Episode Book

EPISODE #5627

Knock, Medjugorje, and the Church's Apparition Playbook

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SYNOPSIS

A listener in Ireland asks why Jews don't report apparitions of Moses, and the question opens onto something bigger: how does the Catholic Church actually decide which visions to vouch for? We walk through Knock, Ballinspittle, Guadalupe, Fatima, Zeitoun, and Medjugorje—then dig into the 2024 norms that put the final call on the supernatural in the Pope's hands alone. Of 295 Marian apparitions studied across centuries, roughly 12 were ever approved. The rejected pile turns out to be its own story: frauds, word-for-word plagiarists, and schismatic movements that walked out when Rome said no.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

The evening sun was still above the horizon. That's the detail that undoes the most famous apparition in Irish history.



Herman

Joe Nickell and an astronomer reconstructed the sky over Knock for the evening of the twenty-first of August, eighteen seventy-nine. Sun up. And there's a school wall angled toward that south gable.



Corn

Which gives you a natural magic lantern. Sunlight off the windows.



Herman

A diffuse reflection, odd shapes, and fifteen people already primed to see something holy. That's the skeptical case in one sentence.



Corn

And it's what Daniel wants to get into. He wrote in this week. He grew up in Ireland, so the Marian apparition is a thing he heard about the way you hear about weather. He's Jewish, and he noticed something. He said he'd never read about Jewish people reporting apparitions of Moses, or Muslims reporting an apparition of Muhammad in Mecca.



Herman

He's right about that, incidentally. We'll get to it.



Corn

He's asking four things, roughly. First, how has the Christian world actually regarded these events, beyond Ireland. Second, does the phenomenon show up in other religions, or in organizations adjacent to religion, cults. Third, what does the Church mean when it says it



Corn (continued)

vouches for one. And fourth, what do the non-religious and scientific lenses say.



Herman

And he flagged a tension himself. Even the Church-vouched ones are incompatible with a scientific worldview.



Corn

That's the thread. So let's start with what an apparition actually is, because the Church has a surprisingly precise definition.



Herman

Precise in a way that gives away the game a little. In Catholic usage, an apparition is a specific thing. The seer claims to see a figure visually located in their external environment. Not a dream. Not imagination. Not a modification of a physical object.



Corn

Meaning a weeping icon doesn't count.



Herman

A weeping icon or a moving statue is classified separately. And if you hear Mary but don't see her, that's an interior locution. Different category entirely.



Corn

The Church polices that boundary itself. Which is interesting. Somebody decided where the line goes.



Herman

And the theology matters here. Apparitions are private revelation. They can never add anything to the deposit of faith. Even when the Church approves one, no Catholic is required to believe it.



Corn

So the Church vouching is not the Church saying you must believe this.



Herman

It's saying nothing stands in the way of devotion. That's the actual strength of the claim. And the stated purpose is usually didactic. To draw attention to some aspect of the Christian message given the needs of a particular time and place.



Corn

With that definition in hand, let's look at the cases. Starting with the one Daniel would have grown up hearing about.



Herman

Knock, County Mayo. The twenty-first of August, eighteen seventy-nine. Wet evening. Villagers reported a silent tableau at the south gable of the church. The Virgin Mary in a white cloak, hands raised in prayer. St Joseph with his head bowed. St John the Evangelist in a mitre holding an open book. An altar with a lamb and a cross. Angels.



Corn

Fifteen official witnesses gave testimony.



Herman

A group of between two and twenty-five people stood or knelt in the rain for nearly two hours reciting the rosary. The figures never moved, never flickered. And the ground beneath them stayed dry despite the wind and rain.



Corn

The silence is the part that gets me.



Herman

It's the part the historian John White connects to the language shift happening in Ireland at the time. The oldest witness had no English. The youngest was being educated with no Irish. There was no shared language for the apparition to speak in.



Corn

So it said nothing. That's either a profound observation or a very convenient one.



