Challenging questions have been raised by Fr. S____, a priest of the Hartford archdiocese, after reading my review article in a previous issue of this journal. This is a critical review of three books on Marian apparitions of which the first is about Lipa, written by June Keithley-Castro, and on which Fr. S____ questions my position.

The position I had tentatively taken regarding the case of Lipa was that Fr. Michael Moylan, O.C.D., was merely following the teachings of St. John of the Cross about the harm that can ensue from visions experienced by Carmelite contemplatives, and these led him to his negative decision about the 1948 experiences of Teresita Castillo. The insightful letter of Fr. S____ now makes me realize that this position is somewhat simplistic.

At the risk of oversimplifying his rich intuitions, I will schematize a few of them in the form of three pointed questions: (1) Is there any evidence to show that Moylan knew the facts? (2) Does hindsight into the teachings in Ascent of Mt. Carmel of St. John of the Cross now support the opinion that Moylan misunderstood Carmelite spirituality in 1948? (3) Did the acceptance of Sr. Lucia into Carmel, despite her Fatima visions of 1917, contradict Moylan’s interpretation of Carmelite spirituality? An attempt to answer these three questions reveal a broader context that raises further questions about: (4) the need for spiritual direction, and (5) Filipino popular piety.

1. Vicente Marasigan, S.J., “Advocatus Diaboli” in Landas 7/1 (1993) 90-96. Since I am not at liberty to identify my correspondent, I here refer to him as Fr. S____. He had written an inspiring meditation about Christ’s mystical body as symbolized by the Lipa vine where Our Lady appeared to Teresita, and this meditation was the start of our correspondence.
1. MOYLAN ON LIPA

The doubt in the mind of Fr. S___ about Moylan’s knowledge of the facts seems to arise from Keithley’s failure to find any documentary evidence in the Carmelite archives in Rome. But it is clear from Keithley’s book that she knew of the testimony of Fr. Eleuterio Espinas, former secretary of the nuncio Msgr. Egidio Vagnozzi. Espinas testified that Moylan had stayed in Manila for one or two months, that he had visited Lipa monastery everyday, and that in the end he had requested Vagnozzi to take action. What action? Fr. Paul O’Sullivan, O.C.D., former superior of Mt. Carmel Shrine in Manila where Moylan was staying, informs me that he understood from Moylan that “the whole Lipa incident was then quashed . . .” If Moylan did not possess all (and more) of the information known to Mother Cecilia in 1948 and now contained on pages 179-204 of Keithley’s book, he would not have been the kind of responsible person that the Carmelite superior general would have sent to Lipa for such a serious investigation.

2. HINDSIGHT ON ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

The passage from Ascent of Mt. Carmel singled out in my review article to exemplify the teachings of St. John of the Cross is worth repeating here:

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 respect to the visions aforementioned, and to the master who directs him, 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.)

But Fr. S__ feels that the Ascent gives only one aspect of Carmelite spirituality and that there is room within this for what Fr. Marie-Eugene, O.C.D., calls "Teresian" spirituality based on St. Teresa's Interior Castle. In this treatise she schematizes her spiritual experiences in the form of seven groups of "mansions" of which the sixth and the seventh are full of "extraordinary signs of God's action in souls."4

One perceives a delicate contrast between the Ascent and the Interior Castle: The first sees visions as extraordinary signs that are harmful in general. But the second favors them in particular for one who has entered into the sixth mansions. For example, in chapter 2 of the Sixth Mansions, St. Teresa says:

Those to whom our Lord may have shown this favour, and, who, having received it, on reading this, grasp its significance, should give him heartfelt thanks, for no deception is to be feared here, . . . 5

In view of these, one can assume that in Moylan's judgment, Teresita had not yet entered into the sixth mansions and that neither the prioress Mother Cecilia nor the monastery chaplain Bishop Obviar was sufficiently familiar with these Carmelite criteria. Whether Moylan's judgments were accurate or not will depend on further investigation.6 Another Carmelite administrator in place of Moylan could have made different judgments but neither he nor Moylan would claim infallibility.

3. CARMEL ACCEPTS LUCIA OF FATIMA

No information can become publicly available about the terms under which the Carmelite convent at Coimbra accepted Sr. Lucia on March 25, 1948. It is not likely that superiors would impose on her the obligation not to have any more visions. Nor is it likely

5. St. Teresa of Jesus, The Interior Castle or the Mansions, trans. by a Discalced Carmelite (Westminster, Md.: Newman Bookshop, 1945) 64. Emphasis added.
6. For example, one investigator (Zimdars-Swartz) characterizes the various interpretations of worldwide Marian apparitions with five labels: free-floating, popular, transcultural, apocalyptic and quasi-cognitive. (See Marasigan, "Advoca-
that her spiritual director would divulge any information about her spiritual progress through the Teresian mansions. At any rate, such information can only be arrived at in a long process of discernment in the internal forum by a learned and experienced spiritual director. Therefore in the external forum, it cannot be said that the Carmelite status of Lucia falsifies Moylan’s 1948 interpretation of Carmelite spirituality.

