

Obtaining a phone number for Benedict Groeschel proved considerably easier than making actual contact with this legendary priest. Father Groeschel took calls during only two hours out of every week, I was informed when I dialed the number, but after waiting three days for this window of opportunity to open, I discovered that I was playing a sort of lottery, hoping to be one of the lucky few who rang in at the right moment. On my fourth failed attempt to reach Groeschel, I was able to win the sympathy of a woman who had answered an earlier call. Unfortunately, I found it almost impossible to communicate with her. The woman didn't just ramble, she repeated herself so many times I lost count. I found myself doing the same after a while, as we stopped and started a conversation that the woman interrupted with one non sequitur after another. She was extremely sweet and obviously wanted to help, but I doubted she understood a word I was saying. Her capacity for digression was breathtaking. At some moments she seemed to imagine that I sought to serve the poor, and at others that I wanted Father Groeschel's help in investigating a haunted house. Several times, her voice trailed off in mid-sentence and the line went quiet until I started again from the beginning, hoping that I might register my request if I repeated it often enough. Finally, I gave up trying, and at least a minute passed without either of us speaking a word. Then, out of nowhere it seemed, the woman repeated nearly every word I had said to her, and suggested that I send Father Groeschel a fax explaining my project and let him know exactly when I intended to follow up with another call. If I interested him, Father would come to the phone, she assured me.

I already knew that Groeschel was esteemed for his work in any number of fields, and that the priest's time and attention were coveted by legions of petitioners. What no one had told me was that one of Groeschel's callings involved ministering to the mentally ill, several of whom served as his assistants. The priest's patron saint was Benedict Joseph Labre, the only presumed schizophrenic to have been canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, an unwashed beggar who was driven from town to town during his life, yet whose death resulted in a funeral attended by thousands of people who made hundreds of miraculous claims on his behalf. Father Groeschel, considered to possess one of the keenest and most versatile intellects in all of Catholicism, was not himself mentally ill. He did question *my* sanity when I made yet another call to his number two days later. "I don't know how you got into this, kiddo," said the priest by way of introduction when he came on the line, "but

you couldn't have chosen a subject more certain to make a person crazy. You must love to suffer." I had no idea what I was getting into back at the beginning of this, I explained. "That, you didn't have to tell me," he said. "You wrote a good letter, though. So come and see me." If I was at his door at five o'clock in the afternoon a week from today, the priest said, he would find a couple of hours for me.

Groeschel also insisted "ipso facto" that I had to find Poulain's book and read at least some of it before we met. This required searching out the all but invisible Sisters of St. Paul bookstore on East Fifty-second Street in Manhattan to buy an excerpt from *Graces of Interior Prayer* that had been published under the title *Revelations and Visions*. I caught the New Haven Line at Grand Central and studied the book all the way to the Larchmont station. Poulain had written his masterwork during the first year of the twentieth century while working as a spiritual director in Paris, a position in which he reported thirty-three instances of authentic "supernatural graces" and only nine cases of "false visions." While this ratio of true to false seemed high by the Vatican's contemporary standards, Poulain was considered to have understood better than any other commentator the writings of St. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, and his book remained a standard work throughout the Church.

I was startled to discover that among Poulain's categories of authentic visions were not only Exterior Visions ("perceived by the bodily eyes") but also Imaginative Visions ("seen without the assistance of the eyes") and Intellectual Visions ("perceived by the mind alone without any interior image"). And while Exterior Visions were considered to be the most remarkable of these graces, the most profound Catholic mystics had reported visions primarily of the latter two categories. St. Teresa's visions, for example, had begun as intellectual, then become imaginative, but were never of the exterior variety, Poulain reported, even if she had imagined otherwise. And while Exterior Visions were purely divine gifts granted without any preconditions, Imaginative and Intellectual Visions seemed to be both given and taken, a product to some degree of the receiver's holiness. Exterior Visions (which might be of either divine or diabolical origin) themselves came in four distinct varieties, according to Poulain. Those of the first manner involved perception of the true heavenly bodies of Jesus or Mary, while those of the second manner involved seeing the "borrowed body" of a heavenly being "formed by the ministry of angels." In cases of the third manner

(called "semi-objective" by Poulain), the visionary did not perceive a true body, but rather saw the "luminous rays" of a body in Heaven with the assistance of angels who "produce these undulations as they would produce sound waves." In the fourth manner, which was "purely subjective, angels imprint the image of the object directly upon the retina."

Poulain was a bit easier for the modern mind to digest when he explained the multiple ways in which visionaries err in understanding and reporting their visions, all of which involved the imperfect natures of human beings whose ignorance, vanity, or simple inability to distinguish their own thoughts from the message of a divine authority could garble, obfuscate, or even falsify its content. St. Teresa, Joan of Arc, Simon Stock—even St. Peter himself—had been subject to such failings, Poulain pointed out, and were evidence that nothing even the greatest mystic said should be accepted without critical analysis. The separation of the divine from the merely human was what made the administration of mystics and their revelations such a thorny problem for the Church.

