



Reader's Digest

An article of enduring significance, in condensed permanent booklet form

65TH YEAR

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Every evening in a small Yugoslav village, there occurs what skeptics say is fraud, but millions call a miracle. However one explains them, these visions of the Madonna-and their impact-are extraordinary.

A Village Sees the Light

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ON A HOT AFTERNOON in June 1981, two girls, Ivanka Ivankovic, 15, and Mirjana Dragicevic, 16, went for a walk outside the village of Medjugorje in southern Yugoslavia. As they passed a hill behind the village, Ivanka saw a bright figure of a smiling young woman ahead of them. "Look," she said, "the Gospa" – the Madonna. Mirjana didn't look up. "Come on," she said. "It's not very likely She would appear to us, is it?"

Later when they went to the hill with 13-year-old Milka Pavlovic to bring in the sheep, Ivanka pointed to the same place. Now Mirjana and Milka saw the figure too.

The next day Mirjana, Ivanka, Vicka Ivankovic, 16, and Ivan Dragicevic, 16, returned to the hill, along with Milka's sister Marija, 16, a calm, sensible girl. Ten-year-old Jakov Colo, Mirjana's cousin, a lively and curious boy, tagged along. Soon the children saw the apparition again, motioning them up the hill. They

obeyed, astonished at how quickly they got to the top. "It was as if we were pulled through the air," Vicka said.

"It was impossible," said Mirjana's uncle who, with many other villagers, had followed them. "It takes at least twelve minutes to get up there, and they made it in about two."

By the time the villagers reached the top, the six children were kneeling on the rocks, praying. The Gospa told them, they said, that this day – Thursday, June 25, 1981 – was to be considered the true beginning of Her appearances, and that She would return the next day.

News of the visions spread like wildfire. By Sunday, thousands had congregated on the hill, over which shone a brilliant light, visible to all.

The children described to the crowd what the Gospa looked like. Having identified Herself

as the "Blessed Virgin Mary," the apparition added, "I come as the Queen of Peace." Soon there occurred the first of many strange phenomena described by eyewitnesses: the word *mir*, "peace" in Serbo-Croatian, appeared in huge flame-colored letters across the night sky, ending above the parish church in Medjugorje.

The parish priest was away on a retreat, but his elderly assistant pointedly ignored the event. It was only when the excitement threatened to turn into religious frenzy that parish officials and local authorities stepped in. The assistant priest and the police interrogated the children. Four doctors, two of the neurologists, examined the young people and stated unequivocally that they were "entirely healthy in mind and body."

During the first week, hundreds of people witnessed the "healing" of a three-year-old boy who had been mute, deaf, and virtually paralyzed since birth. (Since then, numerous other healings have been claimed.) Journalists and television crews began to arrive in droves from all over

Yugoslavia. The parish priest, Father Jozo Zovko, a Franciscan, returned. Like the police, he was convinced that the events were a case of mass hysteria. But on July 1 he was alone in the church, praying, when he says he suddenly heard a voice: "Go out and protect the children."

He jumped up, and "As I was leaving, the children ran toward me crying." They begged him to hide them from the police. He concealed them in the parish house where, over the next few days, they saw several visions.

Another Franciscan, Father Tomislav Vlastic, a leading liturgist, arrived weeks later; he believed in the visions from the moment he questioned the children. "For me there was no doubt," he says, "they were having a genuine religious experience."

OVER THE PAST 4½ YEARS, there have been nearly 2,000 visions, occurring each evening at the same hour. The young "seers," relaxed, natural, arrive at the parish house in Medjugorje at about five, making their way through the crowds of pilgrims. Half an hour of quiet

reading and prayer allows them to concentrate their minds.

Vicka, now 21, is suffering from headaches caused by an inoperable brain cyst and often sees the vision in her bedroom before a homemade altar. Marija and Ivan, both now 20, pray softly, their heads bowed, eyes closed. Jakov, 14, fidgets, looks around and is likely to smile at visitors. It is precisely because of this that the change – from childlike impatience to pure joy once the vision or “ecstasy” begins – is more apparent in him.

Just after 5:40 p.m., they stand side by side facing a wall on which hang a Crucifix and a rosary. Suddenly, as if with one movement, they cross themselves, fall to their knees and simultaneously gaze up at the same point. They then listen, smile, or nod their heads. They speak – their lips and throat muscles move – but without making a sound. These movements occur individually, at different moments: they are apparently having different conversations at the same time. Sometimes they nod together – She seems to be saying the same thing to them all.

These days, the visions last about two minutes. But in the past they went on for as long as an hour. During this time the children seem totally unaware of anything around them. “They hear Her in Croatian,” says Father Slavko Barbaric, a 40-year-old psychotherapist with a Ph.D. in psychosociology from the University of Freiburg (West Germany), who became spiritual adviser for the visionaries in August 1984. “It doesn’t mean She actually speaks in Croatian, or for that matter speaks at all. They see and hear Her speaking about school and work, the nature of faith, moral questions, as well as the future of the world.”

