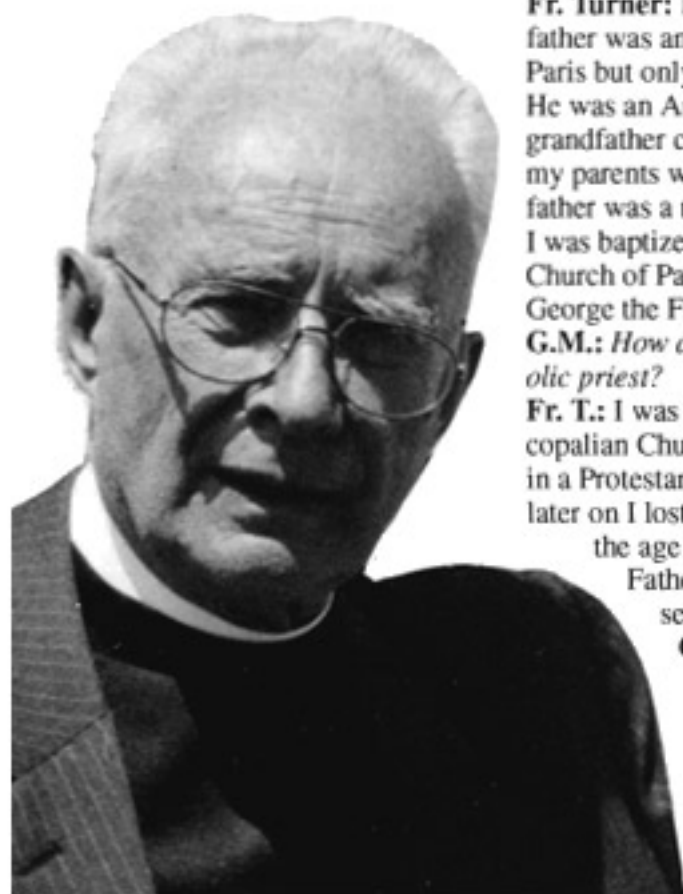


"I felt it had to be studied"

An Interview with Rev. François Turner, O.P.

Ever since he first learned of the Garabandal phenomenon in 1966, Father François Turner, O.P., of Blois, France has been a student of these apparitions. Working closely with Professor Jacques Serre of Paris, he has made the most complete study of the events of anyone outside Spain. He has written numerous articles and under the pen name of Robert François, has authored the book, O CHILDREN LISTEN TO ME which has been printed in French, English and German with the English edition now going into its third printing. In addition he has produced a scholarly work of 24 criteria in defense of the authenticity of Garabandal, yet to be published. In May of this year, Father Turner was the principal guest speaker at the annual Marian Seminar in Columbus, Ohio (see page 19). After the Seminar he visited the New York Garabandal Center for a few days and on May 20, 1992, consented to the following interview for GARABANDAL Magazine.



GARABANDAL Magazine: *You are of American parents. How did you come to live in France?*

Fr. Turner: I was born in France. My father was an American physician in Paris but only for American patients. He was an American citizen and my grandfather came from Boston. Both my parents were Episcopalian. My father was a religious man, deeply so. I was baptized in the Episcopalian Church of Paris on the Avenue George the Fifth.

G.M.: *How did you become a Catholic priest?*

Fr. T.: I was brought up in the Episcopalian Church for a while and then in a Protestant church in Paris. Then later on I lost my faith. That was at the age of 14. (For the story of Father Turner's conversion, see adjacent article.)

G.M.: *You also attended Harvard, isn't that right?*

Father Turner has been a Dominican priest for 45 years.

Fr. T.: That was after my baccalauréat in France. I went to the United States thinking of staying in America. I had both citizenships. But after two years of study at Harvard, I was called to military service in France and I went. Thereby, without knowing it, I lost my American citizenship. I served in the military for two years and then another six months. After that the war (World War II) broke out. I served in the military during the war.

G.M.: *When did you enter the priesthood?*

Fr. T.: After studying the Latin language, which I didn't know, I entered the diocesan seminary of Paris and stayed there for a year. After that, I entered the Dominicans and spent a year in the Dominican monastery in Paris. I was ordained in 1947.

G.M.: *How did you learn of Garabandal?*

Fr. T.: In 1966, a Spanish woman asked me to accompany, as a spiritual director, a group of young people to Tarragona, Spain. I accepted, went there and spent a night at a seminary. In the dining room of the professors' house at the seminary, I saw a flyer in Spanish, about these alleged apparitions. I didn't pay much attention to it because it was badly printed. Nevertheless, I thought it could be serious but not necessarily so. Then back in France, in October of that same year, a priest of Blois asked me if I had heard of them. I said, yes, but very little. He asked me to try to find more documentation because he was interested. And so, I got in touch with Father Laffineur. (Note: Father Martene Laffineur, a Belgian priest living in France, pioneered the promotion of the Garabandal Message in that country.) I had met him a few years before but without knowing at the time who he was.

