Review Articles

ADVOCATUS DIABOLI

Vicente Marasigan, S.J.


Books about recent Marian apparitions are of interest to two types of readers, and the difference between these two types is suggested by St. Matthew in a verse (11:25) where Jesus says: “I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes.” As a rule, book reviewers belong to the first type: from them the Father has hidden divine things revealed only to the humble, thus condemning them to the hypercritical mode of an advocatus diaboli. Moreover, a reviewer for a theological journal is expected to critique these books in the context of systematic theology, especially in regard to mysticism and ecumenism.

1. In her book Lipa, Keithley reports on visionary phenomena that occurred in 1948. She is faithful to her role as journalist
in reporting testimonies as given directly to her by witnesses. Most of these witnesses have been identified for her through the painstaking research of preceding years by the Marian Research Center, a group of dedicated lay men and women modestly remaining in the background. Although Keithley does not hide her own personal hope that the Church will eventually declare Teresita Castillo's visions authentic, she succeeds in maintaining her objectivity and includes even those testimonies and interpretations that might frustrate her hopes. As a result, the book is a valuable source of material that will be needed to complete the official investigation initiated in 1949 and suspended in 1951 for reasons that are still in need of further clarification.

One clarification proposed by Keithley focusses on the apostolic delegate Msgr. Egidio Vagnozzi who managed to persuade six Philippine bishops to deny supernatural intervention in the phenomenon of rose petals and to remove two bishops and two Carmelite formators from Lipa. What was Vagnozzi's motive? Keithley suggests political ambition: on April 9, 1951, he was promoted from delegate to nuncio; later he became a cardinal.

In her desire to be fair, Keithley also includes the testimony of Fr. Eleuterio Espinas, former secretary of Vagnozzi. Espinas testifies that Vagnozzi was persuaded to take action at the request of Fr. Michael Moylan, superior general of the Carmelite order. However, Keithley could find no documented clarification of Moylan's reasons for making his request, and therefore seems to question its veracity.

However, for theologians familiar with the mystical theology of St. John of the Cross, it was unnecessary for Moylan to document his reasons. Contemplative communities of Carmel profess to live their cloistered lives according to the rules laid down in St. John's classic works, for example, his Ascent of Mount Carmel. This is full of warnings against visionary phenomena because these are serious impediments to the spiritual growth of contemplatives. For example:

In this matter of visions we cannot be as brief as we should desire, since there is so much to say about them. Although in substance we have said what is relevant in order to explain to the spiritual
person how he is to behave with regard to the *visions* aforemen-
tioned, and to the master who directs him, the way in which he is
to deal with his disciple, yet it will not be superfluous to go into
somewhat greater detail about this doctrine, and to give more
enlightenment as to the *harm* which can ensue, either to spiritual
souls or to the masters who direct them, if they are over-credulous
about them, *although they be from God.* (Emphases added.)

It was sufficient for Moylan to hear or read Mother Cecilia’s
account, which Keithley faithfully reproduces on pages 179-204,
to notice the preponderance of visionary phenomena belonging
to the type of impediments discussed in 375 pages of *Ascent
of Mount Carmel.*

It may be argued that Bernadette of Lourdes and Lucia of
Fatima also had visionary experiences. But it can also be argued
that neither Bernadette nor Lucia were at that time bound by
Carmelite rules. Moylan or any other Carmelite administrator
was perfectly justified in requesting Vagnozzi to take action and
needed no further documentation beyond the writings of St. John
of the Cross.

The Lipa events of 1948 still remain very ambiguous. Provid-
dentially, with the publication of Keithley’s book, the discernment
process can now be expected to continue with improved trans-
parency and to be broadened so as to include greater partici-
pation of the people of God, among clergy and laity alike, among
both men and women.

