

The Awaited Miracle

Reflections on Marian apparitions in Garabandal, Spain

Introduction

This article reflects upon Marian apparitions that occurred during the years 1961 to 1965 in the village of San Sebastián de Garabandal, or Garabandal, in northern Spain, giving rise to pilgrimages ever since. The events coincided with the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, or Vatican II. Garabandal is the only Marian apparition event to have prophesied and commented on Vatican II (Serre & Caux 2001: 256). Nevertheless, in Christendom, travelling to Garabandal is regarded as an alternative pilgrimage. Garabandal attracts only a small number of dedicated followers and pilgrims. After a visit in April 2009, the high season for pilgrimages to the village, I can confirm that few pilgrims find their way to Garabandal. On the other hand, an unexploited site such as Garabandal is attractive to pilgrims. The pilgrimage route is in several ways unique compared to journeys to other Marian pilgrimage shrines, since it has not yet been approved by the Catholic Church. Pilgrimages to Garabandal were even officially forbidden for several years. The Catholic Church authorities originally declared travelling to Garabandal as forbidden for church officials such as priests and others. Attempts were made to prevent pilgrimages by forbidding the celebration of Masses that referred to the apparitions (Nolan & Nolan 1989: 286). We ask ourselves why this was done, and we may also ask why it is no longer forbidden to do this pilgrimage. I will give an overview of the case of Garabandal through the years and reflect upon why this place is considered special in comparison to other pilgrimage sites. This study examines such aspects of pilgrimages to this village as location and motivation, the Virgin Mary and Marian apparitions and also the messages and miracles of Garabandal.

Marian apparitions

Marian apparitions are not a new or minor cause of Christian pilgrimages through history. Most of these extraordinary events are similar to each other but they also display differences. Apparitions and pilgrimages have increased since medieval times (Nolan & Nolan 1989: 85). Exploring the increasing interest in Marian apparitions, Michael P. Carroll claims that 'nothing so testifies to Mary's importance as the fact that she intervenes directly in the affairs of this earth by appearing face to face with ordinary Catholics' (Carroll 1986: 115). Carroll mentions the conclusion drawn by Karl Rahner that during the Middle Ages appearances of saints, prelates and Jesus were also common but in modern times Marian apparitions have escalated. These phenomena began in the middle of the nineteenth century as we know them in, for example, La Salette and Lourdes, France. Of the apparitions that have occurred in the twentieth century, we should mention those in Fatima, Portugal. These places have attracted a lot of pilgrims, since appearances are said to have taken place there. The interest, mainly from the Catholic Church and its members, has not ceased. These sacred places or shrines continue to attract a lot of pilgrims every year.

Mary Lee Nolan and Sidney Nolan (1989) who discuss modern Christian pilgrimages since 1780 confirm that the most famous modern-age shrines are the church-approved sites in such places. They note that Marian sites not necessarily approved by the Church that nowadays 'draw pilgrims on an international, and sometimes intercontinental basis, are found in such widely scattered places as Garabandal, Spain; Kerizinen in Brittany, France; Heroldsbach and Pfaffenhofen in south west Germany; and San Damiano near Piacenza, Italy' (Nolan & Nolan 1989: 102). They suggest that the interest in such sites will increase and that a few of them will gain full approval from future bishops since they are 'similar in type to the accepted Marian apparitional shrines of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' (Nolan & Nolan 1989: 102). It is established practise that decisions concerning Marian apparitions are in the hands of local bishops.

Another contemporary site known for its Marian apparitions is Medjugorje in Bosnia and Herzegovina. On 6 June 2009, the local bishop Peric in Mostar made public a letter about Medjugorje that shows an example of the Catholic Church's view upon unapproved pilgrim sites: 'Brothers and sisters, let us not act as if these 'apparitions' were recognized and worthy of faith. . .' (Medjugorje09). Bishop Peric continued: 'If, as Catholics, devoted sons and daughters of the church, we want to live according to the norms and the teach-

ing of the church, glorifying the Holy Trinity, venerating Blessed Mary. . . and professing all the church has established in the creed, we do not turn to certain alternative ‘apparitions’ or ‘messages’ to which the church has not attributed any supernatural character’ (Medjugorje09). To begin with, this was also a central question in Garabandal: whether the visions seen by four young girls had a supernatural origin or not (Serre & Caux 2001: 59 ff.). As we can see from Medjugorje, the matter of defining apparitions in categories such as supernatural or not, is still important for the Church today. Another word used is authentic, which here seems to have a similar meaning as supernatural. Scientists would prefer not to use these categorizations. Many kinds of physical examinations were also performed by physicians.

