted out of “lovelessness” and “the desire for usurpation” (Bax 1-2). Thus there is considerable tension, including such personal attacks, between the diocesan priests and the Franciscans, and it did not begin with the events of Medjugorje. The disagreement over the truth of the apparitions is heightened by the attitude in Rome about Medjugorje. While the Church has not officially denied the apparitions, it has also not sanctioned the site as an authentic pilgrimage location. The absence of an official position will be discussed in greater detail below.
The reaction to the events of June 1981 stems from a long history of conflict in Bosnia. Since their missionary activity brought them to the area, the Franciscans had been the primary religious leaders from the 1370s, through the rule of the Ottoman Empire, until the 1960s. In the early 1900s the Franciscans continued to expand and focused on missions to the Eastern Orthodox and Muslim communities. However, after World War II, they lost much of their property and in turn the dioceses began to gain power (Bax 3). As the bishop of Mostar, in conjunction with Rome, regained areas previously controlled by the Franciscans, tension led to actual fistfights between leaders.

When this history of tension is added to the fervor surrounding the early apparitions, the bitter disagreements between the local clergy become clearer. When the Franciscans refused to be silenced by the bishop, Fr. Zani organized a committee to investigate the claims of the visionaries. Their findings were that the visions were not inconsistent with Church doctrine; the bishop abolished the committee and began a second. This second committee, discussed at the Yugoslav Bishops’ Conference announced, “The bishops collectively were against ‘official’ (organized by the Church) pilgrimages to Medjugorje. However, unofficial journeys, individual or group were not forbidden” (Bax 7). The bishop interpreted this as a statement against the site and disallowed anyone going to Medjugorje from receiving the sacraments. As a result, more pilgrims went to the Franciscans to receive communion and thus there was an increased need for Franciscan priests. The Franciscans became the major supporters of Medjugorje and helped to spread news of it nationally and internationally. Speaking of those who claim personal cures, Fr. Krsto explains the power of the site and how the message is spread: “They are walking publicity. Morning, noon and night, day after day, the people
up here see those witnesses of God’s special grace. This is truly living faith” (Bax 11).

There were reports that the Virgin Mary even gave a message to the bishop asking him to reconcile with the Franciscans. The bishop and his priests were in a difficult situation; they could not continue to denounce the apparitions without losing respect in the eyes of the faithful, nor could they admit to the validity of the apparitions without giving in to their Franciscan opponents.

Bax admits that all pilgrimages and apparitions are not caused by factionalism, but he points to other interesting examples in 19th century Netherlands, 17th century Spain, and 17th and 18th century Peru of priests stimulating visions to gain support against diocesan pressures.34 While some thinkers explain the great numbers of pilgrims to Medjugorje by a claim to the authenticity of the visions, Bax claims that it is the result of the work of the Franciscans:

In contrast to what is generally asserted about pilgrimages, the growth in this case has not been due to the standpoint of Rome but to the social strength of the religious elites connected to the devotion. What is concerned here is an extensive provincial order (the only one in the area) with a large amount of social cohesion (all of the members are in the same boat) and a strong historical tie to the local population who, for diverse forms of help, can appeal to a worldwide network of sympathizers. It is

important to stress how crucially important is the role of religious elites in the development of visionary movements. At approximately the same time as the first apparitions in Medjugorje, there was a report of a similar occurrence in another parish of the diocese. The Franciscans dissociated themselves from it, and the young devotion then died a peaceful death.

(12, emphasis added)

After a thorough history of similar movements, the argument that the religious elites utilized religious fervor for their own gain is a convincing one. In this case, the Franciscans acted as a specialized group who, by supporting this particular vision, furthered their own cause. The issue is not whether this group has actually proven the apparition to be valid, but instead that it is this local groups’ stance on the visions that matters and not that of the Vatican in Rome. As noted earlier, each sacred site has a multiplicity of discourses with which it is connected. The strand of discourse focusing on the workings of the local religious leaders cannot be ignored. As with Lourdes, the official understanding of the space, its rituals and meaning must be recognized, even when it is at odds with the popular discourse. It is not the official Church stance that gives a place its power to draw millions, but instead the local interpretation and focus. If the local leaders or the nearby faithful do not commit to the specialness of this place it is doubtful that it would continue to be a popular pilgrimage destination. It cannot easily be dismissed that the Franciscans played an integral role in the development and continuation of the Marian devotion centered on Medjugorje. It is possible that the Franciscans, in the midst of a power struggle with the diocesan leaders, utilized the reports of apparitions to further their cause and gain more followers. Yet it is also
plausible that the site gained significance not because the local religious leaders were motivated by political gain, but instead they were called to shepherd their people and meet the needs of the millions of searching pilgrims.
Historical Context

A third topic of discussion centers on the historical and cultural context of Bosnia. The tumultuous past of conquest and accommodation, including a history of Nazi, Fascist, and Communist rule, as well as bloody civil war battles focused on ‘cleansing’ the society of certain ethnicities, can serve to explain why the Virgin Mary would appear to a group of children or why a town of Catholics would appear to believe that she did. The country known today as Bosnia sits at the crossroads of the ancient divide between the Eastern and Western Christian churches. Not only has there been evident religious and ethnic tension between Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians, but there is also a long history of interaction with Eastern European Muslims. Perhaps it is this background of conflict that best serves to explain the significance of Medjugorje.

Before delving into a more detailed analysis of the history of conflict within the area, it is necessary to comment specifically on the history of relations with Islam. As mentioned above, this geographical region is where east and west meet for Christianity, but is also a point of intersection with Islam. As to be discussed below, Bosnian Muslims were greatly affected by the atrocities perpetrating upon them by the Serbs and Croats. Yet it is interesting that there has also been a long history of interaction and some would argue active, peaceful tolerance. Mostar, a small city nearby Medjugorje, is evenly split between the three faiths and their corresponding ethnic group: Orthodox Serbs, Roman
Catholic Croats, and Muslim Turkish Bosniaks (Muse 50). After the apparitions, “the village became a magnet drawing Catholic, Muslim, Orthodox, Jewish, and Protestant into community. Mary’s message is always the same. She counsels the world to conversion and contends that prayer and fasting can stop war. (She proclaims) ‘I am mother of all, whether Muslim, Orthodox, or Catholic. All are my children’” (50). While the ethnic cleansing temporarily destroyed the famous and beautiful bridge of Mostar, connecting the Muslim side of the river that cuts through town with the Christian side, it has since been restored and can once again be a symbol for peace.

Another point of connection between these groups is their belief in Mary; Muslims also revere Mary. In the Qur’an, her special birth is described as is her unique position among women: “And when the angels said: ‘O Mary: Verily, Allah had chosen you, purified you, and chosen you above the women of the world” (Qur’an 3.42). The virgin birth of Jesus is also noted with a visit from an angel. Like many aspects of contemporarily misunderstood Islam, its veneration of the Virgin Mary is one that is not often highlighted, but in the case of Medjugorje, Mary becomes a point of unity for disparate ethnic and religious groups.

