

"This experience has been always present in me . . ."

The Apparition of St. Michael at Garabandal

BY CONNIE HOEBICH

The witnessing of an ecstasy was often a moving experience, leaving long-lasting impressions. A religious recounts his experience in this little known incident which also points to the importance of St. Michael's protection and guidance for people of faith in today's world.

It has been a little more than 16 years since four young girls at play in a tiny mountain village in Spain first heard a clap of thunder, then saw a great light, an angel and, several days later, the Mother of God. These were the sensational beginnings of events studded by phenomena through the years: ecstatic trances, messages from Heaven, prophecy, the birth and growth of world-wide efforts to make the events known, and many kinds of miracles. But, transcending the sensational, there is in the Garabandal story a quiet simplicity which deeply moved visitors who came to the village during the years of the apparitions and which, these many years later, still stirs their lives.

Juan Bosco, Luis and Miguel, Hospitalarian Brothers of St. John of God, are three such people. They went to Garabandal on August 6, 1962, and the following day Brother Juan wrote an informal account of their visit. NEEDLES has obtained that account, together with 1977 correspondence from Brother Juan in which he responds as follows to our



question, "How did this day affect the lives of the Brothers?":

"The impression was very great. Particularly, I was stunned and with much interior sentiment of having sinned so many times, and because of this I implored mercy. I have never felt in my life such a strong feeling of the supernatural. . . . We all felt . . . a great wish to be better. Afterwards, as the years passed . . . this experience has been always present in me . . . I have a great confidence in the love of the Virgin and an accentuated fervor for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament."

What was the experience that remains "always present" for Brother Juan? The answer is the same for him as it is for thousands of others who



Conchita in ecstasy is closely observed by Brother Miguel. At left, the visionary holds up scapular for St. Michael to kiss.

visited the village during the four years of the apparitions: he witnessed an ecstasy. No fanfare. No commotion. Just a little girl apparently in a trance, apparently in conversation with someone invisible to everyone else. Nothing spectacular here—yet the memory of the scene endures. "I have never . . . felt such a strong feeling of the supernatural."

Again like so many others, Brothers Juan, Luis and Miguel had arrived unceremoniously in the village. In his written account, Brother Juan says that they came upon the child seers, who appeared to be very ordinary little girls, friendly and without affectation of any kind. The Brothers asked questions about the apparitions and received simple, matter-of-fact answers. Later, they sat by the pine trees overlooking the village and chatted with the visionary Conchita. They offered her a sandwich, but she answered, "No, because I will receive Communion

here."* Brother Juan states that this "perplexed" the Brothers and they asked how this could be. She answered simply: "The Angel will give me Communion because I have had no chance to receive Communion at Church."

After an hour and a half of conversation with Conchita, she rose and stepped away from the Brothers—so casually that they thought she was going home and wondered why she hadn't said good-bye. They were watching her walking away when suddenly she dropped to her knees. Her head tilted back. She was in an ecstatic trance.

This particular ecstasy, during which St. Michael the Archangel alone appeared to Conchita, lasted only a few minutes. It was unadorned by ecstatic flights across the hazardous Garabandal terrain. There was no levitation or other frequently seen phenomena. But, like so many ecstasies, it did have something special for particular visitors to the village on a given day, in this case the Brothers of St. John of God. Brother Juan recounts this portion of his memorable experience:

"Looking at the scene presented by the girl, two of us fell to our knees. The third, who had the camera, took some photos. Still kneeling and in the same posture, the girl made the Sign of the Cross very slowly and devoutly. She said words in a low voice and gently struck her chest three times. She was praying in ecstasy. As the prayer ended, she opened her mouth, put out her tongue as in receiving Communion, withdrew her tongue and closed her mouth slowly. Two of us heard the slight noise of her swallowing something. She held this position and we heard her low voice, audible, but we could not hear it sufficiently to understand the words.

"Then, still kneeling, she turned around toward Brother Luis. He, a little frightened, went away from her; but, seeing that the girl still followed him on her knees, he stopped. Then the girl took his Scapular in her hands. She stood up, raised the Scapular in a very solemn way as though presenting it to someone. She lowered the Scapular and again dropped abruptly to her knees, recovering her previous kneeling posture. For a moment she did not move; then she went toward Brother Miguel, repeating the same act with the Scapular as

with brother Luis. She started in the direction of the third Brother, but, before she reached him, Brother Miguel tied his Scapular with that of Brother Juan Bosco—in a knot. But the girl, still with her face turned upward, untied the two Scapulars, selected the one of Brother Juan Bosco and made the same act of presentation. After this, she went on her knees back to the spot where she had started the ecstasy, while speaking in that same voice, not audible enough to understand. She made the Sign of the Cross on her forehead, lips and chest, followed by the regular Sign of the Cross made in blessing oneself. Her ecstasy had ended. She got up very naturally, gave us a simple smile, and fixed the ribbon in her hair that had fallen down while she was in ecstasy."

The Brothers began questioning Conchita immediately: "Have you had Communion?" "Yes." "Why did you take our Scapulars and raise them up?" "The Angel asked me to do it, to kiss them." "Have you spoken to the Angel?" "Yes." "What did he say to you?" "The Angel knew you. He told me that Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin are happy with you."

In the 1977 correspondence with Brother Juan, NEEDLES noted that, when asked some years later about the raising of the Scapulars during this apparition, Conchita had said that the Angel never kissed anything. Brother Juan responded by repeating his 1962 statements and with additional comments:

"When Conchita took Brother Luis' Scapular to raise it up, I thought to myself it was a beautiful gesture and felt I would be pleased if she did the same with mine. We did not know why she had done that, and when she came out of her ecstasy we asked her. She said that the Angel had asked her to give him the Scapulars to kiss them. When the years had passed, reflecting upon this detail, I was not at all surprised because in our Order we honor the Archangel St. Raphael as our 'Big Brother' and in his images or statues he wears our habit with the Scapular.

"In the month of July in 1966 I returned to Garabandal for the second time. While talking to Conchita about what had happened on that day in 1962, she affirmed that the only thing the Angel had kissed had been our Scapulars."

Brother Juan concludes his 1962 notes with the statement, "We arrived home at about 6 p.m., full of the impressions that deep in our hearts had done so much good for our spiritual lives."

It is a simple story, told objectively by a humble religious. And, like so many Garabandal stories, its very simplicity supports its credibility.

Upon further reflections, we are reminded of St. Michael's important role in the Garabandal events, that, in addition to heralding Our Lady's



The brothers of St. John of God with two of the young visionaries. From left to right, Brother Juan Bosco, Mari Cruz, Brother Miguel, Jacinta and Brother Luis.

coming, he continued to appear to the children, and that it was quite natural for them to receive Communion from him. Scripture and Christian tradition cite St. Michael the Archangel as Defender of the Church, Protector of the Blessed Sacrament and Champion of God's People in the continuing struggle against the forces of evil headed by Satan. St. Michael kissed the Brothers' Scapulars on a summer's day in a remote village in Spain and 16 years later Juan Bosco writes: "I believe the essence of the grace given to us is our own perseverance in the Order."

For perseverance in our vocations, religious or lay, indeed, for our very perseverance in the faith in these trying days for Christians, we need St. Michael's ready assistance. Let us ask for it and, with it, go forward in faith. •

*Prior to Vatican II, Catholics were required to fast from food and drink several hours before receiving Communion.