

## Apparitions/Private Revelations

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### *Catechism of the Catholic Church:*

**66** "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.

**67** 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.

**Christian faith cannot accept "revelations" that claim to surpass or correct the Revelation of which Christ is the fulfillment, as is the case in certain non-Christian religions and also in certain recent sects which base themselves on such "revelations."**

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To explain the finality and completeness of Revelation, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes a text of Saint John of the Cross: "In giving us his Son, his only Word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word—and he has no more to say... because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has now spoken all at once by giving us the All Who is His Son. Any person questioning God or desiring some vision or revelation would be guilty not only of foolish behaviour but also of offending him, by not fixing his eyes entirely upon Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty" (No. 65; Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, 22).

Because the single Revelation of God addressed to all peoples comes to completion with Christ and the witness borne to him in the books of the New Testament, the Church is tied to this unique event of sacred history and to the word of the Bible, which guarantees and interprets it. But this does not mean that the Church can now look only to the past and that she is condemned to sterile repetition. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says in this regard: "...even if Revelation is already complete, it has not been made fully explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries" (No. 66). The way in which the Church is bound to both the uniqueness of the event and progress in understanding it is

very well illustrated in the farewell discourse of the Lord when, taking leave of his disciples, he says: “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority... He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (*Jn* 16:12-14). On the one hand, the Spirit acts as a guide who discloses a knowledge previously unreachable because the premise was missing—this is the boundless breadth and depth of Christian faith. On the other hand, to be guided by the Spirit is also “to draw from” the riches of Jesus Christ himself, the inexhaustible depths of which appear in the way the Spirit leads. In this regard, the *Catechism* cites profound words of Pope Gregory the Great: “The sacred Scriptures grow with the one who reads them” (No. 94; Gregory the Great, *Homilia in Ezechielem* I, 7, 8). The Second Vatican Council notes three essential ways in which the Spirit guides in the Church, and therefore three ways in which “the word grows”: through the meditation and study of the faithful, through the deep understanding which comes from spiritual experience, and through the preaching of “those who, in the succession of the episcopate, have received the sure charism of truth” (*Dei Verbum*, 8).

In this context, it now becomes possible to understand rightly the concept of “private revelation”, which refers to all the visions and revelations which have taken place since the completion of the New Testament. This is the category to which we must assign the message of Fatima. In this respect, let us listen once again to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Throughout the ages, there have been so-called ‘private’ revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church... It is not their role to complete Christ's definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history” (No. 67). This clarifies two things:

1. The authority of private revelations is essentially different from that of the definitive public Revelation. The latter demands faith; in it in fact God himself speaks to us through human words and the mediation of the living community of the Church. Faith in God and in his word is different from any other human faith, trust or opinion. The certainty that it is God who is speaking gives me the assurance that I am in touch with truth itself. It gives me a certitude which is beyond verification by any human way of knowing. It is the certitude upon which I build my life and to which I entrust myself in dying.

2. Private revelation is a help to this faith, and shows its credibility precisely by leading me back to the definitive public Revelation. In this regard, Cardinal Prospero Lambertini, the future Pope Benedict XIV, says in his classic treatise, which later became normative for beatifications and canonizations: “An assent of Catholic faith is not due to revelations approved in this way; it is not even possible. These revelations seek rather an assent of human faith in keeping with the requirements of prudence, which puts them before us as probable and credible to piety”. The Flemish theologian E. Dhanis, an eminent scholar in this field, states succinctly that ecclesiastical approval of a private revelation has three elements: the message contains nothing contrary to faith or morals; it is lawful to make it public; and the faithful are authorized to accept

it with prudence (E. Dhanis, *Sguardo su Fatima e bilancio di una discussione*, in *La Civiltà Cattolica* 104 [1953], II, 392-406, in particular 397). Such a message can be a genuine help in understanding the Gospel and living it better at a particular moment in time; therefore it should not be disregarded. It is a help which is offered, but which one is not obliged to use.

The criterion for the truth and value of a private revelation is therefore its orientation to Christ himself. When it leads us away from him, when it becomes independent of him or even presents itself as another and better plan of salvation, more important than the Gospel, then it certainly does not come from the Holy Spirit, who guides us more deeply into the Gospel and not away from it. This does not mean that a private revelation will not offer new emphases or give rise to new devotional forms, or deepen and spread older forms. But in all of this there must be a nurturing of faith, hope and love, which are the unchanging path to salvation for everyone. We might add that private revelations often spring from popular piety and leave their stamp on it, giving it a new impulse and opening the way for new forms of it. Nor does this exclude that they will have an effect even on the liturgy, as we see for instance in the feasts of *Corpus Christi* and of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. From one point of view, the relationship between Revelation and private revelations appears in the relationship between the liturgy and popular piety: the liturgy is the criterion, it is the living form of the Church as a whole, fed directly by the Gospel. Popular piety is a sign that the faith is spreading its roots into the heart of a people in such a way that it reaches into daily life. Popular religiosity is the first and fundamental mode of “inculturation” of the faith. While it must always take its lead and direction from the liturgy, it in turn enriches the faith by involving the heart.