Raymond A. Eve’s “Politicizing the Virgin Mary: The Instance of the Madonna of Medjugorje” offers an interesting discussion of why Medjugorje became an important pilgrimage location. He argues that socio-cultural factors created an environment ripe for such an apparition to be received. He cites Singer and Benassi’s suggestion of four causes for paranormal and pseudoscientific events: errors in human reasoning, low-level science education, sensationalistic media coverage, and socio-cultural factors (23). Eve

investigates this fourth cause and analyzes how we are affected by our times. He notes comparisons in the political times surrounding the occurrences at Lourdes and Fatima and goes on to outline a brief history of Bosnia.

Sarajevo, Bosnia became the site of a critical historical event starting World War I, when the archduke, Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated there. Later, the Croatian state was created after the Nazi occupation of the area in 1941. This state was under Fascist rule and was predominately Roman Catholic. As the Catholics in power sought retribution after centuries of oppression under Turkish rule, the ethnic group, the Serbs, who were mainly Eastern Orthodox in faith, suffered under this regime. After the end of World War II, Marshall Tito expelled the German rule and began a communist one (24). This government suppressed religion, which later became a critical point in the reception of the events at Medjugorje.

The local police closed off access to the mountain for two years shortly after the apparitions, and local supporters were beaten and jailed.

Jozo Markovic (age 32), a local mechanic, and a relative of one of the seers, stated the following: ‘First we were interrogated, beaten, and locked up. But now that those bastards see that there is money in it, they come on a Sunday morning and rub shoulders with the locals to buy their land… They want it for building … lucrative pensions, hostels, and things… When I helped the old folks up the Podbrdo (Apparition Hill), they caught me and they took me to their boss in Citluk. It was a terrible time. … I lost my job in a garage in Citluk. My father… he lives not far from here… they took his old age pension. My brother was a customs officer. … He
was recovering from an operation… they said it was cancer. … One day, he got a letter stating that he was fired because of his involvement in the production of anti-state propaganda. … And look at those bastards now! I told you, they smell money. … They try to steal it from the people and the priests… whenever they can. …’ (Bax 6).

The apparitions ignited fears that the suppressed Catholics might attempt to regain power. Eve claims this is an example of what sociologists call a “revitalization movement.” It might seem to start with increased faithfulness of a formerly dominant, but currently oppressed, group, but the movement shortly develops political and perhaps even militant efforts (25). Eve argues that the events at Medjugorje soon began to correspond to a larger battle of revitalizing Catholicism. He sites early messages from the children about the conversion of Russians and the faithlessness of the West as examples of the politicization of Medjugorje (25). The tension that erupted in the early 1990s was already evident in the history of the previous decade. As the teens continued to receive messages throughout the brutal civil war, it is interesting to note a comparison to the New England witch trials; perhaps these apparitions gave the teens an increased sense of importance in this anxious time (26). The appearance of Mary could be understood as a chance for peace in a tumultuous area, a message of kindness for the whole world. Or perhaps more cynically these visions were used as “symbolic weapons of mass destruction” to disseminate fear and fan the flames of hate that would lead to ethnic cleansing ten years later (26).

Just as the centuries long history of religious tension can serve as a possible explanation for the apparitions, other authors focus on the continued violent history in the
years after the apparitions as a point of investigation into the site of contradictions. As Michael Sells explains in his lengthy and detailed historical interpretation, “Crosses of Blood: Sacred Space, Religion, and Violence in Bosnia-Hercegovina,” this religiously diverse and complicated geographic area witnessed very complicated and brutal infighting. The 1990s were marked by mass rape, destruction of shrines, and genocide as the Serbs in power attempted to erase the Muslims. Catholics also played a role in this ethnic cleansing (311, 315-6). Members of both the Franciscan and the diocesan priests were involved in fighting for the Croatian, Catholic state and in doing so either participated in or looked the other way during the establishment and running of concentration camps and the destruction of non-Catholic sacred sites (317-8). Yet in 1993, both Pope John Paul II and the supposed messages from the Virgin Mary urged peace and compassion for all of humanity. This contradiction continued with reports of a group of pilgrims marching peacefully through battle lines when the town was blocked off during conflict in 1992. This peaceful story is matched by reports of brutal neo-Ustashe (a continuation of the violent terrorist group started during WWII) fatal attacks on monks and priests (320). Meanwhile the tension in the 1990s between the Franciscans and diocesan priests continued to heighten:

At one point militias attached to the Medjugorje Franciscans seized the Bishop, held him overnight, beat him, and ceremonially stripped him of his ecclesiastical insignia. The Medjugorje Franciscans were accused by critics of engaging in cult practices and sexual exploitation.

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Franciscans accused the Bishop of similar depravities, threatened to blow up the cathedral of Mostar, and barricaded a disputed church in nearby Capljina against any effort of the Bishop to assert diocesan control (319-20).

Apparently distracted by their own conflicts and without internal unity, neither the Franciscans nor the diocesan leaders protested the Croatian nationalistic ethnic cleansing (321). Religion played an integral role in this brutal history. The Pope generally remained silent on the violence in this region, even while advocating for general peace and cooperation in certain statements, including *Per la Pace* (326). Sacred symbols and architecture were also used in the battle for Catholic Croatian nationalism. Bishop Peric ordered Catholic shrines to be rebuilt on the ruins of non-Catholic shrines. Among other examples, a crèche was built over the ruins of a mosque, a large shrine to the Virgin was placed in front of the home of one of the notorious war criminals suspected of having destroyed mosques and torturing many, and a shrine, with a statue of “a 19th century warrior-priest notorious for killing Muslims” was erected at the front of a public high school (324). This use, or rather misuse, of sacred symbols demonstrates the depth of this toxic religious tension. The friction and contention appear on multiple levels and do not die out easily. It is within this malicious arena that Medjugorje continue to thrive. Maybe it is just a violent and controversial place such as this that a message of peace is needed all the more. Perhaps it is here that a strong message of faith and peacefulness needed to be heard by Catholics and people of all faiths. One could argue that the Virgin Mary, if she were to choose a place to appear on earth, might specifically choose an
unglamorous, little-known, or perhaps humble locale, a place where peace must be embraced.

The contradiction continues. A place where millions of Catholics visit and claim to find peace is also a place with a violent past, a violence that many Catholic authorities disregarded.

In 1993, the local warlords issued a decree expelling any remaining Serbs and Muslims and threatening the destruction of the home of any Catholic harboring a Serb or Muslim. Five major concentration camps were established just miles form Medjugorje. Still pilgrims continue to report experiencing in Medjugorje a profound sense of compassionate love for all humanity, apparently oblivious both to the concentration camps just on the other side of Medjugorje’s renowned “Christ Hill” (Krizevac) where Muslim and Serb detainees were starved, beaten, sexually tortured and murdered, and to the burned out shells of Orthodox Christian and Muslim homes, interspersed with the unharmed and intact homes of Catholics that they pass on the way to the pilgrimage site (320).

