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# An Exploration of the Context and Ecclesiastical Investigations of the Virgin's Reported Appearance in Knock, Ireland in 1879

Erin Meikle

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AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONTEXT AND ECCLESIASTICAL  
INVESTIGATIONS OF THE VIRGIN'S REPORTED APPEARANCE IN KNOCK,  
IRELAND IN 1879

A Thesis

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts

By

Erin M. Meikle, Ph.D.

May 2019

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Erin Meikle

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INVESTIGATIONS OF THE VIRGIN'S REPORTED APPEARANCE IN KNOCK,  
IRELAND IN 1879

By

Erin M. Meikle, Ph.D.

Approved March 21, 2019

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Kenneth Parker, Ph.D.  
Professor of Historical Theology  
(Committee Chair)

---

William Wright IV, Ph.D.  
Professor of Theology  
(Committee Member)

---

James P. Swindal, Ph.D.  
Dean, McAnulty College and Graduate  
School of Liberal Arts

---

Marinus Chijioko Iwuchukwu, Ph.D.  
Chair, Theology  
Associate Professor of Theology

## ABSTRACT

# AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONTEXT AND ECCLESIASTICAL INVESTIGATIONS OF THE VIRGIN'S REPORTED APPEARANCE IN KNOCK, IRELAND IN 1879

By

Erin M. Meikle, Ph.D.

May 2019

Thesis supervised by Kenneth Parker, Ph.D.

On August 21, 1879, the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, St. John the Evangelist, and the Lamb of God reportedly appeared in Knock, Ireland. Ecclesiastical authorities of the Roman Catholic Church investigated this reported apparition in 1879 and again in 1936. The first chapter of this paper explores the processes by which the Church investigates alleged apparitions and considers different models for conceptualizing the Church. The second chapter unpacks the context of two nineteenth century French apparitions. The third chapter explores the Knock apparition and the immediate historical context surrounding the apparition. The analyses in the first two chapters serve as lenses for making sense of the interpretations and reception of the Knock apparition. The analysis of the Knock apparition in the third chapter suggests that the laity interpreted the Knock apparition as a sign of comfort from the Virgin Mary after experiencing much

suffering during the Great Famine and the Land War. In contrast, the local bishops were more reserved in making a definitive judgment about the authenticity and meaning of the apparition. The analyses also suggest that some sort of recognition from the clergy and enthusiasm from the laity is needed in order for the fruits of an apparition to endure.

## DEDICATION

With Love to our glorious Mother and Queen in Heaven.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have been able to explore these historic apparitions of Our Blessed Mother and to become closer to her throughout the process. Engaging in this type of work required the support and cooperation of many parties. It was a pleasure and honor to have been able to work with others throughout the investigation and writing stages of this project.

First, I would like to thank my thesis director, Dr. Kenneth Parker. Dr. Parker's knowledge, kindness, encouragement, and thoughtful feedback undoubtedly supported the growth of this work and cultivated my skills in conducting historical theology research. Second, I would like to thank my thesis reader, Dr. Wright. I am very thankful for the time and thoughtfulness Dr. Wright put into reading and providing me with feedback on this work. The strong faith in God and expressed interest in the Blessed Virgin Mary of both Dr. Parker and Dr. Wright was inspiring and motivating. I forever will be grateful for their interest in this work.

Third, being granted permission to access primary resources and the assistance of colleagues supported the growth of this project. I am thankful to have had the opportunity to visit the International Marian Research Institute in Dayton, Ohio, the Knock Museum in Knock, County Mayo, Ireland, and the Archdiocesan Archives in Tuam, County Galway, Ireland. The literary resources and primary resource archival materials I consulted at these institutions were invaluable to the development of this work. I also am very appreciative of the time that two of my colleagues, Fr. Fortunatus Mugisha and Matthew Scruggs, spent helping me to translate documents from Latin to English.

Fourth, I cannot express enough appreciation for the love and support of my family. The Catholic faith of my grandparents, parents, and siblings helped develop a strong foundation for my own relationship with God and contributed to my desire to study theology. In particular, my mom taught us how to pray the Rosary which was the beginning of my devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. My husband, Dan, was supportive throughout every stage of this project. Without question or hesitation, he traveled to Ireland with me in order for me to visit the archives in Knock and Tuam. He continuously expressed enthusiasm for this project and encouraged me to continue this work. Thank you, Dan, for your unfailing commitment to my happiness.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Processes for Investigating Marian Apparitions

## Introduction

In the west of Ireland in the isolated town of Knock, County Mayo, something out of the ordinary occurred on August 21, 1879. About 20 minutes after sunset at 7:30 P.M., a shining light appeared on the wall of the chapel in Knock according to fifteen eyewitnesses.<sup>1</sup> Four glorious and identifiable figures were seen along with the light – the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph, St. John the Evangelist, and last but not least, the Lamb of God. The apparition lasted for about three hours.

This apparition in Knock, Ireland is only one of many appearances of the Virgin Mary since antiquity. According to tradition, the first of these reported apparitions occurred not long after Mary's Assumption in Spain to St. James. The most well-known are recent appearances in the last two centuries, which have resulted in major devotional movements: Lourdes in France, Fatima in Portugal, and Medjugorje in Bosnia are examples of the most notable. Yet reported appearances of the Virgin Mary are not out of the ordinary but instead are phenomena of the Christian era. Approximately 2,600 reported Marian apparitions are documented in a dictionary of apparitions from the Common Era, but many reported and unreported apparitions are not included in this dictionary. There were 21,000 reports of apparitions of the Virgin Mary during the twentieth century alone.<sup>2</sup>

Only a handful of these appearances attained a strong, positive approval from the ecclesial authorities of the Catholic Church while others attained more neutral or negative

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition in Nineteenth-century Ireland*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), 172; John MacPhilpin, *The Apparitions and Miracles at Knock: Also, the Official Depositions of the Eyewitnesses*, (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1880), 14.

<sup>2</sup> "Dictionary Published with 2,600 Apparitions of the Virgin Mary," *Rome Reports*, 2017, <https://www.romereports.com/en/2011/01/03/dictionary-published-with-2-600-apparitions-of-the-virgin-mary/>.

judgments by the ecclesial authorities. Many apparitions failed to be investigated because the ecclesiastical authorities lacked the resources to be able investigate them all. For the apparitions that were investigated, it is possible that some of the judgments were grounded in evaluations of miracles that could not be fully comprehended or accessed by those judging the evidence.

Human apprehension and appreciation of apparitions differ. In particular, the laity and ecclesial authorities potentially have divergent assessments of apparition messages and their meanings. At the time of the Knock apparition, the Irish Catholics were deeply devoted to Mary. Irish Catholic religiosity largely was characterized by participating in pilgrimages to holy wells and sacred places while mass attendance was very low.<sup>3</sup> In the nineteenth century, ecclesiastical authorities sought to reorient popular Irish devotions toward the liturgy and hierarchically approved devotional practices. Consequently, the ecclesiastical authorities found in some apparitions, of which Knock is an example, a means of re-situating and re-enforcing the authority of the Catholic Church in Ireland as institution.

In order to better understand the ways in which the Knock apparition was received and interpreted, the first chapter will explore the processes by which Marian apparitions are investigated and the second chapter will explore the ways in which differing models of the Church interacted and competed during the investigations of two additional nineteenth century Marian apparitions (Lourdes and Pontmain). In the third chapter, the contextual situations of Knock and the entire country of Ireland will be considered in order to understand the ways in which the apparition was received and

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<sup>3</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 25, 33.

interpreted by the Irish Catholic laity and the higher clergy.<sup>4</sup> Artifacts from the second Commission of investigation of the Knock apparition will be analyzed in order to better understand the criteria used by ecclesial authorities for their decisions and why this apparition has been granted what could be perceived as unofficial approval by the Church.<sup>5</sup>

## Chapter 1 – Investigating Marian Apparitions

### What is a revelation?

The teaching of the Roman Catholic Church professes that God’s full revelation ended during apostolic times.<sup>6</sup> The complete public revelation through Jesus Christ is accessible to all and is considered to be free from error, when understood correctly, as the Holy Spirit works to uphold the veracity of it throughout time.<sup>7</sup> Catholics are obligated to profess belief in the entirety of this unequivocal public revelation.<sup>8</sup>

Even though it is believed that no further public revelations of Jesus Christ are to occur before the end of time, it is believed that He sends messages to certain people within a particular context in times of need.<sup>9</sup> In fact, throughout Christian history there has been an abundance of reported private revelations. Private revelations, according to Church teaching, are revelations that come indirectly from God and therefore are vulnerable to human error.<sup>10</sup> Authentic private revelations from God do not go beyond

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<sup>4</sup> Stephan B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 7, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Odell, *Those Who Saw Her: Apparitions of Mary* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2010), 136.

<sup>6</sup> Fr. Benedict J. Groeschel, *A Still, Small Voice: A Practical Guide on Reported Revelations* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 25; St. Pope Paul VI, *Dei Verbum* (The Vatican: Vatican Press, 1965), 2, 7, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Groeschel, *A Still Small Voice*, 27, 29.

<sup>8</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 66.

<sup>9</sup> Groeschel, *A Still Small Voice*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Groeschel, *A Still Small Voice*, 27.

what the Word has already revealed to us; but are intended to help the recipients, and perhaps a wider circle of people, to live out the Word with fidelity.<sup>11</sup> Hence, a revelation is the divulgence of a truth, mystery, or divine deed that serves to deepen the Church's understanding of the faith and not contradict it.<sup>12</sup>

One type of authentic revelation from God is a mystical experience.<sup>13</sup> This type of revelation is characterized by a person being so closely united with God that they receive gifts, such as knowledge or strength.<sup>14</sup> Dubay observes that, according to Catholic tradition, it is impossible for this type of revelation to have diabolic origins since the recipient has obtained a very close union with God. When mystics are being investigated for sainthood, the revelations they received, as evidenced in their writings, are examined to determine if they are free from misalignment with faith or morals.<sup>15</sup> The person is declared venerable if the writings do not contradict doctrine.<sup>16</sup>

A second type of revelation is an apparition. Apparitions generally are experienced by unassuming, simple people.<sup>17</sup> An apparition is an external event where the witnesses observe and/or hear a glorified body.<sup>18</sup> Apparitions are not equivalent to hallucinations, dreams, and illusions which occur only in the mind. Therefore, an apparition differs from a vision which occurs internally, and in contrast, is the *bona fide*,

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<sup>11</sup>Blessed John Henry Newman, "On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine," *The Rambler* (1859): 2, 7; St. Pope Paul VI, *Dei Verbum*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Colin B. Donovan, "Apparitions/Private Revelations," EWTN, 2001, <https://www.ewtn.com/expert/answers/apparitions.htm>, 2001; Fr. Thomas Dubay, *Fire Within: St Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the Gospel on Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 256.

<sup>13</sup> Donovan, "Apparitions," 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Dubay, *Fire Within*, 256.

<sup>15</sup> Donovan, "Apparitions/Private Revelations," 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Donovan, "Apparitions/Private Revelations," 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Donovan, "Apparitions/Private Revelations," 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Roy Abraham Varghese, *God-sent: A History of the Accredited Apparitions of Mary*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), 28.

external appearance of a resurrected body to someone else. It is often the case that the external appearance of the glorified body does not appear in the external vision to all those present during an apparition event. According to Varghese, when we observe an external event of something that naturally occurs in the physical world, it does not require any effort on those who have been blessed with the sense of vision to see it. An apparition, a type of paramystical experience which has divine or diabolic origins and does not occur naturally in the physical world,<sup>19</sup> instead, requires another type of vision, which perhaps cannot be explained and is not gifted to all. Hence, visionaries of the Blessed Virgin Mary often claim to be unable to compare the Virgin's beauty to anyone or anything on Earth.<sup>20</sup> The type of vision needed to fully experience an apparition might be similar to the vision that we hope to enjoy in our glorified bodies one day.<sup>21</sup>

### **Why do Marian apparitions have to be investigated?**

The Virgin Mary allegedly has appeared a substantial number of times across the globe during the modern era. Some of these apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary have been deemed plausibly authentic, in part because the messages of these private revelations do not contradict the public revelation received by the Church. Other investigated Marian apparitions have resulted in ecclesial verdicts that suggest the private revelations had alternative origins, such as diabolic origins (e.g., Magdalena of the Cross of Spain) or parapsychological experiences.<sup>22</sup> According to St. Louis de Montfort, the devil beguiles humans into developing erroneous devotions to false apparitions.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Groeshel, *A Still Small Voice*, 153.

<sup>20</sup> Varghese, *God-sent*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Varghese, *God-sent*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Groeschel, *A Still Small Voice*, 5; Varghese, *God-sent*, 225.

<sup>23</sup> St. Louis de Montfort, "True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin," in *God Alone: The Collected Writings of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, (Bay Shore: Montfort Publications, 1987), 90-92.

Apparitions with parapsychological appearances, on the other hand, are those which can be explained by normal physical events in nature.<sup>24</sup> Church investigations of apparitions have a negative and positive purpose. Ecclesiastical authorities of the Church investigate Marian apparitions in order to prevent the faithful from being led astray by a false appearance with diabolic origins. Yet it is equally important to investigate a Marian apparition in order to determine if the origins are divine; because if they are, they are occasions for the faithful to listen to the Virgin Mary and receive her messages.

Apparitions are thus investigated by ecclesiastical authorities for the validity of the reported message or appearance from the visionary. Erroneous testimonies can be harmful when they contradict the truth the Church has received through public revelation.<sup>25</sup> A visionary might unintentionally, or intentionally, communicate a specious account of an apparition. Visionaries are human beings and will make sense of apparitions based on their own understandings, and therefore, will describe the apparitions using ways of communicating that make sense to them.<sup>26</sup> It is possible for a visionary to misinterpret the apparition, fail to recognize the subjectivity in an apparition and fail to understand its symbolism, interpret an apparition based on his/her own needs, or incorrectly describe details of the apparition, failing to remember certain details or embellishing the details.<sup>27</sup> A visionary could also be convinced of the authenticity of an apparition when in fact it is in error. All apparitions at first are viewed with skepticism but it is up to both the laity and the ecclesial authorities to discern whether an apparition

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<sup>24</sup> Groeschel, *A Still Small Voice*, 153.

<sup>25</sup> Groeschel, *A Still Small Voice*, 45.

<sup>26</sup> Groeschel, *A Still Small Voice*, 159.

<sup>27</sup> Groeschel, *A Still Small Voice*, 56-63.

is authentic, false, or fraudulent in order to prevent harmful devotions from being cultivated.<sup>28</sup>

### **Norms for discerning apparitions**

Over time, the responsibility of investigating a Marian apparition has shifted responsibility from the Holy See to local ecclesial authorities. The norms set forth by the Fifth Lateran Council (1512-1517) were the inaugural set of guidelines for analyzing Marian apparitions, but focused primarily on placing the responsibility of discerning revelations with the Apostolic See.<sup>29</sup> In 1563, the decrees of the Council of Trent delegated the responsibility for discerning new miracles to the local bishop.<sup>30</sup> Coinciding with the apparitions at Fatima, Portugal in 1917, a new statute of canon law forbade the publication of news of any reported apparition or revelation without the approval of the local bishop. In 1970, St. Pope Paul VI lifted this ban of publications of apparitions, and shortly thereafter, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith wrote the document “Norms Regarding the Manner of Proceeding in the Discernment of Presumed Apparitions or Revelations” in 1974.<sup>31</sup> This document was approved and published by St. Pope Paul VI and issued in 1978. These norms are to be used a guide for local ecclesial authorities involved with the investigation of a Marian apparition; however, the Apostolic See can intervene with the investigation if necessary.<sup>32</sup> These norms offer insights but

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<sup>28</sup> Groeschel, *A Still Small Voice*, 39-47.

<sup>29</sup> Odell, *Those Who Saw Her*, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Rev. H. J. Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent: Original Text with English Translation* (St. Louis and London, B. Herder Book Co., 1960), 217.

<sup>31</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Norms Regarding the Manner of Proceeding in the Discernment of Presumed Apparitions or Revelations,” The Vatican Press, 1978, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19780225\\_norme-apparizioni\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19780225_norme-apparizioni_en.html); René Laurentin, “The Church and Apparitions – Their Status and Function: Criteria and Reception,” in *National Conference on Medjugorje*, (Notre Dame, IN: Riehle Foundation, May 12-14, 1989), 7.

<sup>32</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Norms,” 1978.

cannot be retroactively applied as norms for the reception of the apparition in Knock, Ireland in 1879.

Just as the *sensus fidelium* is taken into account during the early stages of discerning a development in doctrine, it is also considered important when discerning apparitions.<sup>33</sup> The responsibility to establish conclusive decisions regarding doctrine or revelations rests with the clergy, in part because visionaries can have ulterior motives or unintentionally report details of the apparitions incorrectly.<sup>34</sup> However, not all clergy are members of the teaching authority of the Church, those which are believed to be gifted with the ability to divinely interpret the faith.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, this need for establishing a set of norms to guide ecclesial authorities who have the responsibility of discerning apparitions but are not part of the teaching authority of the Church, developed with the increasing need to investigate a growing number of reported Marian apparitions after the ban on publications was lifted.

These currently used norms for discerning Marian apparitions from the 1978 document appear to have drawn on norms that were utilized previously by the Church. For example, the decrees from the Council of Trent in 1563 forbade public worship at the site of a miracle and acceptance of a miracle until the matter was deliberated by the local bishops and other experts to determine whether the miracle was in concordance with truth received through public revelation.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the norms document from 1978 requires

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<sup>33</sup> International Theological Commission, “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church,” The Vatican Press, 2014, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html).

<sup>34</sup> Newman, “On Consulting the Faithful,” 7.

<sup>35</sup> Armand Robichaud, “The Immaculate Conception in the Magisterium of the Church Before 1854,” *Marian Studies* 19, no. 5 (1954): 73-74, [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2461&context=marian\\_studies](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2461&context=marian_studies).

