Reports about visionary phenomena both here and abroad raise problems about various styles of media reporting. To confront such problems, a re-study is here made of Henry H. Swan’s “My Work with Necedah.” It is about the visionary experiences of Mary Ann Van Hoof of Necedah, Wisconsin.²

Swan’s Volume I begins with his declaration to “submit unreservedly” to the judgment of the Catholic Church. The judgment of the Church, published in American Ecclesiastical Review entitled “The Need for Prudence,”³ was issued by Cardinal Ottaviani in his capacity as prefect of the Holy Office. This included a negative opinion about the Necedah reports. Since Swan’s book was first printed in 1959, the question arises whether Swan was aware of Ottaviani’s opinion published eight years earlier.

Assuming that he was, one possible interpretation is that Swan considered Ottaviani’s judgment, not as a final condemnation, but as a warning against imprudence. Swan might have believed that he was always speaking prudently, but Ottaviani’s concept of “imprudence” included speaking of the Pope, the bishops and


2. While this essay could well fall under the category of book review, it is presented here under “notes and comments.” The reason is simple: on the one hand the book is not recently published, but on the other the topic fits squarely into the “epidemic of apparitions” which is so rapidly spreading around us. (Editor’s Note)

the clergy "in terms of severe reprobation." Swan never spoke against the Pope, but he had some disedifying remarks about some bishops and priests who seemed to be skeptical. On the other hand, he had high praises for Frs. Lengowski, Bernicken, Rykowsky, Scheetz, and other priests who had obtained their bishops’ permission to celebrate Mass at the apparition sight for the thousands of pilgrims.

Was this pluralism healthy? Swan’s style does not give this impression for its Manichean tint portrays things as good and evil, God and Satan. This is carried over into the difference between believing and unbelieving clergy. This is one demerit of the book.

However this negative perception opens the way to perception at a higher level: Swan’s raw data, intricately entangled in emotional and parochial biases, can further be perceived in the wider context of similar reports of visionary experiences in many other parts of the world and thereby lend momentum to a learning experience in a self-correcting hermeneutic circle. The process may take many decades of painstaking studies into a set of phenomena that was not sufficiently understood in Ottaviani’s time but which has, since 1975, been identified by Pope Paul VI as “popular piety” in his Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi (no. 48). With it, Pope Paul VI proposed not a final judgment but an on-going process of discernment converging on and optimizing a creative praxis of faith.

The 1977 reprinting of Swan’s book reveals no changes from the 1959 original. Absent from Swan’s mind was any need for self-correction. Why should he correct anything when the Messages had made it clear that he was the Chosen One? Although Swan was personally humble in many ways, his dedication to what he felt to be a heavenly mandate will be obvious to a sympathetic reader. So much for Volume I.

In the first 179 pages of Volume II, the reader meets with more of the same. However the succeeding 162 pages contain materials of a radically different genre. These are minute-by-minute records of trance-like behavior observed in the visionary almost every Friday of Advent and Lent for five years, beginning on December 14, 1951 and ending on March 30, 1956. They re-enact the three-hour agony of Good Friday.
Are these revelations supernatural? An affirmative answer would imply contradictions of various kinds. It is more accurate to say that these are natural dramatizations of the supernatural meanings revealed in the crucifixion and death of Christ. The dramatic style is necessarily conditioned by the particular culture of the visionary and her select audience.

Documentary records like these are of great value in the study of a process by which particular religious meanings and values are perceived in divergent ways even as they converge towards the world-wide practice of prayer and penance.

With these documentary records of Volume II, the interest of this author wanes. In Volumes III and IV, matters of Mariological value are buried in an emotional mishmash of geopolitical speculations that clutter the fantasy of Swan. For instance, of what Mariological relevance are the seventeen pages devoted to a detailed pinpointing of the global deployment of Russian submarines and air units? How does Van Hoof’s attitude towards the “Yiddish” plans contained in the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion promote Mary’s call for prayer and penance? In this matter, is Swan true to his desire to “submit unreservedly” to the judgment of Pope Paul VI and the other signatories to the Vatican Council’s decree Nostra Aetate?

Thus contextualized, Van Hoof’s experiences take on the function of a mere sugar coating for the unpalatable Realpolitik of Swan. This tendency has historical precedents. In a 1915 publication entitled “The War and the Prophets,” Herbert Thurston, S.J., reviews existing records of visionary predictions of military and political conflicts of the time. War-mongers had long been known to provoke conflicts by predicting them and aureoling the predictions with a supernatural halo. Hence the vast number of pseudo-prophetic books preceding the Franco-Prussian contest of 1870-71. And in the subsequent nightmare of irreligion in France, political rhetoric spewed forth arbitrary interpretations of the ideas of saintly people like St. Bridget, St. Caesarius, the Curé d’Ars, the Abbé Eymard and many others.

Swan’s last two volumes may well belong to this tradition of geopolitical fundamentalism. And the tradition is presently growing by leaps and bounds with the proliferation of fanatic geopoliticians. Fortunately Swan’s Volume II at least has the
saving feature of including documentary records that can be of value in the communal discernment of popular piety.