

'I VISITED THE VILLAGE OF MIRACLES'



Wilma Greenway.

By Wilma Greenway

In 1966, just one year after the apparitions ended, an American journalist from Michigan, Wilma Greenway, visited Garabandal to see for herself this remote Spanish mountain village about which she had heard so much.

SAN SEBASTIAN DE GARABANDAL, a tiny village high on a mountain in northern Spain, to the pilgrim, looks like the top of the world. Perhaps it is. For it is a place of visions; of a promise of a great miracle to come; of a warning of terrible danger;

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and a hope of how that peril may be averted.

So remote is Garabandal that in most seasons, it can be reached only on foot or by oxcart. Here, in 1961, the quiet lives of four girls were interrupted by the visit of an angel, and later, by vision after vision in which, they related, they talked with the Mother of Christ and received from her a message for the world.

Theirs is the story of a miracle "greater than the Miracle of the Sun at Fatima," according to Conchita, the oldest of the four girls. A story of an "eternal sign" to remain forever; of repeated warnings by the Mother of Christ; and finally, by the Archangel

From left: Mari Loli, Conchita, Jacinta and Mari Cruz in ecstasy.

Michael, that men must turn from sin or suffer a terrible punishment.

But it is also a story of inquiry and conjecture, and detailed investigation, since the Catholic Church historically has been reluctant to accept the work of men or women on such momentous matters as apparitions and supernatural happenings.

A Simple Pilgrim

Finally, it is the story of myself—a simple pilgrim—who, having heard of the events of Garabandal, read diaries and accounts of eyewitnesses, decided to go and see.



Visitor, center, with the four girls, who were the only ones able to see the Virgin. Many visitors brought small gifts such as balloons seen here.

And seeing, I was convinced. So much so, that I bought a plot of land in that holy place. Thus, when and if the miracle occurs, I and my people, and America, too, will have our claim upon that blessed spot.

For it is a truth that when I signed the paper that made that piece of land my own, my hand held more than a pen—it held my heart. And the signature was more than a word on paper, it was an “act of faith.”

Take a map of Spain. In the center is the city of Madrid. Run your finger almost due north until, close to the French border, you will find the town of Santander. Near this, perhaps 65 miles to the west, lies the little hamlet of Cosio, and seven kilometers above it, high on the mountain, the village of visions, San Sebastian de Garabandal. You won’t find the village itself on the map, it’s too small.

San Sebastian de Garabandal, not to be confused with the much larger San Sebastian a couple of hundred miles to the east, is a cluster of stone huts, or *casas*, that hug the mountain for shelter and look down on a scene of unsurpassed grandeur.

Here, until 1961, less than a hundred families lived quiet, predictable

lives, tilling their land with the use of oxen, carting their produce on the backs of donkeys, baking bread over wood fires, wearing queer, pegged, wooden clogs to traverse the narrow stony paths from *casa* to *casa*, and to the farm plots, and in the evening, to pray the rosary at the little church.

Among them dwelled four young girls: Conchita Gonzalez, Maria Dolores Mazon, and Jacinta, all then twelve years old, and Mari Cruz, eleven. Their mischievous pastime was snatching green apples from a neighbor’s tree.

The First Angelic Appearance

They were together on the evening of June 18, 1961, when they told the world, the sky opened up and the figure of an angel came to mark them for a special destiny.

From that time to the present, accounts list myriad visions to the girls, and many private “locutions.” Conchita, the oldest, seems specifically favored in that she professes more visitations and confidences have come to her than to the others. Mari Cruz, youngest of the four, seems chosen for a special role, she has seen the least number, but, she says, she is promised more.

Only these four girls see the visions. Witnesses see the girls in a state of ecstasy, impervious to all

around. Nothing apparently can interrupt their absorption in their heavenly visitor. Jagged rocks on which they happen to kneel; pinching, pinpricks or other attempts to distract them go unheeded.

In the course of investigations, three strong men reportedly were unable to lift any one of the girls from where she knelt on the ground. The summons of their heavenly visitor comes as an “interior joy,” and at its call, the girls drop whatever they are doing and run to the place of an apparition.

According to Conchita, spokeswoman for the four, the first vision was an angel, very young, yet with an air of power. He had dark eyes, luminous rosy wings, and wore a long blue robe. He identified himself as Saint Michael, and subsequently appeared several times, telling them he had come to prepare them for an appearance of the Blessed Virgin as Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

The Virgin Appears

A crowd had gathered on Sunday, July 2, 1961, the day the girls said the Virgin would appear. Priests, doctors and people from neighboring villages saw them as the rapture came which no distraction could penetrate.

The four concurred that the Virgin had stood with St. Michael the Archangel on one side, another angel on the other, and above, they thought they saw a huge eye—the eye of God.

Mary was inexpressibly beautiful, they related, with a white robe flowing down to her feet, and a blue mantle. A crown of golden stars adorned her head, and her right hand held a brown scapular. She recited the rosary with them and promised to return. The girls said she did, the next day; and the following day, July 4.