<sup>36</sup> Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees*, 217; Odell, *Those Who Saw Her*, 33.

local bishops to promptly discern a Marian apparition to prevent harm if the apparition is inauthentic. Pope Benedict XIV, who served as pope from 1740-1758, also established norms for discerning revelations and apparitions which declared that events could only be declared miraculous if they could not be explained by natural causes.<sup>37</sup> The norms used today indicate that one of the positive criteria is that the ecclesial authorities can declare morally that there is a great probability that the apparition is of a supernatural nature.<sup>38</sup> In addition; according to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, a former Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; when apparitions receive approbation from the Holy See, the faithful should discern the authenticity of the apparition carefully and should seriously consider an expression of belief in the apparition.<sup>39</sup> Today, it is the responsibility of the faithful to first and foremost remain grounded in the sacraments, the faith, and to be in communion with ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>40</sup> The faithful secondly should seriously consider the authenticity of apparitions which have obtained positive approval from the Church because it would be unwise to reject God's interventions throughout history.<sup>41</sup> However, an apparition can only be examined based on evidence and thus does not have the certitude of truth which is God alone. Hence, the faithful are not required to express faith in an apparition or any private revelation.<sup>42</sup>

It is very difficult to make a timely judgment about the miraculous nature of the event because testing such claims against critical scientific evaluations take time.<sup>43</sup> The

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<sup>37</sup> "Apparitions Yesterday and Today," International Marian Research Institute, October 13, 2018, <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/a/apparitions-yesterday-and-today.php>.

<sup>38</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

<sup>39</sup> Donovan, "Apparitions/Private Revelations," 2001.

<sup>40</sup> Donovan, "Apparitions/Private Revelations," 2001.

<sup>41</sup> Donovan, "Apparitions/Private Revelations," 2001.

<sup>42</sup> Donovan, "Apparitions/Private Revelations," 2001.

<sup>43</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

norms set forth by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith were established to support ecclesial authorities with discerning the apparition so that they can make an initial judgment in order to determine if devotion related to the apparition should be permitted or condemned. The ecclesial authorities are to make this initial declaration about devotion to the apparition in order to prevent any harm from ensuing if the alleged apparition is judged to be fallacious.

After sufficient time has passed, the ecclesial authorities can make a judgment about the authenticity of an apparition, especially after considering the extent to which the apparition has produced spiritual benefit to others. Ecclesiastical authorities categorize apparitions into one of three categories at the conclusion of an investigation. These categories are: *constat de supernaturalitate* (supernatural), *constat de non supernaturalitate* (not supernatural), and *non constat de supernaturalitate* (nothing supernatural is established).<sup>44</sup> For approved apparitions, no evidence has been found that contradicts doctrine and the supernatural character is deemed worthy of belief (“*constat de supernaturalitate*”).<sup>45</sup> According to the International Marian Research Institute, a limited number of apparitions have achieved this approval status by their local diocese or the Vatican.<sup>46</sup> These approved apparitions include Guadalupe, Mexico (1531); Paris, France (1830); La Salette, France (1846); Lourdes, France (1858); Pontmain, France (1871); Knock, Ireland (1879); Fatima, Portugal (1917); Beauraing, Belgium (1932-1933); Banneux, Belgium (1933); Akita, Japan (1973); Betania, Venezuela (1976);

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<sup>44</sup> Donovan, “Apparitions/Private Revelations,” 2001.

<sup>45</sup> Donovan, “Apparitions/Private Revelations,” 2001.

<sup>46</sup> “Apparitions, Approved,” International Marian Research Institute, accessed October 21, 2018, <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/a/apparitions-approved.php>.

Chontaleu, Nicaragua (1987); and Kibeho, Rwanda (1988).<sup>47</sup> For apparitions with the status of nothing contrary to the faith, a supernatural character has not been established (“*non constat de supernaturalitate*”) but there is nothing about the apparition that is harmful or contradictory to the faith.<sup>48</sup> Finally, apparitions deemed not worthy of belief (“*constat de non supernaturalitate*”) declare that the apparition is not of a supernatural origin from God.<sup>49</sup> Even final verdicts related to an apparition are conjectural – the supernatural character and origins of an apparition cannot be proven.<sup>50</sup> The document consists of four sections that the ecclesial authorities are to consider when discerning an apparition in order to label it according to the three categories.

**Section One: Criteria for Judging Apparitions.** The first section deals with the character of an apparition and establishes both positive and negative criteria associated with an apparition, which are not to be considered fixed, or without being subject to revision, but all of the mentioned criteria should be considered when investigating an apparition.<sup>51</sup> The positive criteria are predicted indicators of an authentic apparition. In contrast, the negative criteria are expected characteristics of a false or fraudulent apparition with a source other than from God. Laurentin emphasized that these criteria do not indicate with absolute certainty a level of authenticity in an apparition.<sup>52</sup> It is possible that those analyzing evidence with these indicators in mind could be biased if evidence for one indicator is very strong. Furthermore, evidence could surface for both positive and negative criteria. Laurentin argues that the indicators must be considered collectively

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<sup>47</sup> “Apparitions, Approved,” International Marian Research Institute, <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/a/apparitions-approved.php>.

<sup>48</sup> Donovan, “Apparitions/Private Revelations,” 2001.

<sup>49</sup> Laurentin, “The Church and Apparitions,” 10.

<sup>50</sup> Laurentin, “The Church and Apparitions,” 8.

<sup>51</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Norms,” 1978.

<sup>52</sup> Laurentin, “The Church and Apparitions,” 12.

to determine whether the evidence overall suggests either a positive (approved), neutral (nothing contrary to faith), or negative (not worthy of belief) conclusion.<sup>53</sup>

The two overall positive indicators are moral certitude and particular circumstances. The particular circumstances include, but are not limited to, the personal characteristics of the witnesses (e.g., the extent to which the witnesses live faithful and moral lives, are psychologically stable, and obedient to ecclesial authorities), an increase or intensification in healthy piety as a result of the apparition, and the extent to which the message of an apparition is consistent with doctrine.<sup>54</sup> Apparitions are declared to be invalid if they are contrary to doctrine or would steer others away from Jesus. In particular; evidence from a Marian apparition is measured against popular piety and truths according to the Bible, Tradition, and the Magisterium in order to determine the level of authenticity of the apparition.<sup>55</sup>

The negative criteria consist of five characteristics to look for and be aware of that would be indicators that an apparition is inauthentic. The first two criteria deal with errors. The first criterion establishes that overt errors about the circumstances of an apparition can surface.<sup>56</sup> The second criterion recognizes that doctrinal errors related to God, the Blessed Mother, or the saints are an immediate indication that the apparition is false. The explanation for this second criterion accounts for the erroneous possibility of an authentic apparition being labeled as false or not worthy of belief.<sup>57</sup> The last three criteria are related to characteristics of the eyewitnesses of an apparition that indicate the

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<sup>53</sup> Laurentin, "The Church and Apparitions," 12.

<sup>54</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

<sup>55</sup> Laurentin, "The Church and Apparitions," 5, 24, 15-16.

<sup>56</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

<sup>57</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

apparition is false. These indicators are: (a) profiting from (or attempting to profit from) the apparition, (b) engaging in serious immoral activity related to the apparition or that was synchronous with the event of the apparition, and (c) psychological abnormalities such as hysteria.<sup>58</sup>

There are some norms believed to be part of the process or criteria for discerning apparitions, which are not mentioned in the norms document published in 1978.<sup>59</sup> First, a misconception is that apparition events must have ceased for ecclesial authorities to make a definitive judgment about an apparition. This is not the case because some ecclesial authorities do not always recognize these norms to be canons of the Church.<sup>60</sup> For example, a judgment was made related to apparitions occurring in Venezuela before the Virgin's appearances had concluded.<sup>61</sup> It is important for sufficient time to have passed in order to make a judgment about some of the criteria related to an apparition (e.g., whether or not the apparition produces spiritual fruits or proves itself to be erroneous), but this does not imply that the apparitions had to have ceased. Similarly, St. Teresa of Avila also emphasized the need for sufficient wait time in making a judgment because the visionaries often have trouble articulating the details of an apparition to others.<sup>62</sup> The confessors, who were the ones discerning the authenticity of an apparition, therefore had to remain patient and vigilantly look for other signs, including spiritual fruits from authentic apparitions or lies from the devil associated with false apparitions before making a judgment.

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<sup>58</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

<sup>59</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

<sup>60</sup> Laurentin, "The Church and Apparitions," 18.

<sup>61</sup> Laurentin, "The Church and Apparitions," 18.

<sup>62</sup> St. Teresa of Avila: *The Interior Castle*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 159.

Second, a phenomenon that often has been associated with positively accepted apparitions are external signs or miracles (e.g., the dancing of the sun at Fatima, the healing waters at Lourdes).<sup>63</sup> These external miracles are not included as criteria for determining the authenticity of an apparition in the set of Norms from 1978, but it seems likely that the faithful and non-faithful would more likely be convinced of the authenticity of an apparition when it is accompanied by an external miracle. It is possible the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith did not include external signs or miracles as part of the criteria because apparitions can occur without them.

**Section Two: Intervention of Ecclesiastical Authority.** The second section of the Norms document addresses under what circumstances ecclesial authorities should begin the process of investigating an apparition and their supervision of ensuing cults or devotions related to the apparition. The title of this section and sentences throughout clearly articulate that the involved ecclesiastical authorities must be competent but does not make it clear what the required competencies might involve.<sup>64</sup> The first norm promulgates that the ecclesial authorities are responsible for investigating an apparition if some sort of related devotion or cult has developed.<sup>65</sup> If there are no evident spiritual fruits from an apparition, then there lacks an urgent reason for investigating the apparition. Therefore, the fourth and last norm in this section declares that ecclesial authorities should abstain from making a judgment about an apparition if the “good of the Church,” is not at stake.<sup>66</sup> The ecclesiastical authorities are to remain prudent and intervene if it becomes necessary.

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<sup>63</sup> Varghese, *God-sent*, 219.

<sup>64</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Norms,” 1978.

<sup>65</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Norms,” 1978.

<sup>66</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Norms,” 1978.

The second and third norms in this section give ecclesiastical authorities direction for overseeing cults or devotions which have or might develop. The second norm makes a distinction between the approval of devotion to an apparition and approval of the authenticity of an apparition.<sup>67</sup> The ecclesial authorities can permit devotion to an apparition after an initial investigation of the criteria from the first section of the Norms document, but this does not imply that they must recognize or approve of the apparition. Consequently, it is imperative for the ecclesial authorities who are cultivating a devotion to make it clear that an apparition has yet to be approved.<sup>68</sup> The third norm clearly establishes the right of the ecclesial authorities to intervene, without being asked to, in serious circumstances. These circumstances include, but are not limited to, the practices of a cult or devotion being abused or promoting false doctrine or the development of a harmful mysticism.<sup>69</sup> The document does not go into further detail about these situations, but it is likely that abuses of a devotion or a harmful mysticism might develop when the focus steers away from Christ and more toward idol worship.

**Section Three: Authorities Competent to Intervene.** The third section of the Norms document establishes the instances when it would be appropriate for either the regional or National Conference of Bishops to become involved with an apparition investigation since the initial responsibility for intervention related to an apparition rests with the local bishop.<sup>70</sup> A request can be made by the local bishop for the regional or national conferences of bishops to become involved if he would like a second opinion. The regional or national conferences of bishops also can intervene if the apparition has

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<sup>67</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

<sup>68</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

<sup>69</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

<sup>70</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

implications for the region or nation and if there is consent from the local bishop.<sup>71</sup> It is emphasized in this section of the Norms document that the authority who can intervene must be “competent” and that the Apostolic See may intervene if requested by the local bishop, by a competent group of the faithful, or at the Apostolic See’s discretion.<sup>72</sup> For example, in the case of the investigations of the apparitions at Medjugorje, Bosnia; Cardinal Ratzinger, who was serving as Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith at the time, ordered the local bishop investigating the apparition (Bishop Zanic) to disband his Commission and for it to be replaced with a Commission led by the Yugoslavian Conference of Bishops in 1986.<sup>73</sup> This all occurred after it had been requested for a Marian apparition expert, René Laurentin, to present the Apostolic See with his research related to apparitions. It is possible that Bishop Zanic and his Commission were replaced with what was thought to be a more qualified group of experts after the evidence from Laurentin’s previous research had been examined. Furthermore, the Apostolic See intervened in this case without the request of the local bishop.

**Section Four: Intervention of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.** The fourth and final section explicated appropriate instances when the Sacred Congregation for the Teaching of the Faith can be consulted during an apparition investigation or when they may oversee or evaluate an ongoing investigation. This section formulates that the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith can involve themselves with the investigations of an apparition at the request of the local bishop or by

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<sup>71</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Norms,” 1978.

<sup>72</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Norms,” 1978.

<sup>73</sup> Laurentin, “The Church and Apparitions,” 14.

expert members of the laity.<sup>74</sup> When the laity requests that the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to intervene, the intent of the laity must be examined in order to verify that they are not trying to confirm cultic practices or to change an already established verdict concerning an apparition.<sup>75</sup> The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has the right to intrude *motu proprio*, after discussing with the local bishop whether the apparition has significance beyond the local context.<sup>76</sup> It then becomes the responsibility of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to evaluate the investigation led by the local bishop and determine whether a new and separate Commission led by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith or another group of ecclesial authorities is needed.<sup>77</sup> According to Laurentin, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith tries to limit the Pope's involvement with apparition investigations in order not to discount or bring into question the infallible teaching of the Pope, since apparition judgments are not conclusive but only speculative.<sup>78</sup>

### **Interpreting the norms and processes for investigating Marian apparitions**

One factor that seems paramount to the ways in which an apparition is received, understood and interpreted is the local, as well as the historical context of the apparition. For example, the laity interpreted the 1871 apparition in Pontmain, France to be a sign that their town of Pontmain was spared from the advancing Prussian troops during the Franco-Prussian War.<sup>79</sup> The Catechism of the Catholic Church also recognizes the

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<sup>74</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

<sup>75</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

<sup>76</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

<sup>77</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

<sup>78</sup> Laurentin, "The Church and Apparitions," 15-16.

<sup>79</sup> Sr. Cheryl A. Porte, *Pontmain, Prophecy and Protest: A Cultural-historical Study of Nineteenth-Century Apparition* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Saint Louis University, 1999), 128-129, 131.

importance of the faithful's receptions of private revelations and indicates that private revelations are to be discerned by the sense of the faithful (*sensus fidelium*), but with the help of the Magisterium.<sup>80</sup> The visionaries of an apparition and those privy to being in the immediate contexts of an apparition without seeing the apparition likely draw on their culture and context to initially interpret an apparition.

Another factor which likely influences the acknowledgement and approval of a Marian apparition are the different, and perhaps competing, ways in which the Church is conceptualized by the clergy and the laity. The visionaries of Marian apparitions typically do not hold positions of power, at least during modern times, within the Church, are of humble origins (e.g., St. Bernadette of Lourdes), and often live out their faith in various ways which are not necessarily aligned with Rome. Consequently, the fruits of an apparition, which are corroborated through the piety of the laity, are fundamental to determining the decisive ruling of an apparition and the longevity of the devotion associated with the apparition. In reality, the power of determining whether a Marian apparition officially obtains a positive approval by the Roman Catholic Church lies with the ecclesial authorities. In other words, "the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit, it would seem, must wait upon the approbation of the official leadership."<sup>81</sup> Because visionaries and the clergy hold different positions of power within the Church and possibly have different ways of living out their faith, it is important to consider different priorities for models of Church by those of different social standing or contexts and the push and pull between these models throughout investigations of Marian apparitions.

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<sup>80</sup> Newman, "On Consulting the Faithful," 7.

<sup>81</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 2002), 37.

Avery Dulles' categorizations for models of Church provides a framework for analyzing the perhaps differing interpretations of and discernment of Marian apparitions by the laity and the clergy. Avery Dulles proposes five models of the Church, which are: (a) the Church as institution, (b) the Church as mystical communion, (c) the Church as sacrament, (d) the Church as herald, and (e) the Church as servant. Within the Church as institution model, all power and authority of the Church is believed to be centralized within the higher clergy and this centralized authority has the power to impose doctrine.<sup>82</sup> Operating within this model alone makes it difficult for development and growth grounded in private revelations and apparitions received by ordinary folk, since the laity have no institutional power. The Church as mystical communion does not rely on structures but recognizes the people of God as the living body of Christ and their relationship to the Holy Spirit.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, the mystical communion model is open to the possibility of growth as the Holy Spirit continues to work within us.<sup>84</sup> The sacrament model prioritizes the sacraments as signs of grace, which brings us closer to God and compels us to live out the Gospel more fully.<sup>85</sup> The Church as herald model prioritizes the Word over the sacraments and its objective is to spread this Word, the public revelation received by the Church.<sup>86</sup> Finally, the Church as servant recognizes that the Church does not exist in a vacuum and interprets the role of the Church as discerning the sign of the times in order to determine how to respond to and exist within the contemporary culture.<sup>87</sup> In particular, the Church as Servant model considers whether and

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<sup>82</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 28-31.

<sup>83</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 45.

<sup>84</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 51.

<sup>85</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 60, 68.

<sup>86</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 68, 76.

<sup>87</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 84.

how doctrine and the hierarchical structures of the Church need to be updated in light of modern developments.

It is important to understand whether and in what ways these proposed models of Church are at work during apparition investigations in order to understand the processes by which apparitions are acknowledged or approved. It is likely that some, if not all, of these models of the Church compete and interact throughout investigations of Marian apparitions. The Irish Catholic Church represents an interesting moment when the institutional model was being asserted by the hierarchy to suppress popular devotions that were no longer tolerated by ecclesiastical authority. The west of Ireland, including the parish of Knock, was impacted by this agenda but somewhat later than the rest of Ireland. The exploration of the interacting and competing models of Church at Knock at the time of the apparition and in the years following will be explored in Chapter 3. The purpose of Chapter 2 is utilitarian. Chapter 2 unpacks the immediate historical contexts surrounding two nineteenth century French apparitions in order to juxtapose these apparitions with the Knock apparition analyzed in Chapter 3.

