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"APPARITIONS: NO THANKS"

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Note: *the transposition is liberal, incidental errors may be due to the difference between oral and written language and punctuation has been made by ear..*

First of all I want to thank the organizers of this meeting and the sisters who are welcoming us all.

The subject of this meeting may be considered a bit strange. The title we chose is: "Apparitions, No Thanks". It will mostly deal with "No thanks", than with "apparitions".

Why just this subject?

I'm a friar of the Servants of Mary and it usually happens that I'm asked to speak about Mary, but there are really few information about her in Gospels.

Well, when we speak of Mary or even of Jesus, there's always somebody who intervenes "but the Virgin Mary said...".

But where? In which Gospel?

Not in Gospels, in Medjugorje!

For many people apparitions not only have the same value of revelation, that is the content of faith that the Church considers authentic in Gospels, but even exceed it.

Some months ago, do you remember the episode occurred in Messina? Someone dirtied a statue of Padre Pio for a joke with some blood, and immediately crowds of praying people... already there were alleged recoveries, and so on.

Or maybe do you remember some years ago in Civitavecchia there was a small plastic or earthenware statue of the Virgin crying blood?

What comes out from these episodes is something disheartening: people is hungry of miracles, of supernatural and confronting those episodes gives up logic criteria and good sense. Besides, we just have to turn TVs on and realize how many magicians and vendors, all quacks, sell magic potions!

This arises out of a kind of religiousness which has been kept lacking in all those essential elements of an authentic faith and has therefore been nurtured in a fatal underworld made of visions, apparitions, stigmatized, magicians, dervishes and witches.

In the Book of Jeremiah, the Lord declares something that is very important and topical: *"They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves. They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water"*.

This denunciation made by Jeremiah is more than topical. When the Word of the Lord is ignored, we are filled with idle talk.

Many times I've met people who told me "you know, I'm going to that place of apparitions or to another", and I asked them "Do you know Gospel?" "Not really, but I'm going to that place".

When Jesus' message is unknown, we look for idle talk, as the Lord used to say: "they have forsaken me, the spring of living water and are looking for a polluted one, the one of broken cisterns", but firstly, as Jeremiah wrote: *"They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves"*.

When an individual goes and looks for idle talk, he becomes worthless, not based on firm rock of gospel, but on quicksand of apparitions and visions, trying to be filled with these other kinds of messages.

An uncritical adherence - often even fanatic - to these messages, is not a faith expression, the real one, but hides a lack of faith, for one needs to find always greater and new certainties, because the only and true one is absent. He looks for those elements that can mitigate his hunger for the infinite in the bazaar of religion.

I already told you that the subject of this meeting will be "No thanks" more than "Apparitions", because the early apparitions of Mary date back to the fourth century and it would be an endless story...

That of apparitions, visions or visionaries, is a sort of short cut, the easiest way, but it takes nowhere. Paraphrasing Gospel we may say that they represent the large door, the one that takes nowhere. But you all know there are crowds participating in those meetings and rites; some of them are maybe depressed or anxious and we may say that those pilgrimages are just like spiritual suppositories, having the same effect; in fact, immediately after people need other pilgrimages, other visions and other stigmatized.

She appeared here or there; at present in Italy a dozen of Our Ladies appeared, in great competition between each other, saying the most delirious nonsense in many areas of Italy. In each of these places a great inflow of people is guaranteed.

During this meeting we want to understand - as perhaps it is not clear yet - the point of view of the Catholic Church with regard to this.

One of the greater mystics, Doctor of the Church, John of the Cross, explained in his famous *"Ascent on Mount Carmel"* a criteria on which the Church has approved the truth of apparitions or not: *"Wherefore he that would now enquire of God, or seek any vision or revelation, would not only be acting foolishly"* - a doctor of the Church, a great mystic, states that seeking any vision is acting foolishly - *"but would be committing an offence against God"*.

Swarming and believing to this or that vision doesn't prove one's faith. He goes on: *"I say, then, that the understanding must not be embarrassed or feed upon all these imaginary visions and apprehensions and to all other forms and species whatsoever"*.

So, St. John of the Cross, a Doctor of the Church states that seeking visions is not only a foolishness but even an offence against God, a proof that one has no faith.