Herman

Archbishop John MacHale set up a Commission of Inquiry on the eighth of October, eighteen seventy-nine. It found no natural explanation, no evidence of fraud, and judged the testimony trustworthy and satisfactory. A second commission in nineteen thirty-six relied on the surviving witnesses.



Corn

And then it became an economy.



Herman

It became a national shrine. John Paul the Second visited in nineteen seventy-nine for the centenary. Francis in twenty eighteen. And there's an airport. Ireland West. Msgr James Horan secured it with state funding from Taoiseach Charles Haughey.



Corn

An airport named after an apparition. That's the footprint.



Herman

Then you get nineteen eighty-five, which is closer to what Daniel would actually remember.



Corn

Ballinspittle.



Herman

County Cork, July. An observer claimed a roadside Virgin Mary statue moved spontaneously. It spread to about thirty locations nationwide. Mount Melleray in Waterford, other sites. Not all Marian, some were other saints or figures in wall stains.



Corn

And the crowds.



Herman

Up to a hundred thousand people visited Ballinspittle alone. Thousands at the other sites.



Corn

Here's the contrast that matters. The Church was not the driver on this one.



Herman

The Church was reticent, sometimes openly skeptical. A bishop declared the whole phenomenon an illusion.



Corn

So you have Knock, where the institution investigated and validated, and Ballinspittle, where the institution shrugged and said it's an optical illusion. Same country, a century apart, opposite institutional posture.



Herman

A team of psychologists from University College Cork recorded thirty-one apparition sites and attributed the visions to optical illusions caused by staring at objects in evening twilight.



Corn

Staring. Twilight. That's the mechanism.



Herman

The anthropologist Peter Mulholland argues the continuing role of Marian apparitions in Irish popular culture reflects psychological insecurity from adverse childhood experiences, plus historical and cultural and political factors.



Corn

So not just optics. Optics plus a population carrying something.



Herman

And the statue at Ballinspittle was damaged by hammer-wielding Pentecostal protesters against idolatry. It was repaired.



Corn

Of course it was.



Herman

Moving statues have also been reported in Poland. It's not an Irish quirk.



Corn

Let's widen out. Guadalupe.



Herman

Mexico, fifteen thirty-one. The image said to be imprinted on Juan Diego's cloak. Today it's the most-visited Marian shrine in the world, on the order of ten million pilgrims a year. And it's central to Mexican national identity, not just to Mexican Catholicism.



Corn

That's the thing about these. They stop being religious events and become national ones.



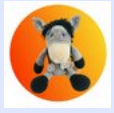
Herman

Lourdes, France, eighteen fifty-eight. Bernadette Soubirous, eighteen visions. Between one and a half and five million pilgrims a year.



Corn

Fatima.



Herman

Portugal, nineteen seventeen. Three shepherd children. The Miracle of the Sun reportedly witnessed by around seventy thousand people. Declared worthy of belief in nineteen thirty.



Corn

And John Paul the Second.



Herman

He credited Our Lady of Fatima with saving his life after the assassination attempt in nineteen eighty-one. Which happened on her feast day. He donated the bullet to the shrine.



Corn

He donated the bullet.



Herman

It's in the crown.



Corn

There's a line I did not expect to say today.



Herman

Then there's Zeitoun, which is the one that breaks the pattern.



Corn

Egypt.



Herman

Nineteen sixty-eight to nineteen seventy-one. A mass apparition reportedly witnessed by hundreds of thousands of people, including on national television. In a majority-Muslim country. Reportedly seen by Muslims as well as Coptic Christians.



Corn

That's the case that complicates the Catholic-skew question.



Herman

It does. Though note it's still a Marian apparition. It's a Christian figure appearing in a Muslim country, not a Muslim figure appearing.



Corn

Fair. Medjugorje.



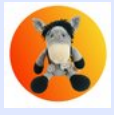
Herman

Bosnia-Herzegovina, from nineteen eighty-one. Six children. Enormous global following, long contested. The Vatican has never definitively approved or condemned the messages. It has authorized veneration without affirming the divine nature.