Then, simultaneously and unexpectedly, their eyes and heads shoot up; one or another might sigh Ode (“She’s gone.”), and the expression of enchantment leaves their faces. They make the sign of the cross, stand up, smile and talk, then separate to make notes describing what they saw. Their impressions of the Gospa’s mood sometimes differ, but the visual details always tally.

The Gospa has told the story of Her life to Vicka. “She talked a lot

about Her childhood," says Vicka, "and a lot about Jesus." To Ivan She has spoken about religion. To little Jakov She has spoken of "children's things."

The visions will continue, the young people say they have been told, until each has received ten special messages – all secrets about future events. Mirjana and Ivanka have already been told their ten secrets and have stopped having daily apparitions. Three have been told nine secrets, Vicka eight.

A NUMBER OF INVESTIGATIONS have tested the validity of the visions. In 1983, a Yugoslav psychiatrist and parapsychologist, Dr. Ludvik Stopar, hypnotized Marija shortly after a vision and found that her account under hypnosis was identical to that in full consciousness. After neuropsychiatric and physical examinations on all the youngsters, he concluded that they were "absolutely normal adolescents with no psychopathological symptoms." Twelve Italian physicians also found no evidence of hypnosis, manipulation or drugs.

In 1984 a team of French doctors under Prof. Henri Joyeux of the University of Montpellier conducted electrocardiograms, electroencephalograms, tests on ocular movements and reflexes, and tests on auditory nerves and larynx muscle movement. The doctors documented the simultaneous fixing of the gaze on an identical point, with eye movement beginning and ending at the same moment and the cessation of the blinking reflex to sudden light.

The team concluded that the phenomenon was scientifically inexplicable. They defined it as "a state of intense, active prayer, partially disconnected from the exterior world, a state of contemplation and of healthy communication with a definite person whom only they can see, hear, and touch."

Prof. Louis Belanger, an expert on paranormal phenomena at the Theological Faculty of the University of Montreal, is more skeptical. He was present when Vicka seemed to flinch during the ecstasy as fingers were suddenly poked at her eyes. This, he says,

shows Vicka was not “disconnected.” “She isn’t,” Father Barbaric replies patiently. “She is in ecstasy – a state in which the subject is partially disconnected.”

Professor Belanger suggests that the youngsters are probably seeing a “vision,” not an apparition – something in their minds, not something outside themselves. The vision could, theoretically, be repeated indefinitely by a sort of self-hypnosis.

The communist Yugoslav state has been ambivalent. On the one hand, it has hardly interfered. On the other, it has firmly resisted demands to set up a scientific commission to examine the young people, the claimed healing, the radioactivity that allegedly increases daily in the room during visions, and the light phenomena.

So far, more than three million people have visited Medjugorje. Although there are no official pilgrimages (both the Vatican and the bishops’ conferences around the world are adopting a “wait and see” attitude), an estimated 50,000 people came on the June 25 anniversary last year.

Bishop Pavao Zanic of Mostar, in whose diocese the Medjugorje parish is located, has voiced the only open church opposition. Parish priests, he asserted, are manipulating the four girls and two youths who say they see the visions.

The only “test” undertaken by the bishop’s investigative commission (which includes 13 theologians and three psychiatrists) was when one member tried the medieval test for ecstasy by plunging a long needle into Vicka’s shoulder during a vision. She swayed slightly under the pressure from behind, but her face remained blissful. He withdrew the needle and pushed it in again, with the same result. When the bloodstain on her blouse was pointed out to Vicka afterward, she showed surprise.

ALTHOUGH MEDJUGORJE still looks the same, its life has changed profoundly. Virtually the entire population believes that the Virgin Mary appears there daily. This belief, and the messages She conveys through the young people – to “pray, fast, recommit yourselves to God and, above all, be

peaceful” – have affected every aspect of the people’s existence. Wednesdays and Fridays, for example, are days of fasting for many villagers, as the Gospa has suggested.

Before, there was competition among the farmers, and among area villages. Now there is none. “Before, we used to think we had to work all hours to get done.” Says one. “Now we stop early and it still gets done.” He laughs. “And we don’t swear anymore, or get drunk. How can we – and why should we – if the Gospa comes to our village every day?”

The focus of village life is the huge, stark church where Mass is held every evening at six. On weekends, holidays and through-

out the summer, services in four languages begin at 6 a.m. and continue the whole day. Confessions are held by as many as 70 priests, sitting out in the fields surrounding the church.

“Before, we were indifferent,” says one villager. “Now we care – not just about ourselves and our neighbors, but about all of the parish, and all of the world.”

“So how can it all happen?” says Father Barbaric. “Only God knows.”

Call: 205-672-2000 or write:

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The site near Birmingham, Alabama where Our Lady appeared to Marija (Pavlovic) Lunetti, one of the visionaries of Medjugorje on Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 1988. During the apparition, Our Lady appeared with 12 stars around Her head. Our Lady promised from this spot to carry all our intentions to the Father. She gave a message to Marija saying: "...I will intercede for you to God for all your intentions." Since then, tens of thousands have pilgrimaged to this spot with their intentions. Many report receiving special graces and answers to their prayers. Caritas is located on Shelby County Road 43, six miles north of U.S. Highway 280.

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