Medjugorje is certainly a place of contradiction. Yet perhaps this contradiction is a sign of the relevance of the message from either Mary, the visionaries, the priests, or the faithful pilgrims. Pilgrims visiting Medjugorje should be reminded that on the next hill such atrocities occurred, perpetrated by members of the Catholic faith. The experience of visiting these hills serves to remind the pilgrim of one’s connection to humanity in more ways than one. There is a unity in the experience of the pilgrimage, but there is also a unity to be recalled between brothers and sisters. When considering Mary’s message,
one must reflect on the ways in which humans have treated other humans, and this location can be a source of such inspiration.

Authors disagree on the validity of the site as a whole. Scientists and theologians attempt to prove there is no natural explanation for the apparitions. Catholic men called to lead the faithful violently dispute one another. Catholic laity, Franciscan leaders, bishops, and even the Pope ignore, or worse, participate in years of cruel atrocities against their neighbors. In addition, the Church has not yet officially sanctioned this pilgrimage site. Despite the seeming contradictions, millions visit the site.

While the reasons for journeying to a pilgrimage site are interesting with regards to any number of popular pilgrimage sites, Medjugorje offers a fascinating example. The question of what motivates pilgrims becomes more significant when the miracles are not acknowledged by the Church authorities, when local leaders are drastically divided on the issue of the spiritual significance of the place, and when it is nestled in the very hills on which vicious attacks were perpetrated in the name of religious identity. Additionally, this site offers a unique example in that it is relatively recent. The visionaries are all still living and the apparitions occurred only twenty-eight years ago. This question has not been sufficiently investigated. Perhaps the answer can be found in Durkheim’s theory of religion and ritual providing a vehicle of social unity, Eliade’s theory that religious ritual serves as a mode of communication with the divine, or simply in the idea that people are unconcerned with the official Church’s teachings on pilgrimage and find a connection to the divine that cannot be found elsewhere.
CHAPTER IV
THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND MEDJUGORJE

Belief. Medjugorje inspires it, and the Catholic Church doesn’t know what to do about it. Over the past 160 years, the Church has approved—through a scrupulous investigative process—only a dozen or so apparitions as ‘worthy of pious belief,’ and Medjugorje is not one. So far, the Vatican has remained uncommitted on the apparitions, the local bishop has called them fraudulent, and a commission of Yugoslavian bishops has stated that on the basis of studies that have been made… it cannot be affirmed that supernatural apparitions and revelations are occurring here. (Junod 5)

Despite tensions between the Franciscans and local bishops, brutal ethnic conflict, and controversial scientific inquiry into the occurrences at Medjugorje, people continue to “vote with their feet”, as Turner claims, and visit Medjugorje. An additional reason why the popularity of the site is so curious is the lack of an official, indisputable sanction from the Vatican. As a result of the absence of an authoritative and binding proclamation on Medjugorje, or perhaps the causality is reversed, the tension between the Franciscans and the bishops continues. Bishop Zanic and then his successor Bishop Peric, both of Mostar, are the biggest critics of the fervor at Medjugorje. Bishop Zanic states that it is nothing but “a case of collective hallucination” and later: “There are witnesses to testify
that there are no ecstasies, no hallucinations, but simply parrot-like performances of a comic show. Therefore I declare the word ‘hallucination’ too generous a description for such a wicked play-acting. … Either I or Medjugorje must die.”38 Zanic comments on the tension, saying: “Militant defenders of Medjugorje, publicly say: ‘the Bishop ought to be hanged, he must be killed, killed…’ He who does not accept the Medjugorje ‘apparitions’ is detested and considered an atheist by many. A fierce frenzy has taken a hold of many faithful… One can look to a religious war here” (137). Beyond the fierce tension, he also comments on the naiveté of the people:

The majority of the pious public has naively fallen victim to the great propaganda, the talk of the apparitions and the feelings. These people themselves have become the greatest propaganda for the event. They do not even stop to think that the truth has been hidden by deliberate falsehood. They do not know that not one miraculous healing has occurred that could have been verified by competent experts.39

Yet the Franciscans just as vehemently exclaim the opposite; Rev. Ljudevit Rupcic, a Franciscan, claims: “These are all outright lies. None of the Bishop’s arguments hold any water when people compare them with the books and studies that have been written about Medjugorje” (3). The ferocity of the comments points to the seriousness of the strife between these two religious groups. Even the most well informed critics, believing that


nothing supernatural is occurring, concur that “something” is happening in Medjugorje (Herrero 152, cites personal interview from 1997). Still, not only do a significant portion of the local religious authorities, but the Vatican itself does not officially approve the occurrences and practices of Medjugorje.
Process of Approval

According to several sources, there is a multi-step process by which the Vatican approves of an apparitional pilgrimage site.\(^{40}\) The criteria include an investigation of the following: the moral character and honesty of the visionaries, the validity of any predictions, contradiction of Church doctrine, and the types of effects or ‘fruits’ that result from the apparitions and messages. It is important to explore this process and the reasons why the apparitions have not been approved as Catholics predominantly visit the site yet the voice of the Vatican has not been supportive.

The first question to be considered in this approval process is that of the character of the visionaries. They must be trustworthy, modest, demonstrate no interest in gaining material benefits and display a respectful attitude towards the Church authority. Additionally, they must not have a history or tendency towards delusion, and should have an unassuming nature as well as good mental health (Herrero 150). Herrero cites several examples of dishonesty: “It appears to be a confirmed fact that they have lied at certain times. The first episcopal commission found thirteen apparent cases of ‘deliberate and conscious lying’” (152). One example of this is Mirjana and Ivanka’s testimony that they had been out for a walk to gather sheep on that first day of the apparitions. Later in a

taped interview a priest confronted them with his evidence that they had in fact been out
smoking and some sources suggest they smoked marijuana (152-3). While it is debatable
whether smoking is enough to discredit the young people’s accounts, it is interesting to
note that even seemingly small details such as these come to the fore of the discussion.
Just as in a court of law, where the character of a witness is scrutinized, here too every
action taken by these six Bosnians becomes fodder in the debate over the validity of their
reports.

