



SINGULAR DECREE

In the Name of God, Amen!

With Pope Francis as our Holy Father, in accordance with the *Norms Regarding the Manner of Proceeding in the Discernment of Presumed Apparitions or Revelations* (CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Normae de modo procedendi in diudicandis praesumptis apparitionibus ac revelationibus*, 25-II-1978), I, Most Reverend Kevin C. Rhoades, by the grace of God and the authority of the Apostolic See, Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend, issue this decree of judgment in accord with *CIC/83* cann. 48, 50-51 regarding claimed supernatural apparitions to Sister Mildred (formerly Sister Mary Ephrem) Neuzil, CPPS, in Rome City, Indiana, U.S.A.

THE FACTS

Sister Mildred (formerly Sister Mary Ephrem) Neuzil, CPPS, was professed as a religious in 1933. About 1938 she began to have what seemed like mystical experiences. They may be described as inner locutions and visions of the spirit, etc.: visits from the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, inner messages from Our Lord on the Cross, and finally frequent visions and messages from the Mother of God and Saint Joseph. In 1948 these experiences were revealed to her confessor. The experiences became more vivid and the messages more pressing. In 1954, these visits took on the nature of a specific program of special devotion to Mary as "Our Lady of America" which this sister was commanded to propagate.

Sister Neuzil served in various places in which these various alleged mystical experiences took place. She claimed that the "official visits" of Our Lady began in the Fall of 1956 at Kneipp Springs (Rome City, Indiana, U.S.A.) in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend. According to her, Mary promised that "greater miracles" of inner conversion would be granted to the United States if they honored her with pure hearts as Our Lady of America, especially honored as such at the National Shrine in Washington, D.C.

These alleged visions and messages from Mary, as well as from St. Joseph, continued through 1959.

Over time, some devotion to Our Lady of America has arisen, including in the place where the alleged apparitions began, Kneipp Springs.

In 2017, six bishops of dioceses in which alleged apparitions and private revelations of Our Lady of America to Sister Mary Ephrem occurred petitioned the USCCB to do an official investigation, however, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith advised that one of the bishops where the alleged apparitions and private revelations occurred should conduct the investigation. I agreed to the request of the other five bishops to conduct the investigation.

In 2018, the BVM Foundation, Inc., provided extensive, authentic documentation of Sister Neuzil's correspondence, especially with her spiritual director, of evidence of cult, and of other evidence related to these alleged occurrences. I then formed a commission of theological and canonical experts to assist me in evaluation of this evidence, and further evidence was gathered including personal interviews with witnesses who knew Sister Neuzil personally.

THE LAW

The above-referenced document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith gives direction as to the competent authority, the procedure to be followed, and the criteria to be used when evaluating alleged apparitions and revelations.

Regarding the authority competent to do the investigation, it states: "Above all, the duty of vigilance and intervention falls to the Ordinary of the place."

Regarding the procedure, it states: "If, on the occasion of a presumed supernatural fact, there arises in a spontaneous way among the faithful a certain cult or some devotion, the competent Ecclesiastical Authority has the serious duty of looking into it without delay and of diligently watching over it."

Further: "When Ecclesiastical Authority is informed of a presumed apparition or revelation, it will be its responsibility:

- a) first, to judge the fact according to positive and negative criteria [. . .]
- b) then, if this examination results in a favorable conclusion, to permit some public manifestation of cult or of devotion, overseeing this with great prudence (equivalent to the formula, "for now, nothing stands in the way") (*pro nunc nihil ob stare*);
- c) finally, in light of time passed and of experience, with special regard to the fecundity of spiritual fruit generated from this new devotion, to express a judgment regarding the authenticity and supernatural character if the case so merits".

Regarding the criteria for judgment, it states:

A) Positive Criteria:

a) Moral certitude, or at least great probability of the existence of the fact, acquired by means of a serious investigation;

b) Particular circumstances relative to the existence and to the nature of the fact, that is to say:

1. Personal qualities of the subject or of the subjects (in particular, psychological equilibrium, honesty and rectitude of moral life, sincerity and habitual docility towards Ecclesiastical Authority, the capacity to return to a normal regimen of a life of faith, etc.);

2. As regards revelation: true theological and spiritual doctrine and immune from error;

3. Healthy devotion and abundant and constant spiritual fruit (for example, spirit of prayer, conversion, testimonies of charity, etc.).

B) *Negative Criteria:*

a) Manifest error concerning the fact.

b) Doctrinal errors attributed to God himself, or to the Blessed Virgin Mary, or to some saint in their manifestations, taking into account however the possibility that the subject might have added, even unconsciously, purely human elements or some error of the natural order to an authentic supernatural revelation (cf. Saint Ignatius, *Exercises*, no. 336).

c) Evidence of a search for profit or gain strictly connected to the fact.

d) Gravely immoral acts committed by the subject or his or her followers when the fact occurred or in connection with it.

e) Psychological disorder or psychopathic tendencies in the subject, that with certainty influenced on the presumed supernatural fact, or psychosis, collective hysteria or other things of this kind.

It is to be noted that these criteria, be they positive or negative, are not peremptory but rather indicative, and they should be applied cumulatively or with some mutual convergence.”