To shun claims of the miraculous, however, was to deny God, Benedict Groeschel and I would agree as we sat nearly knee to knee in his crowded study a short time later. Miracles were the essence of every major religion, not just Christianity. Jesus raising Lazarus to demonstrate His power over death was in this sense of a piece with Buddha rising from the ground, dividing His body into pieces, then rejoining them in midair to demonstrate His liberation from the laws of karma. Without the "supernatural graces" that Poulain dared to catalog, there would be no religions, only philosophies.

Father Groeschel had posed what he called "our mutual dilemma" minutes after we were introduced: "If you do no more than dismiss these things, you're simply an obscurantist. If you mindlessly embrace them, you're just a dope. We have to resist the obsessive-compulsive demand for a clear, definitive answer to these questions. This is a field for people who don't have to have it all figured out, who don't need it cast in black and white. There's a lotta gray mist around this stuff, and you have to be prepared to deal with that. Once in a while a bright, shining light comes through, and we should be grateful for it. Because the rest of the time we have to feel our way through the twilight."

I didn't try to hide the fact that I found this unnerving, and Groeschel seemed to appreciate my discomfort. "Tread lightly," he suggested with a smile.



Groeschel certainly looked the part of a Catholic sage. What little hair he had on top curled around his ears like the overflow of a full beard that was trimmed close on the sides but fell to the middle of his chest in the center. The priest was past seventy, and his whiskers were a considerably whiter shade of pale than the rough gray robe that hung loosely on his small, slender frame. His eyes were gray also, and so intense that they might have been called piercing, except that there was more kindness in them than this word suggests. The man sounded more worldly than he looked. Groeschel's speaking style was staccato, pointed, almost acerbic, with a thick accent that had been formed by his upbringing in Jersey City. He came across at first as a cutting-edge curmudgeon who had long since lost his patience with small talk and other superficial niceties. At the same time, there was a palpably tender quality to the man. When I told Father Groeschel how differently he had been described by the priests I met in Rome—by Augustine DiNoia as a saint in the making, and by Gabriel O'Donnell as Groucho Marx in a monk's habit—the elderly priest laughed ruefully and said, "Well, Gabe probably knows me better than Gus does."

We were meeting at Groeschel's principal residence, an estate on Long Island Sound that had been donated to the Church and was now called Trinity Retreat. The priest also spent a good deal of time in the South Bronx, where he ran a number of programs for the poor, among them a residence hall for homeless mothers and their children. The scope of his ministerial activities overwhelmed me, given that he also served as director of spiritual development for the archdiocese of New York, had managed to produce a shelf of slim books on weighty subjects, preached at churches all over the metropolitan area, worked as a clinical psychologist (he had earned his doctorate at Columbia), and was continually called upon to investigate supernatural—or at least strange—phenomena in locations all over the country. He had been ready to die for more than two decades, Groeschel told me at one point, but was burdened with so many obligations that, "unfortunately," he would have to live another ten years.

I had begun the conversation with my "door-opening" analogy, asking Groeschel if he believed the portal could open from either side. "It all depends on what you're talking about," he replied. "If you're talking about a supernatural event whose origin is an intrusion of the divine will into the world in which we live—the action of God—then you're talking about something that has to begin on the other side. On the other hand, if you're talking about what Poulain calls an 'intellectual vision,' then the ques-

tion is open. An intellectual vision is when the ideas and thoughts of the grace-filled person become so powerful that they seem to be a visible or auditory reality." He placed one of the most famous private revelations in Catholic history, St. Teresa of Avila's "Transverberation," into this category. "She says this angel pierced her heart with a flaming sword, and it's by no means clear whether in her own mind she thought that was an apparition. But John of the Cross, who was there, said, 'These people are so drawn to divine love that it *seems to them* an angel has pierced their heart.' We're talking about a conceptualization of grace so powerful it seems it is there. But what you're receiving is a contact through the ordinary processes of grace, which also has a supernatural origin, but of a different order. So did the door open from this side or that one, or did both sides work together?"

His studies and investigations had led him to any number of persons involved in the Charismatic Renewal "who feel they are speaking words, or sounds, that God has put in their mouths," Groeschel said. "Some even feel that the Lord is telling them to get out and give a teaching. I don't believe anybody who's got any perspective thinks that what they're experiencing is a direct intrusion of divine power into the world, and yet what they're saying is ninety-nine percent truthful. Because to them it *seems* like an ego-alien experience—an experience coming from someone else. But in fact it's assumed to be, and assumed to be by me, as part of the ordinary processes of grace, which are so powerful that they take on an ego-alien aspect or feeling. But they are not. What's essential in dealing with these people is not to dismiss the profound experience of God they've had, but at the same time not to validate their delusions about where it came from."

