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MARIAN LIBRARY STUDIES



MSGR. EDOUARD RANWEZ

— THE VALUE OF THE EPISCOPAL DECLARATIONS
CONCERNING THE EVENTS OF BEAURAING

— INTERVIEW OVER RADIO BRUSSELS

No. 96 — January, 1963

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About the articles . . .

During the weeks between November 29, 1932, and January 3, 1933, five children living in Beauraing, Belgium, claimed to have seen the Mother of God on more than 30 occasions. Twice, so they said, she appeared as the Virgin with the Golden Heart. Her message to them during the course of her visitations was that they should pray much and that she herself would convert sinners. For a long time the apparitions were severely attacked as false; certain quarters even denounced them as illusions of the devil. People did, nevertheless, begin to frequent Beauraing as a place of prayer. After careful consideration of all factors involved, Bishop Charue of Namur issued a number of declarations attesting to the supernatural character of the visions themselves and likewise approving the devotions to which they had given rise. To commemorate the 30th anniversary of Beauraing's origins, we are here publishing in resumé an evaluation of Bishop Charue's official pronouncements about them.

The author of this evaluation, Msgr. Edouard Ranwez, is the president of the doctrinal commission of Beauraing. He presented his study in its original form at the Lourdes Mariological Congress of 1958. This lengthy report, "De valore declarationum ordinarii circa apparitiones Belloraneses," may be found on pp. 57-76 in Vol. XII of *Maria et Ecclesia*, the series containing the official proceedings of that congress. The resumé presented here is a translation from the French of an article that appeared in the *Revue Diocésaine de Namur*, t. XII, Nov.-Dec., 1958. In addition to this article we are also including the transcript of an interview presented over Radio Brussels in 1954, shortly after Msgr. Ranwez returned from the Marian Congress held in Rome that year. The interview bears on the question of apparitions in general as well as those of Beauraing in particular.

Msgr. Ranwez was born at Namur, Belgium, in 1883. He began his studies at the Jesuit College in Namur and then went on to the Belgian College in Rome. From 1901 until 1908 he was at the Gregorian University, where he earned doctorates in both philosophy and theology. His ordination took place in 1906. Following two years of service as a curate, he became professor of philosophy in the minor seminary. At the major seminary of Namur from 1921 until 1954 he was professor of moral, ascetical, and mystical theology. In May of 1954 he became president of

(Continued on inside back cover)



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"THE VALUE OF THE EPISCOPAL DECLARATIONS CONCERNING THE EVENTS OF BEAURAING"

Msgr. Edouard Ranwez

(We herein publish a resumé in translation from the French of the report given by Monsignor E. Ranwez at the Marian Congress at Lourdes, November 12, 1958.

The report constitutes an indirect answer to the difficulties recently raised on the subject of the apparitions.)

The episcopal pronouncements consider the following questions:

- I. Authorization of the devotion to Our Lady of Beauraing;
- II. Recognition of the supernatural character of the apparitions.

I. *Authorization of the Devotion.*

a) The decree of February 19, 1943, approving the devotion does not raise any special difficulty. There was nothing opposed to the Bishop of Namur taking such an initiative. To say nothing of the powers which Canon Law grants to bishops for the regulation of worship in general (Can. 335, par. 1; 336, par. 2; 1261; etc.), His Excellency Monsignor Heylen had already been authorized in 1935 by His Eminence Cardinal Sbaretti to permit popular devotion at the place of the apparitions, and on December 7, 1942, the Holy Office accorded to His Excellency Monsignor Charue the express faculty of passing a personal judgment on the facts of Beauraing. This *a fortiori* qualified him to authorize the devotion.

b) Moreover, several things encouraged the Bishop of Namur to make this decision.

On the one hand,

1. The facts of Beauraing offered nothing contrary to faith or morals.
2. None of the objections raised against the heavenly origin of the apparitions seemed worthy of consideration.