Corn

Which is a very careful sentence.



Herman

It's the Church doing exactly what Tine Van Osselaer says it does. Managing devotion rather than adjudicating metaphysics.



Corn

Kibeho.



Herman

Rwanda, nineteen eighty-two. Teenagers reported visions including rivers of blood. Later read as an ominous prediction of the nineteen ninety-four genocide. Approved by the local bishop and later the Holy See.



Corn

And Akita.



Herman

Japan, nineteen seventy-three. Agnes Sasagawa. A statue reportedly wept, and the tears were reportedly broadcast on Japanese national television. Bishop Ito recognized the supernatural character in nineteen eighty-four.



Corn

So we've seen the cases and how the Christian world has received them. But how does the Church actually decide which ones to vouch for, and what happens when it says no?



Herman

The approval rate is the first surprise. Of two hundred and ninety-five Marian apparitions studied through the centuries, only about twelve had been approved by the Holy See. That's Father Salvatore Perrella of the Marianum Pontifical Institute, around two thousand eight.



Corn

Twelve out of two hundred and ninety-five.



Herman

The Church is not the credulous party in this story. It's the opposite. Most claims get rejected.



Corn

Walk through the process.



Herman

Under the nineteen seventy-eight norms, the local diocesan bishop investigates. He can declare pro nunc nihil obstare. For now, nothing stands in the way.



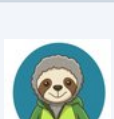
Corn

Then twenty twenty-four.



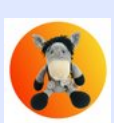
Herman

The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith published new norms on the seventeenth of May twenty twenty-four, effective the nineteenth. And it's a significant tightening. Prompted by social media spreading claims faster than the Church could vet them.



Corn

That's the modern pressure.



Herman

Only the Pope can now declare a phenomenon supernatural. Bishops can no longer make that positive declaration.



Corn

So the ceiling got lower.



Herman

Six possible outcomes now, running from nihil obstat, nothing hinders, no objection, devotion may be promoted, through prae oculis habeatur, curatur, sub mandato, prohibetur et obstruatur, down to declaratio de non supernaturalitate. A declaration of non-supernaturality.



Corn

That's a ladder with a lot of rungs below the top.



Herman

Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez, who heads the Dicastery, said cases like Guadalupe, Lourdes and Fatima would be exceptional. And that rulings overall would remain rare.



Corn

Rare. From the man in charge.



Herman

Religious historian Tine Van Osselaer reads the new norms as prioritizing pastoral integrity over verification. The Church is managing devotion, not adjudicating metaphysics.



Corn

That's the honest reading. They're not trying to find out if it happened. They're trying to keep the devotion from running away.



Herman

And the rejected pile is long. Our Lady of Surbiton, denounced as fraud in two thousand seven. Holy Love Ministries in Elyria, Ohio, condemned in two thousand nine. Veronica Lueken's Bayside messages, declared invalid by the Bishop of Brooklyn. Catalina Rivas, whose messages were found to match exact pages of previously published books.



Corn

Matching exact pages.



Herman

Word for word. And Peter Popoff, the televangelist, exposed in nineteen eighty-seven via a hidden earpiece, replayed on Johnny Carson.



Corn

That's the fraud category, which is its own thing. But the more interesting category is the rejection that produces a schism.



Herman

That's the answer to Daniel's cult question, and it's a good one. When the Church rejects a claim, sometimes the claimants leave. The Mariavite Church. The Palmarian Catholic Church. The Fraternite Notre-Dame. All seceded after their apparition claims were rejected.



Corn

So rejected apparitions are a documented engine of new religious movements.



Herman

Documented and repeatable. It's not a one-off. The pattern is that a rejected seer takes the following with them.



Corn

And the Church has reversed itself.



Herman

Faustina Kowalska's Divine Mercy visions were condemned by the Holy See in nineteen fifty-eight. She was canonized in two thousand. Divine Mercy Sunday is now an official feast.



