

Crackdown on Medjugorje

The Pope has begun a crackdown on the world's largest illicit Catholic shrine — by suspending the priest at the centre of claims that the Virgin Mary has appeared more than 40,000 times.

Benedict XVI has authorized 'severe cautionary and disciplinary measures' against **Father Tomislav Vlasic, the former 'spiritual director'** to six children who said Our Lady was appearing to them at Medjugorje in Bosnia.

The Franciscan priest has been suspended after he refused to cooperate into claims of scandalous sexual immorality '**aggravated by mystical motivations**'.

He has also been accused of '**the diffusion of dubious doctrine, manipulation of consciences, suspected mysticism and disobedience towards legitimately issued orders**', and is suspected of **heresy and schism**.

Father Vlasic was a central figure in promoting the apparitions that allegedly began in 1981 and continue to this day.

In 1984 he boasted to Pope John Paul II that he was the one 'who through divine providence guides the seers of Medjugorje' and the visionaries even said that the **Virgin had told them he was a living saint**.

But the Bosnian cleric later took a back seat when it emerged that he had fathered a child with a nun called Sister Rufina, and that he refused to leave his order to marry her but instead begged her not to expose him.

Father Vlasic then moved to Parma, Italy, where he set up a mixed male and female religious community, called Queen of Peace, which was dedicated to the Medjugorje apparitions.

Medjugorje has grown to become the biggest unapproved pilgrim sight, but the local bishops are convinced the claims are bogus and in 2006 complained directly to Pope Benedict.

This led to a Vatican investigation which turned the spotlight on the role of Father Vlasic.

The priest has now been suspended by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith after he refused to cooperate with the inquiry into his conduct, instead 'justifying himself by citing his zealous activity' in initiating religious communities and building churches the Medjugorje area.

The decree confirming his suspension was signed with the Pope's approval by Cardinal William Levada, head of CDF, and Father Jose Carballo, the Minister General of the Franciscan Minor Order.

It confines Father Vlastic to a Franciscan monastery in Italy and bans him from contact with the Queen of Peace community, or with his lawyers without permission from his superior.

He is banned from making public appearances, preaching and hearing confessions and he will be required to make a solemn profession of the Catholic faith.

The Vatican has warned Father Vlastic that he will be excommunicated if he violates any of the prohibitions.

The action was taken earlier this year but was made public this week by the Bishop of Mostar, Ratko Peric, at the request of the Vatican, to make local people to be aware of the priest's status.

Father Vlastic is the second spiritual adviser to the seers to be suspended from his ministry. The other, **Father Jozo Zovko, was suspended by Bishop Peric in 2004.**

It represents a massive blow to millions of Medjugorje followers worldwide who were hoping that the Vatican investigation would legitimize the shrine.

Earlier this year, Italian Bishop Andrea Gemma denounced the Medjugorje claims as the '**work of the Demon**' and predicted that 'soon the Vatican will intervene with something explosive to unmask once and for all who is behind this deceit'.

The phenomenon began on 25 June 1981 when six children — Mirjana Dragičević, Marija Pavlović, Vicka Ivanković, Ivan Dragičević, Ivanka Ivanković and Jakov Colo — told a priest they had seen the Virgin on a hillside near their town.

Three Church commissions failed to find evidence to support their claims and the bishops of the former Yugoslavia finally declared that 'it cannot be affirmed that these matters concern supernatural apparitions or revelations'.

In 1985 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger — now Pope Benedict — **banned pilgrimages to the site, but this has been widely ignored.**

Instead the seers have grown wealthy as a result of their claims — and so has their town, which has boomed as a result of the '**Madonna gold rush**'.

Some today own smart executive houses with immaculate gardens, double garages and security gates, and one has a tennis court.

They also own expensive cars and have married — one of them, Ivan Dragicevic, to an American former beauty queen.