Religious Experience and Public Cult: The Case of Mary Ann Van Hoof

SANDRA L. ZIMDARS-SWARTZ

ABSTRACT: This study focuses on the first year (1950) of the apparitions of the Virgin Mary reported by Mary Ann Van Hoof of Necedah, Wisconsin. It argues that Van Hoof's experiences met not simply the needs of the community-at-large, but also helped the seer draw meaning from an emotionally-deprived and abusive childhood. The study concludes by suggesting that public serial apparitions are complex events that should be examined for the light they shed on the interaction between the seer's personal characteristics and experiences and the public events that take shape around those experiences.

Introduction

In the spring of 1950, Mary Ann Van Hoof reported that the Virgin Mary had appeared to her and entrusted her with a mission to convey important messages to Americans and specifically to American Catholics. Van Hoof's first two experiences occurred in the bedroom of her Necedah, Wisconsin, farmhouse. Late in the evening of November 12, 1949, she saw standing in the hallway a figure that then entered the bedroom and stood looking down at her. Five months later, on Good Friday, April 7, 1950, she saw the crucifix on the bedroom wall glow and heard a voice that directed her to her parish priest with the request that the community recite the Rosary each night at 8 o'clock. The owner of the voice promised to return to her after she had completed her task and "when and where the flowers bloom, trees and grass are green." The apparitions of the Virgin per se began on May 28, 1950, when Van Hoof saw a blue mist over four ash trees in the farmyard. As she approached what became known as the "Sacred Spot," she instantly saw a "beautiful Lady" who, among other things, promised to return on the next two days (May 29 and 30), on Trinity Sunday (June 4), and on the Feasts of

Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas. Support for this article was provided by the General Research Fund of the University of Kansas.
the Sacred Heart (June 16), the Assumption (August 15), and the Rosary (October 7).³

Public interest in the reported apparitions grew as people gathered at the Necedah farm to hear Van Hoof deliver the Virgin's apocalyptic messages. Twenty-eight people were present on Trinity Sunday,⁴ and approximately 1,500 were present 12 days later on the Feast of the Sacred Heart.⁵ Despite discouragement from Roman Catholic authorities, an estimated 100,000 people gathered at the Necedah farm about two months later on the Feast of the Assumption in "the largest rural gathering in Wisconsin history."⁶

The public press summarized the Virgin's messages, as Van Hoof reported them, as "pray and pray hard."⁷ According to Van Hoof, the Virgin urged priests to spread the messages she had delivered to three shepherd children at Fatima, Portugal, in 1917, and to a Carmelite postulant in Lipa, Philippines, in 1948.⁸ These messages included a warning that Russia would spread her errors throughout the world unless the Pope consecrated Russia to Mary's Immaculate Heart. For many Roman Catholics who took seriously the apparitions at Fatima, Russia was a symbol for atheistic communism which they understood to menace Christianity and democracy. At Necedah, according to Van Hoof, the Virgin reiterated her requests for devotion to her Immaculate Heart and prayer for the conversion of Russia, and warned that America, too, was in danger from this menace. Peace was to be gained through living clean lives, observing the Ten Commandments, praying the Rosary, and doing penance.⁹ At Necedah, as in many post-World War II apparitions, there was a decidedly anti-communist tenor to the messages.¹⁰

Bishop John P. Treacy of the La Crosse diocese established a commission to investigate Van Hoof's visions and her claim to be a "Victim Soul," that is, to suffer on behalf of sinners and to experience the passion of Christ. An official condemnation of Van Hoof's claims was issued in 1955, followed by interdicts in 1970 and 1975. Nonetheless, a group of followers loyal to Van Hoof has persisted in the belief that the messages she reported were indeed delivered to her by the Virgin Mary and that she was indeed a Victim Soul. That group is today attached to the North American Old Catholic Church, Ultrajectine Tradition.¹¹ Van Hoof herself never ceased to affirm the divine origin of her experiences, which apparently continued until her death in 1984.

Methodology of the study

Scholars have termed "public apocalyptic apparitions" religious experiences like that of Van Hoof in which the Virgin Mary appears to one or more individuals to commission them to warn the world that a divine chastisement is imminent unless people repent and do penance for their sins.¹² Such reported apparitions have been especially numerous in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and most of these, like Van Hoof's, have been serial in