4. NEED FOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

As can be seen above, everyone who enters into a life of prayer needs spiritual direction. This is particularly true of Carmelite contemplatives especially those receiving unusual revelations, as frequently emphasized by St. John of the Cross:

And thus, whenever He says or reveals something to a soul, He gives this same soul to whom He says it a kind of inclination to tell it to the person to whom it is fitting that it should be told. Until this has been done, it gives not entire satisfaction because the man has not taken it from another man like himself.7

It was the administrative responsibility of Msgr. Obviar, as auxiliary bishop of the Lipa diocese, to provide Carmel with a spiritual director. His inability to find one forced him to take the task upon himself even though he must have realized his own lack of specialized training for this.8 When unusual things started

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tus Diaboli," 95-96.) Would any of these labels help towards clarifying the theological context of Moylan’s discernment? To answer this, a theologian would have to investigate the phenomenology of the Lipa apparitions that may yet be brought to light by a study of extant documents.

7. Marie-Eugene, I Want to See God, 277. This matter of spiritual direction brings up problems of consensus in the external forum where Fr. S___ and I seem to disagree. Perhaps such consensus is impossible until fifty years after the death of the persons involved or until confidential documents shall have been declassified.

8. The lack of trained spiritual directors was only a small but essential part of the more basic lack of trained and dedicated catechists. Msgr. Obviar must have realized this during his years of penitential solitude and must have inspired him to found the Missionary Catechists of St. Therese. His meditations during this time are movingly expressed in his 3-page deathbed statement entitled “Huling Habilin” kept in the congregation’s archives.
to happen, mistakes were made, some of which have been un-
critically published by Keithley and later cited in my review ar-
ticle.⁹ To remedy the mistakes, the hierarchy acted — perhaps
rather hastily — in accordance with general policies of that time
as prescribed by the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office then
under Cardinal Ottaviani.

For years, Msgr. Obviar and Mother Cecilia suffered trials and
humiliations. I believe that the gentleness and humility with which
they performed their penance bear witness to heroic virtue wor-
thy of veneration. But their heroic virtue also dramatizes the serious
need for spiritual direction and the specialized training this re-
quires. I believe God permitted the mistakes if only to emphasize
how such spiritual direction will, in the second half of this cen-
tury, be the proper response to the signs of the times.

5. FILIPINO POPULAR PIETY

What are some signs of these times? Pinatubo and Mayon?
Eruptions of immorality? Tectonic social tremors? Paranormal
seismicity deep in the collective unconscious? People ask what
these signs signify, and conflicting answers generate religious
confusion. In their confusion, many devout Catholics turn to their
parish priests for guidance in mysticism, but hectic schedules in
undermanned parishes make spiritual direction impossible. Even
the sacrament of reconciliation is a problem. By default, spiritual
direction falls into the hands of illuministic groups.

Illuminism as it presently exists in the Philippine scene is
somewhat different from the “illusions of subjectivity” mentioned
by Keithley in her interview with Fr. Rene Laurentin.¹⁰ It is not
exactly like the revolt against the Magisterium by the European
illuminati of the second century. It is more of a blind and desper-
ate reaching out to some leader, no matter how unscrupulous, no
matter how questionable their liturgies: they seem to mesmerize
devotees into surrendering their personal responsibility for seek-

¹⁰. Keithley-Castro, Lipa, 160. Laurentin was probably misquoted. On another
occasion, he spoke of visionaries as “subject to illusion” and “given more credit,
sometimes, than the Magisterium.” (The Alliance of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary
ing truth and holiness.

In the early 1960s, the cursillo movement ignited psychic eruptions of emotionalism that was utterly disproportional to the catechetical background of the practitioners.11 These eruptions released frightful floods of paranormal phenomena and uncatechized people became easy prey for exploiters like Mama Viring and Ate Salve impersonating “Ingkong,” Sister Gloria speaking as “Nonoy,” TV hacks posing as bible scholars. Their glib rhetoric and charismatic artistry entice the credulous into liturgies that erode their most sacred traditions.

It is becoming apparent that spiritual direction is in urgent demand not only in cloistered communities but also in barrio communities. As mysterious events multiply and induce an epidemic of paranormal experiences, so do signs of danger and — fortunately — intimations of hope. Both the danger and the hope give evidence that spiritual direction is in a state of crisis.

CONCLUDING PRAYER

In this crisis, the recent history of Lipa has assigned to Bishop Obviar and Mother Cecilia the public role of sacrificial victims. Let us pray that, by their penitential act of purification and through the intercession of St. John of the Cross, God will be pleased to bestow the gift of discernment on the Filipino people who, for some unknown reason, glory in the name Juan de la Cruz.

11. Did Msgr. Obviar foresee this in his promotion of a catechetical movement? His “Huling Habilin” (mentioned in note 7) looks like a prophetic answer to this question.