## CHAPTER 2

### Apparitions in Pontmain and Lourdes: Interpreting these Apparitions Through the Lens of the Local and Ecclesiastical Contexts

The nineteenth century was characterized by numerous apparitions of The Blessed Virgin Mary, in particular in France. The French faced hardships and revolutionary changes during the nineteenth century, and the dates and/or locations of some reported apparitions coincided with major historical events. Many French Catholics believed Mary had a special love for them and their country, and that France had a special role to play in the world's eschatology. There were twenty-one reported apparitions in France from 1803-1899.<sup>88</sup>

Apparitions which occurred in the two French hamlets of Lourdes in 1858 and Pontmain in 1871 were deemed worthy of belief by ecclesiastical authorities. The apparitions in Lourdes were interpreted by the clergy to be affirmation of the recently promulgated dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The laity interpreted the Lourdes' apparitions differently, and the associated the healing waters to be a message of consolation from the Virgin Mary. In Pontmain, many French Catholics believed this apparition was the climactic demonstration of Mary's revealed affinity and concern for France.<sup>89</sup>

The analysis of these apparitions suggests they were interpreted in ways that were dependent on the immediate historical contexts but also the larger context of the Roman Catholic Church in France and the Papal States. Belief in the Catholic faith and commitment to religious duties was declining throughout France, which influenced the interpretations of these apparitions. The revolutionary spirit of the French spread to Italy

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<sup>88</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 126

<sup>89</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 127.

where the security of the Papal States was being threatened.<sup>90</sup> Ultramontane ecclesiastical authorities fought to protect the temporal and spiritual authorities of the papacy when it appeared the papacy might come to an end. Interpretations of these two apparitions included affirmations of the papacy's divine right to spiritual and temporal authority and were used to combat ideologies of indifferentism and secularism.

### **Transformation of the Catholic Church in France and the Papal States**

The French Revolution of 1789 included an attack on the Church and the absolute power of the crown. The revolutionaries questioned whether the social hierarchy, with the Church and aristocracy enjoying rights and wealth above others, was ordained by God.<sup>91</sup> The ranks of the higher clergy were comprised nearly exclusively of members of the nobility.<sup>92</sup> Up until that time, members of the king's royal, governing council were appointed by himself, and therefore, the people did not possess elective power.<sup>93</sup> In protest, the Third Estate, comprised of the bourgeoisie and peasantry, confiscated Church property and demanded more limited power for both the crown and the Church.<sup>94</sup> They also wanted a secular state. Under the Concordat of 1801, the clergy became employees of the state of France.<sup>95</sup>

In addition to the opposition to the land and wealth of the Church and aristocracy in France, the temporal authority of the papacy was also threatened during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Two popes, Pope Pius VI and Pope Pius VII, were exiled to

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<sup>90</sup> David I. Kertzer, *The Pope Who Would Be King: The Exile of Pius IX and the Emergence of Modern Europe* (New York, Random House, 2018), 8-9

<sup>91</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope Who Would Be King*, 8-9.

<sup>92</sup> James MacAffrey, *History of the Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 1 (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1910), 4, <https://archive.org/details/historyofthecath01maccuoft/page/n27>.

<sup>93</sup> Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (London: The Penguin Group, 1999), 14; MacAffrey, *History of the Catholic Church*, Vol. 1, 2.

<sup>94</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope Who Would Be King*, 8-9; MacAffrey, *History of the Catholic Church*, 1-2, 6.

<sup>95</sup> J. F. MacLear, *Church and State in the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 96-97.

France when Napoleon Bonaparte's forces took possession of the papal states.<sup>96</sup> Similar to France, some Church property in Rome was taken away from ecclesiastical authorities (e.g., only one church bell was allowed in each town, all horses were seized, and control of schools and universities excluding seminaries, was taken away from the clergy).<sup>97</sup>

Perhaps motivated and inspired by France's revolutionary spirit, citizens of the papal states began to demand civil liberties in the form of a constitution, as had been granted in France.<sup>98</sup> The pope, as a secular ruler, had absolute power over the people – he could inflict capital punishment, his priests entered homes to investigate people for minor sins (e.g., eating meat during Lent), and had a police force of priests who charged Romans with imprisonment for these minor sins.<sup>99</sup> In March of 1848, the Pope granted the people some liberties in a Constitution (e.g., freedom of press and freedom of assembly) but refused to make any more concessions.<sup>100</sup> Tensions continued to rise among the Roman citizens. Pope Pius IX's guards betrayed him, leaving him a prisoner in the Quirinal Palace as canons were pointed towards it.<sup>101</sup> Left with virtually no other choice, Pope Pius IX escaped to the Kingdom of Naples.<sup>102</sup>

As the temporal authority of the Church was left almost defenseless in both France and in the Papal States during the nineteenth century, the spiritual authority of the Church in France also was under attack. The teachings of the Catholic Church were doubted, and religious indifferentism became entrenched in French society.<sup>103</sup> Religious

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<sup>96</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope Who Would Be King*, 16.

<sup>97</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope Who Would Be King*, 156.

<sup>98</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope Who Would Be King*, 65.

<sup>99</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope Who Would Be King*, 7, 157, 337.

<sup>100</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope Who Would Be King*, xxvii, 64-65.

<sup>101</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope Who Would Be King*, xxvii-xxviii.

<sup>102</sup> Kertzer, *The Pope Who Would Be King*, 119.

<sup>103</sup> MacAffrey, *History of the Catholic Church*, Vol. 1, 1.

indifferentism was the belief that all religions were equally valid in obtaining salvation.<sup>104</sup> Pope Gregory XVI harshly condemned indifferentism and stated that it was contrary to the faith to disrespect the clergy in his 1832 encyclical, *Mirari Vos*. Another reaction to the spiritual and temporal dangers to the Church was the push for an ultramontane Church. Famous writers of the time, including de Maistre, Veuillet, and Lammenais, defended the concept of an ultramontane Church. The ultramontanés' defense of the Church led to extremes by mid-century, with assertions among some that the pope assumed almost demi-god-like qualities, as claims for the pope's infallible spiritual authority became more radical. The dogma of papal infallibility was promulgated at the First Vatican Council in 1870.<sup>105</sup> While the minority bishops at the council prevented more extreme claims for papal infallibility to be incorporated into the definition, this new dogmatic principle created obstacles in Europe's secularizing societies.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century in France was characterized by seismic changes (e.g., The French Revolution and the rise of religious indifferentism), which would have been experienced as shocks to the French culture and society. At the same time, there were catastrophic changes in the Papal States as its temporal power was being threatened. These changes in France and the Papal States, in particular the degree to which these changes failed to transform the communities of Lourdes and Pontmain, will be considered in the next sections. The practical purpose for considering the historical

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<sup>104</sup> Pope Gregory XVI, *Mirari Vos* (The Vatican: Vatican Press, 1832), <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/greg16/g16mirar.htm>.

<sup>105</sup> Council Fathers, *Pastor Aeternus* (The Vatican: Vatican Press, 1870), <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum20.htm>.

contexts of Lourdes and Pontmain is in preparation for the analysis of a parallel account of an apparition in Knock, Ireland, which is the focus of Chapter 3.

### **The Apparitions in Lourdes, France 1858**

In February of 1858, Bernadette Soubirous, a fourteen-year-old young shepherd girl of Lourdes, France, was in the midst of a time of much apprehension and suffering for her family. Bernadette was one of four children. Bernadette was the eldest but also the sickliest of the children. She had been a victim of the cholera epidemic of the 1850s which left her with incurable asthma.<sup>106</sup> Her father, François Soubirous, operated a mill, which failed. He tried to establish another mill, which also failed, and during this period, was blinded in one eye while working.<sup>107</sup> François had no other option but to become a *brasseur*, a day laborer, and the family was forced to move in 1857 into a depressing, one-room accommodation in the *cachot*, the old prison in Lourdes.<sup>108</sup> François also was arrested for suspicion of stealing some grain.<sup>109</sup>

Bernadette was sent to live with Mary Laguës, her previous wet nurse, in the nearby town of Bartrès to work as a maid and shepherdess.<sup>110</sup> Mary Laguës spent time trying to teach Bernadette the Catechism in French, but Bernadette struggled to learn any of it since her native *patois* was of Gascon origin. However, Bernadette received a rosary in 1856 and was very drawn to and devoted to this form of prayer.<sup>111</sup>

Three weeks after returning to the *cachot* and during this difficult time for the Soubirous family, Bernadette experienced incomprehensible joy. On February 11, 1858,

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<sup>106</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 28-29.

<sup>107</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 46.

<sup>108</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 47.

<sup>109</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 49.

<sup>110</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 49.

<sup>111</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 50.

fourteen-year-old Bernadette Soubirous, a humble and simple peasant girl, testified to experiencing her first of eighteen appearances of a Lady at the grotto of Massabielle in Lourdes.<sup>112</sup> The Lady held a Rosary, had a gold cross on her arm, was dressed in white, wore a blue girdle, and was supporting herself on a rose tree in a circular depression within the grotto.<sup>113</sup>

The subsequent apparitions occurred on the 14th, 18th, 19th, 20th, 21st, 23rd, 24th, 25th, 27th, and 28<sup>th</sup> days of February, on 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 25<sup>th</sup> days of March, on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of April, and on the 16<sup>th</sup> of July. During the third apparition on February 18<sup>th</sup>, the Lady told Bernadette she would not be happy in this world but only in the next.<sup>114</sup> On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Lady told Bernadette a secret and that she desired for a chapel to be built in that spot.<sup>115</sup> On February 24<sup>th</sup>, the Lady's message was a command of universal importance: "Penance, penance, penance. You will pray God for sinners; you will kiss the earth for the conversion of sinners."<sup>116</sup> The message was somewhat different on February 25<sup>th</sup>. The Lady instructed Bernadette to drink and wash herself with the water from the spring. Bernadette had to dig for a spring and the water began to flow.<sup>117</sup> Today, people still come to Lourdes in hopes of touching these famous healing waters. But, perhaps the most significant of the Lady's messages was on March 25<sup>th</sup> when she revealed her identity stating plainly: "I am the Immaculate Conception."<sup>118</sup> This statement attributed to

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<sup>112</sup> Richard F., Clarke, *Lourdes, Its Inhabitants, Its Pilgrims, and Its Miracles: With An Account of the Apparitions at the Grotto and A Sketch of Bernadette's Subsequent History* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1888), 171.

<sup>113</sup> Clarke, *Lourdes, Its Inhabitants, Its Pilgrims, and Its Miracles*, 171.

<sup>114</sup> Clarke, *Lourdes, Its Inhabitants, Its Pilgrims, and Its Miracles*, 175.

<sup>115</sup> Clarke, *Lourdes, Its Inhabitants, Its Pilgrims, and Its Miracles*, 181.

<sup>116</sup> Clarke, *Lourdes, Its Inhabitants, Its Pilgrims, and Its Miracles*, 182.

<sup>117</sup> Clarke, *Lourdes, Its Inhabitants, Its Pilgrims, and Its Miracles*, 183-184.

<sup>118</sup> Clarke, *Lourdes, Its Inhabitants, Its Pilgrims, and Its Miracles*, 190.

the apparition became instrumental in the fight to maintain the spiritual and temporal powers of the Church.

### **Local Context and Popular Piety in Lourdes**

Throughout these historic changes in France and the Papal States, Lourdes was a provincial anomaly. The majority of France had been impacted by the ideologies of secularism and indifferentism while the spirituality of the people of Lourdes persevered and flourished in the midst of these attacks on the Church.<sup>119</sup>

The mid-1800s were a difficult time for the Lourdais as they struggled for rights like the rest of France. The Lourdais fought for a communal right to land. Under the reign of Louis Napoleon, the Lourdais were subject to strict regulations on use of wood from the forest.<sup>120</sup> Therefore, the Lourdais men protested for communal use of the forest by dressing like fairies and assaulting forest guards.<sup>121</sup> Lourdais women protested by stealing wood from the forest.<sup>122</sup> Food shortages occurred twice each decade and grain prices reached a climax between 1853 and 1857, which resulted in disease, in particular a cholera epidemic.<sup>123</sup>

The Virgin Mary was identified as the protectress and consoler of the suffering Lourdais.<sup>124</sup> Hence, the piety of the Lourdais was characterized by a strong devotion to Mary. It was commonplace to have Marian statues outside of Catholic homes.<sup>125</sup> During the French Revolution, the Lourdais made pilgrimages to Notre-Dame de Meadows

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<sup>119</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 12-13.

<sup>120</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 28, 112.

<sup>121</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 31.

<sup>122</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 31.

<sup>123</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 28-29.

<sup>124</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 15.

<sup>125</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 15.

believing that this act protected the town from harm.<sup>126</sup> Across the Pyrenees from Pau to Coarazze, there were 40 Marian shrines.<sup>127</sup> Pilgrims would approach the Marian statues barefoot, bringing Mary their requests.<sup>128</sup> A confraternity of the Children of Mary was founded in Lourdes in 1841.<sup>129</sup> Between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, Pyreneans, in particular shepherds and shepherdesses, reported many visions of Mary or the discovery of Marian images.<sup>130</sup> Consequently, Bernadette was not exceptional for having been witness to visions of the Virgin.

Lourdais piety also was characterized by unorthodox beliefs and practices. Shepherds were believed to have a connection between humans and the supernatural. In addition, beasts were believed to have the ability to find miraculous images, such as statues.<sup>131</sup> Prayers were combined with magical spells to fight illness and evil.<sup>132</sup> It was also believed that giants inhabited mountains, fairies inhabited fountains and grottos, and demons inhabited intersections and bridges.<sup>133</sup> Witches, demons, and fairies were also believed to inhabit caves where they engaged in evil activities. Consequently, the Lourdais would cross themselves to protect them from these evil spirits as they passed the grotto at Massabielle.<sup>134</sup> In the Pyrenean region, there were ceremonies of washing and bathing and pilgrimages were characterized by feasting, dancing and sexual activities.<sup>135</sup> Hence, religious beliefs and practices were very much connected to the natural

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<sup>126</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 36.

<sup>127</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 36.

<sup>128</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 36.

<sup>129</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 42.

<sup>130</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 36, 38.

<sup>131</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 36.

<sup>132</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 33.

<sup>133</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 33.

<sup>134</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 53-54.

<sup>135</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 36.

surroundings of Lourdes. In addition, there had been prophecies of apparitions at Lourdes, which according to Harris, would have influenced the Lourdais' willingness to accept the authenticity of the apparitions.<sup>136</sup>

### **Interpretation of the Lourdes Apparitions**

In contrast to a France characterized by secularism and indifferentism, the Lourdais maintained their beliefs in the divine and supernatural. Yet, it was the Virgin Mary who was reported to appear at the grotto at Massabielle and not the witches, demons, and fairies who habitually were thought to have inhabited these caves. According to Harris, most writers interpreted Bernadette's purity and poverty to represent a world that was pure.<sup>137</sup> In other words, Lourdes was pure in that it avoided being infected with the ideologies of indifferentism and secularism. This interpretation of purity reinforced the Church's condemnation of these ideologies.

The declaration of the Immaculate Conception by the Lady at Lourdes affirmed the *ex cathedra* proclamation of the Immaculate Conception promulgated by Pope Pius IX in 1854.<sup>138</sup> According to Harris, this clear affirmation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was a weapon against the free thinkers of the time.<sup>139</sup> This dogma, which became entrenched in the accounts of the apparition, contradicted indifferentism, because this was a uniquely Roman Catholic dogma. This simple identification of the Immaculate Conception made the apparition at Lourdes a French Catholic locus for support of the papal office, in both spiritual and temporal terms.

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<sup>136</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 54.

<sup>137</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 24.

<sup>138</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 14.

<sup>139</sup> Harris, *Lourdes*, 14.

The next section unpacks the apparition story of another provincial French town of the nineteenth century, the town of Pontmain. Similar to Lourdes, Pontmain was also within a region which had avoided the rise of secularism and indifferentism and was characterized by religious piety and superstitions. When the Virgin chose to appear to the people of Pontmain, they were in the thick of an unfolding crisis. Thus, the people of Pontmain embraced the Virgin's appearance and message as a consolation and assurance of her protection.

### **The Apparition in Pontmain, France 1871**

On January 17, 1871 around 5:00 PM, as Prussians prepared to invade nearby Laval, France, twelve-year old Eugène Barbadette reported that he was looking out the window of the family barn to see an area of the sky without any stars. In this area of the sky right above the house, a young woman wearing a dark blue dress covered with stars, blue shoes with golden rosettes and a crown with a red band placed on top of a black veil suddenly appeared.<sup>140</sup> Three non-collinear stars sat above the Lady's head.<sup>141</sup> Joseph, Eugène's ten-year old brother, professed that he also saw the Lady and they both concurred that she was smiling at them.<sup>142</sup> Their mother instructed them to pray Five Hail Mary's and Five Our Father's, because she believed the boys were experiencing a vision of the Blessed Mother.<sup>143</sup>

Within fifteen to twenty minutes of the commencement of the apparition, three-quarters of the town had gathered outside of the Barbadette house.<sup>144</sup> Two other children

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<sup>140</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 139.

<sup>141</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 3.

<sup>142</sup> Odell, *Those Who Saw Her*, 120.

<sup>143</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 4.

<sup>144</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 4.

claimed to see the apparition, but adults reported only being able to see the three stars that were atop of the Lady's head.<sup>145</sup> When the parish priest, Fr. Guérin, arrived, the children explained that the apparition transformed into a dark blue oval shape circumscribing the Lady.<sup>146</sup> The children also reported that two candles, one situated to her left and one to her right, and a red cross over her heart emerged.<sup>147</sup> At this point, the priest began to lead everyone in praying the Rosary and the children noted that the apparition subsequently intensified, increasing to twice its initial size and a message appeared below the Lady.<sup>148</sup> The message read: "But pray my children God will answer your prayer. My son is willing to hear you."<sup>149</sup> At that point, the children stated that two white crosses developed on her shoulders, all four crosses were lit by one of the surrounding stars in the sky, and the Lady reached the red cross from her heart to the children.<sup>150</sup> After three hours, the vision of the Blessed Virgin dissolved as a white cloud enveloped her from her feet to her head.<sup>151</sup>

### **Local Context and Popular Piety in Pontmain**

Pontmain is located at the northwest border of Mayenne.<sup>152</sup> At the time of the apparition and even today, it was and is isolated and inaccessible by railroad.<sup>153</sup> The people of Pontmain had resisted the revolutionary changes of previous decades, and still looked to the historic noble families for stability in their region.<sup>154</sup> Many people from

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<sup>145</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 3-4.