A second example of dishonesty on the part of the visionaries is Marija’s
involvement with a faith community called The Beatitudes. Fr. Vlasic, the local priest
who supported the visionaries early on, began this congregation. Marija claimed that
Mary had told her to join this group, yet it was not universally approved by Church
officials. (154) She later left the group because of irreconcilable differences with Vlasic
and drastically changed her story; “she made a public statement (later published in print)
in which she admitted to having lied regarding the origin of certain messages which
supposedly came from Our Lady, but which, in fact, had been suggested by Vlasic”
(154). This example of dishonesty, if all the details are to be trusted, could serve to more
thoroughly call into question the moral character of the visionaries. While this particular
example involves only Marija, it raises questions concerning all her proclaimed messages
if she lied about some messages coming from the Virgin Mary. Conversely, it is also
possible that she did in fact receive messages from Mary and then, under the influence of
others searching for power, added additional messages of her own or someone else’s
creation.
One of the other thirteen examples of dishonesty includes yet another visionary. Vicka admitted to having a record of the apparitions written in her diary. Later she would only show part of it to the bishop and “would even later claim (in October 1983) that no such diary had ever existed in the first place” (Mazza 51). More difficult to prove is the visionaries’ desire, or lack thereof, to gain materially from the apparitions. Some sources claim that the visionaries and the priests who supported their claims never accepted any money; yet others note that there is a clear profit involved for both the Franciscans and the visionaries. New homes, expensive suits, BMW cars, and even Ivan’s marriage to former twice Miss Massachusetts in Boston are noted as signs that material gains resulted from the apparitions. (Herrero 154) Whether these material gains were desired or not becomes the question, and is quite a challenge to prove or disprove. Perhaps these were the unwanted byproducts of their changing life; or perhaps they were sought after symbols of new status and power. Regardless, it is interesting in this debate over character and spiritual sincerity that not a single visionary has taken on an ascetic or monastic lifestyle.

A second criterion in determining the validity of the visionaries’ claims is whether any of their predictions were found to be true. One example of a prediction that did not come to fruition concerns the length of time the visions would continue; some claimed they would end in the near future but yet they themselves continue to claim visions, even if infrequently, still today:

In the case of Medjugorje, there is reliable evidence that shows at least some of the seers did indeed make claims that were later proven false. In a taped interview between two of the parish priests of St. James parish in
Medjugorje and five of the six youth on June 30, 1981, the ‘seers’ say that the Virgin said she would appear for only ‘three more days’. That was over 12 years ago, and the ‘apparitions’ show no sign of letting up. (Mazza 31)

Another example of contradictions in the visionaries’ testimonies centers on the description of a permanent sign that would appear at Medjugorje. All but Ivan refused to give details of the sign that had been described to them by the Virgin Mary. Ivan was separated from the group and he wrote down the details of the sign during one of the investigation commissions. They had promised that they would keep his description sealed in an envelope. Later, after having been rejected from two seminaries due to poor grades, he publically claimed that he had tricked the commission and had put a blank sheet of paper into the sealed envelope. Yet when the commission decided to open it they found the following written on the paper and signed by Ivan: “Our Lady said that she would leave a sign. The content of this sign I reveal to your trust. The sign is that there will be a great shrine in Medjugorje in honor of my apparitions, a shrine to my image. When will this occur? The sign will occur in June.” The letter was dated May 9, 1982. (Herrero 154, Mazza 31) It seems that Ivan believed that all his fellow visionaries were going to write down a sign from Mary, and perhaps this was a previously discussed sign. Ivan proceeded to write down the secret, but later when he was told he was the only one to have written something, it appears he lied to the commission in an attempt perhaps to trick them into not opening the envelope by saying that it was in fact a blank sheet. In fact he had written something down which seems to be foretelling a shrine to Mary in Medjugorje. This is actually a very general sign, and no such sign has yet appeared.
The third criterion to be considered for the apparitions and messages is that of whether they are in accord with Church doctrine. One aspect of this question is whether the Virgin Mary would encourage conflict or disobedience with clergy. According to several testimonies from the visionaries, Mary criticized the local bishop and his lack of support for, according to some, the renegade Franciscans:

Vicka quoted the BVM (Blessed Virgin Mary) herself as blaming the bishop personally for the crisis, whose exact words, according to Vicka and her diary entry of April 26, 1982, were that ‘the bishop doesn’t possess a scrap of the true love of God for those two.’ Furthermore, the Gospa supposedly exonerated the two priests, both of whom were suspended from the priesthood but nevertheless continued to say Mass and hear confessions. One of them, incidentally, would shortly thereafter get a nun pregnant (Mazza 51).

Some claim that Fr. Tomislav Vlasic fathered an illegitimate son who now lives with his mother, an ex-nun, in Germany (Mazza 53). After being transferred to another parish, in 1984, on his behalf the investigative commission requested a consultation with a neuropsychiatrist (Kozlowski 138). The results of the consultation have not been published, but its mention sheds light on the types of personal character attacks present in the on-going debate over the validity of the visionaries’ claims. It is dubious whether the Virgin Mary would vehemently criticize some clergy and absolve others. While most of the messages urge peace, the few reported by the visionaries that seem to incite further tension between individuals seem a surprising addition to a supposed worldwide message of cooperation and harmony.
Along with questioning whether the Virgin would encourage this type of conflict, a second area of concern focuses on the requests for prayer and fasting as explained by the visionaries from the Virgin. Some argue that the advice on prayers and fasting fit well within the Church’s tradition, while others contend that they are “excessive” (Herrero 155). The visionaries claim Mary wants the faithful to pray for several hours each day. This would include the full three sections of the rosary daily and two days of fasting on bread and water weekly. According to personal communications and confidential sources, Herrero notes, “according to qualified theologians, some of the messages contradict evangelical principles” (155). Perhaps Mary’s requests via the visionaries do not coincide with Gospel teachings about prayer and fasting which are not boastful or arrogant.

Another problematic area when it comes to Church doctrine is that of Maria Valltorta’s controversial book The Poem of the Man-God, which was placed on the list of banned books by the Vatican. Vicka, as well as Wayne Weible, have given complete support to the book leading to its popularity among Medjugorje followers. (Mazza 52, Herrero 155) While the list of books is not permanent and is itself controversial, this does point to a further area of question with regard to agreement between the Vatican and the visionaries’ claims regarding Mary. It is curious that the Virgin Mary would recommend a book that the Vatican forbids. This may point to the illegitimacy of the message, or perhaps it underscores the idea that this apparition is in conflict with the Church authorities. Again the popularity of the text demonstrates, at least to some extent, how the faithful followers are unconcerned with the official Church teachings with regards to some matters. A related controversy surrounding the content of the messages
is that of the building of a Pastoral Center at Medjugorje. Some of Vicka’s messages from the Virgin Mary encouraged Dutch followers to donate monetary funds to the construction project. This ‘Pastoral Center’ turned out to be a one hundred bed hotel, and Vicka’s use of messages was denounced in a 1997 Diocesan Pastoral Bulletin (Herrero 156). A final interesting note in terms of the visionaries supporting the Church is that all but Ivanka stated their intentions of joining a religious order very early in the course of the apparitions, yet none successfully have. (Herrero 156)

The fourth criterion for appraising the apparitions is by the resulting effects; “by their fruits you will recognize them” (Mt. 7:16). Supporters of Medjugorje cite peace between various religions before and after the ethnic cleansing and note the relative unharmed condition of the town during the civil war. Others report that the fact that the civil war broke out exactly ten years after the first apparition demonstrates the ‘fruits’ of Medjugorje are not all positive. This is perhaps the most contested criterion in determining the truth of the apparitions. Many argue that the mere fact that prayer and faith are inspired by Medjugorje does not imply that the apparitions are actually valid. One author notes that if a vision of Jesus on a neighbor’s garage door inspires a man to immediately kneel and pray it does not necessarily follow that the vision is real. (Mazza 54) Mazza criticizes those who claim the abundant conversions and increased faithfulness are proof that Mary appeared to the six teens, but does recognize some true and honest positive effects, even if they simply result in the awakening of acquisitive Americans:

This is not to say that genuine spiritual experiences, including sincere conversion, have never occurred in Medjugorje. God can answer fervent
prayer wherever it is offered, and it is certain that the experience of Croatian Catholicism by Westerners jaded by their materialistic and cynical culture provided for at least some of the \textit{bona fide} spiritual fruits.