For example, they might want to study the Virgin’s message
of Oct. 26, 1948, as given on page 201: To Teresita, “That you
may suffer more for Jesus, leave your Carmel!” And to Mother
Cecilia, “If you do not receive another advise[,] I send her out on
the 13th of November.” On Nov. 9, Mother Cecilia “heard the
voice that said that as a gift for the Silver Jubilee of Carmel,
Sister Teresita would no longer leave” (p. 203). However, in 1951,

---

1. *Ascent of Mount Carmel.* By St. John of the Cross. Trans. and ed. by E.
   Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1962) 168. This paragraph is profusely
developed in more than 300 pages of the book.

2. Lucia entered Carmel on March 25, 1948, according to Louis Kondor, S.V.D.,
ed. *Fatima in Lucia’s Own Words: Sister Lucia’s Memoirs* (Fatima, Portugal:
Ma. Mere, one of the foundresses of the Lipa Carmel, advised Teresita to leave Carmel (p. 145), thus countermanding the "voice" heard on Nov. 9, 1948. This suggests questions for study. Are locutions or visions always reliable? If not, how can their reliability or unreliability be discerned?

Prayer groups interested in discernment of spirits regarding visions and locutions may also wish to study the general question whether "good fruits" like petals, spinning sun, cures and conversions are, for a Carmelite community, more important than the rules of St. John of the Cross. If not, the humility and gentleness radiating from Mother Cecilia during her subsequent years of trials and humiliations heroically borne, may well be the divine message being mediated in the unfolding history of Lipa events from 1948 to 1992, a sublime mystery of purification.

2. A similar purification is indicated in the study of the autobiography of Josyp Terelya. Terelya is a zealous activist, partly religious and partly political. For his activities, he suffered persecution from communist authorities for twenty years. Even now, he is an exile from his home country, suffering more from this exile than from his Ukrainian imprisonments.

Twice while he was in jail, he experienced visitations from the Blessed Virgin Mary. Later, together with thousands of devotees, he repeatedly shared in experiencing Mary's apparitions above the Blessed Trinity chapel in Hrushiv in April and May, 1987. Significantly, these apparitions, first noticed by 12-year old Marina Kizyn, began on April 26, 1987, the first anniversary of the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl. The geopolitical repercussions of this disaster are now familiar topics of contemporary history, that includes the collapse of the Soviet government.

Terelya now feels called upon to share these visionary experiences with the whole world, including the Philippines. This book now under review has been widely read and highly praised in rave notices in Manila papers. This reviewer is in general agreement with these praises but also feels the need to call attention to one questionable aspect in Terelya's politically partisan leanings. In particular, his picture beside Pope John Paul II on the front cover of the book gives the impression that his
political inclinations are in perfect agreement with the mind of the Pope. Are they?

To answer this question, it is helpful to reflect on some passages of the Pope’s recent encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*:

On the other hand, I wish to emphasize how profoundly the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church and the ancient Churches of the East feel united by love and praise of the *Theotokos*. Not only “basic dogmas of the Christian faith concerning the Trinity and God’s Word made flesh of the Virgin Mary were defined in the ecumenical councils of the East,” but also in their liturgical worship “the Oriental Christians pay high tribute, in very beautiful hymns, to Mary ever virgin . . . God’s Most Holy Mother.”

It is also appropriate to mention the icon of Our Lady of Vladimir, which continually accompanied the pilgrimage of faith of the peoples of ancient ‘Rus’. The first millennium of the conversion of those noble lands to Christianity is approaching: lands of humble folk, of thinkers and of saints. The icons are still venerated in the Ukraine, in Byelorussia and in Russia under various titles. They are images which witness to the faith and spirit of prayer of that people, who sense the presence and protection of the Mother of God . . .

Such a wealth of praise, built up by the different forms of the Church’s great tradition, could help us hasten the day when the Church can begin once more to breathe fully with her “two lungs,” the East and the West. As I have often said, this is more than ever necessary today. . . .

