

Status of Medjugorje/ True cross of Christ

Q. A friend has just informed me that she is going next month to Medjugorje in Bosnia. She says that the Blessed Mother has been appearing there to six visionaries since 1981 and that Our Lady gives them messages on the 2nd and 25th days of each month.

Can you shed some light on this for me? Is this something that is sanctioned by the Catholic Church? How does one verify that it is not a hoax? (Virginia Beach, Virginia)

A. In May 2019, the Vatican announced that parishes and dioceses around the world are now permitted to sponsor official pilgrimages to Medjugorje. At the same time, however, the Vatican clarified that it was making no statement on the authenticity of the alleged apparitions.

In 1981, six young people claimed that Mary had appeared to them at Medjugorje, which is located in the nation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Some of the six claim that Our Lady continues to appear to them up to the present and gives them messages daily, while others of the group say that Mary now appears to them only once a year.

In 2010, Pope Benedict XVI formed a papal commission to study the alleged apparitions, but that commission has yet to issue an official report.

In 2017, speaking with journalists during a flight from Fatima, Portugal, Pope Francis offered an insight into the Vatican's official thinking. "About the first apparitions when (the 'seers') were young," said the pontiff, "the report more or less says that the investigation needs to continue." However, he added, "concerning the alleged current apparitions, the report expresses doubts."

In its most recent move — permitting organized pilgrimages to the site — the Vatican acknowledges that Medjugorje continues to be for countless pilgrims a place of authentic prayer and spiritual deepening and that many visitors have experienced "abundant fruits of grace."

Pilgrims are offered the sacrament of penance in seven different languages, and confessional lines are sometimes several hours long.

Q. Is there any verifiable evidence as to what happened to the cross on which Jesus was actually crucified? Did the followers of Jesus ask for it and get it, or did it remain in place for further use by Roman soldiers? (southern Indiana)

A. It is difficult with historical precision to determine the exact journey of the cross of Christ from Calvary and the present-day locations of all of its fragments, but the most common belief of scholars is as follows.

During the second century, the emperor Hadrian built a pagan temple over the site of Christ's death and burial. About the year 326, St. Helena — the mother of Emperor Constantine, who first allowed Christianity to be practiced in the Roman Empire — journeyed to Jerusalem in an effort to locate the true cross.

According to legend, she found three crosses buried on Calvary; to determine which was the cross of Jesus and which ones belonged to the two thieves, Helena arranged for a dying woman to touch the crosses and, when the woman touched the cross of Christ, she was healed of her illness.

A portion of the cross traveled with St. Helena back to Rome, and the rest of it was enshrined deep within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. During subsequent centuries, remnants of the cross changed hands several times during battles with Persian and Muslim forces and, later, with those of the Sultan Saladin.

Relics of the cross remain today in Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher as well as in Rome's Basilica of the Holy Cross, while the largest remaining piece is thought to be in Greece on Mount Athos.

Copyright ©2019 Catholic News Service/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.