We have thus moved from the somewhat negative clarifications, initially needed, to a positive definition of private revelations. How can they be classified correctly in relation to Scripture? To which theological category do they belong? The oldest letter of Saint Paul which has been preserved, perhaps the oldest of the New Testament texts, the First Letter to the Thessalonians, seems to me to point the way. The Apostle says: “Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything, holding fast to what is good” (5:19-21). In every age the Church has received the charism of prophecy, which must be scrutinized but not scorned. On this point, it should be kept in mind that prophecy in the biblical sense does not mean to predict the future but to explain the will of God for the present, and therefore show the right path to take for the future. A person who foretells what is going to happen responds to the curiosity of the mind, which wants to draw back the veil on the future. The prophet speaks to the blindness of will and of reason, and declares the will of God as an indication and demand for the present time. In this case, prediction of the future is of secondary importance. What is essential is the actualization of the definitive Revelation, which concerns me at the deepest level. The prophetic word is a warning or a consolation, or both together. In this sense there is a link between the charism of prophecy and the category of “the signs of the times”, which Vatican II brought to light anew: “You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; why then do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (*Lk* 12:56). In this saying of Jesus, the “signs of the times” must be

understood as the path he was taking, indeed it must be understood as Jesus himself. To interpret the signs of the times in the light of faith means to recognize the presence of Christ in every age. In the private revelations approved by the Church—and therefore also in Fatima—this is the point: they help us to understand the signs of the times and to respond to them rightly in faith.

CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH **THE MESSAGE OF  
FATIMA** JosephCard. Ratzinger *Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*

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**Public Revelation.** The Church teaches as *de fide* (of the Faith) that all that the Father desired to reveal for our salvation has been revealed in His Word, Jesus Christ. The Word communicated this Revelation to His Apostles, who either wrote it down or handed it on (*traditio*) in their preaching and teaching (1 Cor. 15:1-3, 2 Thes. 2:15). The deposit of the Faith, therefore, is to be found in the twin fountains of Public Revelation, Sacred Scripture and Sacred (Apostolic) Tradition.

While some things in Public Revelation can be known by reason (the existence of a Supreme Being, elements of the moral law), many matters involve supernatural realities (mysteries such as the Trinity, divinity of Christ, grace, etc.) which cannot be known or proven directly by the senses or human reason. However, fortified by God's gift of supernatural Faith the human intellect is made capable of assenting to such truths (Mt. 16:17) and even understanding them, in so far as human beings can. Catholics are obliged to believe the entire deposit of the Faith by this *divine and Catholic Faith*, the extent of which is known by the teaching of the Church. In the words of the well-known Act of Faith addressed to God,

I believe these and all the truths which the Holy Catholic Church teaches, because You have revealed them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived.

The Teaching Authority (Magisterium) of the Church alone, therefore, determines what Catholics **must** believe by this *divine and Catholic faith*. **Everything else in life rests on human faith in the credibility of assertions of truth of one kind or another, such as whether John Wilkes Booth actually shot Abraham Lincoln or whether the Blessed Virgin appeared to a certain person.**

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**Private Revelation.** God continues to reveal Himself to individuals "not indeed for the declaration of any new doctrine of faith, but for the direction of human acts" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II q174 a6 reply 3). Since it occurs after the close of Public Revelation the Church distinguishes the content of such particular revelations to individuals from the deposit of the Faith by calling it *private* revelation. The test of its authenticity is always its

consistency with Public Revelation as guarded faithfully by the Catholic Church. For example, alleged revelations which propose to improve upon, correct or entirely supplant **Public Revelation are rejected by the Church as inauthentic, regardless of the claims made for them. Such revelations include those of Mohammed in the Koran, Joseph Smith in the Book of Mormon, the writings of new age mystics, psychics and the like.**

Some private revelations, however, the Church has accepted as credible, calling them *constat de supernaturalitate* (that is, they give evidence of a supernatural intervention). Such private revelations cannot correct or add anything essentially new to Public Revelation; however, they may contribute to a deeper understanding of the faith, provide new lines of theological investigation (such as suggested by the revelations to St. Margaret Mary on the Sacred Heart), or recall mankind prophetically to the living of the Gospel (as at Fátima). No private revelation can ever be necessary for salvation, though its content may obviously coincide with what is necessary for salvation as known from Scripture and Tradition. The person who believes the teachings of the Magisterium, utilizes devoutly the sacramental means of sanctification and prayer, and remains in Communion with the Pope and the bishops in union with him, is already employing the necessary means of salvation. A private revelation may recall wayward individuals to the faith, stir the devotion of the already pious, encourage prayer and penance on behalf of others, but it cannot substitute for the Catholic faith, the sacraments and hierarchical communion with the Pope and bishops.