Regardless of this, people have claimed that the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, has appeared at the above mentioned places under names such as Our Lady of La Salette, Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Fatima or, as in Garabandal, Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Serre & Caux 2001: 41). The use of Mount Carmel uniquely connects the apparitions with Jewishness and Israel. During the apparitions, the Virgin has been talking directly to a small number of people, mainly young people or children. She has thus been talking to the entire world to make it change and to do penance. The Virgin has been giving prophecies about a future to come, a conditional future dependent upon the world changing its attitude towards God. In Garabandal the visionaries once sang a song while in ecstasy containing the lyrics ‘The Virgin has warned us: With this time, it makes three’ (Serre & Caux 2001: 128) apparently referring to Lourdes and Fatima, the two major Marian shrines and also marking Garabandal’s importance. The major apparitional shrines are known because of common secrets about the future and perhaps supernatural miracles and healings of the sick. We may ask ourselves how we are to handle extraordinary happenings that even scientists have regarded as possible interventions of a supernatural character. For example in Fatima in 1917, the so-called ‘miracle of the sun’ was witnessed by many thousands of people. The secrets of Fatima are well known, but partly because of the unwillingness of church authorities to fully release their contents. Here we have two elements, secrets and miracles, which entice many pilgrims to make the journey to shrines such as those mentioned here.

Motivations for pilgrimages to Garabandal

Garabandal is such a site or place, but also special since its secrets and miracle are in the future. The main reasons for making a pilgrimage to Garabandal seems to be: an interest in the apparitional events of the past; the apocalyptic information given to the visionaries about the end of time, but not the end of the world; the two special messages given to the world; expectations of healing; prophecies about future events that have been prophesied to happen in the near future, such as a warning and a miracle. Victor Turner reminds us that pilgrimages are often undertaken for the purpose of salvation, for the good of the soul, and that a pilgrimage has in a way replaced initiation rituals (Turner 1974: 65). The apparitions in Garabandal talk about a worldwide warning or purification but perhaps, above all, about a coming miracle, greater than any miracle ever performed by God before. These things are described in great detail and even with dates. This information is said to come from the vision of the Virgin Mary through four child visionaries.

There is much literature and research on approved Marian shrines. However, Garabandal is only a footnote, if mentioned at all, in most of the contemporary books about Marian pilgrimages. The literature about Garabandal mainly comes from its promoters. The well-known pilgrim route El Camino Frances, the nearby pilgrimage from France to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain, does not pass through Garabandal. A case study of this pilgrim route is 'Ancient and Modern Pilgrimage: El Camino Frances' by Nigel D. Morpeth in *Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Management. An International Perspective* (2007). The same book also includes Ruth Blackwell's article 'Motivations for Religious Tourism, Pilgrimage, Festivals and Events'. Both authors define religious tourism, and one difference in category that Blackwell points out, referring to Lefebvre, is that between pilgrimage sites and shrine sites. A shrine normally has a relic or image to venerate. The pilgrim site is a place where a miracle has occurred (Blackwell 2007: 35–47). According to this, a pilgrimage to Garabandal is not yet a complete pilgrimage since it lacks such elements as a relic or a miracle that has occurred. There was actually what was called 'The little miracle' (Serre & Caux 2001: 142). But we could say that the obvious qualifications for pilgrimages to Garabandal are still very limited. A pilgrimage usually also presents a kind of struggle. The site is usually hard to reach. Garabandal, some 50 kilometres up in the Cantabrian Mountains, does offer this. It is in several ways an ideal small pilgrimage site, almost designed for the purpose, with special difficulties adherent to it, including access to its location up in the mountains. To reach the hill site with its pine grove, the last

100 metres have to be made by foot on a rocky trail. Blackwell speaks about process theories of motivation for pilgrimages, about effort and expectation (Blackwell 2007: 42 f.). Reaching Garabandal is made up of these characteristics.