<sup>146</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 5.

<sup>147</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 5.

<sup>148</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 5.

<sup>149</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 5.

<sup>150</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 5.

<sup>151</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 5.

<sup>152</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 2.

<sup>153</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 55.

<sup>154</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 59-60.

Pontmain and the surrounding region of Mayenne had been involved in counterrevolutionary activities to resist changes instituted by the central government. The people of Pontmain were marginalized from the emerging French identity of the period because they resisted change, spoke a distinctive patois, and were characterized by the Frenchmen outside of the region as irrationally violent people.<sup>155</sup>

Western France of the nineteenth-century was an agrarian society. The nobility owned the bulk of the land with minimal ownership opportunities for tenants.<sup>156</sup> Tenants could be evicted at the end of a lease if they had not paid the rent or if the property was in need of repair.<sup>157</sup> The people in western France faced poor farming conditions and constant threat of disease, in particular the cholera epidemic from 1871-1875. Famine, unsatisfactory medical care, and poor hygiene and diet characterized the region.<sup>158</sup> Emigration of people from the west of France persisted due to these challenges.<sup>159</sup> Those who stayed tried to supplement their income with other means beyond what they earned from farming, but this was difficult since industrial production had not expanded to western France.<sup>160</sup>

The French Revolution resulted in a catastrophic loss of power, property, and clergy in France generally, and in this region in particular. However, the west of France, including Pontmain, maintained their Catholic faith and loyalty to the Church.<sup>161</sup> The main objective of education was to learn religion. People of the region continued to

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<sup>155</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 67-68.

<sup>156</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 77.

<sup>157</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 77.

<sup>158</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 77-80.

<sup>159</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 79.

<sup>160</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 158.

<sup>161</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 53.

participate in pilgrimages to shrines, relics, statues, and sacred waters.<sup>162</sup> Saint statues were placed on the sick in hopes of healing and were part of processions through the streets when praying for good weather.<sup>163</sup>

An identifying characteristic of the religiosity of the people of Pontmain was their strong devotion to Mary. Fr. Guérin, the parish priest in Pontmain, erected a Mary statue in the church and gave each family a Mary statue to place outside of their doors.<sup>164</sup> He dedicated confraternities in honor of Mary and painted the ceiling of the church blue with gold stars.<sup>165</sup> His motto was: “Nothing without Mary and all for Mary”.<sup>166</sup> He consecrated all of the men leaving from Pontmain to fight in the Franco-Prussian War to Mary.<sup>167</sup> Following the example of Fr. Guérin, who enjoyed influence in the community, the people prayed the Rosary every Sunday and attended sermons about Mary.<sup>168</sup>

The apparition in Pontmain occurred in the midst of the Franco-Prussian War. The night of the apparition, the Prussians had intended to invade nearby Laval, France but unexpectedly halted their advance.<sup>169</sup> Some Prussian soldiers reported seeing an apparition of Mary guarding the city of Laval and prevented them from advancing.<sup>170</sup> However, the general later claimed that they did not advance because their forces were too small.<sup>171</sup> The end result was that Pontmain was spared Prussian invaders. Thirty-eight men from Pontmain had gone to fight in the war and all of them had returned alive.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 160.

<sup>163</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 94.

<sup>164</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 103.

<sup>165</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 103.

<sup>166</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 104.

<sup>167</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 103.

<sup>168</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 103.

<sup>169</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 137.

<sup>170</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 139.

<sup>171</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 139.

<sup>172</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 6.

Pontmain's avoidance of invasion and loss of life would influence the interpretations of the apparition.

### **Interpretation of the Pontmain Apparition**

An armistice was signed eleven days after the reported apparition at Pontmain and all residents of Pontmain returned home safely.<sup>173</sup> The apparition at Pontmain was immediately received positively both locally and outside the region and Mary was viewed as protectress of Pontmain. People from Saint-Breuc made promises to make annual pilgrimages to the Our Lady of Hope Shrine and the members of the Confraternity of Our Lady of Victory promised a golden heart to Mary for her intervention.<sup>174</sup> Images of the Virgin Mary protecting the French troops from the Prussians spread and this image was eventually painted on the ceiling of the church in Pontmain.<sup>175</sup> About 100,000 pilgrims visited Pontmain within the first year after the apparition.<sup>176</sup> The Bishop Wicart of Laval sanctioned the reports of the apparition within a year and declared that the visitor in the apparition was the Virgin Mary.<sup>177</sup>

The positive reception of Pontmain continued beyond the immediate years following the apparition. During World War I, in the midst of another German invasion, Our Lady of Pontmain was proclaimed to be divine liberator of France.<sup>178</sup> A newer image of Mary emerged holding a red crucifix and protecting the French troops from the Germans.<sup>179</sup> The Pontmain sanctuary became the National Citadel of Prayer, and in 1916,

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<sup>173</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 6.

<sup>174</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 6.

<sup>175</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 139.

<sup>176</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 6.

<sup>177</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 6.

<sup>178</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 145.

<sup>179</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 143.

prayer cards containing a picture of St. Joan of Arc, also venerated as protector of France, were given to pilgrims.<sup>180</sup> The prayer on the back asked the Virgin again to protect them from invasion and for France's victory.<sup>181</sup> The French were responding to Mary's reported message from the apparition: "My Son is willing to hear you."

French Catholics again turned to Our Lady of Hope of Pontmain during World War II. New prayer cards were distributed with an image of Mary holding the red crucifix and a prayer to Our Lady of National Anguish pleading for her protection.<sup>182</sup> The Bishop of Laval required everyone in the diocese to visit the Our Lady of Pontmain shrine and emphasized the urgency for a prayer crusade.<sup>183</sup> Soldiers registered at the Pontmain Shrine and wore medals with a national flag and Sacred Heart.<sup>184</sup> Each day, fifteen decades of the Rosary were prayed in the Basilica.<sup>185</sup> Four hundred bombs were dropped over the area, but Pontmain was once again spared.<sup>186</sup> Protection from German invasion was once more attributed to Our Lady of Pontmain.

It appeared to many Frenchmen that Mary had a special concern for France in light of her numerous apparitions there throughout the nineteenth-century and her protection of Pontmain. After the Papal States were conquered in 1870, the people of Pontmain's faith in the Virgin Mary did not falter. After nearly being conquered by the Prussians, the people of Pontmain appeared to seize the opportunity to express their gratitude to Mary and patriotism to France by promoting an image of Mary as protectress of France. Among Catholics attracted to this devotion, French nationalism became

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<sup>180</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 147.

<sup>181</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 147.

<sup>182</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 150.

<sup>183</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 151.

<sup>184</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 152.

<sup>185</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 152.

<sup>186</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 154.

equated with a strong Catholic faith that was aligned with the Holy See.<sup>187</sup> The strong faith of the people of Pontmain had appeared to not only miraculously save them from destruction but also had allowed them to finally identify with the rest of France, and for their countrymen to see them as a vital part of the faith of their nation.

### **The Impact of the Miraculous Occurrences at Lourdes and Pontmain**

The people in the immediate circumstances of these two apparitions had not identified with the rest of France and instead engaged in both orthodox and eclectic spiritual practices. It is possible that the rest of France acknowledged its secular, contrasting lifestyle and believed the Virgin Mary chose to appear in these humble places where the Catholic faith had not wavered. Even though secularism and indifferentism were prevalent in French culture, the widespread devotion to these two Marian apparitions perhaps displayed that the Catholic faith was still prevailing in certain parts of France.

The Lourdes apparition initially took on a national significance as French men and women from nearby towns and even Paris made pilgrimages there. The apparition quickly took on an international significance for the Catholic Church because the Lady declared she was the Immaculate Conception. The people's acceptance of this message demonstrated their solidarity with the dogmatic statement of Pope Pius IX. The apparition in Pontmain initially took on a local significance as the apparition was interpreted to be Mary protecting a town of unwavering faith. With the crises of the World Wars, Pontmain took on a national significance as many faithful French turned to Our Lady of Pontmain for help during two German invasions.

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<sup>187</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 132.

The next chapter will explore an apparition which reportedly occurred on August 21, 1879 in another small town – Knock, Ireland. Similar to Lourdes and Pontmain, Knock was also within a region characterized by religious piety and superstitions; however, unlike the two French counterparts, the Virgin Mary gave no reported message during her appearance in Ireland. According to the witnesses, she also did not visit Knock unaccompanied. When the Virgin chose to appear to the people of Knock, they were facing fear and anxiety in a time of societal upheaval and uncertainty. Thus, the people of Knock embraced the Virgin’s appearance as consolation during their experience suffering.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Apparition in Knock, Ireland: Interpreting the Apparition through the Lens of the Local Context and Ecclesiastical Models of Church

## The Apparition in Knock, Ireland 1879

On August 21, 1879 about 20 minutes after sunset, fifteen witnesses reported seeing an extraordinary light shining on the wall of the Catholic chapel in Knock, County Mayo, Ireland in the dark of night.<sup>188</sup> They described seeing the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph, and St. John the Evangelist within the light with St. John to the left of the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph to her right. To the left of St. John, some visionaries reported seeing an altar on which a crucifix was situated behind a lamb. The lamb was illuminated with a golden light and surrounded by hovering angels.<sup>189</sup> St. Joseph was facing Mary with his head rising up towards her. St. John had a mitre on his head and was holding an open book of what was thought to be the Gospels in his left hand. His right hand was raised with the middle and index fingers protracted as if he was giving a blessing. At the center of the apparition was the Virgin herself. She appeared to be looking up to heaven while her hands were raised with the palms of her hands facing the people. She wore white garments and a crown. The witnesses reported that the apparition lasted from 7:30 PM – 10:00 PM. The visionaries lost the ability to see all other objects other than those within the extraordinary light of the apparition.<sup>190</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland was characterized by seismic changes (The Great Famine, The Land War, and the Devotional Revolution), which would have been experienced as shocks to the Irish culture and society. First, these changes in Ireland, in

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<sup>188</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 172; Rev. Francis Lennon, "Letter from Rev. Francis Lennon to Fr. Cavanaugh Concerning His Investigation of the Possibilities of Alternative Explanations for the Apparition," (Archives of the archdiocese of Tuam Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, 1936), 8; John MacPhilpin, *The Apparitions and Miracles at Knock*, 14.

<sup>189</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 172; MacPhilpin, *The Apparitions and Miracles at Knock*, 14.

<sup>190</sup> Rev. Francis Lennon, "Letter from Rev. Francis Lennon to Fr. Cavanaugh Concerning His Investigation of the Possibilities of Alternative Explanations for the Apparition," (Archives of the archdiocese of Tuam Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, 1936), 8.

particular how these changes were experienced in Knock, will be unpacked. This historical context is important to consider because it would have influenced the ways in which the apparition was received and interpreted by the Catholic clergy and laity. The Land War was centralized in County Mayo and was gaining momentum before and at the time of the apparition and the surrounding circumstances caused much distress for both the laity and the clergy. One of the major nineteenth century societal changes in Ireland, the Devotional Revolution, forced both the laity and clergy to reconsider and reinforce the core practices and beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, the Land War and the devotional revolution, in particular, might have influenced both the ways in which the apparition was received and the investigations of the apparition. Second, the investigations of the apparition will be explored to better understand the processes by which the clergy investigated the apparition and the interpretations of the apparition. The 1978 norms for investigating apparitions will offer insights but cannot be retroactively applied as norms for this study of the investigations of the apparition in Knock. The conclusion will consider ways in which the historical context and competing models of Church influenced the reception and longevity of the devotion to the Knock apparition.

### **Changes to Irish Culture and Society**

Three historical developments had huge impacts on the Irish people in the latter nineteenth century: the Great Famine, which decimated the population and drove emigration from Ireland; the Land War, which partially evolved from a shift from the communal organization of land under the rundale system to a primogeniture system; and the Devotional Revolution, which emerged in the wake of the promulgation of the dogma of papal infallibility in 1870. These transformative events created a society unsure or

unable to adjust to these changes without much suffering and confusion. Yet, the people of Knock, in some ways, were affected differently than the rest of the Ireland by these metamorphic circumstances. The reported apparition of the Blessed Mother in this particular place in Ireland illustrates how the experiences of the people in Knock diverged from those of the rest of the island.

### **The Great Famine**

During the years of 1846-1851, Ireland was devastated by the Great Famine, an unparalleled catastrophe in Irish history. The population of Ireland was reduced by 2,000,000 in four years - approximately 730,000 Irish people died of starvation while approximately 1.25 million people emigrated to the United States or Canada during the Great Famine.<sup>191</sup> Of those who emigrated, about 17% of them died before reaching the shores of a new home. Compared to the rest of County Mayo, which was the county with the largest population decrease in Ireland during the Great Famine, the parish of Knock in County Mayo had a comparatively low decrease in population.<sup>192</sup> Knock parish's population decreased by 6% compared to declines ranging from 15% to 60% in most other Mayo parishes.

According to Hynes, there are three possible explanations for Knock's relatively lower decline in population during the famine compared to other parishes in Mayo. One possible explanation for the low population loss may be attributed to Charles Strickland, land agent for the absent landlord, Lord Dillon.<sup>193</sup> Strickland was heavily involved in

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<sup>191</sup> Emmet Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-1875," in *The Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 58-59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt284xxf.5>; James MacAffrey, *History of the Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 2 (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1910), 199; Note. These statistics are sometimes recorded to be higher (e.g., <https://www.newsweek.com/great-famine-ireland-potato-849499>).

<sup>192</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 92.

<sup>193</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 92.

relief efforts and claimed he did not evict anyone from their houses on the Dillon estate during the famine.<sup>194</sup> Strickland granted reductions in rent for tenants during the famine and provided food at cheap rates.<sup>195</sup> Overall, there was only about a 2% decline in population on the Dillon estate during the decade of the famine while contiguous estates were left practically uninhabited.<sup>196</sup>

A second possible explanation for the comparatively stable population in Knock was in-migration.<sup>197</sup> In some areas there was an increase in population because of new settlements or the establishment of a workhouse, but in Knock this was not the case.<sup>198</sup> There is a lack of evidence from the parish census data to support the claim of in-migration to Knock.<sup>199</sup>

A third possible explanation for what appears to be Knock's immunity to a large decline in population during the famine, was a communal confidence in an old, often repeated prophecy, assuring the residents of Knock of supernatural protection.<sup>200</sup> Daniel Campbell, a man who had grown up in Knock, wrote a 120-page document about Knock when he heard about the Virgin's appearance there.<sup>201</sup> According to Hynes, Campbell attributed Knock's escape from the famine fever (only one person in Knock died of famine fever) as a fulfillment of this prophecy that Knock would never experience endemic suffering. This prophecy had been proclaimed by a pilgrim to Knock who had been offered a ride in a horse-driven cart and had reciprocated this kindness with words

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<sup>194</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 92-93.

<sup>195</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 93.

<sup>196</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 93.

<sup>197</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 94.

<sup>198</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 95.

<sup>199</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 95.

<sup>200</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 96.

<sup>201</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 1.

prophetic protection. Campbell claimed the Knock prophecy was fulfilled when the town was spared from the 1832 cholera epidemic, which killed 20,000 people in Ireland.<sup>202</sup> The Great Famine, for Campbell, was another instance of the prophecy fulfilled.<sup>203</sup>

Knock's relatively low population decline compared to other parishes in County Mayo does not seem to be able to be explained by in-migration. The altruistic land agent Strickland helped to minimize sickness and fatalities by easing financial burdens on the people of the Knock parish during the Great Famine. However, potatoes were scarce everywhere so it does not seem possible that Strickland's efforts were the only contributing factor to Knock's low population decline. Consequently, it makes sense that the people of Knock would put their confidence in the repeated prophecy when the low population decline could not fully be explained by natural means. The comparatively low population decline, a benevolent land agent, and a communal belief in a prophecy made the Knock parish an exceptional context in Ireland at the time.

### **The Land War**

Knock was a very small village located in the west of Ireland in County Mayo. According to reports in 1880, Knock had only six houses on very small plots of farmland.<sup>204</sup> The land of the area was very poor for agriculture and other means to supplement income in the area were nonexistent.<sup>205</sup> Yet, Knock stood out from other areas in County Mayo, because Archdeacon Bartholomew Cavanaugh (the parish priest of Knock) ardently denounced the Land War making Knock the locus of a large protest by Land War agitators.

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<sup>202</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 55, 96.

<sup>203</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 96.

<sup>204</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 11.

<sup>205</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 11; MacPhilpin, *The Apparitions and Miracles at Knock*, 6.

The people of Knock lived marginal lives, renting the land they farmed from a landlord for centuries.<sup>206</sup> Within this structure of landlordism, extended families lived and operated rented farms communally before the Great Famine.<sup>207</sup> This rented land was frequently redistributed among family households across different generations and ties so that no one person or family had sole rights to a farm. Intermarriages within families and inheritance of land passed on to multiple members of a particular group sharing a farm fostered loyalty toward a particular land-renting group.<sup>208</sup> This particular model of landlordism was referred to as the rundale system.

The rundale system was abandoned in favor of a system of imposed boundary lines on farms throughout an estate. The boundary lines of farms of the landlord's estate in Knock were restructured by Strickland and Dillon in 1859.<sup>209</sup> However, boundary lines seemed to have been established throughout other parts of Ireland earlier than Knock, because the negative impact of this system was reported a decade earlier in "The London News":

The more it is probed, the better for the country, and the more it will become apparent that an inordinate subdivision of soil, rendering good and profitable farming impossible, preventing pasturage, and filling the land with a potato-eating population, barely removed above pauperism at the best of times, has caused all the evils under the operation of which Ireland has become what we now behold her – the most unhappy and most degraded among the nations of Christendom.<sup>210</sup>

The establishment of new borders on the tilled land throughout County Mayo, left many tenants without parcels of land to inherit and created perturbation and confusion.

