

Several people have asked me about my claim that “group hallucinations” are possible – that is, that a “vision” can be seen by many people at once. It seems counter-intuitive: aren’t hallucinations by definition the inner workings of a person’s mind? How can more than one person have the same hallucination at the same time?

Well, I’m not sure how that works, psychologically. My guess is that there is a strong sociological component as well – i.e., that something weird is seen by a number of people, one of the persons in the group interprets it, and the rest agree that Yes, that is indeed what they saw. But that’s just my guess. Maybe some of the trained psychologists on the blog can tell us.

But in any event, it is a well-documented phenomenon. Here is the query from one of the people who asked the question, specifically with respect to the modern-day appearances of Jesus’ mother, Mary, followed by a brief discussion of the phenomenon taken from my book [How Jesus Became God](#).

QUESTION: Bart, when you refer above to “the hundreds of people who say they have, at one and the same time, seen the Blessed Virgin Mary” what apparition or apparitions are you referring to? Can you give some background details please? Thank you!

RESPONSE: Here is a brief discussion taken from my book:

The Blessed Virgin Mary

René Laurentin is a modern-day Catholic theologian and expert on modern apparitions, who has written many books on the topic.^[1] He has a degree in philosophy from the Sorbonne in Paris, and two PhDs, one in theology and one in literature. He is not your average intellect. And he deeply and sincerely believes that Mary – the mother of Jesus who died 2000 years ago – has appeared to people in the modern world and that she continues to do so. Here I give just two examples from his writings.

In Cua, Betania, in Venezuela, a woman named Maria Esperanza Medrano de Bianchin received peculiar spiritual powers: she could tell the future, levitate, and heal the sick. The Virgin Mary appeared to her...

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The Virgin Mary appeared to her several times, starting in March 1976. The most striking occurrence involved lots of other people, on March 25, 1984. After the Catholic mass that morning, a number of people went to enjoy some time outdoors near the local waterfall, when the Virgin Mary appeared above it. This began a series of visions. Mary came and went, often visible for five minutes or so, the last time for a half an hour. Among the observers were doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, engineers, and lawyers. People over the weeks to come started picnicking there. At times up to a thousand people observed

Mary there, bathed in light and accompanied by the smell of roses. This continued until 1988. Later a Jesuit priest, Monsignor Pio Ricardo, who was a professor of psychology at the Central University of Caracas, interviewed 490 people who claimed to have seen Mary there. They convinced him.

A second example comes from Cairo, Egypt in 1986, at a Coptic church. Mary had appeared a number of times between 1983 and 1986. Once she appeared on the roof, and four Coptic bishops arrived to authenticate the vision. They did indeed see her. At other times she was seen by (non-Christian, obviously) Muslims. In some instances she was actually photographed. Laurentin indicates that he actually has a photograph of a similar apparition from another Coptic suburb, from 1968.

My point is not that Mary really is appearing in these times and places. But people deeply believe she is. And it is not just illiterate peasants, but highly educated people. Terrifically anecdotal collections of Mary visions can be found in numerous books, such as Janice Connell's [Meetings with Mary: Visions of the Blessed Mother](#). [2] Connell provides sixteen chapters detailing visions of Mary, from a believers' perspective, from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as these are documented from Lourdes, Fatima, Garabandal, Medjogorje, and so on. There is, for example, the "cosmic miracle of the sun" that took place at Fatima on October 13, 1917. We are told the sun was seen to spin wildly and to tumble down to earth before stopping and returning to its normal position, radiating indescribably beautiful colors. The miracle was seen and attested to by over 50,000 people.

Do such miracles happen? Believers say yes, unbelievers say no. But it is striking and worth noting that typically believers in one religious tradition often insist on the "evidence" for the miracles that support their views and completely discount the "evidence" for miracles attested in some other religious tradition, even though, at the end of the day, it is the same kind of evidence (for example, eyewitness testimony) and may be of even greater abundance. Protestant apologists interested in "proving" that Jesus was raised from the dead rarely show any interest in applying their finely honed historical talents to the exalted Blessed Virgin Mary.

[1] See, for example, René Laurentin, [The Apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary Today](#) (Dublin: Veritas, 1990; French original 1988). The examples that I give below are all drawn from this book.

[2] New York: Ballantine Books, 1995.



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