Let's go back to Mary. One of the greater Saints who was - we may even say - in love with Mary is St. Louis Mary de Monfort. Nevertheless he used to say: "You shall not believe in tales, in stories without foundation, and not seek visions". Great saints, mystics and Doctors of the Church always dissociate from visions and visionaries.

Each age has its own visions and visionaries. This crop of apparitions is often attributed to the Second Vatican Council. It has been the Council that has taken the attraction of religion away, together with the mysterious Latin language and the fascinating but incomprehensible rites. It destroyed this religiousness and people started seeking visions and apparitions in order to mitigate their hunger.

Well, in 1948 already, before even imagining a Second Vatican Council, one of the most famous experts in apparitions wrote: "we're living a time when it is easy to talk about apparitions and visions".

So it's not Council's fault; in 1948 the Church already complained about the spread of visions and apparitions.

And, citing a non-suspicious source, Card. Ottaviani in 1951, who was the Prefect of the Holy Office, that is the one who seated in the place of Ratzinger - wrote: "We have been witnessing since many years a fresh outbreak of popular passion for the wonderful religious heart attack'. In 1951, quite before the Council, a passion for visions was witnessed: "hordes of believers go to places of alleged visions".

This hunger of supernatural, of sacred, of visions and visionaries, always existed. It's not Church's fault, then.

Which is Church's point of view of regarding visions and apparitions?

Church, even not getting enthusiastic about these phenomenon, doesn't a priori exclude - and it is right - that a divine person or a saint may somehow reveal himself to certain individuals.

But, in order to admit the truthfulness of the fact, it sets some criterions - which are the real subject of this meeting. It would not be strange realizing that in such places of visions and apparitions, visited by thousands of people, believers, priests, bishops, it has just been a trick, maybe started for fun.

It happened in the sixties in Garabandal, Spain, where some young boys maintained they had seen the Virgin and immediately crowds started going there... It was a joke. But it has been very difficult to say it was not true, until the boys admitted they didn't see anything.

There's something important that people must know: the official position of the Catholic Church regarding apparitions, visions, heavenly messages. **All those elements, even those acknowledged by the Church, are optional, they're not a requirement of faith.**

So, Catholic doctrine states that one can be a perfect Catholic without believing in apparitions like Fatima, Lourdes, etc.

There's no obligation. The Church - and this is very important - never guarantees the truth of apparitions. It says that one can believe in them but it's not a requirement.

Therefore, the one who believe in apparitions doesn't add nor take anything away to his faith and the one who doesn't believe isn't lacking anything, for they simply might represent useful instruments for someone.

The Church is clear: one is a perfect Catholic believing in Jesus, in his message and mission, even not believing in apparitions which did never have influence of the creed of the Church.

It is interesting. One of the most well-rounded popes in the history of the Church - also a very pleasant one, maybe you know him, Card. Lambertini, then Pope Benedict XIV - established the criteria for discerning apparitions. And this criteria has not been changed.

Between 1933 and 1984 there has been no new acknowledgment on behalf of the Church. The date 1933 is important. Why? New branches of learning had arisen, psychology, anthropology, sociology and Church started acquiring them; many things that were not ascertainable before, revealed their groundlessness. Last acknowledged apparition was in 1933 and then in 1984 there was one in Venezuela. During some 50 years no apparitions was acknowledged.

Let's understand now which is the basis for Church's acknowledgment.

Pope Benedict XIV said - I read the text for it is very important: *"we inform that when the Church approves private revelations, she simply permits them to be published for the instruction and edification of the faithful"*.

Acknowledging an apparition simply means that the Church states she is informed - she never enters into the merits of the content of apparition. And the document goes on: *"The assent to be given to them is not therefore an act of Catholic Faith but of human faith, based on the fact that these revelations are probable and worthy of pious credence"*

What is this "assent of Catholic Faith"?

Catholic Faith is the one that the Church proposes and people must welcome. Apparitions don't require an assent, instead.

Let's pay attention to the words used by this pope "*probable*" - that is not sure. The Church approved them by saying they only are probable. She doesn't put the signature on them! Then she defines them "*worthy of pious credence*". **Note the word pious!!!!**

A pious person can believe in them, but one who is not pious can feel free to reject them.

Therefore, as I already told, the greatest enthusiasm of the Church regarding apparitions is represented by "it's probable" - not, it is true - "it is worthy of pious credence". But it can also be rejected, preferably without despise.