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<sup>206</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 137, 141.

<sup>207</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 130.

<sup>208</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 130.

<sup>209</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 131.

<sup>210</sup> "The Land Question: In France and Ireland," *Illustrated London News* (London, England), Sept. 8, 1849.

The people had to adjust and accommodate themselves to this new societal structure. In order to preserve individual farms, increasingly only one son had inheritance rights. Women and men were now marrying later, on average, because sons without an inheritance and daughters without a dowry were considered less desirable potential spouses. The children who lacked an inheritance or dowry had to prepare to emigrate to make new lives for themselves and to help supplement the family farm income. For example, many men and women migrated seasonally to England or permanently elsewhere to find work to help pay the rent.<sup>211</sup> While emigration was an opportunity for employment, the people of Knock viewed it as deportation and lacked the power and faculty to change the circumstances.

The year of 1879 became a time of fear and distress for Mayo as another famine loomed over them. It rained two out of every three days from March through September of 1879.<sup>212</sup> In addition, the weather of the previous years had yielded heavy losses to all crops.<sup>213</sup> The harvest of 1879 in Ireland was the worst since the famine and this produced great anxiety.<sup>214</sup> The people of County Mayo were concerned about having food, being able to pay rent, and about the possibility of eviction from their homes.<sup>215</sup>

The famine was perceived to be empirical evidence for the evil nature of the tenant-landlord system.<sup>216</sup> With the fears of another famine and eviction, the lay Irish began to demand for change, giving rise to what is now known as the Land War. On

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<sup>211</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 134, 165.

<sup>212</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 163.

<sup>213</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 163.

<sup>214</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 163; John Joseph White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage: Popular Piety and the Irish Land War" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston College, 1999), 6.

<sup>215</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 142-143.

<sup>216</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 38.

April 20, 1879 in Irishtown, County Mayo, which was only about 20 kilometers from Knock, the leaders publicly demanded rent reductions for tenants.<sup>217</sup> However, some of the leaders demanded even more drastic change, proclaiming that it was their natural right to land ownership and desired Irish freedom from the English.<sup>218</sup> The arguments against the tenant-landlord system proposed by these zealous leaders at a series of meetings, demonstrations and protests gave birth to the Land League, which was officially founded by Michael Davitt on October 21, 1879 in Castlebar, County Mayo.<sup>219</sup> The Land League not only argued for one's natural right to land ownership but to their divine right to land ownership.<sup>220</sup> A farmer made the land holy through his tilling of the land, and hence, the land rightfully should be his.<sup>221</sup> With the nucleus of the land war within County Mayo, Knock was very much effected by and at the heart of the Land War with Fr. Cavanaugh being one of the most outspoken antagonists of the movement.

The Irish did not separate religious from secular matters. If the land was believed to be holy, then the question of land ownership was believed to be a religious matter. Consequently, the Land League desperately wanted the support of the clergy but disappointingly was denied that support in parts of County Mayo.<sup>222</sup> In particular, Archbishop MacHale of Tuam and Fr. Cavanaugh of Knock opposed the Land War.

Archbishop MacHale, the archbishop of Tuam, had typically supported the people in their struggle for improved conditions, in particular during the fight for Catholic emancipation earlier in the nineteenth century, but denounced the demonstrators in the

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<sup>217</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 20, 39.

<sup>218</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 39.

<sup>219</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 20.

<sup>220</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 13.

<sup>221</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 13.

<sup>222</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 15.

Land War.<sup>223</sup> In particular, MacHale wrote letters condemning the Land War leaders.<sup>224</sup> MacHale opposed any organization which was not under control of the Catholic clergy and thus was opposed to the Land League.<sup>225</sup> MacHale thought that any organization without clerical supervision would lead to defiance of the church and state.<sup>226</sup>

Knock stood out somewhat from other parishes in County Mayo during the Land War, because the parish priest of Knock, Archdeacon Cavanaugh, was one of the most outspoken opponents of the Land War while some other priests, in contrast, eventually became involved in the land movement.<sup>227</sup> Cavanaugh condemned the Land War, in particular the Fenians and Nationalists, in a homily which prompted a large reaction by the laity.<sup>228</sup> The following Sunday on June 1, 1879; a march of 20,000-30,000 protestors came upon the small village of Knock to demonstrate their despondency and disapproval of Cavanaugh's denunciation of the Land War.<sup>229</sup> There was even a rumor that Cavanaugh's ears would be cut off for his failure to support the people.<sup>230</sup>

MacHale and Cavanaugh's denunciations of the Land War were viewed as an extreme betrayal of this lay-led cause.<sup>231</sup> Priests had been perceived to be intermediaries between the people and God and were believed to be God's instruments.<sup>232</sup> For example, each diocese was believed to have a healing priest. In other words, the laity put priests on a higher level than themselves, giving them a privileged position when it came to

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<sup>223</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 161-162; White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 32.

<sup>224</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 162.

<sup>225</sup> Rev. Ulick J. Canon Bourke, *The Life and Times of the Most Rev. John MacHale* (New York: P. J. Kennedy, 1882), 197.

<sup>226</sup> Bourke, *MacHale*, 197.

<sup>227</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 148, 153, 162.

<sup>228</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 148, 162; White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 27.

<sup>229</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 148.

<sup>230</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 29.

<sup>231</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 163.

<sup>232</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 71.

religious matters.<sup>233</sup> However, there is evidence that the Land League's perception was that some members of the clergy would rather have poverty-stricken tenants emigrate elsewhere instead of working to better the situation of the tenants. The Land League confronts the clergy in an article in *The Nation* on July 17, 1880:

Emigration for the few who would freely propose to try their fortune in younger lands might be no evil; but wholesale and indiscriminate deportation of unwilling and unsuitable emigrants has had as necessary results the fruitful immorality of the passenger-ship and the well-recruited alums and jails of the eastern cities of America. And yet "philanthropic" men – nay, religious men – are found to be enthusiastic advocates of emigration. Why cannot these "philanthropic" and religious men expend their efforts in trying to settle the people at home? There is only too much room, and the expense would not be greater. True, landlordism proclaims its malignant prohibition, for one of its habitual crimes is the leveling of the homes of the poor. Come, then, we say benevolent emigration agents, and help us to root out the cause of the nation's woes.<sup>234</sup>

It was thought that someone with power, like Archbishop MacHale, could have used his influence to work through the challenges of landlordism but instead was too bothered that a movement was initiated by a lay-led group instead of a clergy-led group.

But why did some priests oppose the land movement? Some members of the clergy supported the tenants with their calls for rent reductions but refused to support their cries for abolition of landlordism.<sup>235</sup> The priests against the land movement believed the demand for the eradication of the landlord system had evil origins.<sup>236</sup> Priests had long served as representatives for tenants to the landlords.<sup>237</sup> MacHale had long desired an Ireland free from English rule, but unlike the proponents of the Land War, he envisioned an Ireland that would retain a landowning aristocracy that would not be adverse to the Catholic

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<sup>233</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 71.

<sup>234</sup> Charles S. Parnell et al., "A Warning to the People.: The Land League and Emigration," *Nation* (Dublin, Ireland), July 17, 1880.

<sup>235</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 27.

<sup>236</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 27.

<sup>237</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 71.

Church.<sup>238</sup> The clergy was concerned about how the upheaval of landlordism would amend the social construction of Ireland even more so than had already occurred following the famine and fall of the rundale system. The parish priest in Knock, Archdeacon Bartholomew Cavanaugh, may have been particularly concerned for his parishioners, who had a good situation with their landlord Dillon compared with other estates in County Mayo and perhaps thought that abolishing landlordism would result in severe hardships in his parish.<sup>239</sup>

Thus, Knock had a different situation from other estates in Mayo because the laity was somewhat better off in terms of their tenant-landlord relationship and had a parish priest who vehemently opposed the Land War in defense of that local amity. Many other priests opposed the Land War, but Knock was different because both MacHale and Cavanaugh had been regarded very highly by the laity for their previous support and protection of the people throughout other challenges.<sup>240</sup> The Knock parish also had been fortunate compared to other areas of County Mayo during the Great Famine. Therefore, it is possible Fr. Cavanaugh had not seen the evils of landlordism exposed during the Famine to the extent of other priests around the country and thus was fearful of change. Knock would also not be transformed devotionally to the same extent as other areas in Ireland had been in the years before the Land War. Instead, these devotional changes would reach Knock around the time of the rising tensions at the commencement of the Land War. All of these changes all at once would have been a lot to contend with for both the laity and the clergy.

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<sup>238</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 44.

<sup>239</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 146.

<sup>240</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 163.

## The Devotional Revolution

Irish Catholicism endured repressive measures from Protestant England under the penal laws which extended from 1695 to their final abolition in 1829. During the early decades, Catholics were not allowed to practice their religion openly, and therefore, masses were forced to be held in secret in secluded areas. Priests were in constant fear for their lives and could not openly instruct the laity on orthodox practices.<sup>241</sup> In contrast, the latter half of the nineteenth century was marked by a return to orthodox practices in most of Ireland. However, Knock and the rest of the archdiocese of Tuam were one to two decades behind the rest of Ireland in implementing these reforms, in part because MacHale was resistant to them.

Pilgrimages were forbidden by the English in the Legislation of 1703 (2 Anne c. 6), which specifically mentioned pilgrimages to Lough Derg.<sup>242</sup> Those caught going on pilgrimage were threatened with fines of ten shillings and whipped if they did not pay the fine.<sup>243</sup> According to the Act of 1695, Catholics would be punished with a fine of two shillings for not reporting to work on the 29 holy days of obligation.<sup>244</sup> The punishment for not paying the fine was whipping.<sup>245</sup> Accordingly, the Irish bishops beseeched Pope Benedict XIV to reduce the number of holy days of obligation to lighten the burden for Irish Catholics.<sup>246</sup> Pope Benedict XIV modified the obligation for 19 of the holy days of obligation to include only the requirement of mass attendance and not a day of rest.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Thomas McCarthy, "The Tridentine Evolution of Modern Irish Catholicism, 1563-1962: A Re-examination of the 'Devotional Revolution' Thesis," *Recusant History* 20, no. 4 (1991): 519.

<sup>242</sup> John Brady and Patrick J. Corish, "The Church Under the Penal Code," in *A History of Irish Catholicism*, ed. Patrick J. Corish (Dublin: Cahill and Co. Limited, 1971), 78.

<sup>243</sup> Brady and Corish, "The Church Under the Penal Code," 78.

<sup>244</sup> Brady and Corish, "The Church Under the Penal Code," 71.

<sup>245</sup> Brady and Corish, "The Church Under the Penal Code," 71.

<sup>246</sup> Brady and Corish, "The Church Under the Penal Code," 71.

<sup>247</sup> Brady and Corish, "The Church Under the Penal Code," 72.

The remaining 10 holy days of obligation maintained the obligation for Catholics to abstain from work on those days. Later, Pope Pius VI removed the obligation of going to mass on these days and decreased the number of holy days of obligation again.<sup>248</sup>

During the period of the penal laws, lay Catholics in Ireland resorted to practicing Catholicism in ways that were not church-centered.<sup>249</sup> Pilgrimages continued even though they were forbidden by the Legislation of 1703.<sup>250</sup> Patterns around holy wells, station masses held at private homes, fasts and abstinences, family and individual prayer, and the famous Irish hospitality were all ways in which Irish Catholics lived their faith.<sup>251</sup> However, according to Larkin, only 33% of Catholics attended Sunday mass in pre-famine Ireland.<sup>252</sup>

Even though the hierarchy tried to make accommodations for Catholic laity by reducing the number of obligated holy days, they opposed pilgrimages, patterns, and wakes that were characterized by superstition.<sup>253</sup> Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, lay Irish Catholics contended with reform-minded Catholic clergy in addition to the English Protestants, as the clergy aimed to purge these superstitions from popular practice. However, one orthodox practice remained very central to the pious practices of the clergy and laity – praying the rosary. In Clonfert, for example, the clergy were instructed to pray the rosary with the congregation before all Sunday and holy day masses and the laity were instructed to pray the rosary every night.<sup>254</sup> In this way the clergy sought to channel Catholic piety in ways that were more orthodox during penal times.

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<sup>248</sup> Brady and Corish, “The Church Under the Penal Code,” 72.

<sup>249</sup> McCarthy, “The Tridentine Evolution,” 520.

<sup>250</sup> Brady and Corish, “The Church Under the Penal Code,” 78-79.

<sup>251</sup> McCarthy, “The Tridentine Evolution,” 520.

<sup>252</sup> Larkin, “The Devotional Revolution in Ireland,” 68.

<sup>253</sup> Brady and Corish, “The Church Under the Penal Code,” 79.

<sup>254</sup> Brady and Corish, “The Church Under the Penal Code,” 73.

The Catholic emancipation of 1829 in Ireland coincided with the momentum of ultramontanist promoted by some church leaders throughout Europe. The goal of ultramontanists was to disseminate and bring all Catholics in-line with orthodox practices and doctrines, and to look to the papacy as the ultimate source for these teachings.<sup>255</sup> The ultramontane outlook viewed the pope as the supreme source of magisterial authority, and therefore, thought the pope should be consulted on all matters.<sup>256</sup> According to this view, final teaching authority rested with the pope and not the bishops.<sup>257</sup> During the penal times when the clergy could not instruct the laity on proper interpretation of the catechism and gospels, it is possible that the laity did not interpret doctrine or practices of the Catholic church with fidelity. Ultramontanist resulted in a more intellectualized teaching authority, that suspected mystical expressions of faith, in order to create a more centralized, uniform and universal teaching authority.<sup>258</sup>

In Ireland at the First Synod in Thurles in 1850, a push for a more ultramontane approach to the organization and operations of the Catholic church gained even more momentum and thus ignited what Larkin deemed to be a devotional revolution.<sup>259</sup> The aim of this First Synod was for bishops to regulate the clergy and to enforce the administration of sacraments in church only with the hope of eradicating the practice of station masses, confessions, baptisms, and marriage ceremonies held at private homes.<sup>260</sup> A Second Synod held at Maynooth in 1875 aimed to reinforce laws of the Synod in

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<sup>255</sup> Ulrich L. Lehner, *The Catholic Enlightenment: The Forgotten History of a Global Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 216.

<sup>256</sup> Lehner, *The Catholic Enlightenment*, 215.

<sup>257</sup> Lehner, *The Catholic Enlightenment*, 216.

<sup>258</sup> Lehner, *The Catholic Enlightenment*, 217.

<sup>259</sup> Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland," 72.

<sup>260</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 25, Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland," 72.

Thurles and increase the power of the clergy, dependent upon one's station within the ecclesiastical hierarchy.<sup>261</sup>

The clergy had long aimed to streamline the practices of the laity to be aligned with Rome, but it was not until the period of devotional revolution from 1850-1875 that this was accomplished under the leadership of Cardinal Paul Cullen. Cullen served as archbishop of Armagh from 1850-1852 and as archbishop of Dublin from 1852 until his death in 1878. According to Larkin, mass attendance increased from only 33% before the famine to over 90% in less than fifty years.<sup>262</sup> However, the Catholic population also had decreased from 5 million to 4 million as the country was still feeling the effects of the famine.<sup>263</sup> During the years of the devotional revolution (1850-1875), the number of priests increased from about 2,500 to 3,200 and the number of nuns increased from 2,200 nuns to 3,700. However, Larkin claims that new devotions surfaced but evidence for the praying of the Rosary can be found during penal times.<sup>264</sup> The main focus of the devotional revolution was on penance and the Eucharist, and also to engage in other, more recent devotional practices promoted by the papacy, such as to the Sacred Heart and Immaculate Conception.<sup>265</sup>

One way in which Cullen promoted his message was by publishing pastoral letters in local and national newspapers. These pastoral letters, therefore, were meant to be messages for both the laity and the clergy. Cullen's ultramontane schema is evident in the way that he instructed the clergy and the laity to engage in orthodox religious practices in

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<sup>261</sup> Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland," 73.

<sup>262</sup> Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland," 68.

<sup>263</sup> Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland," 77.

<sup>264</sup> Brady and Corish, "The Church Under the Penal Code," 73; Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland," 78.

<sup>265</sup> Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland," 78.

his pastoral letters. In a pastoral letter published in *The Cork Examiner* on December 3, 1861; Cullen directed the clergy of the Dublin diocese to instruct and command the laity to do the following in preparation for the Feast Day of the Immaculate Conception:

As usual you will perform a novena in preparation for that great festival, on which we commemorate one of the holy virgin's most glorious privileges - her exemption from original sin, the unhappy inheritance of all the other children of Adam. During the novena you will have continual opportunities of explaining to the faithful the greatness and sublimity of the dignity to which the holy virgin was raised, when the only begotten Son of God, condescending to assume human flesh in her chaste womb, became man. You will also be able to propose to them for imitation her admirable virtues, her humility, her obedience, her resignation to the will of God, her patience in the time of suffering, her faith, and her charity; exhorting them copy in their lives the image presented to them in the life of the Virgin and to walk in her footsteps... Let us often, then, repeat the words - Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.<sup>266</sup>

Cullen's didactic letter about preparing for the Feast Day of the Immaculate Conception came only eight years after the promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854. St. Bernadette had testified to seeing a young woman who called herself the Immaculate Conception in Lourdes, France in 1858. Cullen's pastoral letter was written in 1861 before the apparition in Lourdes was deemed as worthy of belief in 1862 and was an ultramontane reinforcement of the dogma promoted by Pope Pius IX.