(54)

It is certainly more difficult to prove something true than to disprove it, but this debate continues to be quite heated. Many of the rebuttals to critiques of the ‘fruits’ of Medjugorje resort to questioning the faith and devotion of the critics, thus not forwarding the discussion. While there must be true conversions and sincere prayer, it cannot be known if all the results of Medjugorje are positive. If one is to judge a tree by its fruits, some argue that a bad tree can still produce good-looking fruit.

Both Mazza and Herrero cite the argument that the work of Medjugorje is the work of Satan. According to Pope Benedict XIV in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, ‘good fruits’ can be the work of Satan. He wrote that evil spirits “have at times recommended that which is good in order to hinder a greater good and have encouraged persons to do a particular act of virtue that they may the more easily deceive the unwary and in the course of time lead them by degrees to commit the most horrible sins” (Mazza 55). This line of inquiry is fascinating; people could be inspired to do wonderful things or be brought into a deeper personal faith by an evil force and smaller good works could in fact lead to the obstruction of a greater positive accomplishment. If with the ‘fruit’ argument the end result is being measured, perhaps it is still critical to consider the intentions. This brings into question the self-proclaimed faithful: perhaps Medjugorje is not a powerful place and instead it is the people who are weak. Many question the fervent devotion some have to the place:
Unquestionably, the Medjugorje movement has attracted many people to church who were religiously indifferent or, in some cases, even hostile to religion. Bishop Peric finds it astonishing, though, that an ample number of Medjugorje followers keep coming back to Medjugorje again and again, ‘some people up to thirty times… if they have converted they should live the Gospel at their homes, at their workplaces, why keep coming to Medjugorje?’ (Herrero 157)

Not only is the authenticity of the devotion questioned, but the understanding of it as well. If these masses are in fact converted or led to a deeper personal faith, some question whether this new faith is understood and then truly lived out in the appropriate manner. While no statistics are available on the numbers of pilgrims who visit Medjugorje multiple times, it is interesting that apparently many do.

This question of authenticity becomes complex. According to some, even if devoutness is inspired in followers it can be heretical. Again critics, including Bishop Zanic, note that prayer and conversion are not proof:

It is well known in the history of the Church that behind the heretics and schismatics there were masses of followers doing great penance and having pity, sharing with the poor… but such signs were not proof that the heretics were on the right track! It’s also well-known that people pray in just as devout a way both in front of a false relic and an authentic one, both places where Our Lady has appeared and elsewhere where there was just hallucination. (157)
This brings the hierarchical power of the Church to the center of the debate. If the Church is the authority that has the power to decide whose ideas are heretical and whose ideas are acceptable, this sets up, perhaps an inevitable, tension. This takes away the individual’s ability to determine one’s own faith. This bishop’s bold comment seems to argue that it is only the Church that can decide whether personal or private devotions are true and meaningful or simply heretical. If this is the attitude of the local bishops towards their parishioners and visiting pilgrims it is impossible for the people to convince the leaders otherwise; the deck is stacked against them and the Church authorities will persistently have the power to dismiss the practitioners’ weakness, misdirection, and impiousness.

When a vision causes direct conflict or confusion it is easier to claim it is inauthentic. The Church supports the idea that false visions and apparitions can come from satanic activity; the Devil may even ask for prayer and other works of piety (158–9). One intriguing point in the demonic hypothesis concerns feet. According to ancient tradition, the feet of Satan cannot be disguised; it is the only part of the Devil that cannot be hidden in human form. During the investigation at Lourdes, priests asked Bernadette whether she saw the feet of the vision. She replied that they were beautiful and surrounded by roses; at Medjugorje all of the visionaries agree that the feet of Mary were never seen, always obscured by clouds. (Herrero 158) While a unique argument against the validity of the Medjugorje apparitions, it does demonstrate the powerful fears and beliefs that are at work within the debate over the visions. Not only do some believe the teens were lying but that even worse it was the work of the Devil. These apparitions are not taken lightly and can be understood within the context of an on-going battle between
good and evil. A claim to communicate with the Mother of God arouses strong emotions, and, for some, in particular those of fear and mistrust. Most discredit this demonic argument noting that while they do not support the validity of the Medjugorje apparitions, they do not believe that it is instead the work of Satan. More easily it could be the work of selfish or misdirected individuals.

Yet many do claim positive effects and their testaments are powerful:

Authentic or not, there is little doubt that the Medjugorje apparitions have changed many lives. ‘My friends thought I was becoming crazy and fanatic, but my heart just pulled, pulled, pulled,’ said Milona von Habsburg, a 32-year-old Archduchess in Austria’s former ruling family who abandoned a job in a fashionable Geneva auction house to do volunteer work in Medjugorje. (Sudetic 3)

A Rev. Theodore Cassidy from St. Joseph’s Parish in Sykesville, Md. writes: “There is an awful lot of good that comes from it. You can see it in improvements in family life and people giving up drugs. No one has to believe this, but I would encourage people of all faiths to come here, and they should be ready to change” (3). The personal accounts are numerous and moving. The place certainly has the potential to change lives.