Corn

Condemned to feast day in forty-two years.



Herman

And Maria Valtorta's visions were placed on the Index of Forbidden Books and declared not supernatural in origin. That was Ratzinger, nineteen ninety-five.



Corn

So the verdict is not always final.



Herman

The verdict is a pastoral judgment at a moment in time. Which is a very different thing from a fact about the universe.



Corn

Let's get to the part Daniel is actually poking at. Why does this look Catholic.



Herman

The specific form is Catholic. A named figure, recurring, institutionally vetted, with a shrine and a process. That package is disproportionately Catholic.



Corn

But the underlying thing.



Herman

The underlying thing is a cultural universal. Perceiving divine figures or sacred imagery in the world is not a Catholic trait. It's a human one.



Corn

Give me the other traditions.



Herman

Islam is the cleanest comparison, and the form is different in a way that proves the point. Islam is aniconic, so you don't get figures. You get text. The most commonly reported analogue is perceiving the word Allah in Arabic script in natural objects. Fish, fruit, vegetables, eggs, honeycombs, animal markings, clouds.



Corn

Because the script is simple enough to read into parallel lines.



Herman

And some Muslims read the Arabic script for Allah in a satellite photo of the two thousand four Asian tsunami and took it as evidence of divine punishment.



Corn

That's the same move as Knock. Pattern, then meaning, then judgment.



Herman

Islam also has a strong tradition of dream visions, ru'ya, rather than waking apparitions. So the channel is different too.



Corn

Hinduism.



Herman

Several murtis are held to be self-manifest, swayambhu. Most commonly lingams of Shiva. In Jurong West in Singapore, two thousand seven, tree calluses resembling Hanuman drew crowds. Nearby trees resembled Guan Yin and Ganesha.



Corn

Tree calluses.



Herman

Three deities, one row of trees.



Corn

And Judaism. Daniel's own observation.



Herman

He's correct, and it's a genuine asymmetry, not an oversight. There's no comparable tradition of Moses apparitions. Judaism has prophecy and dream traditions, but it's generally wary of claims of direct visual revelation. And it has no institutional apparatus for authenticating apparitions.



Corn

No machinery.



Herman

Which is half the answer to why the phenomenon looks Catholic. The other half is that other traditions have the phenomenon but not the apparatus. No process, no shrine economy, no press office.



Corn

What about the non-Catholic Christian traditions.



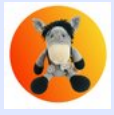
Herman

Latter-day Saints. Joseph Smith's First Vision in eighteen twenty, and the Kirtland Temple vision in eighteen thirty-six. That's a non-Catholic Christian tradition built directly on an apparition claim.



Corn

And Adventists.



Herman

Ellen G. White reported over a hundred visions. The movement is based largely on her interpretations.



Corn

So it's not Catholic-only even inside Christianity.



Herman

It's Catholic-dominant in the specific form. The named, recurring, vetted apparition with a shrine and a file. That's the Catholic specialty.



Corn

Why.



Herman

Four factors, roughly. The Catholic theology of Mary as an ongoing intercessor, so apparitions read as expressions of Mary's ongoing motherly care. The institutional machinery to investigate and publicize. The pilgrimage economy. And the fact that apparitions tend to incorporate local culture and language, which makes them adaptable across countries.



Corn

Protestant traditions.



Herman

Tend to be more skeptical of post-biblical revelation. Which is a doctrinal position, not a scientific one. They're not rejecting apparitions because of optics. They're rejecting them because the canon is closed.



Corn

That's an important distinction. The skepticism is coming from inside the tradition.



Herman

Right. And that's why Daniel's framing is slightly off in an interesting way. He said the Church vouching doesn't detract from the fact that these events are incompatible with a scientific worldview. True. But the Church's own skepticism is also a thing, and it's not scientific skepticism. It's a different animal.



Corn

Now the scientific and atheist lens.



Herman

Pareidolia is the central concept. The human mind's over-sensitivity to patterns, especially faces, in random stimuli.



