

Backgrounder – Apparitions of the Blessed Mother

Apparitions by the Virgin Mary are found throughout the history of the Catholic Church. A significant example is her appearance to St. Dominic in the early 1200s, when she gave him the devotion known as the Rosary.

Although the apparitions have occurred at various times and places, Mary's reason and message remain consistent – she warns those she appears to that the world is in spiritual trouble, and she calls for the turn to conversion, prayer and penance.

Many Marian apparitions have been thoroughly investigated and approved as valid by the Church. Following are brief summaries of some of the more well-known visits by the Blessed Mother. They appear in chronological order.

Guadalupe, Mexico, 1531 – On his way to Mass on Dec. 9, 1531, Juan Diego suddenly hears beautiful music and a woman calling him from the top of Tepeyac Hill. He climbs the hill to find a woman, beautiful and radiant, who reveals herself as the Virgin Mary. She asks him to go to his bishop and relate her request that a chapel be built in her honor at the bottom of the hill. Bishop Juan de Zumarraga quickly dismisses Juan Diego in disbelief. Juan Diego returns to the hill where Our Lady asks him to return to the bishop and ask again. He does, and Bishop Zumarraga asks for proof of the story. When Juan Diego, now fearful and worried, finally returns to the top the hill on Dec. 12, Our Lady directs him to pick the gorgeous roses that now bloom on Tepeyac Hill, known as a barren and desolate place. Juan picks the miraculous flowers and puts them in his cloak, carrying them to the bishop. When Juan opened the cloak to reveal the roses to Bishop Zumarraga and several other witnesses, they discovered a stunning image of Our Lady on the cloak as the roses fell to the floor. A long list of cures, interventions and miracles are attributed to Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Patroness of the Americas. Dec. 12 is her feast day, and Dec. 9 is the feast day of St. Juan Diego. The apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe were approved in 1555.

Lourdes, France, 1858 – Lourdes is one of the most well-known apparition sites in history. Beginning on Feb. 11, 1885, the Virgin Mary appeared to French teenager Bernadette Soubouris 18 times through April 7 of that year. All of the apparitions occurred in Massabielle grotto, where Bernadette had gone in search of firewood on Feb. 7. After seeing a golden cloud and a beautiful lady holding a Rosary appear in the grotto, the teen fell to her knees and prayed the Rosary. The most significant apparitions occurred on Feb. 25 (the 9th apparition) and March 25 (the 16th apparition). In February, the beautiful lady shows Bernadette some muddy water in the back of the grotto. The teen digs at the spot until she is able to drink from and wash herself with the water – which becomes an enormous spring known ever since as the source of “miraculous water.” During the March apparition, the lady finally identifies herself to Bernadette as “The Immaculate Conception.” After investigation, the Vatican approves the apparitions at Lourdes in 1862.

Fatima, Portugal, 1917 – Beginning on May 13, 1917, Our Lady appeared six times to peasant children Francisco and Jacinta Marto and their cousin, Lucia dos Santos. These apparitions were preceded by three visits to the children by an Angel of God in 1916. During the last of these visits, he gave the children Holy Communion. During Our Lady's apparitions, she urged the

children to pray the Rosary fervently for conversion of sinners and in penance. She also revealed to them three messages, including a vision of hell. She also asked for the Pope to consecrate Russia to her Immaculate Heart. By Our Lady's final appearance to the children on Oct. 13, 1917, upwards of 70,000 people were on hand because Our Lady had promised a miracle so that "all people will believe." On that rainy day, the sky cleared and everyone on hand witnessed the sun "dance" in the sky. It spun, changed position in the sky and radiated a rainbow of colors. It seemed to be falling from the sky toward Earth before returning to its original position and color in the now-clear sky. For generations following these apparitions, the Third Message of Fatima remained secret. On May 13, 2000, the Vatican revealed the Third Message – a vision of a bishop in white climbing toward a cross through a sea of martyrs' bodies who is shot and killed. In revealing the message, the Vatican suggests that the third message foretold the 1981 assassination attempt on Blessed Pope John Paul II, which occurred on May 13 – the 64th anniversary of Fatima. Blessed John Paul II visited Fatima and placed the bullet that had been removed during surgery in the crown of the statue of Our Lady of Fatima. The Vatican approved the apparitions at Fatima in 1930.