Transformation can range from a total life makeover or simply a newfound perspective on humanity’s connections to the divine and each other. People claim miraculous visions and healings or uncover something deeper about who they are and who they want to become. Pilgrims can connect with a worldwide Catholic community or commune with the plight of humanity. Not only are some people changed forever by this place, they passionately urge others to visit as well. This remote, rocky hamlet allows for this
adjustment and conversion. And yet these people are in tension with the Catholic Church.
An additional point of discussion in the on-going debate on the Medjugorje apparitions focuses on the Catechism of the Catholic Church. These teachings include two relevant passages for this debate; the first is as follows:

The Christian economy, therefore, since it is the new and definitive Covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet even if Revelation is already complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries. (#66)

The first teaching quoted here explains that there will not be a public revelation before Christ returns, but also that even though all teachings have already been revealed to humanity the faithful will continue to learn the true meaning over time. Thus while there can be nothing new revealed from apparitions for example, such visions and messages could serve to more fully explain the meaning of earlier revealed scripture. The only new addition can be towards understanding and not actual material. The second relevant Catechism passage continues:

Throughout the ages, there have been so-called “private” revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to
improve or complete Christ’s definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history. Guided by the Magisterium of the Church, the sensus fidelium knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church. (#67)

In the second passage the focus is on private revelations. Some of these revelations have been authentic divine communications to individuals, yet these messages are not to be seen as a correction or fulfillment of the revelations to Jesus Christ. Instead these messages are meant to assist the faithful in living through a particular time in humanity’s history; again they can only add clearer comprehension. The Church will investigate the messages and determine which are valid and connect to the Church. Thus divine messages can continue through “lives of holy people, historical events, natural phenomena, and prophetic figures,” but they never add anything new (Ryan 6). This ongoing private revelation may enhance devotion or piety but, according to the teachings of the Catholic Church, can never add something new to the previous revelations (Turner 210). Thus the apparitions cannot contradict any previous Revelation, nor can they insert any original teachings. This does allow for individuals to receive divine messages, but they must be in accordance with what has already been revealed. Again it is not up to the individual to decide the validity of such a message; instead it is the Church authorities that will determine the authenticity.

The Church clearly supports the idea that individuals can receive messages from the divine and that they can serve to enhance the lives of the faithful, but this is a measured approach. The Church chooses to balance faith and reason. While faith is
inevitably more valuable than reason, the Church still sees reason as important. Faith will take one further than reason; for example the concept of the holy Trinity cannot be understood purely using reason. According to Catholic understanding, if we use our faculty of reason in the correct manner it will never contradict faith. Our reason is divinely given and thus cannot be in error. It can be used incorrectly, and often is, but when used in the right manner our reason will not lead us astray. Similarly we can use our reason to interpret revelations and doctrines may in fact develop with time, but the Church teaches that the essence of the doctrine will not alter. This development will lead to a greater understanding. Cardinal John Henry Newman writes of our ‘illative sense’ that leads us to knowledge.\footnote{For more on the ‘illative sense’ see John Henry Newman. \textit{An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent}. London: Elibron Classics, 2007. Print.} We can never actually use reason to figure out a faith-related issue as though we were completing a deductive syllogism. Instead we continue to add up what rational evidence we can find, and it is through the illative sense that the conclusion is drawn. Using reason we work closer and closer to a true understanding, but we can never deduce one conclusion without a doubt. We must continue to work around an idea circling nearer to the truth.

With regards to these private revelations, we can use our reason to learn from them more about already acknowledged teachings and gradually build a greater understanding of Revelation. These individual messages cannot contradict nor can they even improve upon already accepted Revelation found in the Old and New Testaments and the teachings of the Catholic Church. The Church has always been cautious and shown moderation and restraint in examining private revelations, thus exhibiting this delicate balance between faith and reason. (Kozlowski 139) Mazza notes the dangers of
ignoring the Church’s rational approach and instead overemphasizing these private revelations. He writes of four ways excessive focus on these messages can lead the faithful astray.

The first point he makes is that an overemphasis of these revelations can lead to a “mistrust of intellect” (29). If a believer comes to follow any and every proclaimed private transcendent message, one’s own rational abilities are no longer consulted. Recalling that since our reason is divinely given, it will not lead us astray, if a revelation contradicts the correct use of reason, it must be, at the very least, questioned. This also may place too much power within the individual receiving the ‘revelation,’ and if reason is no longer trusted and consulted, no other outside authorities can comment on the revelation. The Church has established a system with a check; an individual cannot claim independently to be the holder of truth without any recourse to reason and intellect. The methods discussed here, used by the Church to validate private revelations and apparitions, are based on rational inquiry.

The second warning point is that an overemphasis on private revelations could lead to a “thirst for ‘signs and wonders!’” (29). According to the Gospels, Jesus himself warned against this practice: “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign!” (Mt. 12:39, 16:4, Lk. 11:29); “For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible.” (Mt. 24:24); “He sighed deeply and said, ‘Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it.’” (Mk 8:12) While the private revelations pertain to their respective historical periods, Jesus’ warnings are taken to be relevant to all time periods, thus we should be very wary of miraculous signs. This is not to say that
miracles are to always be distrusted or signs cannot be real; it is the desire for such intangible proof that is to be mistrusted. The overemphasis on special or miraculous signs was cautioned against in the Gospels and today many offer the same advice with regards to the occurrences at Medjugorje. Again, according to the Gospels, Jesus performed miracles to support his teachings and special signs proclaimed his messiahship.

The third reason why private revelations should be taken with a note of caution is that they “can also unwittingly promote a contempt for the humble ways of Our Lord, who chose the ‘hidden’ way of Bethlehem, Nazareth, Calvary, and the Eucharist in order to encourage his followers to bear a similar attitude of self-abnegation” (Mazza 29). The argument here is that if Jesus took the unassuming path to proclaim his message, the private revelations must also demonstrate humility. With regards to Medjugorje this point is contested. Many claim that the young visionaries were meek and innocent children; others argue that with time they became self-serving and focused on celebrity.

The final reason why an overemphasis of private revelations can be dangerous is that they can “fool or confuse people” (29). Again people can exhibit weakness and be deceived.

An example of how good people may be fooled by spiritual ‘signs’ is that of Magdelena de la Cruz. As a teenager in the 1500s, this young woman struck an agreement with Satan himself in order to dupe people into

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42 An example of Jesus’ perceived humility can be found in Paul’s second letter to the Philippians 5-8: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (NIV)
thinking she had heroic holiness. Magdelena gave all the outward appearances, including ecstasies, levitations, predictions, and even the stigmata. She became a Franciscan nun and abbess of her community three times. For almost forty years she kept up the charade, deceiving thousands of lay people, bishops, theologians, and even the Spanish Inquisitors. Finally, on her deathbed, she confessed the whole thing and was exorcised. (29)

This reconnects with the previous argument about the work of the Devil when considering the ‘fruits’ of an apparition, as described above. These revelations also have the potential to confuse people and result in a splintering of the faithful. Those who receive the message could be seen as the elite having a secret knowledge. This schism could also lead to a disregard for other Church teachings: “What does fighting world hunger matter, since the end of the world is right around the corner?” (29-30) One could argue that a pilgrim might get so caught up in the miraculous and apocalyptic messages that other Catholic practices might be ignored. If pilgrims continually fast and pray or repeatedly visit Medjugorje, some argue that other issues, such as social justice concerns, will fall by the wayside. It is interesting to note once again the seeming lack of respect for the faithful. As described above, according to some church officials, the lay population is not permitted to determine the validity of personal revelations, they might misunderstand and misdirect the message of a true vision, and are apparently easily swayed by the Devil. This does not portray the lay population in a very positive manner. Perhaps the popularity of a place such as Medjugorje can be attributed to the populace’s decision to
disregard the ‘official’ teachings or sanctions on a particular location and follow their heart, or as Turner would say, vote with their feet.