Corn

The grilled cheese sandwich.



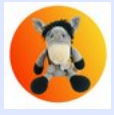
Herman

The Virgin Mary in a grilled cheese sandwich. The Clearwater Virgin, a stain on a Florida office building's glass, attributed by a chemist to water deposits and weathering. It drew about a million visitors. The Nun Bun. The Jesus Nebula.



Corn

A million people to look at a stain on glass.



Herman

And the Islamic Allah sightings are the same mechanism. The Arabic script's simplicity makes it especially easy to read into parallel lines or lobes.



Corn

So the mechanism is shared across traditions even when the content isn't.



Herman

That's the whole thesis in one line. Mechanism shared, content supplied locally.



Corn

Let's do the weeping statues, because that's where the fraud is most documented.



Herman

They're trivially easy to fake. Liquid injected into porous material seeps out as tears. Oil mixed with fat applied to the eyes weeps as chapel temperatures rise. Condensation forms on the denser, colder parts of a statue.



Corn

So the physics does it for you.



Herman

Documented hoaxes. Montreal, nineteen eighty-five, the owner's blood and shaving cream. Civitavecchia, nineteen ninety-five, the blood was found to be male, and the owner refused a DNA test. Two thousand eight, an Italian church custodian convicted after his own DNA matched the miraculous blood. Two thousand twelve, a weeping Jesus traced to a sewage pipe.



Corn

A sewage pipe.



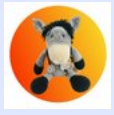
Herman

Hobbs, New Mexico, twenty eighteen. Tears confirmed to be rose-scented olive oil.



Corn

Rose-scented.



Herman

And the Church declared the Trevignano statue fake this year.



Corn

The Church itself.



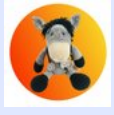
Herman

Which is the second time in this episode the institution has been the skeptic, not the mark.



Corn

Now the psychology, which is the part that actually changes how I think about this.



Herman

The Society for Psychical Research was founded in eighteen eighty-two and collected about eighteen hundred first-hand accounts. And then Green and McCreery in nineteen seventy-five pulled out the patterns.



Corn

What did they find.



Herman

Apparitions are often not frightening. Frequently soothing or reassuring, and they tend to happen at times of crisis. They occur in humdrum settings under low central nervous system arousal. Often at home doing housework.



Corn

Doing housework.



Herman

Not at haunted sites. Not at night in a graveyard. At home, folding laundry, and then there's a figure.



Corn

That's the opposite of every ghost story.



Herman

They appear solid, not transparent. And verbal interaction is unusual. Usually one sense only. You see, you don't hear.



Corn

So the popular image is wrong on almost every count.



Herman

Then there's schizotypy. Psychosis-proneness as a continuously distributed personality dimension. It helps explain how psychologically normal people have anomalous perceptual experiences without tipping into psychosis.



Corn

It's a spectrum, not a switch.



Herman

A spectrum. And here's the part I find striking. Green and McCreery's reassuring apparitions suggest hallucinations may be adaptive. Helping people cope with adverse life events. Which would explain why the trait hasn't been weeded out by natural selection.



Corn

The hallucination as a coping mechanism.



Herman

A thing the brain does to get you through something. Which reframes the whole question. It's not a defect.



Corn

There's a philosophical angle too.



Herman

Apparitional experiences are a standard objection to direct realism in the philosophy of perception. They're cited as empirical support for representationalism. The idea that we perceive representations, not the world directly.



Corn

Which sounds abstract until you remember the fifteen people at the gable.



Herman

It's the same point. If perception is a construction, then two people standing in the same rain can construct different things.



Corn

And that gets us to the cultural filter.



Herman

This is the strongest bridge between the religious and the skeptical framings. What people see is mediated by culture, politics and worldview. Our naive descriptions are neither innocent nor objective.



Corn

Say that again, because it's the line.



Herman

Our naive descriptions are neither innocent nor objective. The experience may be real and neurologically ordinary, while the content is supplied by the surrounding culture.