G.M.: *Did Father Laffineur provide*

The Typical Young Man

I was born in 1915, near Paris, of American parents and was still an American citizen when I was 18 in 1933. In that year, I was invited by a friend my age to spend a fortnight at his country home in the Dordogne, that part of France well known in England because it was occupied by the English armies during the Hundred Years War, and because of its good wines.

We spent these two weeks with his mother, his sister and another girl.

At school, I was a fairly good student, especially in physics. Often my mind would turn to philosophical speculations and I was prone to say that I was an atheist. Thereby, I meant that I was an agnostic in theory and an atheist in practice because no one up to that point in my life led me to "see" God. In other words, I ignored God but my responsibility in such an ignorance was limited. It was limited because no one spoke to me about God. He was not mentioned in the schoolbooks I used, or if mentioned, only as a former belief so to speak. None of my pals was giving an ardent Christian testimony.

The fortnight I spent with my friend in the Dordogne with its beautiful countryside, the excellent moral and religious testimony of the two girls both my age played a part in my conversion; the atmosphere was pure and joyful.

When the day of Quasimodo (First Sunday after Easter) came, I didn't know that I was about to fall into God's embrace. I had a choice; I could either stay at home alone or else go to church with my friend's family. I decided to go to church.

As I already mentioned, my mind was purified by the good atmosphere. But I was naturally curious. What was the priest going to say when he mounted the pulpit?

It turned out to be very different from what I expected. It was his duty once a year precisely on this first Sun-

day after Easter, to present in proper form, a summary of the Church's teaching from A to Z. This summary was organic and quite different from what I thought—not without a good deal of pride—of Catholicism. I felt, pardon the



François Turner about 21 years of age, the "typical young man."

expression, that it was a hodgepodge of devotions and devotees. The sermon was extremely sobering for me, the typical young man coming of age and able to judge all things.

After this initial experience, things went very fast. When I came out of the church, I thought to myself, "If there is a true religion, it is Catholicism."

In my bedroom later that evening, I spent some time meditating on the trees I could see from the window. These trees, I thought, either reason out their growth or else there is a Being reasoning out their growth. But could one say "Being"? Is it a person? I then came to the decisive point. If it (or It) is a per-

son, it hears one's prayers, a demand from a person to a Person. So why not act? I decided to kneel and ask this eventual Person that if my demand is heard to let me know that He hears me. This is the prayer of the unbeliever.

My prayer was heard. The world suddenly became mysteriously peopled with this nameless Person Who, during that long night of prayer, became for me the Peaceful One, the peace-giving One. What more could I have asked for? To have asked for more would have been spiritual greed.

Later I was to learn that the spiritual experience I had on the night of my discovery of God's existence is a fruit of the spirit mentioned by St. Paul: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace" (Gal 5:22). It was for me especially deep and lasting on that night.

What happened next was very simple, I went to the parish priest and told him I was now a Catholic. He told me to pray.

Back at the boarding school where I lived, Providence made it easy for me to ask a Jesuit for instruction in the Catholic Faith. This was done with the help of a book I still have 59 years later.

I became a regular churchgoer and then a year later, in the spring of 1934, something happened. As I was walking on a wide sidewalk not far from my home in Paris, I felt a presence, that of the Lord Jesus, telling me, but without audible words: "Come follow Me." In spite of the lack of words, the meaning was clear. I didn't speak of this to anyone but felt I had to go and tell the Jesuit priest that I thought I was receiving a call to the priesthood. He was elated when I told him and this surprised me.

Later I would learn that this experience I had on the Avenue Victor Hugo was an intellectual locution accompanied by the knowledge that it came from Jesus and that it was an invitation in which my freedom was respected. It went deep, rooting itself and never ceased growing on me. I later entered the Dominican Order. □

you with some documentation?

Fr. T.: Oh, yes. His book, *Star on the Mountain*, had already been printed. I obtained it, read it, and was interested. But at that point I was only interested. I hadn't made up my mind because I felt it had to really be studied. I didn't feel his book was a book of study; it was a book that related a certain num-

ber of facts but without any in-depth investigation. I felt it would be a good thing to keep in touch with Father Laffineur partly because, after all, it seemed to be serious, genuine, but I didn't know for sure. In fact, I only came to really consider Garabandal as genuine around 1978.

By then, I had begun my criteria.

[Twenty-four criteria in defense of the authenticity of Garabandal]. It took me eight years. Before writing twenty-four criteria, I started with seven and then fifteen. These criteria were taken partly from the facts of the Garabandal events and partly from studies I made in a library at Poitiers where I spent several weeks.