An edifying pastoral letter written by Cullen was published in *The Freeman's Journal* on March 4, 1867, which had been read in all churches of the Dublin diocese the previous day. The pastoral letter unpacked ways to prepare for the Resurrection of the Lord during Lent and used zealous language to emphasize the importance of penance in cleansing oneself of pejorative acts. Cullen stated in the letter:

However, we are still obliged to carry out the spirit of the apostolic law, and to do everything necessary to bring our passions under the dominion of reason, to

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<sup>266</sup> Cardinal Paul Cullen, "Pastoral of His Grace The Most Rev. Dr. Cullen," *Cork Examiner* (Cork, Ireland), Dec. 3, 1861.

chastise ourselves for our sins, and to make some reparation for having so offended the Author of our being, and turned away from, and insulted, the Supreme Rule of heaven and earth.<sup>267</sup>

Cullen mentioned immoral acts such as improper dancing, reading novels and attending theatrical performances that were deemed inappropriate, and drunkenness.<sup>268</sup> He again underscored extreme forms of penance: “let us chastise our bodies, and reduce them into subjection; let us take up our cross, and work out our salvation in fear and trembling.”<sup>269</sup> Cullen’s religious rhetoric reinforced conformity to devotional and disciplinary reforms he promoted, and which aligned with ultramontanist priorities.

Even though Cullen was the archbishop of Dublin, there is evidence that his ultramontane reforms aimed to impact the entire island and he sought to suppress any organization which would threaten an Irish Catholic Church aligned with Roman authorities. His pastoral letters and addresses had an intention of reaching a wide audience as they were published in other areas of Ireland and the United Kingdom (e.g. *The Cork Examiner* and *the Morning Advertiser*). In these published communications, Cullen denounced the evil of secret societies and revolution. In reference to Pope Pius IX, Cullen stated: “From his words we learn the necessity of combatting socialism, revolution, indifferentism, insubordination, and contempt for authority – the cankers of society in our times...”<sup>270</sup> Earlier in 1861, Cullen warned against the evils and crimes of secret societies and revolution and that the habits and aims of these groups leads to anti-religious sentiments.<sup>271</sup> Consequently, Cullen opposed the aims and actions of the Land

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<sup>267</sup> Cardinal Paul Cullen, “Pastoral of Cardinal Cullen,” *Freeman’s Journal* (Dublin, Ireland), March 4, 1867.

<sup>268</sup> Cullen, “Pastoral of Cardinal Cullen,” March 4, 1867.

<sup>269</sup> Cullen, “Pastoral of Cardinal Cullen,” March 4, 1867.

<sup>270</sup> Cardinal Paul Cullen, “Cardinal Cullen on Roman Catholicism,” *Morning Advertiser* (London, England), Sept. 24, 1866.

<sup>271</sup> Cullen, “Pastoral of His Grace,” Dec. 3, 1861.

League – an organization which had proven to be insubordinate to Church authority and had engaged in acts of revolt.

Cullen strategically implemented his ultramontane reforms within the Church hierarchy by removing any bishops who disagreed with his agenda and tactics.<sup>272</sup> By 1875, the only bishop who eventually did not wholeheartedly support Cullen’s religious reforms was MacHale.<sup>273</sup> MacHale supported a more gallican ecclesiology emphasizing the power of local bishops without full dependence on the Apostolic See.<sup>274</sup> MacHale’s archdiocese of Tuam was viewed from Rome as being in a lamentable state compared to other dioceses which had progressed in ways which agreed with Cullen’s reforms.<sup>275</sup> Some ways in which Rome was displeased with the archdiocese of Tuam included a priest shortage, nepotism practiced by MacHale when appointing clergy, seminary debts, and priests publicly deprecating colleagues and laity.<sup>276</sup> Hynes cites an undergraduate thesis by Patrick Nold who claimed that the devotional revolution reached Knock one to two decades later than the rest of the country, according to a communication written by Larkin, and did not have essential devices for celebrating mass or other Catholic sacramentals.<sup>277</sup> This suggests that MacHale’s resistance to Cullen’s reforms impeded ultramontane reforms that would have aligned the archdiocese of Tuam, including in Knock, with Cullen’s devotional revolution.

Knock was distinct from other areas in County Mayo and the rest of Ireland for several reasons. First, Knock had a somewhat-better landlord-tenant situation than

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<sup>272</sup> Larkin, “The Devotional Revolution in Ireland,” 73.

<sup>273</sup> Larkin, “The Devotional Revolution in Ireland,” 73.

<sup>274</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin’s Apparition*, 159.

<sup>275</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin’s Apparition*, 161.

<sup>276</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin’s Apparition*, 114.

<sup>277</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin’s Apparition*, 115.

neighboring estates with both the landlord and land agent being more merciful to their tenants than demonstrated on other estates.<sup>278</sup> The Knock parish pastor, Archdeacon Bartholomew Cavanaugh, and the Archbishop of Tuam, MacHale, in particular were fervidly forthright about their objections to the Land War when they had previously been very supportive of the needs of the laity.<sup>279</sup> Second, there was a communal optimism grounded in an earlier prophecy that predicted Knock would be spared from tragedy.<sup>280</sup> Knock had been spared from the 1832 cholera epidemic and was comparatively less effected by the Great Famine by other nearby towns in County Mayo. Third, there is some evidence that the devotional revolution did not reach and influence the area of Knock until much later than the rest Ireland, in part because MacHale was resistant to the reforms.<sup>281</sup> The interpretations of and reactions to the apparition and the ways in which they were related to these changes are unpacked in the next section.

### **Interpretation of the Knock Apparition in Relationship to Changes to Society and Culture**

Media coverage and publications about the Knock apparition likely influenced the ways in which the apparition was received and interpreted. However, the clergy likely would have influenced the reception of the apparition as well, since the people very much looked to the clergy as the authoritative figures when it came to religious matters. Eugene Hynes argues that the residents of Knock could have interpreted the apparition to be a sign that the Virgin Mary was not pleased with the clergy's lack of solidarity with the Land War activists; however, the residents would not have felt comfortable expressing

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<sup>278</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 92.

<sup>279</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 148, 153, 162-163.

<sup>280</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 55, 96.

<sup>281</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 115; Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland," 73.

this belief to the clergy. Overall, there is a lack of evidence to make a generalizable claim about the eyewitness interpretations of the apparition.

The Knock apparition was widely publicized in local newspapers after the clergy lifted the initial ban on publications related to the Knock apparition. There was a contest advertised in *The Freeman's Journal* for the best-written poem about Knock.<sup>282</sup> Some poems written by the laity confirmed their beliefs that Mary was consoling Ireland for its hardships. For example, the following poem was published in the *Weekly News* in 1880:

She has appeared! She loves our land!  
Sweet Virgin! Heaven's Celestial Queen!  
Bearing from God in her right hand  
Blessings to Erin's Isle, I ween!  
Erin! Oppressed, despised; yet to Mary so dear  
That she has come to thee, and lingers near  
The humblest shrine within thy sea – girt shore:-  
Oh! Bounteous Queen! Welcome! Welcome! Evermore,  
To Knock! To Erin! O'er and o'er!  
Queen of Heaven! And as of yore,  
Queen of Erin evermore!  
Welcome to our shore!...<sup>283</sup>

There also were advertisements in newspapers for *The Apparition at Knock*, a book written by a well-known author of the time Sr. Mary Francis Clare, and for medals engraved with pictures of the apparition and the Knock chapel.<sup>284</sup> Sr. Clare interpreted the apparition of Knock to be a message for all of Ireland and a sign of comfort for Ireland for all they had endured.<sup>285</sup> She encouraged everyone to buy her book, *The Apparition at Knock*, to help feed the poor and to honor Mary.<sup>286</sup> Sr. Mary Francis

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<sup>282</sup> "The Apparitions of Knock," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin, Ireland), 1881.

<sup>283</sup> As cited in White "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 319-320.

<sup>284</sup> "The Knock Apparitions: Archdeacon Cavanaugh's Diary of Cures Continued," *Nation* (Dublin, Ireland), July 17, 1880; "Letter CXLVIII: The Apparition at Knock," *Manchester Weekly Times* (Manchester, England), May 1, 1880.

<sup>285</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 318-319.

<sup>286</sup> "Letter CXLVIII: The Apparition at Knock," *Manchester Weekly Times* (Manchester, England), May 1, 1880.

Cusack's interpretation of the apparition heavily influenced others' interpretations of the apparition.<sup>287</sup> Cusack also interpreted the apparition to be confirmation that Ireland was a holy nation living out their Catholic faith with fidelity.<sup>288</sup> With Ireland's resurgence in the reception of Sacraments in church and commitment to devotions such as the Immaculate Conception, Cusack seemed to be suggesting that the impact of the devotional revolution was looked on with favor by the Virgin Mary.

It is probable that the large devotional reaction among the laity to the apparition can be credited to the media coverage and promotion of the apparition.<sup>289</sup> One way in which the laity responded to the apparition was by going on pilgrimage, in particular on the feast day of the Assumption the year following the apparition. The pilgrims engaged in reading prayer books, prayed the Rosary and Stations of the Cross, and engaged in the Irish practice of making rounds around the Shrine, and prayed to the Virgin Mary for homes.<sup>290</sup> It was reported that fifty thousand pilgrims visited Knock during Holy Week of 1880.<sup>291</sup> These pilgrimages partly were motivated by reports of numerous cures attributed to the cement of the gable on which the apparition had appeared. The *Manchester Times* reported: "The Roman cement on the gable will be worth more than its weight in gold, and it will not fail to be renewed, so that pilgrim expectations may not be disappointed."<sup>292</sup> A further promotion for the pilgrimages was impelled by the publication of reported cures, documented by Fr. Cavanaugh in a diary. These cures were

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<sup>287</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 330.

<sup>288</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 326.

<sup>289</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 184.

<sup>290</sup> Rev. Michael Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock: The Apparition at Knock: A Survey of Facts and Evidence* (Naas: The Leinster Leader Limited, 1955), 92, 94.

<sup>291</sup> "Lady Day at Knock: Fifty Thousand Persons Visit the Scene of the Apparition," *Cork Examiner* (Cork, Ireland), April 17, 1880.

<sup>292</sup> "Letter CXLVIII: The Apparition at Knock," *Manchester Weekly Times* (Manchester, England), May 1, 1880.

numbered and published in recurring articles in *The Nation*. For example, *The Nation* reported cures numbered 104-200 on March 13, 1880; cures numbered 523-552 on July 17, 1880; and cures numbered 569-587 on July 31, 1880.<sup>293</sup> The cures were even promoted in a poem called “The Miracles of Knock” published on June 8, 1881. Three verses from the poem stated:

Then wonders at the Church came fast  
That were made by the much-favoured viewed;  
More apparitions strange lights cast,  
Miraculous cures ensued.

Then pilgrims to the Church repair,  
And every day more people came,  
Because they heard of mercies there  
Shown to sick, blind, and lame.

And then sight to all was given  
To see at Knock how people prayed,  
Whose only hope was in Heaven  
And in Our Lady’s aid.<sup>294</sup>

Further incentive for making a pilgrimage to Knock was the gratification of reduced train fares for pilgrims making their way from Dublin to the west of Ireland.<sup>295</sup> People placed crutches, bandages, and medicine bottles on the chapel wall as signs of their gratitude for being cured.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> “The Diary of Cures: Another Hundred Cases. Sight, Hearing and Strength Restored,” *Nation* (Dublin, Ireland), March 13, 1880; “The Knock Apparitions: Archdeacon Cavanaugh’s Diary of Cures Continued,” *Nation* (Dublin, Ireland), July 17, 1880; “The Knock Apparitions!: Continuation of Archdeacon Cavanaugh’s Diary,” *Nation* (Dublin, Ireland), July 31, 1880.

<sup>294</sup> “The Miracles of Knock,” *Dundalk Democrat* (Dundalk, Ireland), June 8, 1881.

<sup>295</sup> “The Knock Apparitions: Continuation of Archdeacon Cavanaugh’s Diary and The Lancashire Pilgrimage - Interesting Announcements,” *Nation* (Dublin, Ireland), July 31, 1880.

<sup>296</sup> “Pilgrim,” *Catholic Times* (Manchester, England, 1887), taken from (Cusack Cavanaugh Papers, Box 253 #146, Knock Museum Archives, 1887).

People desperate for a miraculous cure wrote to Fr. Cavanaugh asking to be sent pieces of the cement from the gable.<sup>297</sup> However, the amount of cement was limited and the stability of the wall was soon compromised.<sup>298</sup> Consequently, barriers were put around the cement to prevent pilgrims from removing it.<sup>299</sup> Because this cement was finite, it is speculated that this was partly responsible for the decline in pilgrimages to Knock until its rebirth in the 1930s. According to White, the lack of a definitive judgment from the clergy concerning the authenticity of the apparition also probably contributed to the eventual decline in visitors to Knock.<sup>300</sup>

Walsh claims that the Bishop of the archdiocese would have traditionally made an official declaration of approval or disapproval of the apparition, but MacHale died shortly after the apparition on November 4, 1881 leaving him with little time to discern the evidence collected from the First Commission.<sup>301</sup> A letter written by MacHale's successor, McEvelly, to Sr. Mary Francis Cusack, who was pushing for approval of the apparition, indicated that he also withheld a decision about the authenticity of the apparition:

We would moreover have it distinctly understood that in thus acceding to your pious request, it is by no means to be inferred that we sanction or approve of the alleged apparitions or miracles said to have occurred at Knock. As at present disposed, we neither approve or disapprove of such, we reserve our judgment until the time comes, if ever, for canonically and judicially investigating the whole matter. But at present we neither admit nor reject the alleged occurrences. So that we are in a position to approach the consideration of the subject with a perfectly unbiased mind.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> "The Knock Apparitions: Interesting Acknowledgements. Extraordinary Cures," *Cork Examiner* (Cork, Ireland), June 5, 1880.

<sup>298</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 251.

<sup>299</sup> Rev. Michael Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 89, 91.

<sup>300</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 15.

<sup>301</sup> Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 122.

<sup>302</sup> Archbishop John McEvelly, "Letter Written from Bishop McEvelly to the Nun of Kenmare on November 23, 1881," (Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

Fr. Cavanaugh demonstrated his own approval of the apparitions through documenting reported cures. It was also reported in a newspaper advertisement that Fr. Cavanaugh approved of John MacPhilpin's book, which included eyewitness accounts of the apparition and information surrounding the apparition.<sup>303</sup>

Eugene Hynes's hypothesis treats the reports of the apparition as a form of objecting to the clergy's resistance to the Land War and refusal to demonstrate solidarity with the tenants of County Mayo.<sup>304</sup> Not only is there a lack of evidence to make this claim for the communal reception of the apparition, but Knock's local history suggests that this concern might not have been as much of a concern to the residents of Knock, who admired Fr. Cavanaugh for his piety. White drew a very different conclusion. He suggested that the people would have interpreted the appearance of the three virginal saints—Mary, St. Joseph, and St. John—to be role models for the increasing numbers of people forced to be chaste as they were marrying later.<sup>305</sup> Again, there is a lack of evidence to confirm that this was the way the laity or clergy interpreted the apparition. The apparition may have been interpreted in different ways within the unique historical context of Knock; but outside of Knock the laity tended to believe the apparition was a sign of comfort for all they had endured through persecution, starvation, and disease. Because no clear message was connected with the apparition, it became in that period, and afterwards, a canvas onto which many different concerns could be projected. In the next section of this chapter, the Commission investigations from the Knock apparition are

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<sup>303</sup> MacPhilpin, *The Apparitions and Miracles at Knock*; "Publications," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin, Ireland), April 21, 1880.

<sup>304</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 222-226

<sup>305</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 343, 350, 352, 362.

explored and the interpretations from the time period are considered through the lens of the unique historical context of Knock. It is perhaps due to a lack of clarity about the intention of the apparition that the clergy never declared a strong approval for the apparition in Knock in 1879.

### **Investigations of the Apparition in Knock: 1879 and 1936**

The apparition at Knock in 1879 was investigated by two ecclesiastical commissions: one in 1879 and the other in 1936. The Second Commission of 1936 seemed to transpire and be motivated out of a resurgence of pilgrimages to Knock by the laity and with the founding of the Knock Shrine Society by District Judge William Coyne and his wife in 1935.<sup>306</sup> The Second Commission was necessary since a definitive verdict on the apparition had never been declared and there was a lack of existing materials produced from the First Commission. However, the aim of the Second Commission was to collect evidence - a *processus informativus* - and was not to make a definitive verdict on the level of approval of the authenticity of the apparition.<sup>307</sup> In a undated letter written by Irish laypeople to the Holy Father mentioned that it was sixty years after the apparition and that the Second Commission had sent its collected evidence to the Holy Father for his evaluation.<sup>308</sup> To my knowledge, no decision has ever been made by a pope regarding the authenticity of the apparition at Knock; however, both St. Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis have since visited the Knock Shrine, lending the apparition implicit papal sanction.

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<sup>306</sup> Catherine Rynne, *Knock 1879-1979* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1979), 1942.

<sup>307</sup> Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 42.

<sup>308</sup> "Letter written to the Holy Father in 1939," (Coyne Papers 194 #135, Knock Museum Archives, 1939). Note. Pope Pius XI died on February 10, 1939. Pope Pius XII's papacy began on March 2, 1939. The letter did not have a specific date, but only said it was sixty years after the apparition. Therefore, it is not clear to which Holy Father the letter was addressed.

In this section, the 1978 norms for investigating apparitions are used as points of reference for understanding what may have seemed important to the 1879 and 1936 Commissions when investigating the apparition.<sup>309</sup> The analyses demonstrate that two norms from the 1978 norms for investigating apparitions that can offer insight into the Knock investigations were those concerning the trustworthiness of those who witnessed the apparition and with exploring alternative explanations for the apparition. Evidence continued to be collected concerning these two norms after the completion of the Second Commission.

### **1879 Investigation**

The First Commission began its work on October 8, 1879 and its concluding documents were likely sent to the Archbishop by October 31, 1879.<sup>310</sup> The members of the Commission included Archdeacon Bartholomew Cavanaugh of Knock, Canon Ulick Bourke, President of St. Jarlath's College in Tuam, and Canon Waldron of Ballyhaunis.<sup>311</sup> The fate of the original documents collected and produced from the 1879 investigation is unknown.<sup>312</sup> The documents were either lost or destroyed. Fifteen witnesses were interrogated separately six weeks after the apparition but were not sworn under oath.<sup>313</sup> The short turn-around time for completing the investigations suggests that the reliability of the eyewitnesses was not scrutinized very deeply or was not a priority.