Corn

So a Catholic sees Mary. A Muslim sees Arabic script. A Hindu sees Ganesha.



Herman

Not because one is right and the others are wrong. Because the brain is doing the same thing and the culture is filling in the picture.



Corn

That's more respectful than debunking, and it survives the fact that most witnesses are sincere.



Herman

It survives it and it explains it. Most of these people are not lying and not crazy. They're having an ordinary perceptual event in an extraordinary frame.



Corn

C.S. Lewis had a counter-argument, for balance.



Herman

He argued that humans are wired to perceive religious forms, and that we should trust that wiring the same way we trust our wiring for logic. Despite the fact that we sometimes make demonstrably mistaken inferences.



Corn

Which is a real argument, and also the argument that proves too much.



Herman

It does. If the same wiring produces Mary in Mayo and a lingam in Singapore, the wiring is doing the work, and the content is local.



Corn

The light had been off for years. It came back on during a power surge, and the people outside started weeping.



Herman

Which shrine.



Corn

I'm not going to say which one. It doesn't matter which one. It was a maintenance access panel behind the figure, with a light fixture inside that somebody had installed decades earlier to illuminate it from below. The bulb had been dead so long nobody remembered it was there.



Herman

And when it flickered on.



Corn

There was a glow under the statue's chin and along the folds of the cloak. From where the pilgrims were standing, on the other side of the rail, it looked like the figure had lit up from within. One woman went to her knees. Then a dozen more.



Herman

And you watched.



Corn

I watched from a doorway. I had the keys to the panel. I knew the wiring diagram. I also knew that the light really did come on, and that the timing really was strange, and that whatever those people saw, they saw it.



Herman

So which fact matters more.



Corn

I've had a long time to think about that and I still don't know. Both facts are true. The light came on. The wiring is thirty years old and the breaker is in a closet nobody checks. Those two things sit next to each other and neither one cancels the other.



Herman

That's the thing the research can't give you. The Church investigates the vision. Nobody investigates the building.



Corn

The donation boxes, the candle room, the gift shop inventory, the exact spot where the statue is bolted to its base. That's all part of how the apparition actually happens, and it's not in any of the files.



Herman

So the question isn't fraud or miracle. It's an ambiguous stimulus in a charged environment, with a physical plant nobody thinks to examine.



Corn

Right. And the people were not stupid. That's the part I want to be clear about. They weren't gullible. They were standing in a place built to make them look up, at a moment when something changed, and they did what people do.



Herman

The maintenance panel is going to stay with me.



Corn

It stays with me too, and I'm the one who had the keys.



Herman

So let's pull this together. If the experience is neurologically ordinary and the content is culturally supplied, what does that mean for the millions of people who report these things sincerely?



Corn

It doesn't debunk them. That's the point. It explains them. A person can have a real perceptual event, in a real place, at a real moment of crisis, and the event can be entirely genuine to them while the content comes from the world they grew up in.



Herman

And the asymmetry Daniel noticed is real. Catholicism has the machinery. The theology of Mary as ongoing intercessor, the investigative process, the pilgrimage economy. Other traditions have the phenomenon but not the apparatus. Judaism has neither the apparition tradition nor the machinery to vet one.



Corn

Which means the map of where apparitions get reported is partly a map of where apparitions get processed.



Herman

And the twenty twenty-four norms are the Church trying to manage devotion in a decentralized information environment. Social media spreads a claim faster than a diocese can investigate it. That problem isn't going away.



Corn

The one thing I'd take from this. The Church is not the credulous party. Twelve approvals out of two hundred and ninety-five. Only the Pope can declare a phenomenon supernatural. The institution has spent centuries building a filter, and the filter mostly says no.



Herman

And the filter is pastoral, not scientific. It's deciding what's safe to devotion, not what's true about the universe. Those are two different jobs and the Church knows it.



Corn

If you enjoyed this one, leave us a review. It helps other listeners find the show.



Herman

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you tomorrow.