The high seasons for pilgrimages to shrines in honour of Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary are April and September (Nolan & Nolan 1989: 63). The most important months to make the journey to Garabandal are March to May and especially around Easter and in the middle of April. An organized pilgrimage group from the United States has made an annual visit to Garabandal in April for about thirty years, organized by Maria Saraco, an eyewitness from the 1960s. Nowadays, the Internet plays an important role for people not able to visit a site like Garabandal. Travel via the web demands no effort, painful good-byes or long voyages, being 'a series of actualizations of temporally limited virtual sites. . .' (Apolito 2005: 226 f.). As we will see further on, the expectation of a future miracle is very central for pilgrimages to Garabandal. It is possible to get information by email before the date of this future miracle through the website of Joey Lomangino, a key witness of the events of the 1960s. Lomangino declares how useful online technology is in spreading the message and in giving information to future pilgrims who prepare to visit Garabandal on the day of the miracle:

You can help in the promotion of the message around the world. Use of this new technology ensures that the story of Garabandal reaches new places and new generations before the prophesied events occur. Please refer this website to your friends, family, church groups, religious organizations and apostolates via chat room and email. If this new technology passes you by, promote the website to your children and grandchildren. (Garabandal US.)

Reports of healing are also an important part of the Garabandal events and websites (e.g., Our Lady CA) and therefore also for pilgrimages. Otherwise life in the small village could be described as calm, with elderly villagers viewing the small number of pilgrims, villagers that were eyewitnesses to the events in the 1960s. Many of them were interviewed in *Garabandal. The Village Speaks* (1981) by Ramon Pérez.

Marian apparitions in Garabandal

The apparitions in Garabandal occurred in the years 1961–5. Four girls, of around 12 years old were picking or stealing apples. Like the first persons mentioned in the Bible they felt bad after stealing the apples. Suddenly they heard thunder and an angel appeared before them. Later on the vision of the Virgin Mary would appear to have conversations with them. The girls very much loved meeting her. This is how the visionary Conchita Gonzalez describes the Virgin Mary:

The Virgin Mary

The Virgin comes in a white robe, a blue mantle, and a crown of little golden stars. The feet are not seen; the hands are open and there is a scapular on the right one: the scapular is brown. Her hair is long, a dark chestnut brown colour, wavy, and parted in the middle; the face is somewhat elongated; the nose is also somewhat long, and fine; the mouth, very beautiful with slightly full lips. The colour of her face is tan, but much lighter than that of the Angel, different. The voice is very beautiful, very unusual. I don't know how to explain it. There is no other woman who resembles the Virgin, either in the voice, or in anything. (Conchita's Diary: Chapter 3.)

The children entered into ecstatic states some two thousand times and every day or night in 1962. Inhabitants in Garabandal could look out of their windows any day or night and get to see one or more of the visionaries following the vision of the Virgin Mary. This often happened during the night and the young visionaries went out from their homes in ecstasy, usually accompanied by their mother or another family member. This happened in summer as well as during snowstorms. It was not really possible to stop the children from following the vision. Their bodies were insensitive to contact. The visionaries' faces were shining with an interior beauty. Usually the visionaries spoke of the communications with the Virgin formally and with seriousness but also in a typically childish way:

The Virgin has told us: The world continues the same. . . That it has not changed at all. FEW WILL SEE GOD. They are so few that it causes The Virgin much sorrow. What a pity that it does not change. . . The cup is filling up. How sad The Virgin was although She didn't let us see it because She loves us so much and She suffers alone. She is so good! Be

good everyone so that The Virgin will be happy. . . . (Garabandal: June 23, 1962.)

Two or three men could not lift up the visionaries but they could easily lift up each other to get closer to the vision of the Virgin. Even if they could spend three or four hours during the night following and communicating with the Virgin, they were never ill and they had always recovered in the morning and were ready to go to school. The numerous visits by the Virgin to the young girls had different purposes. Among the most unique are two messages given to the world to repent and to turn towards God. At shrines such as Lourdes or Fatima the Virgin never specifically talked about giving messages (Serre & Caux 2001: 36). The first message of Garabandal had already been revealed by an angel, on 24 June 1961. About two weeks later, on 4 July, the Virgin taught the children the message and told them it was not to be made public until 18 October the same year:

First message. October 18, 1961

We must make many sacrifices, perform much penance, and visit the Blessed Sacrament frequently. But first, we must be very good. If we do not, a chastisement will befall us. The cup is already filling up, and if we do not change, a very great chastisement will come upon us. (Serre & Caux 2001: 108.)