While the people continue to be drastically split as to whether the apparitions of Medjugorje are real, the Church has at least taken a stand on the role that the messages play for the faithful. Pope Benedict XIV, 1740-1758, wrote the following:

What is to be said of those private revelations, which the Apostolic See has approved of, those of the Blessed Hildegard, of St. Bridget, and of St. Catherine of Siena? We have already said that those revelations, although approved of, ought not to, and cannot, receive from us any assent of Catholic, but only of human faith, according to the rules of prudence, according to which the aforesaid revelations are probable, and piously to be believed. (*De canon.*, Book III, chap. Liii, No. 15; Book II, chap. xxxii, No. II. Eng. Trans: *Benedict XIV on heroic Virtue*, Vol. III, chap. xiv—emphasis in original). (30)

If the apparitions at Medjugorje represent true private revelations, according to the Church, it must be remembered that they are only a demonstration of human faith and can be taken as no more than that. While at first this statement may seem to denigrate such private revelations, the notion that these messages speak to a human faith, or one that transcends the traditions of the Catholic Church, may be one more reason why so many go to Medjugorje. Perhaps it is this universal nature of the messages of peace that draw interest and then followers. If the message was a specific reiteration of Catholic dogma, like Bernadette’s claims about the Immaculate Conception at Lourdes, perhaps the events
would not be as popular. Conceivably it is this human faith that is sought by every pilgrim throughout time.
Final Authority of Bishops

Even if all criteria are met, as described above, in the process of approval and the Catechism is followed as pertaining to private revelations, the final authority is given by the Vatican to the local bishops (Herrero 150-1). The Church is in a difficult position; it would not want to criticize piety and yet it also must show restraint with regards to the validity of the visionaries’ claims:

On the one hand, the Church has not condemned the visionaries, because it does not want to be in the position of condemning prayer, penance, conversion, the rosary and a renewal of humankind’s allegiance to Mary. On the other, it fears what the visionaries have unleashed, because if by chance such extraordinary piety is the result of a hoax, then not only has the Church’s authority been called into question but also the whole enterprise of belief (Junod 5).

Amidst this delicate balancing act, the Vatican has not often made official statements regarding Medjugorje; the statements made are also not congruous and uncontroversial. Pope John Paul II’s statement “Let the people go to Medjugorje if they convert, pray, confess, do penance” has been contested and could not be corroborated (Mazza 56). Pope Benedict XVI, as Cardinal Ratzinger, the head of the Vatican’s office on doctrine, issued a warning that the church forbade official pilgrimage to Medjugorje (Sudetic 2). Yet it is not up to the Vatican; instead the local bishops have the final say (Herrero 150-
1). The violent controversy surrounding Medjugorje may in part be due to the lack of an official, final, and binding proclamation from the Vatican. By leaving the decision to the local bishop, the Church allows for an indigenous perspective, but also leaves open the door for endless neighborhood debates.

There have been three ecclesiastical commissions in the 1980s. Two were led by Bishop Zanic and the third by the Yugoslavian Bishops Conference, as suggested by the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Herrero 145). All three councils could not verify the supernatural character of the events. In 1996, the Vatican stated that this conclusion constitutes the position of the Church; it became known as the Declaration of Zadar (145). In an interview in October of 1993 in a diocesan newspaper, Bishop Peric is quoted supporting the decisions of the commission:

The Church recommends prayer, fast, penance, reconciliation, and conversion to each of its members. I do not want to forbid anyone to go wherever he wants to pray to God. But I cannot approve that from the altar of the church in Medjugorje the priest themselves advertise “pilgrimages to the place of apparitions,” despite the fact they have simply not been recognized as supernatural by the Church. If, after serious, solid, and professional investigation, our Bishops’ Conference had the courage to declare that Medjugorje’s apparitions are not supernatural, in spite of massive stories and convictions to the contrary, then that is a sign that the Church, even in the 20th century ‘upholds the truth and keeps it safe’ (1 Tim. 3:15). I affirm this unequivocally and I answer it publicly to all
those who have written either anonymous or signed letters to me with contrary advice… (Mazza 53)

Here the bishop offers a calm and measured response. He acknowledges the good practices that might be supported by followers of Medjugorje and recognizes that it is not his role to limit where people connect to God. Yet he sees his role as supporting the statements of the Church, thus he cannot encourage such pilgrimages since the councils have determined that nothing supernatural has occurred there. Interestingly, he comments on the “courage” of the Bishops’ Conference; even in the face of such a popular response, this council could not validate the apparitions. Here he may be acknowledging that it would have been far easier to accept the visionaries’ accounts and cater to the flocks of pilgrims; yet the Church remains steadfast in striving for the previously discussed balance between faith and reason. This bishop believes it is the reasonable decision not to back the claims of apparitions. Thus the Vatican, giving authority to the bishops, does not support Medjugorje, and yet the controversy continues. Even as recently as 2010 the debate continues. On March 17, 2010 the BBC reported on the following story: “Vatican investigates Bosnia ‘apparition’ of Virgin Mary.” The brief article states that the Vatican has formed a “commission to investigate the claims that the Virgin Mary appears on a daily basis in a town in Bosnia-Hercegovina.”43 It notes that an estimated 30 million pilgrims have visited since the early 1980s and concludes by commenting that believers will most likely continue to visit until the report is given to the Church’s top doctrinal body.

Most times the Church does not make an official statement until an apparitional event has ceased; as a result, supporters of Medjugorje thus claim that the Church’s statement against official pilgrimages to Medjugorje and that Medjugorje is not an officially sanctioned Marian shrine is not in fact the final word (146).

Msgr. Frane Franic, former archbishop of Split was the only bishop of the now defunct Conference of Bishops of Yugoslavia to have a favorable attitude to Medjugorje. In 1987, he ‘clarified’ for the people of his diocese that the bishops prohibition to organize official pilgrimages to Medjugorje as a place of supernatural apparitions applied strictly to pilgrimages officially sanctioned, or led, by a bishop. (146)

Not all bishops were in agreement about the decision, and, for some, a loophole of sorts was found so that pilgrimages could continue as long as they were not led by a bishop or somehow more officially sanctioned. It seems that not only is the Vatican’s position ignored, but even the claims of other bishops: “The Declaration of Zadar had virtually no effect on the number of pilgrims arriving in Medjugorje” (147). Many apparitions and reported miracles fade away with time, but Medjugorje has failed to do so. It seems that people ignore what the Church declares and follow what is in their hearts, whether erroneously or not. John Shinners, a Marian author, offers one way to explain this disparity: “What the theologians ignore, ordinary people will provide” (Ryan 7).
CONCLUSIONS

Medjugorje, Bosnia continues, even after almost thirty years, to be a popular pilgrimage site, primarily for Roman Catholic Christians. One aspect of this site that makes it unique is the highly contentious variations in the understanding of the meaning of the place. There are marked differences between the ways in which the lay populace and various religious groups comprehend this sacred space. Even within the category of the religious leaders there is much tension between groups, for example between the Franciscans, the local bishops, and the Vatican. While pilgrimage has been studied extensively in terms of the transformations and bonds it creates, this paper has focused on the category of Marian pilgrimages and the modern anti-structural, anti-authority characteristics apparent there. After detailing the site of Medjugorje, its particular history of Marian apparitions, and information on previous sources that cover this material, a discussion of the current debates and the cultural context follows. Still the question remains: If this place has such a controversial history and the Catholic Church itself has not officially sanctioned pilgrimages to the site, why does it continue to be so popular?