On the other hand,

3. The undeniably sincere return of devotion to the Virgin, the great number of conversions and of graces of all kinds, both spiritual and physical, received through the intercession of Our Lady of Beauraing militated positively in favor of a decree, for which the people petitioned.

c) Naturally, this episcopal decision of a disciplinary order called for the submission of the faithful to the various provisions of the decree.¹ The only thing that could cause some difficulty here would be the unwilling-

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ness of minds prejudiced against Beauraing to abide by a decision which would assume the authenticity of the apparitions as established.

II. *Recognition of the Supernatural Character of the Apparitions.*

This second part of the report is divided into three points corresponding to the following questions:

1. What exactly does the declaration of the Bishop of Namur allow, in its letter and spirit, regarding the supernatural character of the apparition?
2. Is the episcopal declaration unassailable on all points?
3. In what way is the conscience of the faithful bound because of this declaration?

1. A) Materially speaking, that is to say, considering only the text, the episcopal decision is contained in two documents: the first is in the form of a letter to the clergy of Namur dated August 2, 1949. The second is a pastoral letter published on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the apparitions (1957). The bishop there reiterated his judgment of 1949 in the following terms: "We declare that in our judgment it can be affirmed in all prudence that between November 29, 1932, and January 3, 1933, a group of children from Beauraing were brought in contact with the Virgin Mary in a supernatural manner on several occasions, and that this intervention of the Divine Mother had as its purpose. . . ."

B) From this literal statement the formal disposition (the intention) of the document can readily be abstracted:

a) It is evident, first of all, that the Bishop did not pretend to assume responsibility for everything that was said relative to the subject of the apparitions. He limited himself to consider as *historic* evidence the substance of the facts on which qualified witnesses seemed best to agree. The equivalent is found in the work published by Canon Monin under the title of *Notre-Dame de Beauraing*, second edition.

b) The Bishop did not make any further statement on the *natural* or *supernatural* character of each and every detail contained in the usual story of the apparitions. He did not ignore the fact that frequently, in cases of this kind, the forces of nature interfere with the supernatural. He knew, as we do, that the imagination of a visionary is capable, on occasion, of unconsciously embellishing a sketch possibly received from Heaven. Then too he did not intend to be guarantor of certain particulars, as, for example, whether such and such a visionary was at any given moment in a state of ecstasy properly so called, more especially as the experts themselves do not always agree even on the generic nature of the realities underlying such terms.

c) Likewise, in what pertains to the central core of the phenomena, the intention of the ordinary was not to decide under what kind, that is, under what classic category of supernatural apparitions or visions

he could conveniently file the facts of Beauraing. For example, did the Blessed Virgin truly descend from heaven, or did she only cause a semblance of her presence here below? Was it a question of phenomena explainable principally by factors external to the visionaries, or of phenomena attributable solely to supernaturally *released* activities within their sensory or mental faculties...?² Psychiatrists and mystical authors may expatiate upon these questions with freedom provided that they admit a miraculous intervention. This miraculous intervention remains a fact, no matter how earthly creatures may have contributed to the production of the phenomenon.

d) Once we have determined what the ordinary wanted to define, we can ask whether the latter was in a position to make a pronouncement with complete certitude, or whether he could advance only a more or less probable opinion.

The interest – as well as the difficulty – of the question arises from what we read in many works which treat of “private revelations,” notably in the famous treatise *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione* of Cardinal Lambertini, who became Benedict XIV. It must be understood that private revelations to which the Church grants approbation, “habendas esse tantummodo ut probabiles et pie credibiles fide tantum humana . . . juxta regulas prudentiae” (are to be considered only as probable and as piously credible only on human faith . . . according to the rules of prudence). What meaning must be attributed in this context to the word “probabiles”? Does it necessarily exclude the idea of certitude? Does it simply mean that the alleged facts are considered by the Church as admissible, probable, worthy of being taken seriously while remaining uncertain? It seems that the same stereotyped formulas have not always been interpreted with discretion and in accord with the nuances that the variety of cases under examination would have demanded.