Another way of saying this is that private revelations may not be believed with *divine and Catholic Faith*. They rest on the credibility of the evidence in favor of a supernatural origin. In the case of private revelations approved by the highest authority in the Church we can say with Pope Benedict XIV,

**Although an assent of Catholic faith may not be given to revelations thus approved, still, an assent of *human faith*, made according to the rules of prudence, is due them;** for according to these rules such revelations are probable and *worthy of pious credence*. [*De Serv. Dei Beatif.*]

The Pope is saying that a Catholic, seeing that the Church (and here the Holy See is meant, as only it's acts can be of universal effect) has investigated and approved certain revelations, is being prudent to give them *human* assent. That acceptance does not rest on the guarantee of Faith, or the charism of infallibility, but on the credibility of the evidence as it appeals to reason. The assent involved is not supernatural but the natural assent that the intellect gives to facts which it judges to be true. Approved private revelations are thus worthy of our acceptance and can be of great benefit to the faithful, for as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes,

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. [CCC 67]

**However, on the other hand, they do not demand acceptance by Catholics. As Pope Benedict states in the aforementioned text,**

it is possible to refuse to accept such revelations and to turn from them, as long as one does so with proper modesty, for good reasons, and without the intention of setting himself up as a superior. [*De Serv. Dei Beatif.*]

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**Sources of Private Revelations.** *Approved* private revelations derive from two sources. First, there is the mysticism of the *Servants of God* who have been proposed for canonization. When the diocese which initiated the Cause has concluded its investigation and forwarded the documentation to Rome, the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints undertakes its own study of the person's life. If the Congregation determines that he or she lived a life of *heroic virtue* this decision necessarily includes the judgment that the writings, including any mystical ones, are not contrary to faith and morals. If the Holy Father concurs the person is declared *Venerable*. The later canonization of the person (generally considered an act of papal infallibility), only heightens the credibility of the person's writings and the pious regard Catholics should have for them, according to the standard given by Benedict XIV.

The second kind of private revelation comes through apparitions. The person who receives an apparition is not necessarily far along in the spiritual life, though they are typically humble and simple souls. God grants this grace for the good of the Church and not as the fruit of contemplative prayer. When apparitions judged at the diocesan level *constat de supernaturalitate* (giving signs or evidences of supernaturality) receive the approbation of the Holy See, as indicated by a positive judgment, the granting of papal favors to the apparition site, the approval of a liturgical feast, the canonization of the seer or other clear signs of approval, the words of Pope Benedict XIV can certainly be applied, as well, "an assent of *human faith*, made according to the rules of prudence, is due them."

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**Private Revelations Without Roman Approval.** Since most private revelations and alleged apparitions never receive the approval of the Holy See Catholics must often judge for themselves whether they are credible. If the person (whether living or dead) has a reputation for sanctity (such as Padre Pio had), then clearly any mystical revelations have considerable credibility prior to any formal evaluation by the Church. The witness of prudent priests, especially the spiritual director of the person, is a key element in determining credibility. However, even here care must be taken. The spiritual director himself must be competent in mystical theology, credible as a person and in good standing with the Church. False mystics have been known to "shop" for gullible, extremely aged or incompetent directors. Ideally, a bishop upon hearing of an alleged mystic would assign a competent director, thus insuring the authenticity of the evaluation.

In the case of apparitions, however, they often occur to obscure individuals with little or no reputation. Their human credibility may rest initially on the attitude of the local clergy and the personal experience of observers. There may or may not be phenomena which suggest something out of the ordinary. The message may or may not appear to be consistent with Church teaching. The person or persons may or may not have a competent spiritual director. Finally they may or may not be investigated by the local bishop to determine if they are credible. In the end

the faithful are often left to fend for themselves in a perplexing sea of information. If the message is orthodox, the seer(s) of good reputation, the clergy favorable, the signs supportive, even without an official investigation the faithful can make a prudent judgment that it is credible. **Certainly those who were present at the apparitions of Lourdes and Fátima, as well as those who believed in them prior to Church approval, had to have made such a judgment.**