A variety of possible answers exist. Emile Durkheim would argue that the ritual of pilgrimage offers a social bond centering on the sacred space of the location, differentiated from the profane world. Karl Marx’s insights offer assistance in understanding criticism of the place. Those who debate whether the apparitions actually occur or comment on the political in-fighting between local religious leaders and also
those in Rome could look to Marxian thought that organized and hierarchical religion merely serves to aid those with power and further oppress those without. Mircea Eliade offers additional insight. Instead of conforming to socio-political forces, humanity responds to universal archetypes, and pilgrimages represent the seeking of sacred space, a place where we can communicate with the divine through rituals. While these famous thinkers in the field of Religious Studies offer wisdom with regards to pilgrimage, questions remain with regards to the popular response to Medjugorje.

From the numerous personal and academic sources studied here, it seems that the will of the masses define the place. This population searches for transformation and is unconcerned with the institutional understanding of where or how it is found. After an investigation of the multi-step procedure of approval for apparitions and pilgrimages by the Church, it is clear that the process is complicated. From the *Catechism* it can be learned that no new revelations can be added and thus these apparitions cannot constitute new teachings, but they can deepen our understanding and human faith. While this teaching adds another layer of difficulty for those who support the Medjugorje apparitions, it also may serve to draw more followers. If people are searching for a new way to comprehend ancient texts or teachings, perhaps their search would lead them to seek out instances of believed heavenly messages. In pursuit of new and deeper understanding, finding a spot where others believe sacred communications have occurred could become important. People are drawn to sites where that potential exists.

In a similar search for new meaning, truth, or transformation people might also seek out a location, such as Medjugorje, where reports of personal faith experience and conversion abound. One of the previously discussed criteria for the Church’s acceptance
of an apparition centers on the question of the results of such an occurrence. If something fruitful and good comes from the vision this could be a sign that the apparition itself is legitimate. It is significant to note the abundance of reports of accompanying miracles, personal conversion and transformation, and turning to private prayer and fasting. Whether these people have been duped into doing so or if they thus display a sign of mental weakness, is not the issue. This cannot serve to explain the continued devotion and dedication. Even if the original six children were deceptive with regards to their supposed visions and messages, the fact remains that millions go to Medjugorje, and many claim an experience of spiritual change.

The Church is in a difficult position. It does not want to criticize piety and faith, yet it also must show restraint in supporting these on-going visions. Perhaps some of the continued tension within the religious leadership is in fact a result of the continued delay in an official and immutable decision from the Vatican. There have been commissions to study the Medjugorje apparitions starting in the 1980s, continuing into the 1990s and even as recently as March of 2010. The local bishops do not want to limit the ways in which the faithful connect to God, but they also want to support the Church. Perhaps this friction will end with the conclusion of this most recent commission, but the Church will continue to strive for a balance between faith and reason. The apparitions will be methodically investigated and the messages judiciously examined for authenticity.

Yet despite what this newest commission concludes it is unlikely that pilgrims will stop visiting this tiny, remote spot in Bosnia. Pilgrimages have continued unsanctioned in the past, and they most likely will continue in the future. It seems the faithful are unconcerned with the declarations of the Church. They follow what is in their
hearts. Their hearts seek a connection and a transformation. One author explains the lure of the place with the following:

Part of the appeal of Medjugorje is the piety of fellow pilgrims. True, some flock to the shops after a few perfunctory prayers, and others spend hours gazing hopefully at the sky. But most pilgrims search for God, not souvenirs or unnatural signs. To stand close to pious Catholics of diverse nationalities is to appreciate that God and God’s goodness are everywhere (Copp 379).

It is God they are after, not a correct application of Church doctrine. Continuing analysis from above regarding the lack of institutional presence, Medjugorje seems to thrive, at least in part, due to its anti-institutional character. While some pilgrimage sites serve to further support orthodox teachings and correlate with Church doctrines, this site gives a sense that one can encounter God here. Perhaps due to the less structured nature of the pilgrimage, one feels they can restructure themselves. They can be transformed.

There are many ways in which the pilgrim throws off the institution and structure:

It appears, then, that, although the Catholic Church maintains control of the situation in Medjugorje, pilgrims resist the form and fact of control in various ways. The local Franciscans contest the secular power of the bishop of Mostar. Supernatural interpretations of events counter the normally conservative reactions of the church to phenomena such as Marian apparitions. Pilgrims identify with female images of God, in contrast to the typical male personifications of deity. And the activities of

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the lay visionaries and pilgrims upset the normal church hierarchy (Jurkovich 10).

As described above, some priests resist the teachings of the Vatican; the lay population embraces the charismatic and supernatural apparitions, while the Church is cautious. Additionally the pilgrims are drawn to the female presence at Medjugorje. In contrast to the male dominated traditional authority of the Church, an appearance of Mary offers a necessary counterpart. The young, mostly female visionaries and their messages from Mary offer a balance to the voice of the male clergy. This aspect of Medjugorje sheds light on the search of many faithful. This additional role of the feminine offers something that cannot be found elsewhere in the Church:

We long for a God of compassion who knows our pain and weeps over us. If we fail to restore these so-called feminine aspects to our image of God, then our spiritual life and culture will reflect only the violence of a conquering war god. Women will remain undervalued and powerless in our church and culture. With God’s shadow side denied, a people in need will look elsewhere for comfort.45

The gender duality existent in humanity is sought within the divine, and our spiritual development requires a multiplicity of voices and forces, and this includes that of women. What brings people to Medjugorje is a search for something that cannot be found elsewhere. The faithful will not be forced to follow the path laid out for them by an institution, for example the Catholic Church. Perhaps as a result of the fighting and tension within the sphere of religion in this region of Bosnia, many have turned from the

religious authorities. These are the same authorities who looked the other way when atrocities were committed in the name of their faith. People want something different, something tangible, and they yearn for change. One way to inspire this transformation is to change place and time. By going on a pilgrimage, one can relocate into sacred space and enter the sacred time of ritual. These changes can offer a new perspective of one’s life, faith, and God, and by following one’s own heart one may redevelop a close relationship with the divine, the same relationship that the Church seeks as well.


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