What is certain is that when some pious person says he is favored with revelations or visions without, however, at the same time supporting his statement by anything other than his own testimony, the Church obviously cannot without reservation confirm the authenticity of the so-called supernatural event. The most she may accord in such a case is the equivalent of a *non obstat*.

Is this the case with Beauraing?

No. At Beauraing, as at Fatima and elsewhere in our day, there was no longer question of “private revelations” in the sense generally understood heretofore. The present day apparitions of the Blessed Virgin to children, particularly to a group of children, are of course not comparable to the public revelations of Christ which ended with the apostolic age; but, on the other hand, they are not strictly private revelations, like those which are the principal concern of our escetical and mystical writings. Modern apparitions like those of Beauraing represent a separate

category of revelations more or less public in their end, in the way that they occur, and in their immediate recipients. The criteria governing the judgment of their authenticity are different from those reserved for the strictly private revelations with which Cardinal Lambertini was concerned.³

As a matter of fact, in so far as they are observable in public and above all if they are directed many times to several visionaries, our modern apparitions render possible comparisons and counterchecking that are definitely conclusive for minds free of prejudice. The certitude thus obtained is not a compelling one like mathematical certitude. But it is true *moral* certitude in so far as it concerns human acts and supposes the normal play of free will, that is, a minimum of "good will."

It was this kind of "moral certitude" that the Bishop of Namur could claim when he affirmed that in his judgment he had serious reasons for admitting the celestial origin of the apparitions of Beauraing.

2. In its letter and in its spirit, is the episcopal declaration as given to us unassailable at all points?

An affirmative answer

A) presupposes recourse to objectively valid proofs on the part of the bishop;

B) it supposes, besides, that:

- a) the bishop had the right to publish his judgment and that
- b) the bishop made use of this right:
 - 1. for sufficiently important reasons and
 - 2. in a manner clearly conformable to the practices recognized by the Church in this regard.

Let us briefly examine these various aspects of the question.

A) Before venturing to affirm explicitly the celestial origin of the events of Beauraing, the Bishop of Namur had, first of all, to substantiate his verdict by unimpeachable proofs.

a) He obtained these proofs mainly from the investigating committee. The members of this official committee – who can be accused neither of caprice nor of prejudice – tried during eight years of conscientious efforts to track down everything which could have constituted a truly serious objection to the authenticity of the events at Beauraing. Their conclusions which range – first hesitatingly, then with more and more assurance – from 1943 to 1949, rested first of all on the convincing character of the testimony of the visionaries as well as on that of all persons in a position to corroborate or to weaken the first evidence given.

This evidence was found moreover to be solidly confirmed by the unchanging behavior of the five children and by a psychosomatic ex-

amination in which neither their temperaments nor their upbringing presented anything suspicious to an impartial observer. The evidence was further confirmed by a series of unusual phenomena closely connected with the apparitions themselves.

b) To these fundamental arguments may be added those which the bishop, desirous of forming his personal convictions, drew from the abundant reports at his own disposal.

c) Finally, as he expressly declared, he found a singularly impressive confirmation in the two miracles, both occurring shortly after the first events, which were recognized canonically in 1949.

This allusion to miracles in the physical order raises an important question which it would be well to examine more closely.

In a recent Spanish work published in Madrid in 1954, under the title *Apariciones*, Carlos-Maria Stehlin, S.J., maintains that an apparition could be considered supernatural only if a separate miracle were foretold "como milagro de comprobacion" (as a miracle of proof). This opinion seems to have in its favor neither any "argument from authority" nor any convincing "argument from reason."

The miracles which the Church requires in the process of canonization need not necessarily have been announced in advance as an element of proof and never, to our knowledge, have the authorities charged with declaring the authenticity of apparitions stated that a new miracle was absolutely indispensable when the facts in question are by themselves sufficient evidence of their divine origin.

As for an argument from reason, we think that reason itself is frankly opposed to the position of Father Stehlin.

If a "sign from heaven," that is, a miracle, is necessary to prove the celestial origin of some phenomenon or other, there is nothing to prevent this "sign from heaven" from taking place with the phenomenon in question. However there is nothing to substantiate the notion that in order to prove the nature of a possibly miraculous event it is necessary to add still another miracle. Otherwise we would be caught in an inescapable vicious circle.