I believe this is a very wise and balanced position: **even regarding those apparitions she acknowledges, content is not guaranteed. Pious faithful can piously believe in them.**

Which are Church's acknowledging criteria, then?

I repeat once again that this is not a matter of saying the apparition is authentic, but it's just an assent that allows a pious person to believe in it.

The figure of the diviner is quite important. The holiness of the diviner is not a guarantee of the truthfulness of apparitions, in fact there have been saints whose apparitions have never been acknowledged by the Church. One of the most clamorous cases - maybe some of you wear it as necklace - was the one of a sister of the Daughters of Charity, St. Catherine Labouré, who has been canonized by the Church not for what she said, but for what she made.

She thought she had apparitions by the Blessed Mother who asked her to strike a medal - the Virgin is very detailed during apparitions - to be worn around the neck (not elsewhere) in order to receive the great graces that the Blessed Mother allegedly granted.

There's a clear psychological background and a sense of ancestral and rough religiousness that needs amulets to be sure of the protection of the divinity.

Maybe there are people among you who're wearing this miraculous medal. I urge you to wear it at the right place, otherwise no graces!!!!

Many saints and blessed failed over apparitions they thought they had seen or messages they thought they had received.

I still remember when I read works by St. Teresa of Avila I was rather disconcerted because of one of her statements.

Teresa of Avila, one of the few women acknowledged as Doctor of the Church, writes: "when I have to choose a confessor, between a holy and a learned, I choose the latter". It seemed very strange to me for I thought a holy one was better. She explains: "a holy one can be mistaken and make me fail, a learned one even if he is not holy, leads me on the right way".

Holiness of an individual is not a guarantee of authenticity of his apparitions. Nevertheless Church analyzes the figure of the diviner: his uprightness, his education and his common sense are important.

But the crucial point is always the message.

The main criteria: if only a small part of the received message contradicts or opposes the content of Revelation - the "Revelation" is represented by the teaching of Jesus that the Church acknowledged as inspired by the Holy Spirit, that is Gospels, all the New Testament, and also the Old Testament - or the message of Jesus, the whole apparition is rejected.

If it coincides with the content of Gospels and of the New Testament it can be accepted, even without - and I might seem boring but it is crucial - binding believers' faith.

One of the greatest theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas, used to write: *"For our faith rests on the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books, and not on any revelation (if such there was) made to teachers."*

Church's faith is based on the teaching of Jesus and on tradition that conveyed it to us.

The behavior of the Church regarding apparitions is not that of putting them down, otherwise a sense of martyrdom would arise and they would come out strengthened. Though believing in many apparitions the Church doesn't promote them, nor does she oppose them, particularly trying to direct, straighten and purify those elements which she doesn't consider genuine.

When you ascertain that the Church allows priests to celebrate rites or Eucharists in the places of alleged apparitions, it's not because she agrees with them, she just says: this phenomenon exists and trying to eliminate it would make things get worse; it is better to guide and purify it.

For this reason the Church doesn't judge apparitions; she never says "this is true" or "this is not true". The line she prefers is that of not acknowledging something supernatural in those events; it is a soft denial. Therefore, claiming the Church approval of an apparition, based on the words of diviners, wouldn't be fare.

Confronting apparitions, Church is usually suspicious. If the apparitions has followership she doesn't oppose it, but tries to weight it up and direct it. In those places of apparitions people prays and frequently goes to confession and it is easy to direct them.

Well, let's find out whether the content of apparitions corresponds to that of Revelation, starting with the greatest ones.

A typical example goes through Fatima since the soap of Medjugorje.

Also in this case the apparitions followed a typical cliché: the scourge of moral decline spread all over the world, it reached the top, mankind's immorality reached the top. God's anger towards the wicked is being poured.

Normally in this situation it's Mary who intervenes - and we will see the reason why - as she is not able to hold back God's anger any longer as he wants to stir his punishment on the world. Extraordinary signs are assured as a guarantee of authenticity of apparition and seriousness of threats.

But there's always a way out: the only way of salvation is prayer, especially the rosary. It's interesting to notice that in certain apparitions the diviners say that Mary herself says the rosary - not realizing they're becoming ridiculous.

I always wonder how she could say the rosary, maybe she recites ... "Hail Me, Hail Me..." and after "Holy Me ... pray for us sinners", for sure she jumps this last part... however she says the rosary.

