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A man prays near a statue of Mary on Apparition Hill in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in th

A man prays near a statue of Mary on Apparition Hill in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in this Oct., 8, 2010, file photo. Pope Francis has decided to allow parishes and dioceses to organize official pilgrimages to Medjugorje; no decision has been made on the authenticity of the apparitions. (CNS/Reuters/Matko Biljak)



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In a new crackdown aimed to prevent scams, hoaxes and heresies, the Vatican has updated its guidelines for reviewing apparitions, visions and alleged revelations, and reaffirmed that only a pope could formally deem something to be "supernatural."

The document, "Norms for Proceeding in the Discernment of Alleged Supernatural Phenomena," was released by the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith on May 17. It tasks bishops with investigating such cases, but mandates that they receive Vatican approval before ruling on the validity of alleged supernatural events.

The guidelines outline six potential conclusions that may be reached and that even the highest level of approval from the Vatican office — *Nihil obstat* ("nothing hinders") — does not express certainty about the event itself, but grants permission

for the bishop to promote its pastoral value.

The new rules, which have been in development since 2019, replace the Vatican's 1978 norms, which were kept secret until 2011. The Vatican has historically exercised great caution in giving its seal of approval to supposed supernatural occurrences; the revisions require increased scrutiny and mandate sign-off from Rome before a bishop can rule on a particular case.

The update comes at a time when social media has led to an explosion of new claims of supposed apparitions or visions — including Jesus appearing on food and weeping statues of the Virgin Mary — and at a moment when even traditional Catholic devotions, such as Our Lady of Fatima, have become increasingly politicized and the source of seemingly endless conspiracy theories.

While the document affirms that there have been historical cases where spiritual phenomena have led to spiritual flourishing — consider devotions to Our Lady of Guadalupe or Our Lady of Lourdes, which have received approval from the church — it also acknowledges that many claims have led to confusion or even harm.

"There are serious critical issues that are detrimental to the faithful; in these situations, the Church must respond with utmost pastoral solicitude," wrote Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez, head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, in the introduction to the new norms.

"In particular, I am thinking of the use of such phenomenon to gain 'profit, power, fame, social recognition, or other personal interest," he continued, "even possibly extending to the commission of gravely immoral acts or the use of these phenomena 'as a means of or pretext for exerting control over people or carrying out abuses.' "

In assessing the spiritual authenticity of such claims, the May 17 guidelines — which were approved last month by Pope Francis and officially take effect on May 19 — stresses the need to have quick and clear rulings that involve collaboration between local bishops and the Vatican's doctrinal office in order to avoid confusion.

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The new norms outline six prudential conclusions that may eventually be granted to such phenomena:

- *Nihil obstat*: Without expressing certainty about the event itself, there may be an appreciation of the potential spiritual and pastoral value, where the diocesan bishop is encouraged to promote its spread, including through possible pilgrimages to a sacred site;
- *Prae oculis habeatur*: A recognition of certain positive signs, but notes there are some aspects of the event that may need further discernment or may cause confusion;
- *Curatur*: An event where there have been "verifiable spiritual fruits" and where an outright ban "could upset the People of God," but where the bishop is asked "not to encourage this phenomenon but to seek out alternative expressions of devotion and possibly reorient its spiritual and pastoral aspects";
- *Sub mandato*: An occasion where a person, family or group is misusing an event or occurrence that could potentially lead to exploitation;
- *Prohibetur et obstruatur*: An occurrence where some legitimate merits are found, but where there appear to be "very serious" risks. In order to prevent confusion or scandal, the bishop is asked to declare that adherence to the phenomenon is not allowed. The bishop is also asked to provide further instruction and catechesis "that can help the faithful understand the reasons for the decision and reorient the legitimate spiritual concerns of that part of the People of God;" or,
- *Declaratio de non supernaturalitate*: An authorization to declare that the phenomenon is found to be not supernatural.

The text — which details how such investigations are to be executed — also insists that even if a *Nihil obstat* is granted, bishops, episcopal conferences and Vatican dicasteries are all prohibited from declaring the phenomena to be of supernatural origin, and that only the pope could authorize such an extraordinary measure.

At a May 17 Vatican press conference, Fernandez was asked about the controversial case of Medjugorje, the site of alleged Marian apparitions in Bosnia-Herzegovina that draws thousands of pilgrims each year but has been the subject of much skepticism, including from Francis. The pope, in 2018, appointed a special investigator to study the case, and Fernandez told journalists that no decision had been reached about its status but that the new standards will make it easier to reach a conclusion.

Quoting Pope Benedict XVI, the new guidelines reiterate that for Catholics, even when such events receive church approval, they are meant to be "a help which is proffered, but its use is not obligatory."

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