There can be no doubt about the high priority that the Pope places on ecumenical unity with the Orthodox Christians. In this, he is faithful to his mystical insights into the unity of the Church as the body of Christ. He is also faithful to the policies of previous Popes and particularly to the decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* of the Second Vatican Council.

Terelya’s political platform emphasizes the legalization of the Ukrainian Catholic Church. Nothing wrong with that. But he insists that such legalization must be *separate* from the legal status of the Orthodox Church, and that to merge with it is to “capitulate” to it (p. 319). Is this partisan slogan helpful in promoting the Pope’s mystical insights and ecumenical efforts? Does it not rather tend to prolong the ecclesiastical impasse
that has been plaguing Christianity for centuries and fragmenting the mystical body of Christ?

It would be most unfair to deduce from this book that Terelya is using mystical phenomena merely as an instrument for partisan goals. Surely, he endured persecutions from a motive that transcended earthly politics. But he shares in the very human difficulty of distinguishing between mystical realities and partisan politics. Pinpointing the dividing line between the two sometimes involves an agonizing process of trial and error. To err is human and Terelya is very human. (So is this reviewer.)

3. Human error increases with bias. Zimdars-Swartz sees bias also in visionary reports that are subtly influenced by apologetic and/or devotional concerns, and such reporting needs purification from all bias. To respond to this need, does she act here as an advocata diaboli? Apparently not. But she conscientiously devotes her efforts towards a detached critique of documents and testimonies by utilizing her skills in cultural anthropology and socio-psychological analysis and by her religious fidelity to established norms of historiography.

Zimdars-Swartz aims to discover the basic elements of modern Marian worldviews from an understanding of visionary experiences at Rue du Bac (1830), La Salette (1846), Lourdes (1858), Pontmain (1870), Fatima (1917), Beauraing (1932-33), Banneux (1933), Garabandal (1961-62), San Damiano (1964-81), Medjugorje (1981-92), Melleray (1985), and Necedah (1950). Of these, the first seven have been investigated and approved by the local bishop, the last five are still being studied, and the last one has raised serious doubts among clergy and laity alike.

(Philippine readers interested in what this book has to say about Lipa would be disappointed in finding Lipa as rating merely a brief mention by the discredited seer at Necedah. Before the 1992 publication of Keithley’s book, all that was publicly known abroad about Lipa was the negative judgment of six bishops in 1951. Zimdars-Swartz refers to such negative judgments as “not necessarily irreversible.”)

In the concluding chapter, Zimdars-Swartz proposes that the principal elements of modern Marian worldviews may be characterized by five labels: (1) free-floating, (2) popular, (3)
transcultural, (4) apocalyptic, and (5) quasi-cognitive. To this reviewer, these labels probably mean: (1) that interpretations are in constant flux and are free from institutional structuring; (2) that popular piety is taking the initiative of interpreting visionary experiences as responding to devotional needs; (3) that these popular interpretations are conditioned and filtered by the culture of each particular locality; (4) that all these particular cultures converge on the fear that geopolitical clashes and ecological deterioration are approaching a climax similar to or identical with the catastrophes prophesied in the Apocalypse; and (5) that the phenomena indicate either a tendency antithetical to traditional "cloud of unknowing," or alternatively, a gnostic regard for secrets.

* * * * *

If so, what would the response of church officials be? Zimdars-Swartz, unlike Keithley and Terelya, does not pursue this line of inquiry. To interested readers, this reviewer would suggest that church officials may be divided by two different attitudes. The first would see these phenomena as revealing nothing that has not already been revealed in biblical teachings and ancient traditions and no new Marian dogma need be defined. The second would not propose any dogmatic definition either but would see the phenomena as dramatic and inculturated reminders of gospel exhortations to prayer and penance-reminders that are particularly relevant to the signs of the times. According to Gaudium et Spes (n. 4), "the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel."

Hopefully, these books of Keithley, Terelya and Zimdars-Swartz will be helpful tools for this scrutiny and interpretation.