"It had to be studied"

I studied the good authors, the ancient authors, on such facts as apparitions, revelations and mystical experiences in general and then applied these principles to the case of Garabandal. I came to the firm opinion that it was genuine.

G.M.: *Did the negative aspects of Garabandal such as the verdict of the first commission and the doubts and denials of the visionaries present stumbling blocks to you in your study of the events?*

Fr. T.: No, not at all. In fact, one thing that amused me was the weakness of the objections made as to the authenticity of Garabandal whether they came from the first commission or from other people, you see, because all sorts of people have presented objections. And I remember one day that Jacques Serre told me, "There are no negative aspects to Garabandal." And I thought, well, after all, he's right. Because the negative aspects that were put forth were

inconsistent, especially the negative aspects presented by the first commission.

Those who present the doubts as being negative simply don't seem to know that in the cases of St. Teresa of Avila and Bernadette of Lourdes and the visionaries of Pontmain, doubts of the sort are quite numerous and are almost the rule. What surprised me a lot was that the work of the first commission was simply not done. Don Valentin (former pastor of Garabandal) told me somebody had asked him if the work of the commission was finished. He answered, "It isn't finished, it hasn't started."

G.M.: *Around 1970, the then Bishop of Santander, Monsignor José Cirarda, through the instrumentation of the Vatican Secretary of State, managed to have a letter circulated to all the bishops of the Church which, without condemning Garabandal, nevertheless spoke in very strong terms that the movement should not*

be spread. At least in some places, that attitude still persists today. What is the Church's official position on Garabandal now?

Fr. T.: To begin with, Bishop Cirarda is not the authority on the Garabandal apparitions or messages. He was, but is no longer. There is now a bishop whose name is Vilaplana who recently succeeded Bishop del Val and he is the authority. And Bishop Vilaplana is not acting one way or another. He considers the matter of Garabandal as open. Recently, he received my friend, Ramon Perez (author of *Garabandal—The Village Speaks*) and told him he was open in the matter of Garabandal and would act according to whatever the Holy See would tell him to do. There is a dossier in Rome on Garabandal that was made by a quadruple commission set up by Bishop del Val and its work lasted from 1985 to September of 1991. This dossier of documentation in Rome is being studied. Of this I am practically certain—I can't tell you exactly why I'm sure because I must be discreet.

G.M.: *Isn't it rather unusual for the Holy See to study apparitions as opposed to it being done on the diocesan level?*

Fr. T.: Yes, it seems to me not customary. But the Holy See is only verifying what was done at Santander. They want to act on a higher level as a court of appeal, you see. Why? Well, apparently because the spreading of these messages has reached the whole world. It isn't a local matter as Pontmain. Pontmain was never more than a local affair and I could give other examples of apparitions that took



Father Turner has studied documents of key witnesses to the girls' ecstasies, such as those of Father José Ramon Garcia.

Changing of the Guard in Santander. In August, 1991, Bishop José Vilaplana Blasco, right, succeeded Bishop Juan Antonio del Val Gallo, far right, who had been Ordinary of the diocese since 1971.

place in France. And they were all local except in the case of Lourdes. Lourdes really became international. It's been more international this year, 1992, than it's ever been. So, in such cases, when it becomes really international, the Holy See feels it should intervene as a court of appeal. All this is done in complete discretion.

G.M.: *Do you know anything about this most recent investigation? Do you know who the investigators were?*

Fr. T.: The only thing I know is that it was composed first of a group of four young sociologists, two women and two men and a fifth who came later. The first four were lay people and the fifth was, I think, a Dominican sociologist. The second part of the investigation was the psychological part. I don't know who the investigators were or how many. And then there was the theological and the spiritual. I don't know who the investigators were or how many. He [Bishop del Val] kept that a secret.

G.M.: *You have known Bishop del Val for quite a few years. When did you first meet him?*

Fr. T.: It was in 1976 and since then I have met him practically every year, either in his office or at Lourdes or both.

G.M.: *What was your feeling on his attitude toward Garabandal in the beginning when you first met him?*

Fr. T.: (Laughter) Well, to begin with, he was extremely polite, extremely discreet and extremely aware that the whole thing was important. The way he acted was flattering; he had me sit in a deep armchair, and so on. He was glad that we were able to speak in Spanish although he speaks French fluently. Little by little I found that he seemed to be really interested. He was a good pastor. He was very intelligent. That, of course, doesn't fully answer your question but it's



difficult to answer such a question.

G.M.: *But over the years, did you see any change in his attitude toward Garabandal at any one point?*

Fr. T.: Well, he seemed to be more hearty. He dealt with me with greater and greater friendship, hugging me in front of the grotto at Lourdes in one case. But if he were changing his way of looking at Garabandal, he would avoid showing it one way or the other. And if I had anything to say about it, I would have said it.