According to Father Ramón María Andreu, who witnessed several ecstasies, there were around five thousand people in the village that day in October (Conchita's Diary: Chapter 12). On the same day an ecstasy followed the announcement of the message. The Virgin then told Conchita Gonzalez that a great miracle certainly would come. At that time the visionary did not know what it would consist of, or when it would come. From November to January further explanations were given to her about the future miracle (Serre & Caux 2001: 158ff). In a letter of 28 May 1965 to Joey Lomangino she explained why the miracle would come: There will first be a warning sent worldwide from heaven to induce humanity to change towards God and to prepare for the great miracle. If the world still does not change a chastisement will fall upon mankind, the Virgin told Conchita Gonzalez. The Virgin also explained that the world believes in heaven and hell, but that people do not think they have to go to the one or the other. That humanity thinks only of the present life (Serre & Caux 2001: 186). Also the second and last of the messages was foretold by Conchita Gonzalez and this time as much as six months earlier.



Conchita Gonzalez receiving the final message of Garabandal on 18 June 1965. Photo www.garabandalarchives.com.

The Virgin revealed to her on 8 December 1964, that she would be given a second message for the world on 18 June 1965. During that spring, people's expectations for this message increased to a very high level. Several thousands of people were again present to witness the receiving and announcing of the message (Serre & Caux 2001: 188).

Second message. June 18, 1965

As my Message of October 18 has not been complied with and has not been made known to the world, I am advising you that this is the last one. Before the cup was filling up. Now it is flowing over. Many

priests, bishops and cardinals are on the road to perdition and are taking many more souls with them. Less and less importance is being given to the Eucharist. You should turn the wrath of God away from yourselves by your efforts. If you ask His forgiveness with sincere hearts, He will pardon you. I, your mother, through the intercession of Saint Michael the Archangel, ask you to amend your lives. You are now receiving the last warnings. I love you very much and do not want your condemnation. Pray to us with sincerity and we will grant your requests. You should make more sacrifices. Think about the passion of Jesus. (Serre & Caux 2001: 192.)

The messages and prophecies of Garabandal can be summarised as follows: (1) There are two unique and specific messages for converting the whole world. (2) It foretells the end of times but not the end of the world. The end of times has been interpreted as it happened with the end of the Roman Empire and is said to arrive after the late or present Pope. (3) It foretells a worldwide warning and a miracle with a certain date. If the world still does not change toward God a chastisement will be sent over the world. This chastisement is conditional.

We must finally mention that Church authorities have done only brief examinations of the events in Garabandal. The village priest until November 1965, Father Valentin Marichalar, was never interrogated, neither by the bishop nor by the special Commission (Pérez 1981: 71). Nevertheless, a Decree issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 15 November 1966 and in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council granted a new responsible freedom in the field of apparitions, revelations, visions and prophecies (Serre & Caux 2001: 210). In order to calm things down, Bishop Puchol Montis of the Santander diocese in March 1967 made public a denial in which the four visionaries declared that there had not been any apparitions; there were no messages; all the events had natural explanations and had started as innocent children's games (Pérez 1981: 64f). However, the visionaries had been under much pressure from church authorities during long interviews to agree upon this. Subsequently, the visionaries have withdrawn their denials and have lived lives dedicated to the Catholic faith with devotion to the Virgin Mary. They remember the apparitions as dreams since they were then in ecstasy. And there is one circumstance that they have never denied and that is the feeling of joy they experienced before entering into ecstasy. Before the ecstasies they experienced three interior summons or mystical calls, *llamadas*:

A feeling of joy accompanies the first call. One or two hours later, the delight felt by the visionaries signalled the second call. 'As if they had been guided,' they would set out towards the site where the ecstasy was to take place. The third 'llamada' gave them yet a more intense joy, which would increase until they would effectively fall into ecstasy a few minutes later. (Serre & Caux 2001: 72.)