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<sup>309</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Norms," 1978.

<sup>310</sup> Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 35-36.

<sup>311</sup> Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 34.

<sup>312</sup> Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 15.

<sup>313</sup> Rev. Francis Lennon, "Letter from Rev. Francis Lennon to Fr. Cavanaugh Concerning His Investigation of the Possibilities of Alternative Explanations for the Apparition," (Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936), 2; Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 15.

The main objective of the First Commission was to collect and document depositions from the apparition eyewitnesses.<sup>314</sup> The First Commission did not allow the publication of any materials concerning the apparition until it had concluded.<sup>315</sup> The two resulting publications of the witness depositions by John MacPhilpin's and Thomas Sexton in 1880 were sanctioned by Fr. Cavanaugh and Canon Bourke.<sup>316</sup> The existence of two publications of the depositions suggests that the Committee did not come to a consensus on the deposition descriptions.<sup>317</sup> According to Hynes, the clergy controlled what was published about the apparition and thus managed the reception and interpretation of the apparition.<sup>318</sup> Consequently, even though McEvelly had claimed that the clergy in no way endorsed nor denied the authenticity of the apparition, Cavanaugh and Bourke lobbied for a positive reception of the apparition through their control over the way the apparition was portrayed in the media.<sup>319</sup>

Rev. Francis Lennon, a scientist from Maynooth, was asked to investigate the possibility of natural causes for the apparition. In a letter written to Fr. Cavanaugh, Lennon summarized his findings and analyzed them. He said: "I assume that I cannot warrant in admitting supernatural agency; if it is possible to account for the appearances

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<sup>314</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 3.

<sup>315</sup> Rynne, *Knock 1879-1979*, 75.

<sup>316</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 182; MacPhilpin, *The Apparitions and Miracles at Knock*; Thomas Sexton, *The Illustrated Record of the Apparitions at Knock: The Depositions of the Witnesses, Lists of the Alleged Miraculous Cures...* (reprinted from the 'Weekly News') (Dublin: T.D. Sullivan, 1880). Published without an author being listed, this work is widely ascribed to T.D. Sullivan.

<sup>317</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 177.

<sup>318</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 265.

<sup>319</sup> Archbishop John McEvelly, "Letter Written from Bishop McEvelly to the Nun of Kenmare on November 23, 1881," (Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936); Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 265.

by other means.”<sup>320</sup> Two other means, collusion and deception, were two natural explanations for the apparition which he deemed to be possible.<sup>321</sup>

In order to determine if collusion was a possibility, Dr. Lennon examined Mary (Byrne) O’Connell, Mary O’Connell’s brother, an unnamed woman of 74 years of age, and Patrick Hill.<sup>322</sup> Lennon said he attributed little to no value to Patrick Hill’s testimony. According to Lennon, the testimonies of Mary (Byrne) O’Connell, her brother, and the unnamed 74-year old woman were very similar with only minor differences. Lennon said he could not trust their unsworn testimonies since the Byrnes were interested in the apparition and the elderly woman could not be considered to be unbiased when she depended on the charity of others.<sup>323</sup> Dr. Lennon also thought it was peculiar that none of the witnesses thought to alert Fr. Cavanaugh during the apparition when they remained there for 1.5 hours, and yet, assisted at the death bed of a neighbor.

Lennon indicated that deception is possible by means of a phosphorescent substance painted on the gable.<sup>324</sup> He said this phosphorescent substance would not be detectible during the day but could be visible for hours in the darkness. The phosphorescent substance is usually visible when placed on white paint. Lennon stated he

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<sup>320</sup> Rev. Francis Lennon, “Letter from Rev. Francis Lennon to Fr. Cavanaugh Concerning His Investigation of the Possibilities of Alternative Explanations for the Apparition,” (Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936), 1.

<sup>321</sup> Rev. Francis Lennon, “Letter from Rev. Francis Lennon to Fr. Cavanaugh Concerning His Investigation of the Possibilities of Alternative Explanations for the Apparition,” (Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936), 1.

<sup>322</sup> Rev. Francis Lennon, “Letter from Rev. Francis Lennon to Fr. Cavanaugh Concerning His Investigation of the Possibilities of Alternative Explanations for the Apparition,” (Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936), 1.

<sup>323</sup> Rev. Francis Lennon, “Letter from Rev. Francis Lennon to Fr. Cavanaugh Concerning His Investigation of the Possibilities of Alternative Explanations for the Apparition,” (Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, 1936), 2.

<sup>324</sup> Rev. Francis Lennon, “Letter from Rev. Francis Lennon to Fr. Cavanaugh Concerning His Investigation of the Possibilities of Alternative Explanations for the Apparition,” (Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, 1936), 9.

could easily imagine someone painting the figures on the wall during the day without anyone else noticing and the figures only becoming visible after sunset. Another form of deception was by what was being referred to as a magic lantern theory. This theory speculated that the apparition images were produced on the gable through the use of projector slides. Through Lennon's tests, he determined this theory to be "highly improbable and "morally speaking impossible."<sup>325</sup>

Evidence from archival sources makes clear that the 1879 investigation was focused on establishing the trustworthiness of the witnesses and the consideration of alternative explanations for the apparition. The trustworthiness of the witnesses perhaps was not given as much consideration as would be today, but it was mentioned by Dr. Lennon. In post-1978 investigations, witnesses are interrogated to determine if they are: psychologically sound, obedient to ecclesiastical authorities, and practicing Catholics of good faith. Discerning the moral certitude, good character, and piety of the witnesses perhaps would not have looked the same as it would today, because the devotional revolution had not fully transformed the pious practices of the people in Knock at the time of the apparition. The second norm, other possible explanations for the apparition, was given much time and deliberation by Dr. Lennon, and seemed to be the main concern of the commission coupled with the collection and documentation of the deposition of the witnesses.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Rev. Francis Lennon, "Letter from Rev. Francis Lennon to Fr. Cavanaugh Concerning His Investigation of the Possibilities of Alternative Explanations for the Apparition," (Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, 1936), 9.

<sup>326</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 3.

The Commission deemed the depositions of the witnesses to be trustworthy and satisfactory.<sup>327</sup> According to Walsh, this statement provided enough validation for one to believe in the authenticity of the apparition. However, he also argues that the lack of documented and saved evidence from the Commission could prevent one from fully believing in the apparition.<sup>328</sup> The Commission's verdict on the depositions was somewhat equivocal, leaving one with questions about why the depositions were declared to be trustworthy and satisfactory and did not substantiate that the apparition itself was authentic. With a lack of preserved evidence and the absence of an official statement from the ecclesiastical authorities on the apparition at Knock, it is no wonder that a second Commission was resurrected in 1936 to reopen the investigation of the Knock apparition while some of the eyewitnesses were still alive.

### **1936 Investigation**

The Second Commission consisted of Rev. Monsignor E. A D'Alton, Very Rev. Stephen Canon Walsh, Very Rev. Denis Canon Ryder, and Rev. John Killeen as the *Promotor Fidei* (the Devil's Advocate).<sup>329</sup> Rev. James S. Fergus, the archbishop's secretary, served as the secretary for the Commission.<sup>330</sup> The Commission consisted of 15 sessions beginning on August 24, 1936 and ending on April 14, 1939.<sup>331</sup> A major focus of the Commission supported by the evidence was to establish credibility of the witnesses, in particular based on their adherence to religious duties and moral character.

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<sup>327</sup> Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 40.

<sup>328</sup> Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 40.

<sup>329</sup> Rev. John Killeen, "Mary O'Connell Testimony from 1936 Commission," (Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

<sup>330</sup> Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 41.

<sup>331</sup> Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 41.

A document from the diocesan archives of Tuam lists the objectives of the 1936 Commission. These objectives were: (a) for the credibility of the surviving and deceased witnesses to be established, (b) to examine cases of 15 alleged cures with the help of a medical professional by interrogating witnesses to cures and examining documents that might prove the cures, and (c) to examine evidence of cultivating devotions and pilgrimages related to the apparition.<sup>332</sup> Another objective of the Second Commission apparent from the evidence collected was to examine the possibility of natural causes for the apparition. The objective related to cures will not be explored in this thesis, since this objective is not within the parameters of the analysis.

Unlike the First Commission, all depositions were given under oath during the 1936 Commission.<sup>333</sup> Two surviving witnesses, Mary O'Connell (maiden name was Mary Byrne at the time of the apparition) and Patrick Byrne, gave depositions in 1936 in Ireland. Mary O'Connell gave her deposition from her death bed and died a few weeks later.<sup>334</sup> Mary O'Connell had previously given another testimony in 1932.<sup>335</sup> Patrick Byrne gave his deposition in the sacristy of the church on August 27, 1936 at noon.<sup>336</sup> A third surviving witness, John Curry, gave his deposition in 1937 in New York City where he was living at the time of the Second Commission.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> "Instructions for the Commission," (Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations 1936, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

<sup>333</sup> "Instructions for the Commission," (Tuam Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations 1936, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936); Rev. John Killeen, "Mary O'Connell Testimony from 1936 Commission," (Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936); Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 41.

<sup>334</sup> Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 41, 42.

<sup>335</sup> "Mary O'Connell Testimony 1932," (Tuam Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations 1936, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

<sup>336</sup> Rev. James Fergus, "Informative Process," (Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936); Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 42.

<sup>337</sup> Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 42.

A major aim of the Second Commission was to determine whether the surviving eyewitnesses were trustworthy and reliable. Some of the questions posed to Mary O’Connell and Patrick Byrne were recorded by the *Promotor Fidei*, John Killeen. The questions included, but were not limited to:

Do you fulfill your religious duties?  
Did anyone instruct you how to answer questions or make your depositions?  
Did you observe the ground to be dry even though the rain was blowing against the gable-wall?  
What kind was the gable-wall? Was it smooth and even or rough? Was it clean or lately white-washed?  
Did you see any person cured at Knock?<sup>338</sup>

These questions indicate the Commission focused on validating the moral character of the visionaries and identifying any possible natural causes for the apparition. The questions about fulfilling religious duties relate to moral character; while the questions about the chapel wall revisited the possibility of a phosphorescent substance being used to deceive.

In order to hopefully attest to the reliability of the witnesses, evidence was collected throughout the Commission. Twelve other residents of Knock and four priests gave depositions on the reliability of the eyewitness accounts and to relay stories of what they had heard about the apparition.<sup>339</sup> The twelve residents of Knock all reported the witnesses were trustworthy and said Knock residents believed in the authenticity of the apparition. All four priests indicated the eyewitnesses were trustworthy with the exception of one priest indicating he had reservations about an unnamed witness.<sup>340</sup> In addition, Fr. Fergus indicated in his notebook from the Commission that both Mary

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<sup>338</sup> John Killeen, “Interrogation Script,” (Box 108 Processus Informations session 1 and 11, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

<sup>339</sup> Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 42.

<sup>340</sup> Walsh, *The Apparition at Knock*, 45. Note. It was not clear about which witness the priest was concerned.

O'Connell and Patrick Byrne demonstrated above average intelligence, understood the seriousness of the oath, and demonstrated scrupulousness in their willingness to correct or modify statements and resistance in swearing to certain statements if they were uncertain of their validity.<sup>341</sup> However, he did indicate the following concerning Patrick Byrne: "The other witness (Patrick Beirne) who is a rather different character somewhat more cocksure and seemed to feel he was a person of some importance after having seen the apparition."<sup>342</sup> Fr. Fergus noted that the witnesses testified that they had not been told or coached on what to say in their original depositions given in 1879.<sup>343</sup>

A letter written to Cardinal Hayes on December 2, 1936 included instructions for the manner in which the ecclesiastical commission in New York should prepare for and administer the investigation of John Curry.<sup>344</sup> Cardinal Hayes was sent a book entitled "Knock Shrine" and was instructed to have the ecclesiastical commission in New York study pages 59-75, which included the original witness depositions, before conducting the interview of John Curry.<sup>345</sup> A *Promotor Justitiae* and *Notorious* were to be appointed

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<sup>341</sup> Rev. James Fergus, "Notes Take During the Process," (Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations 1936, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

<sup>342</sup> Rev. James Fergus, "Notes Take During the Process," (Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations 1936, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

<sup>343</sup> Rev. James Fergus, "Notes Take During the Process," (Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations 1936, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936); Rev. John Killeen, "Patrick Byrne Testimony from 1936 Commission," (Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936); Rev. John Killeen, "Mary O'Connell Testimony from 1936 Commission," (Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

<sup>344</sup> "Letter to Cardinal Concerning John Curry Deposition," (Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations 1936, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936); Note: The letter does not appear to include a signature and therefore might be characterized by missing information or pages. However, a response by an auditor, Robert E. McCormick, indicates that the letter was written to Cardinal Hayes.

<sup>345</sup> "Letter to Cardinal Concerning John Curry Deposition," (Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations 1936, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

and the questions included from the *Promotor Fidei* in Ireland were to be posed to John Curry.<sup>346</sup> A sample of the questions posed to John Curry were:

Describe what you saw at the church gable as you can remember?  
Do you fulfill your religious duties?  
Has anyone instructed you as to how you should answer the questions to be put to you?  
Do you remember the 21<sup>st</sup> August 1879?  
About what time did you arrive on the spot?  
What effect did the apparition have on you?  
Was it raining when you left the house?  
Have you read the depositions of the eye-witnesses as they were published at Tuam in 1880 by John MacPhilpin and as they are quoted in the recently published book 'Knock Shrine' by Mr. W.D. Coyne D.J.?  
Did you personally see any person being cured at Knock?<sup>347</sup>

The letter denotes the Commission's expectation of inaccuracy in John Curry's deposition since he was only six years old at the time of the apparition, which had occurred 57 years prior, and illustrates their concern with examining the trustworthiness of the eyewitnesses.<sup>348</sup>

John Curry's upstanding character was attested to during the Commission by the Chaplain at the Little Sisters of the Poor, Fr. Alexius Gasteaux, O.P.<sup>349</sup> Fr. Gasteaux said he had known John Curry to always be trustworthy since he had known him and that Curry received Holy Communion every day.<sup>350</sup> Long after the completion of the Second Commission and after John Curry's death, a letter written on March 4, 1955 by a

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<sup>346</sup> "Letter to Cardinal Concerning John Curry Deposition," (Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations 1936, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

<sup>347</sup> "John Curry Deposition," (Box 109 Knock Processus Informations Sessio XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936); Rev. John Killeen, "Letters to Roman Curia," (Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio III, IV, V, VI, VI, VIII, IX, X, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

<sup>348</sup> "Letter to Cardinal Concerning John Curry Deposition," (Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations 1936, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1955).

<sup>349</sup> "John Curry Deposition," (Box 109 Knock Processus Informations Sessio XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936), 25.

<sup>350</sup> "John Curry Deposition," (Box 109 Knock Processus Informations Sessio XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936), 26.

religious sister, Sr. Alice, included details of John Curry's pious life, which had been relayed to her by sisters who had known him.<sup>351</sup> Sr. Alice wrote that the other sisters recalled John Curry saying the Blessed Mother never left one of his prayers unanswered, he would always tell the sisters if he did something wrong, he always was eager to help, and assisted with mass and cleaning the dining room each day.<sup>352</sup>

The preponderance of evidence above suggests that the Commission prioritized seeking confirmation that these witnesses were of good character: virtuous, honest, and practicing Catholics. One of the examining questions asked to all of three living witnesses was about religious duties. Twelve other residents of Knock and four priests were examined to determine the extent to which the moral character of the witnesses could be substantiated. A chaplain for the Little Sisters of the Poor was examined in New York City to vouch for John Curry's character.

A second major aim of the Second Commission inferred from the preserved evidence was to rule out alternative explanations for the apparition. The phosphorescent substance theory was considered again. Patrick Byrne and Mary O'Connell were asked questions aiming to determine whether there had been any white paint on the gable during the apparition or afterward. Patrick Byrne stated: "The gable wall had a cemented surface rather coarse. It was not whitewashed."<sup>353</sup> Mary O'Connell's corroborated Patrick

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<sup>351</sup> Sr. Alice, "Letter Written by Sr. Alice of the Little Sisters of the Poor to Reverend Michael Walsh," (Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations 1936, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1955).

<sup>352</sup> Sr. Alice, "Letter Written by Sr. Alice of the Little Sisters of the Poor to Reverend Michael Walsh," (Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations 1936, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1955).

<sup>353</sup> Rev. John Killeen, "Patrick Byrne Testimony from 1936 Commission," (Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

Byrne's response by unambiguously declaring she had not seen any paint on the gable on the night of the apparition or the days following.<sup>354</sup>

Evidence for another theory for the cause of the apparition, the magic lantern theory, was collected and preserved after the Second Commission. Michael O'Connell wrote a letter to Very Rev. Canon Clenaghy of St. Malachy's presbytery in Belfast, describing what he had heard from a man named McDermott.<sup>355</sup> According to the letter, McDermott had worked in the barracks in Knock at the time of the apparition. McDermott told O'Connell that there had not been an apparition in Knock. Even though he was Protestant, McDermott had been asked to run a lantern with slides for an upcoming event at the parish church in Knock. When the lantern arrived, he claimed he tested it and projected images on the gable, which the townspeople took to be an apparition. McDermott became fearful that others would find out that he was responsible for the images and fled Knock. This evidence contradicts Fr. Lennon's judgment from the First Commission that the magic lantern was "morally speaking impossible."<sup>356</sup>

Because neither Commission ever made an ultimate decision regarding the authenticity of the apparition at Knock, evidence continued to be collected and preserved. The evidence collected to corroborate or contradict the trustworthiness of the eyewitnesses and the authenticity of the apparition are not retroactive applications of the 1978 norms pertaining to the character of a visionary and to the plausibility of the

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<sup>354</sup> Rev. John Killeen, "Mary O'Connell Testimony from 1936 Commission," (Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

<sup>355</sup> "McDermott Letter about Magic Lantern Theory," (Box 109 Knock Shrine Papers re Processus Informations of 1936, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1947). Note. The archival source was likely a copy of the original letter. The source was dated 1947 but indicated the letter may actually have been written a decade earlier. A specific month and day also were not provided.