A phenomenon verified historically may be unexplainable by known natural forces and thereby brought to the attention of men as a "sign from heaven," destined in one way or another for the sanctification of souls.

No doubt it is always possible to deny the truth of miraculous intervention especially since, even though the preternatural character of the facts is once established, it is occasionally very difficult to show that one is not dealing with a diabolical delusion. But this is exactly what brings out the *moral* character of the certitude we speak of. It enables us to see why we must set aside every method of investigation that would want to

be too mechanically assured of success and not more infallible in favoring a second miracle than in favoring just a first one. In the case of Beauraing at least the multiplicity and the significant convergence of details, considered singly as well as together, constitute a proof sufficient to dismiss any opposing views. It is proof, moreover, that we were very happy to see confirmed in the course of time by miracles in the physical order distinct from the apparitions.

B) It was not enough that the personal judgment of the bishop rest on indisputable proofs; it was further necessary – for his statement to be irreproachable at all points – that the Bishop (a) have the right to make this statement, and that (b) he used this right 1) at an opportune time and 2) in clear conformity with the traditional laws of the Church.

b) 1. Was it opportune to exercise this right in the case of Beauraing? Beyond all question. In view of the wishes of the faithful to see finally brought into the open a cause held in check by specious objections which were for the most part publicly propagated but never officially refuted.

2. Finally, it was necessary that nothing in the procedure followed by the bishop go against the rules traditionally observed in the Church.

On this point, certain punctilious souls could object: since the Holy See has always denied itself a definitive judgment in favor of “private revelations,” it is not fitting for a bishop to pronounce categorically on such matters.

But, we reply, there is no comparison between the situation of the Holy See and that of an individual bishop in his own diocese. To convince our objector, it is but necessary to reread the text of the letter addressed by Cardinal Marchetti-Selvaggiani to Msgr. A.M. Charue in 1942, confiding to him the care of inquiry and of judgment of the Beauraing case for the reason, among others, that the Holy See does not have the same sources of information as the local ordinary. We understand that a bishop can declare an official judgment – however, by no means irrevocable – whenever Rome would not be in a position to use its own authority, although it is greater than that of any individual bishop.

Be that as it may, we can say that if, in principal, Rome does not take a formal position in this kind of affair, nevertheless, it so happens that the Holy See shows (we cannot use a more emphatic word) its approbation in regard to certain revelations that are not, strictly speaking, private, as was the case with Lourdes.⁵

We conclude that in defining the supernatural character of the apparitions of Beauraing, the Bishop of Namur deviated in no way from the laws in force in the Church.

3. A last point remains to be settled: To what are the faithful bound as a consequence of the judgment held by the ordinary? They are not obligated by virtue of intellectual obedience: the bishop in announcing his conviction did not intimate a command in the proper sense of the word: he did not impose his own view. He is content to announce officially what he, as head of the diocese, thinks on these matters.

Nor is divine faith invoked by the decision of the ordinary regarding the facts of the apparitions: the reason for eventually complying being only of the human order, only human faith, although founded upon the authority of the Magisterium⁶, enters into consideration.

Altogether different would be the question of knowing how far — granted the certitude that the Virgin has appeared and has spoken — divine faith (we do not say “Catholic faith”) can or must intervene in order to make one acknowledge the object of the message which one knows through personal and certain knowledge to be of celestial origin.

In all conjectures, the testimony of the bishop, the chief spokesman of the teaching Church, is for all believers worthy of the most respectful attention; especially because in the present circumstances it is given with special guarantees due to the seriousness of the case. It is, however, not infallible, and on this score the judgment of the bishop remains open to the criticism — discreet, naturally, and always deferential — of those who in good faith think that they must raise an objection against it, an objection which in their eyes is insurmountable.