Unfailing prayer is the rosary and unfailing cure is fasting. It seems that the Eternal Father doesn't care of the fasting of half of mankind that is starving ... He only appreciates the middle-class spirituality with its chic fasting: those who don't succeed losing weight with a diet usually make an attempt with visions.

Let's objectively analyze all these points by matching them with Jesus' message.

The first one is: **moral decline spread all over the world.**

There has never been so much violence and wickedness as today, the world is on the edge of the abyss.

Well, if we get back through history we realize that each generation regrets the past, complains of the present and gets upset about the future. For sure we say the same and heard this by our parents, our grand-parents. In the Ecclesiastes - three centuries before Christ - we read: "*Do not say, "Why is it that the former days were better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this*".

Even three centuries before Christ Scriptures said that those who think that former days were better, are foolish.

Each generation, in fact, complains of the present: we can't go on like this; regrets the past: in my day things were better. It's the typical language of each generation: the youth of today is not able to have fun, in our day... In their day their parents used to say: this youth is not able to have fun. Each generation says the same. Once there was more respect, sound moral principles. How about fashion? Each generation says the youth dress like clowns.

In 1794 there was a synod in Pistoia and bishops decreed: "in last centuries an overall clouding on the most important religious truths representing the ground of faith and moral doctrine of Jesus Christ, occurred".

Pope Pious VI declared this same statement as heretic.

Another example. In 700 bC the Prophet Micah says: *The godly have been swept from the land; not one upright man remains. All men lie in wait to shed blood each hunts his brother with a net*". (Mi 7.2).

One more example. Fourth century before Christ, Plato: " *The father grows accustomed to descend to the level of his sons and to fear them, and the son is on a level with his father, he having no respect or reverence for either of his parents ; and this is his freedom, and the metic (naturalized foreigner) is equal with the citizen, and the citizen with the metic, and the stranger is quite as good as either.*" (Plato - Republic)

Last example. A ancient roman poet, Juvenal wrote: *Happy were our great-grandfathers and their forbears, happy the days of old which under Kings and Tribunes beheld Rome satisfied with a single jail!* (Satire III); crime in Rome is on the increase and even strolling in the streets seems dangerous, it's a disgrace!

OK. That's enough. What does all that mean? It means that history of mankind, to say it with the words of the Church, is not a sort of painful reascending after the end of happy times, but a providential path towards a future full of promises. The temptation of regretting the past - past is always better just because it's gone - is a kind of regretting a lost paradise.

Through a hasty reading of the Book of Genesis it seems that at the beginning God created a wonderful Eden and men destroyed it forever.

This is not true! The text is not a chronicle of something already happened, but a prophecy of something that will happen. There has never been a wonderful time when men and creation were in harmony and then "crack", an offence, a sin and everything is irremediably lost.

The author confirms that God's plan expects a perfect harmony between man and woman and between mankind and creation which is a paradise to be created, not a lost one.

In the same way if you read the description of an early Christian community in Acts you get demoralized: *"The believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had"*.

If we look at our communities for sure we regret the early church!!!!

This is not a historic portray, it's a prophecy, it's the description of how communities should be, so much so that immediately after the author says: *"Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit because they kept some money for themselves"*, so they didn't share everything.

And after that he also writes: "*the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food*". They were not so open-hearted, then. That is the ideal of a Christian community, the reality is that we try to carry it out.

Jesus' teaching is an optimistic vision on mankind; maybe it develops very slowly, but man's sake will surely be accomplished.

Another point suggested by apparitions is **God's anger**. It supposedly reached the top and represents judgment and the punishment by God on mankind. The word "punishment" is completely absent in Gospels, it is part of religion. According to religion God rewards the good and punishes the wicked. In his message Jesus teaches that God is love, is a Father who has no other ways of communicating with men than love. And this love might be welcome or not, this pertains to men, but for sure God doesn't punish at all.

The concept that God intends to punish mankind is something that contrasts with Jesus' message; as a matter of fact we try to base this theory on the Old Testament, especially on the episode of the Flood.

Pay attention, Scriptures must be correctly read!

The expression we find in Genesis: "*I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth*" (Gn 6.7) is a denial of this wiping out.