THE FINDINGS

Having investigated the matter thoroughly, after study and prayerful discernment by me and the investigatory commission, I can now offer judgment according to the positive and negative criteria listed above. First, regarding Sister Neuzil herself, there is much evidence that she was honest, morally upright, psychologically balanced, devoted to religious life and without guile. Alongside these many signs of goodness, we also found signs of imperfection, but no evidence that she was the perpetrator of a hoax or the victim of delusion. What she communicated about her alleged experiences, she believed to be true, and her communication of these alleged experiences are filled with humility and forthrightness.

Regarding spiritual fruits, there are numerous reports of good fruits, including some conversions, spiritual refreshment and consolations, and even some physical healings at the Rome City site of the alleged apparitions. However, upon study of these reports, we cannot conclude that any of these events are conclusive enough to warrant certification as miracles. It seems likely that in such personal contexts of faith and prayer, God's graces were received.

Regarding the alleged revelations themselves, much of what is expressed does not contain any doctrinal error. However, there is a claim regarding Saint Joseph which has never been expressed as Catholic doctrine and must be seen as an error, namely, that he was a "co-redeemer" with Christ for the salvation of the world.

Sister Neuzil's spiritual director, Archbishop Paul F. Leibold of Cincinnati, wrote to the Director of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. on June 17, 1970. In that letter written two years before his death, Archbishop Leibold stated that he was unable to make a judgment on the supernatural nature of the visions or apparitions reported by Sister Neuzil. He did, however, attest to Sister Neuzil's holiness and to the solid doctrinal content of her writings. He noted that he "helped her with some private printing of some material and also in having a medal struck, all strictly as a private devotion." Archbishop Leibold wrote: "I have never taken any action to promote her devotion publicly and of course never followed through on the Shrine request." (N.B. The "Shrine request" refers to the alleged request of Our Lady of America that her statue be placed in the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception).

Looking at the nature and quality of the experiences themselves, we find that they are more to be described as subjective inner religious experiences rather than objective external visions and revelations. A well-known author describes this critical distinction stating: "Simply put, religious experience as distinct from private revelation is recognized as highly subjective" (BENEDICT J. GROESCHEL, *A Still, Small Voice*, San Francisco-CA 1993, p. 128), and further: "The vision of Bernadette [. . .] is something clearly outside herself. It is not primarily subjective. There is an experience that seems to fall between the two, between the obvious personal experience of Thérèse, in which emotion, will, and intelligence are completely involved, and that of Bernadette [. . .] These descriptions, especially that of Saint Thérèse, serve to illustrate that religious experience of a type very different from private revelation is possible to all" (*Ibid.*, pp. 130-132).

Thus, while it may be said that there is possibly an authenticity to Sister Neuzil's subjective religious experience, we do not find evidence pointing to her experiences as being in the category of objective private revelation. Sister Neuzil herself describes her experience as "inner vision" (p. 143), and we find that her experiences were of a type where her own imagination and intellect were involved in the formation of the events. It seems that these were authentically graced moments, even perhaps of a spiritual quality beyond what most people experience, but subjective ones in which her own imagination and intellect were constitutively engaged, putting form to inner spiritual movements. However, we do not find evidence that these were objective visions and revelations of the type seen at Guadalupe, Fatima and Lourdes.

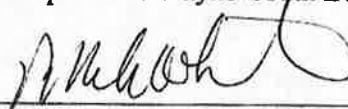
Therefore, I must come to the conclusion that the visions and revelations themselves cannot be said to be of supernatural origin in the sense of objective occurrences (*non constat de supernaturalitate*); thus further, I cannot approve or support public devotion or cult.

Date: July 29, 2019

Given in Fort Wayne, Indiana,
at the Archbishop Noll Center

+ Kevin C. Rhoades

Most Reverend Kevin C. Rhoades
Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Mark A. Gurtner', written over a horizontal line.

Very Reverend Mark A. Gurtner
Chancellor

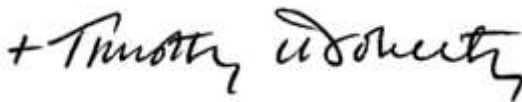
We, the undersigned diocesan bishops of the dioceses where the purported visions, locutions and private revelations were said to have occurred in relation to the devotion to "Our Lady of America, the Immaculate Virgin," concur with the foregoing findings and conclusions of the investigative commission as decreed by Most Reverend Kevin C. Rhoades, Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend:

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Dennis M. Schnurr", preceded by a small cross symbol.

Most Reverend Dennis M. Schnurr
Archbishop of Cincinnati

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Allen H. Vigneron", preceded by a small cross symbol.

Most Reverend Allen H. Vigneron
Archbishop of Detroit

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Timothy L. Doherty", preceded by a small cross symbol.

Most Reverend Timothy L. Doherty
Bishop of Lafayette in Indiana

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Thomas J. Olmsted".

Most Reverend Thomas J. Olmsted
Bishop of Phoenix

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Daniel E. Thomas", preceded by a small cross symbol.

Most Reverend Daniel E. Thomas
Bishop of Toledo in Ohio