In June 1970, Bishop José Cirarda Lachiondo of Santander published a long document, said to have been sent to all bishops of the whole church. He reminds the recipients that the messages from Garabandal do not contain any-



Looking at the vision of the Virgin Mary, Conchita Gonzalez is offering her crucifix to be kissed. Photo www.garabandalarchives.com.

thing contrary to the teaching of the Church on faith and morals but that the phenomena all have a natural explanation and that pilgrimages and exercises there are discouraged (Pérez 1981: 65 ff.). The Bishop (1971–91) Juan Del Val Gallo, member of an investigating Special Commission in 1961, requested that the ‘Garabandal dossier’ should be officially reopened, but Rome refused since no new events had occurred. He later lifted the interdiction upon priests, forbidding them to go up to Garabandal (Serre & Caux 2001: 218 f.). The church’s unofficial position on Garabandal is ‘*Non-constat de supernaturalitate*. . . It is not certain that the events are of supernatural origin, or the supernatural origin has not been established. . . ? (Garabandal Clarification), which is to say that the events are still open to the possibility of recognition as being authentic. Garabandal has not yet been approved by the Catholic Church, but neither has it been condemned. The current Bishop of Santander, Archbishop Vincente Zamora, as well as the Catholic Church, holds the position of ‘wait and see’ upon any new information and for the date of the miracle to arrive.

Scientists such as prominent doctors and psychiatrists examined the four visionaries and found them in very good condition during or after the ecstasies: ‘Pinching, burns, intense light: so many sensory stimulants producing no effect’ (Serre & Caux 2001: 61). After years of observation, a child specialist certified that the girls had always been completely normal and that the ecstasies did not fall under any known physiological phenomenon (Garabandal Science). A Special Commission was set up by the bishop to investigate the events. The members, three priests and two physicians, visited the village three times during the years. The visionaries share their opinion about their examiners: ‘The Commission has come up here very few times; never did it bother with us; they interrogated only certain persons in the village chosen among those who did not believe in the apparitions’ (Pérez 1981: 71). Doctor

Luis Moralès, psychiatrist and head of the commission, commented on the phenomena: ‘This is in no way supernatural. . . it is a psychogenic reaction to the situation. . . vulgar hysterical phenomena. . .’ (Serre & Caux 2001: 59 ff.). Dr Moralès assured that the ecstasies would cease within the same day. Ten minutes later the visionaries entered into ecstasy but Dr Moralès had already left the place (Pérez 1981: 70). Twenty years later he reversed his position and publicly defended the authenticity of the apparitions. Science has so far been unable to explain the events, the over two thousand apparitions which occurred in San Sebastián de Garabandal in 1961–5.

The future miracle

The term miracle (Lat. *mirari*) is usually used about a phenomenon that has already occurred in the past. A miracle is regarded as an extraordinary happening that has unexpectedly surprised unknowing people. Niels Christian Hvidt talks about three aspects in the term miracle: its nature, its psychology and its symbolism. Hvidt refers to Thomas Aquinas when defining a miracle as something above the order of nature or natural law. In a Christian context God himself is performing this event. The psychological effect on witnesses of a miracle is great. Thirdly, the symbolic effect of a miracle is important for the interpretation. A miracle has usually been seen as a word or act of God to help people know more about God and salvation (Hvidt 2003: 14 f.). On the other hand, human beings have as far as we know always been hoping or praying for divine intervention. In the case of the events in Garabandal, it could be seen as if such a prayer was partially answered. The inhabitants of the isolated village have been praying the Catholic rosary prayer together in the small village church every night since time immemorial, or at least over the last five hundred years (Serre & Caux 2001: 15). This in order to have the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, to protect them through the assistance of her son. In the early 1960s things took a dramatic turn when the vision of the Virgin Mary appeared to the four girls in Garabandal. And on 18 October 1961, after giving the first message, the Virgin promised that her son Jesus in the future would perform a miracle in Garabandal, so the world would believe (Serre & Caux 2001: 109). These are the words of the visionary Conchita Gonzalez:

The Virgin told only me about the miracle. She forbade me to say what it will consist of. I cannot reveal the date either until eight days beforehand. What I am allowed to say is that it will coincide with an event in the

church, and with the feast of a saint who is a martyr of the Holy Eucharist; it will be at half-past eight on a Thursday evening; it will be visible to everybody in the village and on the surrounding mountainsides; the sick who are present will be cured and the incredulous will believe. It will be the greatest miracle that Jesus has worked for the world. There will not remain the slightest doubt that it comes from God and is for the good of mankind. In the pine grove, a sign of the miracle will be left forever. It will be possible to film and televise it. (Sanchez-Ventura y Pascual 2000: 167.)