In fact after that we find God saying: "*Never again will I curse the ground... and destroy all living creatures I have done*" (Gn 8.21), or "*Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood*" (Gn 9.11).

In a religious world where everything that happens comes from God and where the flood, the thunderbolt are divine punishments for our sins - the author wants to prove exactly the opposite. And has God say these words: "Never again will I inflict punishments for sins".

The subject of punishments inflicted by God for sins of mankind is absent from Gospels; as a matter of fact in Gospels a God who exclusively conveys love to men is displayed.

Another expression which is very much used during apparitions is God's anger. Only once we find Jesus' anger in Gospels, but it has nothing to do with sinners. It is addressed to Pharisees because Jesus, who always wishes everybody's well, doesn't get along with Pharisees for they don't care about men's sake, but only care about themselves and their prestige. They know that, as people believe in Jesus, their power and their prestige based on a religion based on merits and obedience, have been dashed. They went so far as to say that all the good that Jesus operates is evil.

Mark says in his gospel: *"he looked at them in anger"* (Mk 3.5). Why? Then Mark provides a explanation: *"they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath, looking for a reason to accuse him"* (Mk 3.2).

So the only time that Gospel mention God's anger - Jesus' anger is God's anger - is not in connection with sinners. Jesus communicates his love to sinners; he looks in anger at those who have distorted God's image and manipulate God to make people suffer.

There's another common expression and it is the one used by Pharisees. They are still with us for they've been able to clone themselves. In order to bring a Pharisee into the open, tell him that God is love, that God loves everybody, that God never punishes, that he always forgives, and at a certain point he won't hold it out and will jump and say: "Yes, but the Lord is also a God of justice".

Sometimes we hear people say: "you may escape men's justice but you may not escape God's one!"

The most important thing is a correct understanding of the word "justice".

When Bible was translated into Latin, two different Greek words were translated with *jus*, law, justice (δικαιοσύνη and κρίνω). These two words don't have nothing in common - one means "justice", another means "judge". Speaking about God's justice we were forced to assimilate the idea of judging God, according to our law mentality.

But the word δικαιοσύνη, that has been translated with justice, doesn't refer to a court justice, but to a **justice that is love faithfulness of God to his people.**

When in the Old Testament we read that God is righteous, it means that God is faithful. So much so that the Greek word δικαιοσύνη translates the Hebrew 'kesen' that means forgiveness.

So, the word "justice" - the Greek δικαιοσύνη - means: God's forgiveness is faithful to his people apart from their deeds. God made a pact of faithfulness with his people, who is unfaithful and treacherous, but God is righteous.

God's justice is not God's judgment; it is God's faithfulness to mankind apart from their behavior.

Almost exclusive protagonist of these messages is Our Lady, better called Heavenly Mother, as diviners and lovers of visions are used to define her.

Why did Mary get the role of the lightning conductor - using a kind of absurd expression - for God's anger?

Answer has to be found in the role of mothers in patriarchal families which were the standard in Western and Italian cultures until some decades ago.

For families fathers represented authority and severity; they were not joyful or playful, like the ones of today.

Sons, normally, did not dare to ask something to fathers directly, but used to resort to mothers who plead with fathers on their behalf. When mothers found their husbands calm and available they used to say: look, your son needs this or that... First of all fathers represented punishment.

Mothers also used this mean: when your father comes home I'll tell him everything and you will see ... And father was the one who punished - and most of you remember - with belts, carpet beaters etc. He had to punish all son's wrongdoings!

Mothers acted as mediators; often they were standing between the two and ended with getting a good thrashing. This was normal for patriarchal families of those times.

Therefore it has been easy to transpose family figures on the religious plan and God, as a Father, is the grumpy, the threatening, the one who punishes. Mother is always mother, a reassuring tenderness. Son is always the one whose conscience torments and who is always worried about punishments. In this case punishments are divine ones, so even more fearful.

In Gospels this aspect of Mary is totally absent because the image of a threatening God is. Therefore, not being God dangerous for men, Mary loses this role of defender against God's anger.

In apparitions you will always see this woman who can't go on any longer keeping the arm of God full of anger against mankind, an image that recalls ancient myths.

In Gospels Mary never holds this role, she is great not because she gave birth to Jesus, but for she's been able to become his disciple.

Apparitions introduce an always worrying and gloomy Lady, particularly crying blood tears, it's more effective.