NOTES

1. Cf. text of the Decree in A. Monin, *Notre-Dame de Beauraing*, Bruges, 1952, p. 44.
2. Cf. Gabriel de St. Marie-Madeleine, *Visions et vie mystique*, Paris, 1855, p. 59 ff.; J. Marechal, *Etudes sur la psychologie des Mystiques*, Paris, 1929, t. I, p. 134-136.
3. Cf. *Rev. dioc. de Namur*, 1950, t. V, p. 165-169.
4. *Cod. j. c.*, can. 355, No. 1; 336, No. 2; 1226; 1327, No. 1; 1336.
5. Cf. *Rev. dioc. de Namur*, 1950, t. V, p. 328 sq.
6. In order to put in relief the special credence merited by all intervention of the Magisterium (even though not infallible), one of the participants in the Marian Congress at Lourdes (November 12, 1958), proposed that a new name be reserved for this particular form of “human faith.” He suggested the term “ecclesial.” “Ecclesial faith” would thus hold a place between “ecclesiastical faith” (implying infallibility) and the simple human faith rendered to any human testimony not otherwise qualified.

"INTERVIEW OVER RADIO BRUSSELS"

Msgr. Edouard Ranwez

November 21, 1954

- Q. Canon, you have recently attended the Marian Congress at Rome. Would you tell us what part Belgium took in this Congress?
- A. Certainly. An important group of Belgian clergymen actively participated in the Congress. Theologians, exegetes, canonists, historians presented reports, many of which were given at the plenary sessions. Two special sections had been reserved for Belgium. One of them had on its program discussions by professors from Louvain University relative to the Immaculate Conception. The other was dedicated to the Marian apparitions which recently occurred in Belgium.
- Q. Concerning this matter, Canon, may I remark that some people have been very much surprised to see a special section of this Congress reserved for the apparitions of the Virgin?
- A. This should not be when one realizes that the Congress was not limited to dogmatic questions of Mariology, but devoted a very large part to various aspects of the Marian movement, such as iconography, history, devotion. . . . It is logical that whatever is of interest regarding apparitions should be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, it should not be concluded from this very understandable initiative taken by the Congress at Rome that the Holy See is involved.
- Q. Does this remark imply that the Church is uninterested in these questions?
- A. In general, the Supreme Authority of the Church abstains from taking an official position on the matter of apparitions. On each occasion, the Church recalls that the approbation She eventually grants in the case must only be interpreted as saying *non obstat*, that is, let it pass. The Church tolerates, She permits us to believe in certain apparitions, but never imposes an act of faith in these matters. She allows each one to judge in his soul and conscience, following the norms of Christian prudence. This, however, does not prevent her from being grateful for such evidence – as the apparitions at Lourdes, for example.

As for the attitude of the Magisterium properly speaking, in the face of these apparitions which are commonly called private revela-

tions (to distinguish from public revelations given to the world by Our Savior), She is guided by the rule of faith which is that public revelation was closed with the apostolic age. Consequently, any private revelation could never add anything further to the deposit of the Faith which the Church is charged with keeping intact.

- Q. If the apparitions spoken of add nothing to the deposit of the Faith, exactly why are they of interest to the public life of the Church?
- A. The usefulness of private revelations, under the form of apparitions or otherwise, can be seen expressed in Christian practice or doctrine. In practice it is evident: all authentic apparitions which have been recognized have had a beneficent reaction on the conduct of the people. Manifestly the large pilgrimages to Lourdes and other places give strong support in the minds of the faithful to the exhortations which the Virgin addressed to them regarding the necessity of penance, prayer, generosity, etc. . . .

As for the influence which can be seen in certain apparitions on the doctrinal level, they fix the attention, for example, on certain aspects of revealed truth by stimulating the zeal of scholars in such or such a direction.

It is certain that the message of the Blessed Virgin to Catherine Laboure in 1830 was not necessary in the elaboration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, but who dares to affirm that the apparitions of the Rue du Bac have not contributed in some way to stimulate a study of the dogma proclaimed in 1854.