**Certainly, however, the faithful benefit the most from the judgment of the bishop of the diocese in which the apparition occurs. He has the authority to assemble a commission of scientific and theological experts, to judge the case, as well as the grace of vocation to carry out this pastoral service. While his decision is not infallible, it has the presumption of being correct and should receive the respectfully adherence of the faithful (Canon 753). Thus, such decisions should generally be decisive in the prudential judgment of the faithful. It would require very weighty and sound theological reasons (not feelings or mere agreement with the content of the alleged apparition) to find defect in such a decision. Such intellectual disagreement, however, does not permit acting out of communion with the bishop. (See my FAQ on [Medjugorje](#) for the attitude of the Holy See in one such case.)**

**With respect to any disciplinary precepts the bishop makes concerning the apparition and its site, they should be followed faithfully (e.g. what sacraments, if any, may be celebrated there). No Catholic should ever violate the practical norms laid down by the local bishop with respect to an alleged apparition, even if intellectually they disagree with his conclusion regarding the alleged apparition. Such disobedience would be sinful, and if it characterized the attitude of the followers of the alleged apparition it would be a sign of its inauthenticity, i.e. by producing bad fruit.**

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## **Types of Decisions.**

The decision of the local bishop should be one of the following: 1) *constat de supernaturalitate* (established as supernatural), 2) *constat de non supernaturalitate* (established as not supernatural); or 3) *non constat de supernaturalitate* (not established as supernatural).

1. *Constat de supernaturalitate*. An apparition judged *supernatural* (formerly called *worthy of belief*) has manifested signs or evidence of being an authentic or truly miraculous intervention from heaven. This judgment is possible when there is evidence of supernatural phenomena, sound doctrine, moral probity, mental health and sound piety of the seer(s) and enduring good fruits among the faithful.

The issue of supernaturality is one that deserves to be explored more fully. According to the common teaching of the Church, most extraordinary phenomena in the mystical order (visions, apparitions, locutions, ecstasies, mystical knowledge etc.) are caused by angels acting on God's behalf. Whether the burning bush which Moses saw, the ecstatic flights of St. Joseph Cupertino, the stigmata of St. Francis or the revelations of St. Catherine, the general rule in the spiritual order is that God does not do immediately and directly what can be done mediately through a lower order nature, in this case the good angels. The presence of such phenomenon is not,

therefore, unequivocal evidence of supernaturality. Each of the approved apparitions have had such clear signs, from the instantaneous and inexplicable cures at Lourdes to the natural prodigy of October 13<sup>th</sup> 1917 in Fátima, but also the other marks of authenticity mentioned above.

2. *Constat de non supernaturalitate*. The judgment that an alleged apparition has been shown to be *not supernatural* means it is either clearly not miraculous or lacks sufficient signs of the miraculous. Private revelation, for example, which is doctrinally dangerous or which manifests hostility to lawful authority could not come from God. It could even be demonic, especially if there are extraordinary signs accompanying it. The devil gladly mingles truth and lie to deceive the faithful, dazzling them with signs and wonders to give credence to his message. His purpose is to separate them from the Church, either by getting them to believe things contrary to the deposit of the faith or to act contemptuously of Church authority. An attitude of pride and judgment toward the Church is a clear sign of his presence. An alleged revelation may also only be a pious rambling, consistent with faith and morals, but lacking evidence of being anything more than the product of human effort. No fraud need be intended, only an active imagination. Finally, it may be that the doctrine may be sound and there may be phenomena, but insufficient to demonstrate supernaturality. In this latter case, there would seem to be a possibility of revision.

3. *Non constat de supernaturalitate*. Finally, it may not be evident whether or not the alleged apparition is authentic. This judgment would seem to be completely open to further evidence or development.

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**Responsibility of the Faithful.** Today there are a myriad of alleged private revelations and apparitions vying for the attention of the faithful. None have been definitively judged by the Holy See, some have been approved by local authority (e.g. Akita, Cuapa, Betania), others have been found lacking in supernaturality (e.g. Medjugorje, Garabandal), some few have been condemned (e.g. Necedah, Bayside) and finally, the vast majority have received no attention from Church authorities whatsoever.