This summons up one reason for pilgrimages to Garabandal. But there had already been ‘The little miracle’. Three weeks in advance Conchita Gonzalez announced the mystical Communion, a host given by an angel to appear on her tongue. This happened on 18 July 1962 (Serre & Caux 2001: 138 f.). The great miracle is to become the greatest miracle God has ever performed and lead Christians back to unity. It will take place in Garabandal. The date will be announced by Conchita Gonzalez eight days in advance so as many people as possible can travel there. As Conchita Gonzalez simply declares in an interview with Auxiliary Bishop Francisco Garmendia of New York: ‘Because whatever the Virgin says happens just as she says it’ (Garabandal Journal). In the interview she also says:

I would like to add, however, with reference to Rome, that some priests or people are putting too much pressure on the Church to approve Garabandal. I believe it would be better that this be left in the hands of God. Let them speak about and spread the Message of the Virgin, but leave the rest in the hands of God. . . .Before, when I was so concerned about whether Rome would believe me or not, the Lord Himself told me: ‘Don’t worry about being believed, especially in Rome. I will do everything.’ I would like to tell this to all those who want the Bishop and Rome to hurry ahead in this matter. (Garabandal Journal.)

One interesting detail is that a Catholic priest became involved in seeing the vision of the Virgin Mary and the future miracle. Father Luis María Andreu, a Jesuit Doctor in Theology and Professor of Theology in Oña, Burgos, was visiting Garabandal and celebrated mass in the village church on 8 August 1961. That evening the girls fell into ecstasy inside the church. Father Andreu followed their ecstatic walk up to the pines and suddenly he fell in ecstasy. He shouted ‘Milagro!’ (Miracle) four times: ‘His eyes fixed on heaven, he was granted to see the Blessed Virgin of Mount Carmel, and also, by anticipation,

the future great Miracle which is to take place at San Sebastián de Garabandal' (Serre & Caux 2001: 85). The visionaries had seen him during their ecstasy. Father Andreu died the same night after having reported what he had experienced earlier:

I am filled with joy! What a favour the Blessed Virgin has granted me! How lucky we are to have such a Mother in heaven! We must not be afraid of the supernatural. The children have taught us how to speak to the Blessed Virgin. For me, there can be no doubt! Why did the Blessed Virgin choose us, yes, us? Today is the happiest day of my life! (Serre & Caux 2001: 86)

Conclusion

San Sebastián de Garabandal is a pilgrimage site that still awaits its pilgrims. The village and its surroundings offer a traditional site for pilgrims, but the main elements for a traditional pilgrimage are not yet completed. Such elements are a relic, an image to venerate, or a miracle. Therefore neither the Catholic Church, nor scientists, have approved the apparitions in Garabandal, although they have never been condemned, either. There are no contradictions to the Church's traditional teachings or morals. Today the main motivation for pilgrimages to Garabandal is their interest in the past events as well as an expectation of the foretold future events. One of the visionaries, Conchita Gonzalez, has in mysterious ways been prepared for announcing a future miracle. Before having ecstasies she and the other visionaries experienced three interior calls of joy. Three weeks in advance she announced and later experienced 'The little miracle'. Six months in advance she announced and later received the second message of Garabandal. For almost fifty years Conchita Gonzalez from Garabandal has been facing her biggest challenge: to announce 'The great miracle'. The visionary knows the date and will announce it eight days in advance. Huge expectations, with unique Jewish overtones, are connected to this event that will motivate many pilgrims to make the journey to the mountains of northern Spain. The pilgrims will go with journalists, television teams and scientists. If or when this event will take place the idyllic village of Garabandal will certainly become a major shrine in Christianity.

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