Time after time the Lady of Light returned, they said, sometimes to one or more of the girls, sometimes to all four. In visits lasting anywhere from a few minutes to ten hours, the girls explained she came alone or with the Christ Child in her arms. Each of the

Conchita said the Miracle would be man's last chance to avert the 'great punishment.'

girls claimed to have held the Infant Jesus, whom, they said, had fair hair and resembled the Blessed Mother in features.

She spoke, the girls said, of their own lives and of things to come—kissed the religious objects they brought for her to bless and reiterated her pleas that men must amend their lives and avert punishment. A punishment, Conchita said, so terrible that "the living will envy the dead."

The "Great Miracle"

Then, they related, the Virgin Mother told them of a new means of grace—a "great miracle" which would occur in that place, and to be announced eight days in advance. The miracle, according to Conchita, will be "greater than the Miracle of the Sun at Fatima," when, in 1917, the sun was said to whirl and plunge in the sky.

The coming miracle, Conchita said, would be seen from the surrounding countryside and would be able to be photographed. "The sick will be healed, and there will be many conversions," Conchita said. Also a sign would appear.

The sign, the girl said, would be left at "the Pines" and would remain there forever.

It would appear, she said, "some-

thing like a pillar of smoke." It could be photographed and televised but not touched, and it will be apparent that it is "of God."

Conchita implied that the miracle and the sign—visible to all—would be man's last chance to avert the "great punishment." But before the miracle occurs, she said, there also would come a "warning."

All these things I knew before I started on my solitary pilgrimage in the summer of 1966. I had poured over translations of Conchita's diary and examined documents of eye witnesses. I had talked with a blind businessman from New York who knows Conchita perhaps better than any other American, having talked and corresponded with her, lived with her relatives, witnessed her ecstasies, and who had been promised a cure at the time of the great miracle.

I had seen pictures and slides of all four girls in their ecstasies. I heard from my son, who a year earlier had visited Garabandal, and who gave me accounts of his visit and talks with the girls.

The Miracle of the Host

Of the many phenomena at Garabandal, one, the "Miracle of the Host," stands out. The event occurred July

18, 1962, and a photograph was taken. It had been announced 15 days in advance when the Virgin, Conchita said, told her that on her feast day in the village, she would receive communion miraculously from Saint Michael the Archangel, and that the communion wafer or "Host" would be visible to all.

Hundreds gathered. When night came without any sign, the crowd almost gave up hope. Then, suddenly, Conchita appeared in the doorway of her home, her face expressing great sweetness and her form assuming the classic stance that characterizes her ecstasies. She walked strangely, unseeing, gliding down the cobbled lane, impervious to the crowd surging around.

Suddenly she knelt, head back in the traditional manner of receiving communion.

Spectators said the Host appeared to "blossom on her tongue" and "seemed to glow" with a kind of radiance. She remained kneeling; the Host was visible for several minutes, according to eyewitness accounts.

Afterwards, Conchita remained in rapture for some time. Later she said Saint Michael had given her communion and told her to let the Host remain on her tongue until the Blessed Virgin appeared. When the Virgin Mary came, she swallowed the communion Host.

The last and perhaps most important of the Virgin's messages was received June 18, 1965, was imparted not by Mary herself, the girl said, but through Michael the Archangel. This had been announced six months ahead, and consequently large crowds were present.

The message was that the Lord's chalice was overflowing and called for repentance and sacrifice. "You are already in the last warnings. I love you very much and do not want your



Conchita, center, tells visiting members of a Detroit delegation that a sign will appear at the Pines and will be visible forever.



Crowd gathers in the *calleja* (sunken lane) to witness the ecstasy of the four girls.

condemnation." (See page 2 for complete Messages.)

What did the girl's own Catholic church think of these phenomena? Were the girls imaginative and hysterical? Could it be a hoax?

Remembering that it was some years after Fatima before the church gave its sanction and that Beauraing, Lourdes and similar visitations received much opposition before investigation and reported miracles won them official approval, it seemed reasonable to suppose the Catholic church would not act until the warning, miracle, and "sign" proved the

truth of the apparitions, or their absence disproved it. I decided to go and see for myself.

I Reach Garabandal

I joined a group tour to shrines in Europe, separating from my companions for the three-day trip to Garabandal. In the rural sections of Spain I found none spoke English, and I spoke not a word of Spanish, only a smattering of French. Only the grace of angels and saints who watch over lost children brought me to my destination.

By a series of what appeared to me as minor miracles, I reached Cosio,

not by bus and taxi as planned, but transported magically in a royal red Fiat, with a charming French-speaking Spaniard at the wheel. The young señor brought me to my mountain with courtesy and aplomb.

Cosio, like its sister, Garabandal, perched above it on the mountain, is a village of steep *casas* and quiet, sun-tanned people. In America, Cosio would be a target for the antipoverty program. But in Spain the village was left as God and simple men had made it, and somehow there was bred into it a deposit of resourceful strength that seemed infinitely richer than the glitter of our urban free-loading society.