<sup>356</sup> Rev. Francis Lennon, "Letter from Rev. Francis Lennon to Fr. Cavanaugh Concerning His Investigation of the Possibilities of Alternative Explanations for the Apparition," (Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam Box 108 Knock Processus Informations Sessio 1 and 11, 1936), 9.

legitimacy of apparition claims. However, these types of evidence demonstrate a pattern of investigation in pre-1978 investigations which sought to rule out perfidiousness of the testimonies of the witnesses and to identify any possible natural explanations.

### **Significance of Apparitions Over Time**

The significance of an apparition can change over time. For example, the Virgin Mary appeared to children in the small town of Pontmain, France in the midst of the Franco-Prussian War on the night of January 17, 1871.<sup>357</sup> The Virgin appeared with a written message that read: “But pray my children God will answer your prayer. My son is willing to hear you.”<sup>358</sup> Pontmain was an isolated community, which had resisted the revolutionary changes of the central government.<sup>359</sup> Consequently, the people of Pontmain were marginalized from the emerging French identity of the period because of their resistance to change.

The night of the apparition, the Prussians had intended to invade nearby Laval, France but unexpectedly halted their advance: Pontmain was spared invasion.<sup>360</sup> All thirty-eight men from Pontmain who had gone to fight in the war returned home alive.<sup>361</sup>

The apparition at Pontmain was immediately received positively both locally and nationally. There had been a long-held belief in a prophecy that Pontmain would rise when Paris was in destruction.<sup>362</sup> Pontmain was viewed as the protector of France through its devotion to Mary.<sup>363</sup> Therefore, the initial reception of the apparition provided Pontmain with a way to identify more with the national spirit.

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<sup>357</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 1-6.

<sup>358</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 5.

<sup>359</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 56-59.

<sup>360</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 6.

<sup>361</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 6.

<sup>362</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 52, 110.

<sup>363</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 110.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Church began to use the apparition to develop a patriotic spirit within all of France while maintaining fidelity to the Church, especially during the World Wars.<sup>364</sup> Different cards with prayers to Our Lady of Pontmain were distributed during both wars and French soldiers registered themselves at the shrine in Pontmain.<sup>365</sup> Pontmain was spared during both wars. Therefore, the Church began to interpret the apparition to be fulfillment of a prophecy of salvation for all of France, and not just Pontmain. Mary's message at Pontmain was initially received as a local promise. But by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the second part of her message, "My son is willing to hear you," took on the larger national meaning of affirmation of divine protection in times of distress.<sup>366</sup>

The Knock apparition is also an example of an apparition which has been influenced by different parties and taken on different meanings over time. Fr. Cavanaugh and Canon Bourke had major influence over the lay interpretations of the apparition initially, since they regulated much of the initial major publications about the apparition.<sup>367</sup> These priests were not trying to suppress the developing devotion to Our Lady of Knock but instead shaped how the apparition was interpreted through these publications. In particular, Cavanaugh published hundreds of cures from his dairy.<sup>368</sup> These cures tempted even more pious and sick people to come in droves to Knock for spiritual and physical healing. Even though Fr. Cavanaugh took the initiative to publish reports of miracles without these miracles being investigated, the laity had been the first

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<sup>364</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 123-124.

<sup>365</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 147, 150.

<sup>366</sup> Porte, *Pontmain*, 120, 146.

<sup>367</sup> Rynne, *Knock 1879-1979*, 76-77.

<sup>368</sup> "The Knock Apparitions: Archdeacon Cavanaugh's Diary of Cures Continued," *Nation* (Dublin, Ireland), July 17, 1880; "Letter CXLVIII: The Apparition at Knock," *Manchester Weekly Times* (Manchester, England), May 1, 1880.

to act and use the cement from the gable as a healing device. Cavanaugh responded to this mystical communion at work through his ratifying publications of the cures.

The laity also had some influence over the interpretations of the apparition through published poems and through their promotions of Knock as a pilgrimage site.<sup>369</sup> In the published poems, the laity of Ireland interpreted the apparition to be a sign of comfort for all they had endured through famine and landlordism and approval of their piety from Mary.<sup>370</sup> Even though ecclesiastical authorities, in particular Archbishop McEvilly, did not promulgate a strong approval of the authenticity of the apparition, devotion to the apparition was encouraged through publications, thus allowing good fruits of prayer, devotion, and pilgrimages to develop around the apparition for the immediate years following the apparition.

Even though the laity and the local clergy, like Fr. Cavanaugh, were enthusiastic about the apparition, the First Commission withheld from making a clear verdict on the apparition. Instead, Archbishop McEvilly made it clear that the ecclesiastical authorities had not made a decision in favor of or in disapproval of the apparition.<sup>371</sup> White claimed that Knock needed approval from the ecclesiastical authorities to approve the apparition.<sup>372</sup> The ultramontane church in Ireland functioned primarily around a church as institution model. The laity would not continue a strong devotion to Knock without approval of higher clergy. Thus, the pilgrimages in the late nineteenth century phased out eventually.<sup>373</sup> When it came to a verdict being made about the Knock apparition, all

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<sup>369</sup> Hynes, 1 *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 20.

<sup>370</sup> As cited in White "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 319-320.

<sup>371</sup> Archbishop John McEvilly, "Letter Written from Bishop McEvilly to the Nun of Kenmare on November 23, 1881," (Box 109 Shrine Papers re Processus Informations, Archives of the Archdiocese of Tuam, 1936).

<sup>372</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 4.

<sup>373</sup> Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition*, 218.

power rested in the hands of the ecclesiastical authorities, and not the lower members of the clergy on the Commission or the laity. Everyone hopeful for the bishop's stamp of approval of the apparition never got it.

The fruits of the apparition resurfaced in 1929 when Dr. Gilmartin, Archbishop of Tuam, visited for the fiftieth anniversary of the apparition.<sup>374</sup> Pilgrimages picked back up in the 1930s and the Knock Shrine Society was established in 1935 by District Justice William Coyne and his wife.<sup>375</sup> As White had claimed, the laity would only continue pilgrimages with the approval of the apparition by the ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>376</sup> It was not until after Dr. Gilmartin's visit that there was a resurgence in pilgrimages to Knock. The renewed interest in Knock by the *sensus fidei* led to the establishment of a Second Commission in 1936.<sup>377</sup> Therefore, the significance of the apparition shifted from only that of local or national importance to making the apparition known globally.<sup>378</sup>

Even with a more thorough investigation than the First, the Second Commission, nevertheless, did not come to a conclusion on the apparition. However, the prudence of the clergy did not stop the fruits of the apparition from being realized - the laity continued to come to Knock with deep reverence.<sup>379</sup> In 1979, Rynne declared that about one million pilgrims visited Knock each year.<sup>380</sup> But, Knock devotions continued to grow after that year. In 1979, Knock finally gained recognition by an ecclesiastical authority when Pope John Paul II visited Knock.<sup>381</sup> This implicit papal affirmation was recently reinforced by

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<sup>374</sup> Rynne, *Knock 1879-1979*, 142.

<sup>375</sup> Rynne, *Knock 1879-1979*, 142.

<sup>376</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 4.

<sup>377</sup> Rynne, *Knock 1879-1979*, 142.

<sup>378</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 2.

<sup>379</sup> Rynne, *Knock 1879-1979*, 142-145.

<sup>380</sup> Rynne, *Knock 1879-1979*, 144.

<sup>381</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 2-3.

Pope Francis' pilgrimage to Knock.<sup>382</sup> Today, 1.5 million pilgrims visit Knock each year.<sup>383</sup> The significance, survival, and growth of Knock had depended on both some sign of approval from the ecclesiastical authorities and the laity. The need for some sign of recognition of the apparition from ecclesiastical authorities demonstrated that Ireland was still operating in an ultramontane ethos. However, even without official approval declared after the Second Commission, the dedication of the laity supported the survival of the pilgrimage site.

During the First Commission and the initial years following the apparition, the center of gravity of the Irish Catholic Church increasingly became the members of the higher clergy as Cullen's reforms pushed for an ultramontane ecclesiology. The First and Second Commissions focused on determining the extent to which the eyewitnesses were trustworthy and fulfilled their religious duties. Thus, the investigations guided any interpretation of the apparition toward a reinforcement of an institutional model of the church. The laity also reinforced this model of Church by seeking approval of the apparition from ecclesiastical authorities. The pilgrimages declined when this approval was not granted, but did not end. Over time, subtler signs of approval given by the clergy (Dr. Gilmartin, Pope John Paul II, and Pope Francis), encouraged the laity to establish and maintain a pilgrimage site and Marian shrine. Intriguingly, the *sensus fidei* perpetuated the private devotion to this Marian apparition, and episcopal and papal approbation of this devotion followed. Despite the ultramontane ecclesiology pressed on

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<sup>382</sup> William Booth, "Pope Francis Visits the Knock Shrine, Where Faithful Believe Virgin Mary Appeared On a Rainy Night in 1879," Washington Post, August 26, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/08/26/pope-francis-visits-knock-shrine-where-faithful-believe-virgin-mary-appeared-rainy-night/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.8803714a8d1b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/08/26/pope-francis-visits-knock-shrine-where-faithful-believe-virgin-mary-appeared-rainy-night/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.8803714a8d1b).

<sup>383</sup> "Knock Shrine," <https://www.knockshrine.ie>, accessed January 20, 2019.

the Irish Church by Paul Cullen in the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century and ecclesiastical reticence to endorse the Knock apparition, the sense of the faithful prevailed. This is a striking reminder of Newman's insight, in his "On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine," that the institutional Church may at times gain from listening to the faithful. Knock is now an international locus of Marian devotion, despite the humble, local origins of the vision, and the early reticence of the hierarchy.

The concluding section in this chapter considers similarities and differences between the historical circumstances of the Knock apparition and the apparitions of Lourdes and Pontmain. The section also points to Avery Dulles' models of the Church that were reflected in the historic interpretations of the Knock apparition. The comparisons between the three apparitions help to shed light on what conditions might be needed for an apparition to obtain the highest level of approval from ecclesiastical authorities.

### **Using the Apparitions of Pontmain and Lourdes to Shed Light on the Knock Apparition**

The two Commissions did not come to definitive conclusions about the Knock apparition. The apparition was difficult to decipher without a spoken or written message and with multiple apparition figures. In addition, there were proposed possibilities of natural explanations for the apparition. Instead of using the apparition to denounce the Land War or to affirm the work and fruits of the devotional revolution, the ecclesiastical authorities remained noncommittal during the First Commission and did not make a verdict on the apparition. The clergy, intentionally or unintentionally, created a space within which the laity and clergy could explore the fruits of the apparition slowly, over

the decades, until the shrine became a major pilgrimage site, manifesting what Avery Dulles would term a church of mystical communion. However, the historical interpretations of the Lourdes, Pontmain, and Knock apparitions suggest that safeguarding the institution of the Church was related to and paramount to an apparition achieving the highest level of approval from ecclesiastical authorities.

In contrast to the Knock apparition, the Lourdes apparitions of 1858 and the Pontmain apparition of 1871 were approved rather quickly. The local bishop made a conclusive statement in January 1860 that the Virgin Mary had in fact appeared in Lourdes. The Virgin Mary reportedly identified herself to be the Immaculate Conception. Her identification as the Immaculate Conception validated the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which had been promulgated in 1854, only four years before the apparitions. Consequently, the quick approval of the apparitions in Lourdes by ecclesiastical authorities and the convergence of the Virgin Mary's identity with Church dogma points to a Church as institution model being prioritized.

Similarly, the local bishop of Laval officially recognized and approved of the apparition in Pontmain in February of 1872, only a year after the apparition occurred. This interpretation of the apparition in Pontmain took on a nationalistic tenor as the image of Our Lady of Hope of Pontmain was promoted as the protector of France. French nationalism became equated with a strong Catholic faith that was aligned with the Vatican. Thus, the interpretation of the Pontmain apparition also points to a Church as institution model. The nationalistic interpretation highlighted that Mary had chosen to protect the faithful of Pontmain who had not strayed from the Catholic faith and practices endorsed by the Holy See like the rest of France had done.

In contrast, the people in Ireland at the time of the Knock apparition had not rejected the faith but were being encouraged to develop a homogenous Catholic church in Ireland that paralleled the orthodox practices promoted by the Holy See. The laity and clergy had submissively conformed to Archbishop Cullen's reforms; however, these reforms had not fully infiltrated the west of Ireland at the time of the apparition. Cusack influenced the lay Irish reception of the apparition through her deduction that the apparition was a sign of Mary's acclamation to Ireland for living out their faith with fidelity.<sup>384</sup> This interpretation suggests that there was an inherent Church as sacrament interpretation of the apparition by the laity since there had been a considerable return to receiving the sacraments in church buildings. However, this interpretation also might suggest the laity believed the apparition to be affirmation for the more widely-asserted power of the clergy, since an increase in the authority and power of the clergy was also an intended outcome of the devotional revolution. Consequently, Cusack's interpretation of the apparition reinforced the importance and centrality of the Church as sacraments and Church as institution models.

The laity also largely interpreted the apparition as a sign of comfort from Mary, as evidenced in poems published in newspapers and Sr. Cusack's book.<sup>385</sup> The laity thought Mary came during their time of need with impending famine and evictions. Because all publications had to be approved by Fr. Cavanaugh and Canon Bourke, it can be inferred that some of the clergy also interpreted the apparition in this way. Perhaps this interpretation of Mary as consoler intrinsically recognizes Mary's role in the Church, the tabernacle that holds the living body of Christ. This interpretation implies that the Irish

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<sup>384</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 326.

<sup>385</sup> White, "The Knock Apparitions and Pilgrimage," 318-319.

people perhaps believed subconsciously that Mary would nurture the Irish Catholic Church as she nurtured Christ in the womb.

The French apparitions of Lourdes and Pontmain also were interpreted in ways that responded to contemporary culture. In Lourdes, the messages of penance supported a resurgence in Catholic faith throughout France after the intensification of the ideologies of secularism and indifferentism. At Pontmain, the faithful in France reinterpreted the message of the apparition that Jesus would hear them to be relevant during the First and Second World Wars. The people of Lourdes and Pontmain had not strayed from or rejected the Catholic faith endorsed by the Holy See and were not actively protesting against the clergy like the rest of France. Yet, the messages of these apparitions permeated throughout secular France and reinforced the French clergy's alliance with the Holy See. The interpretations of these apparitions thus point also to the Church acting as a servant, discerning the signs of the times.

Unlike the local residents of Lourdes and Pontmain at the times of the apparitions, the Irish people in Knock and the surrounding area were actively protesting the local clergy. Eugene Hynes proposed that Mary's appearance in Knock was a condemnation of the clergy for not demonstrating solidarity with the tenants during the Land War, because St. John was depicted as a bishop. According to this line of thinking, if the clergy had been acting as servants and discerning the signs of the times, they would have shown their support for the tenants. Instead of recognizing or admitting to the injustices and evils of landlordism, the clergy refrained from joining the Land War movement initially out of fear of a social upheaval in Ireland. Archbishop MacHale, in particular, was concerned that a revolution led without the direction of the clergy would lead to

opposition to the Church hierarchy, as had already occurred in France. There is a lack of evidence to make a definitive claim that the landed tenants or clergy interpreted the apparition to be a condemnation of the clergy. However, there was a rise in the tenants acting as servants by admitting to and protesting against the iniquities of landlordism before the apparition occurred and by pleading for the support and involvement of the clergy in this movement. The *sensus fidei* was that the Church needed to be involved in social justice issues before the clergy recognized this need during the Land War.

The historical interpretations of all three apparitions point to the importance of preserving and advancing the institution of the Church. The historical contexts and locales of the three apparition sites also are characterized by interesting parallels. The people of all three places had remained faithful and were facing times of distress. The locations of Lourdes, Pontmain, and Knock were all isolated and were fighting for land in different ways.

One way in which the historical context of Knock diverged from the contexts of the Lourdes and Pontmain apparitions was that the local people were actively protesting against the clergy at the time of the apparition. All of those present at the parish church in Knock at the time of the apparition testified to witnessing the apparition. Not all of the visionaries were subpoenaed to give depositions, so it is unclear whether any of the visionaries were involved in public protests against the clergy. But, according to the 1978 norms used today for discerning apparitions, the lack of obedience and respect for the clergy would be believed to be evidence associated with a false apparition. It is possible that the ecclesiastical authorities refrained from making a definitive judgment on the Knock apparition because of the extensive discontentment with clergy in County Mayo,

Ireland. However, the interpretations being dispersed by Sr. Cusack and the laity reinforced the importance of the institution of the Church and did not reflect a condemnation of the clergy as suggested by Eugene Hynes. Even though the importance of the Church as institution was being emphasized in publications about the apparition, the ecclesiastical authorities abstained from making a conclusive judgment on the apparition. It is also possible that the apparition at Knock was just too difficult to discern without an explicit message from the Virgin Mary and her accompanying apparition figures.

Even though the institution of the Church is the model of Church most strongly reflected in the interpretations of these three apparitions, the Knock apparition is an example of the *sensus fidei* being instrumental to the enduring fruits of an apparition. To my knowledge, the Catholic Church has never reported any negative implications associated with the Knock apparition or to the pilgrimages and devotions associated with the apparition. The faithful continue to visit Knock each year, which is a testament to the fruits of the apparition. In a 2016 documentary on the Knock Shrine today, the parish priest of Knock, Fr. Richard Gibbons, claimed he believes that the Knock Shrine has much potential to spiritualize the Irish and has a role to play in revitalizing the Catholic Church in Ireland.<sup>386</sup> The faithful can only continue to pray to Our Lady of Knock that the apparition will continue to produce fruits, thus continually converting the Catholic Church in Ireland on its path to holiness.

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<sup>386</sup> Rachel Lysaght, *Strange Occurrences in a Small Irish Village*, directed by Aoife Kelleher (2016; Knock: Underground Films, 2016), Amazon Prime.

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