

Apparitions

Filipinos have been Roman Catholics for generations or even centuries, thanks to Spanish missionaries and friars. Some Catholic practices and beliefs are carried to greater lengths in the Philippines than in other Catholic countries. I started to write this essay about the widespread belief in apparitions of the Virgin Mary after reading a Spanish writer's somewhat irreverent comment. My research into the subject of apparitions revealed that this is taken very seriously not only in the Philippines but around the world as well.

The comment I refer to came from a journalist named Jose "Pepe" Rodriguez of Galicia, Spain. He has spent more than a decade in the Philippines as a correspondent for EFE, the Spanish international news agency. He truly loves the Philippines and is married to a Filipina. He wrote a book titled "*Cronicas*" or "*Chronicles*" describing his experience in the Philippines. In a chapter about Philippine faith healers (that's another subject), he referred to Filipinos frequently claiming apparitions of the Virgin Mary. I quote from his book "*It seems – that is, if one were predisposed to see with one's ears – that she (the Virgin Mary) has been appearing, or making her presence felt, more often and in more places in the Philippines than elsewhere. It has always made for good tourist business.*"

Three Vatican-approved apparitions of the Virgin Mary are universally known among the Catholic faithful and are the subjects of very popular pilgrimages. Peruse a Catholic newspaper and you'll see advertisements for many tours to the sites of these apparitions. The earliest occurred in 1531 in Guadalupe, Mexico, where Mary is believed to have appeared to Juan Diego and his uncle Juan Bernardino. She is believed to have appeared to Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes, France, in 1858 and in 1917 in Fatima, Portugal, she is believed to have appeared to the three children Lucia dos Santos and her cousins Jacinta and Francisco Marto. Bernadette and Juan Diego have since been canonized. There have been only sixteen apparitions that are Vatican approved starting with Juan Diego's. There were others before the 16th century but let's limit the discussion to the last 500 years. There is a claimed apparition in Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina that began in 1981. It is the third most popular pilgrimage site in Europe after Fatima and Lourdes, having been visited by millions. Full disclosure – I was given a rosary by a co-worker who went to Medjugorje about 15 years ago. I still use the rosary today. But Medjugorje has been controversial and is not on any approved list. In fact the priest who was responsible for originally promoting it has been defrocked. Officially, the Medjugorje apparition is still under investigation by the Vatican.

There are literally hundreds of claims of apparitions around the world, about 500 in the 20th century alone. It can take a very long time for the Church to approve apparitions. The 1664 apparition in Le Laus, France was not approved until 2008. No Philippine apparition has been approved by the Vatican, but Filipinos have not given up hope.

The earliest occurrence of claimed apparition in the Philippines took place in Caysasay, a district of Taal, province of Batangas. A statue of the Virgin Mary of unknown origin was recovered by a fisherman casting his net along the Pansipit River. This river connects Lake Taal to the sea. There is quite a very long story attached to this and subsequent events which started in 1603. There were disappearances and reappearances of this small statue less than a foot high. There were claims of multiple apparitions to local women. The local church authorities (Spanish friars) verified the apparition in 1620. Today there is a church housing the statue of the Virgin and the feast day of December 8 is a huge event.

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The apparition of Lipa was claimed to have occurred in 1948. The Virgin Mary allegedly appeared before a Carmelite postulant named Teresita Castillo at the convent grounds in the town of Lipa, also in the province of Batangas. There was a dialogue within the church about this event for many decades. The latest word from the Archbishop is that no such apparition occurred. I couldn't find any report of what happened to Teresita.

A woman named Emma de Guzman claims to have first seen the Virgin Mary in 1991 while she was in New York. She later returned to the Philippines and claimed another apparition, this time in Batulao, Batangas. An immigrant to Canada, Ms. De Guzman claims a wide audience, with prayer services all over North America. Whenever she returns to the Philippines, Masses are held at the Mountain of Salvation in Batulao. There is no chapel in Batulao and from the pictures it appears that the Mass is held outdoors. Ms. De Guzman has additional claims, including stigmata, gold dust in her face during apparitions and having talked to Jesus Christ. At present, the claims are under investigation by the church.

The apparition of Agoo started in 1989 to a 16 year old boy named Judiel Nieva. The town is in the province of La Union in northern Luzon's east coast. A concurrent phenomenon from this apparition was the "dancing sun." A witness described it as "spinning and dancing of the sun for about 15 minutes." This claim has been rejected by the church.

EDSA is an acronym for Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, the main artery that encircles Manila. The rallies and demonstrations against then-President Ferdinand Marcos in the 1980s were conducted along EDSA. The now-famous "People Power" mass demonstrations that toppled Marcos in 1986 occurred along EDSA. This was a bright shining moment in Philippine history when nuns armed with rosaries stopped the armored personnel carriers of Marcos. Some have claimed that the Virgin appeared to the soldiers, inspiring them to defect. A shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Edsa was constructed in 1989 but there hasn't been any more mention of any apparition.

The only other Christian traditions that recognize apparitions are the Coptic Church in Egypt and the Anglican Communion. The Copts recently elected a new pope after the death of Shenouda III. The Anglican Communion recognizes just three apparitions, including Lourdes. Orthodox Christians (Russian, Greek, Serbian, etc.) do not recognize apparitions and some theologians have written scathingly about such beliefs. Protestant denominations hardly mention the phenomenon at all.

What are we to make of all this? For one thing, I disagree with the esteemed Señor Rodriguez. Considering the numbers of claims it is clear that Filipinos are not more predisposed than other nationalities to claim apparitions. In fact, they are less so. Relative to the claimed apparitions, Europe leads with Italy, Spain, France, and Belgium having the greatest number of claims. I started to count the Italian claims and stopped at 50. Whoever the Vatican has appointed to investigate claims of apparitions has more than a lifetime of thankless work ahead of him.

Whenever an apparition is reported in the Philippines, devotees immediately rush to the location of its claimed occurrence. Perhaps we should all simply await the Church's judgment. As the theologian Fr. William G. Most stated, "*The Church does not require belief in any apparition or other private revelation. However, she does exercise her maternal judgment for the protection of the faithful in declaring some apparitions to be*

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inauthentic, others to be 'worthy of belief.' Investigations into alleged apparitions are rigorous."

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