It was dusk when I started up the mountain, alone, afoot, and not without misgivings as to whether night would overtake me on that unknown road. But suddenly there was a shout, and this time it was a lumbering cement truck and dust-covered driver who was to rescue me and bring me right to Garabandal.

I made that journey sitting in the open sided "cab" with nothing between me and what looked like a five-mile drop, with my prayers and a desperate left-handed grip on the roof above my shoulder.

The truck swayed precariously on the narrow road, twice backing up for hairpin turns that left its rear wheels teetering ominously over the void, but we made it to the top! I think I even detected a glint of admiration for the "gringo" in the eye of my rough-but-ready driver.

In Garabandal Village

I stayed with Maximina, aunt and godmother to Conchita, and through her met Mari Cruz, youngest of the four girls, who showed me "the Pines" and prayed with us there.

In Maximina I sensed a genuineness and sincerity, as I slept in her home, ate her bread and drank her coffee, and, finally, with the help of

“I learned how the children had screamed in terror, ‘oh the fire, the little children.’”

another pilgrim who could do a little interpreting, asked her to help me buy a piece of land. She offered me some of her own and we looked it over in the black of night, stepping and skipping over rivulets that ran among the stones of the road.

We climbed a wall of loose rocks that almost tumbled us into the water. Just three women, two of us middle-aged, giggling and laughing like schoolgirls at our ridiculous nocturnal antics.

We used flashlights to see the land, and to this day I can't tell you the exact size. But it was green and grassy, and part of the mountain where so much had happened. Moreover, it was above the village, within sight of “the Pines.” When the promised miracle comes, I would have a reserved place. And from “my land” I would be able to see the “sign” left by a loving Father to tell His children that He cares for them.

Mari Cruz

Of the four girls, the three oldest, now 17, were in a distant town as boarding students at the Carmelite convent. Only the 16-year old Mari Cruz was in the village.

She met my tentative gestures of friendship with shyness. She seemed genteel and rather serious, very unassuming. She did not have a special aura of holiness about her, as I had naively expected to see in one who had entertained the Queen of Heaven.

I was not able to converse since we had no common language. But we said the rosary with the Belgian girl who also was visiting—each of us leading a decade of the Hail Mary, she in her own language, while the other two responded in theirs.

Perhaps there is a better way to promote friendship between nations, but if so, I don't know of it. In the church I snapped a picture of Mari Cruz with some rosy cheeked children who clustered about her.

The return journey down the mountain was rich in knowledge for me. I made it on foot, with my com-

panions, my Belgian pilgrim-friend and a South American artist who lives in Garabandal and could interpret for us.

We walked slowly, preceded by a little donkey with my few belongings in a basket on its back. Now I began to hear the “inside story” of the visions. For our artist guide had been with the girls constantly, seen them in their ecstasies, and talked with them about their “visits” with the Queen of Heaven.

It was she who told me Mari Cruz had been the first to hold the Christ Child and how she had coaxed and been permitted to place the mantle of the Blessed Mother on her own head. How she had draped it over her dark tresses and preened herself and asked, “Do I look pretty?”

Of her, my companion told me, the Blessed Virgin had said that she had a “heart compassionate, like the heart of Jesus.”

The Virgin Asks for Prayers

I learned, too, how the children had screamed in terror, crying, “Oh, the



Jacinta, left, and Mari Cruz (not in ecstasy) around 1965.

fire! Oh, the little children! Don't let it be them, let it be me!” This, when they received a “vision of punishment” which would befall men if they failed to heed the warnings of the Mother of Christ, and how only the prayers of the people could calm them.

The worldwide warning, the great miracle, the eternal “sign,” will they come as proofs, in an “age of reason,” that God cares for man?

This I know: If the visions are true, then we are in a crisis—maybe the “last days” the Bible foretold.

Our age has known a great breakthrough in science. Maybe, just maybe, this is the time for a breakthrough of man's spirit. Most of us have known, at some point in our personal lives, the power of prayer. What if we began to use prayer, as man uses his scientific tools and his lethal weapons, on a grand scale?

And the Virgin, the girls said, asked for prayers.

This, they reported, was what she said:

“As my message of October 18, has not been complied with and has not been made known to the world, I am advising you that this is the last one.

“Before, the cup was filling up. Now it is flowing over. Many cardinals, many bishops and many priests are on the road to perdition and are taking many souls with them.

“Less and less importance is being given to the Eucharist.

“You should turn the wrath of God away from yourselves by your efforts.

“If you ask His forgiveness with sincere hearts, He will pardon you.

“I, your mother, through the intercession of Saint Michael the Archangel, ask you to amend your lives. You are now receiving the last warnings. I love you very much and do not want your condemnation.

“Pray to us with sincerity and we will grant your requests.

“You should make more sacrifices. Think of the passion of Jesus.” □

—Signed: Conchita Gonzalez, June 18, 1961

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