**The first responsibility of the faithful is to remain firmly established in the faith, in the sacraments and in communion with the Pope and bishops. Any Catholic who gives their primary attention to alleged private revelation at the expense of Sacred Scripture, the teaching of the Church (especially the *Catechism*), sacramental practice, prayer and fidelity to Church authority is *off course*. The running after *spiritual phenomena*, such as alleged revelations, is condemned by St. John of the Cross as spiritual avarice. This means that pious souls who would be repulsed by crude materialistic greed think nothing of being greedy to know revelations and prophecies. An exclusive, or even a predominant attention to these matters (especially apocalyptic ones), cannot help but produce an unbalanced spirituality. Should the Church condemn some favorite alleged revelation such a person may find themselves believing more in it than in the supernatural authority of the Church. The devil will have succeeded in what he had set out to do.**

The second responsibility is to have regard, in the first place, for those private revelations and apparitions approved by the Church. **Within a balanced practice of the faith the edifying content of approved private revelations can be a motive for deeper piety and fidelity to the Gospel. God has chosen to give guidance to the Church in particular eras in this way and we would, as I noted above, be imprudent to disregard altogether what are credibly His prophetic interventions in the life of His Church.**

Finally, there are many other private revelations that have not received Church approval. The Second Vatican Council urges us to discern the Spirit in the case of such extraordinary graces [*Lumen gentium* 12], **which means being neither gullible or incredulous, but subjecting them to all relevant theological and human tests of credibility. Clearly, in this the judgment of the local bishop is the key element of such a discernment as I noted above.** Often enough, unfortunately, the laity are left to make this determination themselves, relying on the testimony of the events, the judgment of holy and orthodox priests and common sense. It must always be kept in mind that however credible and reasonable such revelations seem to be, God would never ask one to separate oneself from the faith and discipline of the Church to follow it.

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Answered by Colin B. Donovan, STL

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[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20100930\\_verbum-domini\\_en.html#\\_ftnref44](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini_en.html#_ftnref44)

POST-SYNODAL  
APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION  
*VERBUM DOMINI*  
OF THE HOLY FATHER  
BENEDICT XVI

**Saint John of the Cross expresses this truth magnificently: “Since he has given us his Son, his only word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything at once in this sole word – and he has no more to say... because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has spoken all at once by giving us this All who is his Son. Any person questioning God or desiring some vision or revelation would be guilty not only of foolish behavior but also of offending him, by not fixing his eyes entirely on Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty”.**<sup>[43]</sup>

**Consequently the Synod pointed to the need to “help the faithful to distinguish the word of God from private revelations”<sup>[44]</sup> whose role “is not to ‘complete’ Christ’s definitive revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history”.**<sup>[45]</sup> **The value of private revelations is essentially different from that of the one public revelation: the latter demands faith; in it God himself speaks to us through human words and the mediation of the living community of the Church. The criterion for judging the truth of a private revelation is its orientation to Christ himself. If it leads us away from him, then it certainly does not come from the Holy Spirit, who guides us more deeply into the Gospel, and not**

**away from it. Private revelation is an aid to this faith, and it demonstrates its credibility precisely because it refers back to the one public revelation. Ecclesiastical approval of a private revelation essentially means that its message contains nothing contrary to faith and morals; it is licit to make it public and the faithful are authorized to give to it their prudent adherence. A private revelation can introduce new emphases, give rise to new forms of piety, or deepen older ones. It can have a certain prophetic character (cf. 1 Th 5:19-21) and can be a valuable aid for better understanding and living the Gospel at a certain time; consequently it should not be treated lightly. It is a help which is proffered, but its use is not obligatory. In any event, it must be a matter of nourishing faith, hope and love, which are for everyone the permanent path of salvation.[46]**

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My Comments:

Much of what is passed on today as divine enlightenment can easily be reduced to political correctness, and psychology promoted with twists of Scripture referenced here and there for effect. All things must be judged according, and in communion to the deposit of faith. Anything contrary to that, or even seeking a completion and/or correction to a supposed omission is indeed seeking to separate ones thinking and faith from the absolute authority of the Church and the Church's deposit of faith.

This by no means implies that the Holy spirit cannot impart to us private revelations; quite the contrary. He very often brings us back in remembrance to His word with a fuller, more complete understanding for the moment before us. All of this theological conversation before us is a moot point if at first a person is not well versed with comprehension in Scripture and Church teaching; wearing that complete armor of faith, truth, and love.

"When the Church approves private revelations, she declares only that there is nothing in them contrary to the faith or good morals, and that they may be read without danger or even with profit; no obligation is thereby imposed on the faithful to believe them. Speaking of such revelations as (e.g.) those of St. Hildegard (approved in part by Eugenius III), St. Bridget (by Boniface IX), and St. Catherine of Siena (by Gregory XI) Benedict XIV says: "It is not obligatory nor even possible to give them the assent of Catholic faith, but only of human faith, in conformity with the dictates of prudence, which presents them to us as probable and worthy of pious belief" (De canon., III, liii, xxii, II)." <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13005a.htm>