In Gospels she never cries. Standing nearby Jesus nailing on the cross, Mary is not the one who cries or faints; she doesn't sympathize with her son. By Jesus' cross there's a woman who chooses to end up like his master: this is the greatness of Mary near the cross.

Certainly you all know the *Stabat Mater*, an extraordinary work, where Mary, standing near the cross, is the weeping one of Jacopone da Todi - though feeling a great respect for this great poet - but she is not the one of Gospels.

John the evangelist (Jn 19.25) writes that Mary is standing near the cross, she chooses to stand, and accepts to end up like her master, not like her son. Therefore there's not a suffering mother for her son's death, but a disciple who

accepts to end up like her master. This is Mary in Gospels, not a weeping and moaning Madonna but - as fathers of the church already realized - a sister in faith.

As a guarantee that apparitions and warnings are genuine there will presumably be an extraordinary sign. Since Fatima onwards, all apparitions predict a sign. In Fatima, the extraordinary sign was a sun turning in a circle and it became a thriller because the *Osservatore Romano* (the Vatican Newspaper), willing to encourage this apparition, published a picture of this sort of "dancing sun", but it was so home-made that after some days the editorial staff was forced to state: "it could be a similar phenomenon".

Not being able to photograph something imaginary ... It's a similar phenomenon!! If we go outside and fixedly look at the sun maybe that - apart from the damage we cause to our retina - we see something strange.

Through apparitions we await extraordinary signs. Well Jesus defines "*wicked and adulterous generation the one who asks for a miraculous sign!*"

Jesus performed many signs! But why, even when Jesus performed many - people go on asking for miraculous signs? Because those of **Jesus were love signs** and the one who looks for extraordinary, will never be able to feel it.

Paul writes in his First Letter to Corinthians: "*Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*" (1Cor 1.22-23).

Signs of Jesus are love signs that enrich men' existence. He never acts at the outside, through extraordinary or powerful signs that display his power, but at the inside of individuals to convey a new quality of life.

Those that authorities and even disciples require are extraordinary signs. The Lord only operates intimate signs that each of us can verify. As a matter of fact Jesus says: "*A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it*" and then also says: "*For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles*".

When Jesus is asked to perform miracles and signs, he just answers: **'Believe and you will become signs that others experience'**.

They beg: please rain down some manna again. Jesus replies: No! **Share the bread you have with others and it will be turned into manna.**

Jesus never promises miracles; the only signs he performs are deep ones that are perfectly able to convey his love.

In Matthew's Gospel is clearly written "*In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*" (Mt 5.16). Here are effective signs.

No signs are guaranteed by Jesus; apparitions that continuously assure miraculous signs are outside of his system. Most of pseudo-apparitions state that the only salvation is guaranteed by a particular prayer: rosary. This prayer comes from Western and not from Eastern world where the worship of Mary is much more lively and fertile than ours and there's another kind of prayers to Mary.

The suggested prayer - as we have said - is rosary. It arose as a praying instrument for illiterate persons, in monasteries where clerics and monks who knew how to read recited 150 psalms, but those who were illiterate - as prayers were in Latin - were not able to pray; so rosary was created as a repetitive prayer.

This is a prayer known only in Western world. Let's find out what Jesus said about prayer. For sure he exhorts to pray but never suggested a specific method. Why is this particularly important?

Prayer might represent an expression of the intimacy of each individual relationship with God. Therefore there cannot be a particular method for each one has a different background, sensitivity and spirituality; but, above all, prayer grows, changes and is transformed as far as our faith and our experience of God increases.

If we still pray as parents or catechism taught us, this sounds quite alarming, because it means that our spiritual life remained at children's level. Prayer changes and models itself as far as our relationship with the Lord develops.

A children religious relationship is the one based on begging: providing exact details of "who" and "what" and also giving recommendations, because one is not sure about God's real presence. As one little by little acquires a greater experience of a God who is not far, who is not to be shout at, who has not to be looked for, but is intimate, begging prayer reduces.

And Jesus always states: why do you go on begging God, while the Father knows what you need before you ask him? Prayer, as it grows, turns into thanks and praise. There's something important: prayer must always be related to love.

Experiencing that God loves us unconditionally, apart from our behavior, lets us identify with him and allows this same love to be transformed for others.