Likewise, the apparitions granted to Bernadette in 1858 were not absolutely necessary to bring about the acceptance by the faithful of the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception. However, was it not, in many minds, a remarkable confirmation of the dogmatic definition of Pius IX?

The apparitions of Beauraing date from 1932 to 1933. Today, we are primarily moved by their spiritual effect. Pilgrims flock to Beauraing which appears more than ever to be a living center of Marian devotion. On the other hand, in these troublesome times, and in the light of the pontifical action of consecrating the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and of instituting the feast of Mary, Queen of Heaven and Earth, we are impressed to notice that the apparitions of Beauraing seem to belong within the actual movement which led to these recent acts of the Holy See.

In fact, at the same time when this movement was barely started, the Virgin presented herself at Beauraing as "Queen of Heaven" and showed

the children – while entreating sacrifices from them – her radiant Heart. This aspect of the *Message of Beauraing* (which was the object of one of three reports presented at the Congress at Rome) seems to illustrate appropriately what has been said previously of the influence exercised on the life of the Church by private revelations under the form of celestial apparitions.

They can efficaciously contribute to everything which touches the individual or collective conduct of Christian people. Like any actual grace, like any circumstance determined by Providence, these supernatural interventions can also – at least indirectly and by way of an occasional stimulant – favor the effort, even scientific, which may be the prelude to the establishment of a liturgical feast or to a declaration of the Supreme Pontiff.

To conclude, let me repeat that it is the infallible Authority – and it alone – that has the right to take inventory in an official and definitive manner of the treasure contained in Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Tradition – the holy deposit which we call “public revelation” or “Christian revelation.” It is precisely in order to safeguard intact this patrimony of revealed Truth that the Church has found herself bound in the course of the ages to condemn so many heresies, that she had several times to deal severely against a “prophetism” or “messianism” of an evil nature, against the pseudo-revelations and false apparitions such as were produced in Belgium not too long ago.

(Continued from inside front cover)

the Beauraing doctrinal commission, a body to which he belonged since its foundation in 1935. Pius XII in 1956 conferred on him the title of Domestic Prelate.

André-Marie Charue, whose proclamations are the object of Msgr. Ranwez's study, is the 27th bishop of Namur, the diocese in which Beauraing is located. He was ordained in 1922 and subsequently became a master in sacred theology and a licentiate in Sacred Scripture. In October of 1941 he had been appointed administrator of the diocese, when two months later he was named its bishop. His consecration took place on February 11, 1942, which, it may be remarked, happened to be a Marian feast, that of Our Lady of Lourdes.

We wish to extend our sincerest thanks to Rev. Joseph Debergh, O.M.I., who obtained the necessary permission for use of the material in this study and who also arranged for its translation by Sister Thomas Catherine, O.P., of the Adrian Dominicans. Father Debergh is the director of the Pro Maria Committee of Lowell, Massachusetts, which promotes devotion to Our Lady of Beauraing.

Suggestions for further reading. Books and pamphlets:

1. Sharkey-Debergh: *Our Lady of Beauraing*. Garden City, Hanover House, 1958. (Awarded the Marian Library Medal for 1958.)
2. Sharkey, Don: *I will convert sinners*. Techny, Illinois, Divine Word Publications, 1955.
3. Marian Reprint No. 64: *Beauraing Documents of Bishop Charue*.
4. Marian Library Studies No. 88. Fernand, Toussaint, *Beauraing - a theological study*.

Magazine articles:

1. Sharkey, D.: *Jean Helle and the miracle of Beauraing*. Ave Maria, 83, June 16-23, 1956.
2. Cranny, T.: *Our Lady of the great return*. Crosier 32: 18-25, October, 1957.
3. *Her jubilee year: a Marianist picture story*. Marianist 49: 15-20, June, 1958.
4. Suenens, L. Card.: *Legion of Mary and Beauraing*. Marianist 50: 12-15, November, 1959.
5. *Pilgrim for life*. Sign 40: 19-23. August, 1960.
6. Debergh, J.: *Your power for peace; Our Lady of Beauraing*. Ave Maria, August 12, 1961.

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