G.M.: *Do you personally think he believed in Garabandal?*

Fr. T.: What I think is that with his prudence, normal prudence, he had to act a certain way. Let's suppose, first of all, that he hasn't studied the whole thing of Garabandal. That, I think, we should suppose. I think his view would be: there is a serious likelihood that it is supernatural. Second, it is possible that there is some mixture of something else, human or diabolic. Third, the important thing for me as Bishop of Santander is not so much to figure out if it's supernatural or not, but how to deal with such affairs because there are so many problems.

Some people would speculate in matters of philosophy, theology, spirituality and so on. Others would speculate in matters of *dinero* (money), buying land. In fact, the villagers of Garabandal know that. They know that there is such a danger. One bishop of Lourdes noted it very well. A

priest of Blois said to me, "The Bishop of Lourdes told me, 'There is the Blessed Virgin here at Lourdes but the devil as well.'" What he meant was that the girls working in the hotels at Lourdes were severely underpaid. And that the people who opened shops at Lourdes made a fortune in ten years and left. While at Lourdes one day this year, I saw that the same postcard sold for ten francs in one shop and one franc in the next shop.

G.M.: *Are people permitted by the Church to promote the Message of Garabandal in the present situation?*

Fr. T.: Since the former Bishop of Santander, [for the last 20 years] Bishop del Val, has never acted against the promotion of Garabandal and because the present Bishop of Santander is so open, I don't think promoters of Garabandal need any permission. If, in a diocese, the bishop forbids you to promote the Message of Garabandal, I think you should take into account his point of view, to keep the peace of the Church. But if you feel the peace of the Church is not at stake and that you could give a private lecture or show slides in a private room or hall, well, I think you could do it, why not?—if you don't harm the peace of the Church. Father Combe [France's leading promoter], as you know, is very firm on that point. As long as the bishop doesn't give you a proof that

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it's been, as they say, "condemned," you can very well go along. That's what he does; that's his way. Another person will have another way. In one country, most people will have one way of acting while in another country they will have another way.

G.M. *What about the 1970 Cardinal Seper letter which seemed like a very strongly worded statement. People who are not well informed about Garabandal, especially regarding the most recent developments, but judge it solely on the basis of what is recorded in former Church documents, read the Cardinal Seper letter as a warning against it. Is the letter an official document?*

Fr. T.: I doubt it. I doubt that it is an important document. Why? To begin with, Cardinal Seper died years ago. Second, his pronouncement was based on no investigation of his own, but simply on the hearsay of another bishop. And then, today, the situation is *completely* different. There is another cardinal in his place. And then at the Holy See their investigation is going on. The documents have been

sent to the Holy See for what I call the last stage of the investigations. After these investigations, there will be nothing left but for the Holy See to act and for the Bishop of Santander to act as well. That will be all.

G.M.: *Has Cardinal Ratzinger ever made any statement regarding Garabandal?*

Fr. T.: I can't answer that question. There are things I can answer to but not that. I feel it wouldn't be proper for me. What I can say is this: the matter of Garabandal is important in his eyes. Mr. Hivbier has seen my book [*O Children Listen to Me*] on Cardinal Ratzinger's desk so he certainly must have perused it. It would not take him more than a few minutes to look at the table of contents to have an idea what it is. People of his kind of mind and his excellent intelligence will understand very rapidly, in a few minutes, whether it's worth considering or not. In some cases, false apparitions can be recognized as such by any theologian in two minutes. In other cases it takes a long time.

G.M.: *In reference to other alleged apparitions, specifically one that is quite popular today, a woman was quoted in our diocesan newspaper as saying, "I don't believe it's true, I know it's true." It seems a rather strange statement for a person to make who hasn't really studied the events. But apparently many people base their belief on the feelings that they have. What would you say about that?*

Fr. T.: In that context, the woman is completely wrong. But when she says "I don't believe" she's right in a way. You don't really believe in apparitions because the word "believe" refers usually to religious belief, so that verb must be avoided. One shouldn't say, "I believe in Garabandal" but rather "I believe that Garabandal is genuine."

As I said at Columbus, Ohio, there are only three ways altogether to reach truth. First it is obvious. Second through a demonstration—a professor of physics or mathematics will make a demonstration. Or third, because you are an authority on that matter. You've studied it thoroughly and know it very well. That's my case. I can't help saying otherwise. And there is no fourth way to know truth, neither through feeling, thinking nor anything of the sort. What I would simply add is that in the case of apparitions and the like, grace will help you because there is a spiritual aspect to that type of truth. If you are in the state of grace, if you are spiritual yourself, well, you will be helped by God to see through a false apparition or see through a genuine one. □

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