This is the source of a prayer that becomes thanks and praise. The desire that this love be extended to others will be the base of a petition prayer made for others. It won't be like giving precise indications to the Lord suggesting him what he has to do, but **adding our love to the love he feels for these people.**

The *Our Father* is not a prayer, but is an acceptance formula of beatitudes. Jesus never provides prayer formulas to his community because this might

condition people's growth. Therefore there're no preferred prayer that may assure their fulfillment: prayer must change and grow in parallel with individuals.

Our Lady, as she needs to appear anywhere - at the moment there's a dozen apparitions - strange to say she's always in Raphael's style, the one on holy pictures and she seems not to be updated on recent Gospel translations, always proposing things that the Catholic Church already dismissed.

One of her frequent requirements is fasting.

As we already told, neither Mary nor the Eternal Father seem to be touched by the fasting that three quarters of mankind is forced to suffer.

The infallible weapon she uses is: the idea of a voluntary fasting. It's a sort of diet which seems ideal for an obese Catholic middle class that finds in Mary's messages the solution to problems that a family dietician is not able to solve.

Where does this fasting practice come from?

There's a passage in Mark's gospel, in chapt 9 verse 29, where Jesus explains to his disciples the reasons why they didn't succeed in driving out the evil spirit from a man: *"This kind can come out only by prayer"*. Prayer - like already said - is a sort of identification with God, which turns into gift to others.

Since the Fourth Century, when monasticism gained ground, a copyist - at that time copyists in monasteries made manual copies of Gospel - added, by his own initiative, the term "fasting".

Copy after copy, this was the text that was transmitted and read in the Catholic Church. If you have an old copy of the New Testament, one of about 40 years ago, you will find the expression "This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting".

So Jesus was thought to have urged to fast, but he never did.

In the same way one of the most known expressions in apparitions is: do penance.

Also here Mary, poor her, hadn't enough time to update her copy of Gospels and didn't notice that the word that was translated with "do penance", is now translated with "convert".

This mistake had inestimable consequences on people spirituality because it was Jesus himself who was thought to say: "if you don't repent, you will not enter the kingdom of God". People go on poisoning their lives giving room to masochism (if ten times I knock my head against the wall maybe God is happy, or if I remain on my knees on a carpet full of broken glass maybe he's even happier). Why do these kind of aberrations exist?

People believed that the Lord would have said: the more you do penance, the more your place next to God is guaranteed.

But Jesus never asked people to do penance!!!!

If you go and see the *Gospel of Mark*, chapt 1 verse 15 you find "repent and believe the good news", but this translation from Greek is not correct. It should be "convert and believe the good news".

"Conversion" means a change of outlook and consequently a change of behavior towards others. This is what the Lord requires us to do; not to do penance.

We may say than, that Jesus never asked people to do penance or fast. Fasting was an ancient superstition of the Greek world; when a person died, demons who had cause the death were thought to be still in the air and willing to kill all relatives. So they alternately chose to:

1. change clothes in order not to be recognized (the origin of wearing moarning)
2. fasting, because food was supposed to be infected by demons.

These two elements - clothes and fasting - are a superstition from Greek world.

In *Gospels* Jesus never invites to fast. In *Mark's Gospel*, when John's disciples and Pharisees' ones were fasting and ask Jesus why his disciples were not, he answers: *"How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast"*.

It always happens that when a dear one dies we don't want to eat. As a matter of fact in many countries there's a tradition for which the neighbors bring food. So, the day of his death, his disciples won't eat.

Fasting pertains to religion, to Law: I do something in order to obtain God's benevolence and fasting is part of category of rewards: God's love must be deserved. Well, Jesus eliminates this category and God's love must not be deserved with prayers, efforts or fasting, but welcome as a gift He makes for free.

We saw that this meeting would have been more about "No thanks" than on "Apparitions"; but have there ever been real apparitions?

Yes, of course! Even if "apparition" doesn't mean that somebody saw something. Some very sensitive people happen to live a deep experience of sacred and in order to communicate it have been forced to use the language of men. It's always important to consider the message of apparition and the way how it is expressed.

One of the greatest mystics of the Church was Blessed Angela of Foligno. She thought she made some experiences of the Holy Trinity and when theologians asked her to relate it, she used to howl or to bark and she was thought to be crazy. The fact is the men language cannot express realities which are out of human expressions.

Through history there have been some true apparitions, which have been weighted up by the Church and are, in most cases, serene apparitions.

I summarize now only two very important ones.

The first, the most important: in 1531. The Spanish conquered Mexico and Aztec people have been decimated in the name of the God of white. Towns have been destroyed, women raped and children killed.

Survived Indians killed themselves because everything had been destroyed, even their religion. Conquistadores demonstrated that their religious idols were false.

Juan Diego, an Aztec, experiences something wonderful - but I repeat apparitions' language pertains to theology, not to history - about Mary who appeared with mixed-race features and says something sensational, in a very confidential way: "*Juanito, look, I'm on your side*".

Maybe we don't understand the greatness of these words. Let's try to imagine that nowadays, in the present situation of Palestine, Moses appears and says to Palestinians: "Look I'm on your side and want to set you free from Israeli". This is the effect that apparition in Guadalupe had.

It was not the white Madonna of conquistadores, the severe one, but - as Mexicans say it - the "Virghen Morena", the "Dark Virgin".

Liberation theology was not born in the last decades, but, should it be heard, it was based and rooted in the apparitions and in facts of Guadalupe. What is really important is that in this apparitions there are songs and flowers, the entire hill of this narration is full of songs and flowers. Why? Aztec theology reached very high levels, Aztecs were not uncivilized people.

In this town - which had been destroyed - Mary appears and says to Juan Diego: "I'm on your side" while there were songs and flowers.

Why?

Aztec spirituality said that God's deep truths can be transmitted only through songs and flowers. This is very important because songs and flowers are perceptible elements that anyone can understand.

It's not necessary to study theology, to state one's creed; the beauty of a song or flowers can be perceived by anyone.

The importance of this message is that theology must not be expressed through dogmatic formulas, but through songs and flowers, very easily understandable elements.

The other one we are considering - and what I'm going to say is subjective - is the one of Bernadette in Lourdes.

I've synthetically explained the fruit of many years of analysis and research; I've studied all apparitions starting from the IV century until the "soap opera" of Medjugorje, the never-ending one.

Do you know why it is not ending? Because the Church can judge it only when it is finished. This one doesn't finish, so the Church doesn't judge.

Studying apparitions I had an adolescent crush on Bernadette. Such an extraordinary woman!!! The guarantee of Lourdes lies in the figure of Bernadette. Try to imagine this girl, 1,40 tall, a shorty one, whose mother was an alcoholic, and who liked drinking wine, too. She did her penance while staying with nuns.

Try and imagine - today it would be a scandal - the freedom of sister Bernadette - we are in '800. She sniffed tobacco and offers it to other sisters. For heaven's sake, she says she saw the Virgin and she sniffs tobacco?

Maybe this sounds strange to us, too. And the Mother Superior said: "I've always mistreated Bernadette because it was impossible that, among all the noble people - the Mother Superior was - the Virgin appeared to such a rough girl".

Not only this, Bernadette's mother was alcoholic and she liked wine very much, too. But her monastery gave her few, so she asked somebody take some from outside. How is it possible!!!! You're the witness of an apparition and you sniff tobacco and drink wine! It's not serious. But she was free.

And Bernadette, who made a deep experience of sacred, resisted. She never Told she had seen the Virgin. Thousands of questionings, but she never admitted: "Yes, I saw the Virgin". She always said "It". Why?

She made a deep experience of the Holy Spirit. Lourdes is documented since the first day. She said she heard a strong wind noise, one that recalls Pentecost and she calls it "It". Other people, after asking here about that "It", identified it with Mary.

When Bernadette was told: "Well, what did the Virgin say?", she used to answer: "No! I never said I saw the Virgin".

She made a deep experience of sacred, a positive one. She prays for conversions, there are no threat and no miraculous signs. When people told her: "Do you know that many drink the water of the Grotto?" She asked: "Why?". And others told her: "You know, people take sick persons to the Grotto", and she wondered: "But the Virgin, or the apparition, never told something about it".

This is the guarantee of Lourdes - Bernadette. As years were passing, she detached from events and her last words were: "After all, I'm not sure that what I lived was true".

Another guarantee is the brevity of apparition. Another criteria of the Church's judgment is brevity: not many apparitions to the same persons and under the same circumstances. (It's impossible that the Virgin spends ten years to say something...)