For Groeschel, and for the Catholic Church, "the benchmark of private revelations" were the apparitions of Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes. This wasn't a value judgment about *what* Bernadette had experienced, Groeschel emphasized, but about *how* she had experienced it. "Bernadette is the best because she makes the least possible subjective interpretation," he explained. "Even when told that the words 'Immaculate Conception' referred to the Virgin Mary, Bernadette continued to say simply, 'I saw a lady, a young woman.' And they said, 'Yes, but she told you she was the Immaculate Conception, which means she was the Virgin.' And Bernadette said, 'No, I saw a young lady who told me she was the Immaculate Conception.' Neither the priests who believed nor the priests who disbelieved could influence her. And Bernadette never added a



syllable to what she was told during her apparitions. She was a witness par excellence. Bernadette was a smart kid, shrewd and fresh as a daisy. The monsignor says to her, 'Do you expect me to believe you saw the Virgin?' And Bernadette says, 'No, I don't expect that at all. It's not my job to get you to believe. It's my job to tell you what She said.'

The visions of the Sacred Heart reported by St. Margaret Mary Alacoque may have been no less extraordinary than Bernadette's apparitions, Groeschel observed, yet had to be regarded with a level of caution that was not required in dealing with the phenomena at Lourdes: "Margaret Mary was a deeply spiritual person who fell into a profound ecstasy of a supernatural dimension, no doubt about it in my mind. At the end of the great feasts she would kneel down as the other sisters were retiring and she wouldn't move a muscle. She wouldn't cough, she wouldn't shift her weight, nothing, until six o'clock the next morning. On three occasions she had to be roused and assisted back to her room at the time of morning prayers. And these were the three occasions of the visions of the Sacred Heart. Now, I believe entirely that these were supernatural phenomena. But in her descriptions of them, you are, I believe, getting the subjective ideas of a devout Frenchwoman who had read some theological treatises about the Sacred Heart and then injected some of her own thoughts. Understand, I feel certain that she received genuine revelations, but the account of the revelations has the subjective in it, and so has to be handled with kid gloves. See, here's the basic problem: On the one hand, you have an infinite reality that is impenetrable and incomprehensible to us, touching a finite reality here on earth. The person is going to feel like they are talking to *someone*. And they were being contacted by another world, but in order to grasp it, they have an image—probably put into their mind by divine providence—so they can relate to the source of this experience. We can never know exactly what took place, because even the person it happened to doesn't know. All they know is how it *felt* and what they believe about that. We have to decide what we believe all on our own."

I had been told in Rome that Groeschel's intellectual daring, his willingness to poke fun at (and holes in the mythology of) Catholicism's most venerated figures, combined with his ability to communicate a heartfelt regard for their experiences and accomplishments, was what had made him such a respected figure in the Church, not to mention the most influential thinker in all of Christendom on how to deal with reports of supernatural experiences. What delighted me, though, was his disdain

for the flocculence in which most Catholic commentators felt compelled to cushion their appraisals of the saints.

"We are never going to have anything more than the vaguest clue as to why this or that person is chosen to receive such graces," he told me. "About all we can hold on to is what St. Paul told us about it: 'The poor things of this world hath God chosen, things that are nothing.' Look at St. Catherine Laboure. Poor Cate, she was absolutely a klutz. She was a super-klutz. But St. Catherine Laboure predicted any number of things that happened exactly as she said they would. She also predicted a couple of things that didn't happen. When they asked her about that, she said, 'I got it wrong.'" Groeschel cracked up as he repeated the saint's words. "Good for you, Cate," he chortled. "Let them deal with the truth."

"And Joan of Arc, there's a girl," he went on. "She said she spoke to the saints, when what she really saw were statues. But they spoke to her. Was she crazy? I don't know. I do know that she stopped the longest war in European history. Winston Churchill, no less, said of Joan, 'There is no purer figure in all of European history for a thousand years.' Freud, on the other hand, called her a schizophrenic. Who's right? You decide. Was she both mad and blessed? It's entirely possible, my friend. Entirely possible."

"Devotionalists" liked to imagine that receiving an extraordinary grace resulted in an exemplary life, Groeschel continued, but this was often not the case. "Look at La Salette," he said. "Those two kids never amounted to anything. The girl ended up being a flake and the boy was a kind of crook. Yet it's widely accepted within the Church that they received authentic visions of the Virgin. I accept it."

He did not see it as his job to encourage the sort of pious embroidery that framed even the major apparitions, but to strive for a perspective in which reverence and critical thinking could coexist. Even Lourdes was not exempt from his scrutiny. "What happened there was miraculous and extraordinary, but it may very well have been what Poulain calls an 'imaginative vision,'" he said. "That isn't in any sense a pejorative description, by the way. It doesn't diminish what took place, but it does put it in a category called 'nonperception.' The eyes can't see it, but the brain does. The reason you can say this about Lourdes is that when Bernadette saw the Blessed Mother, there were ten thousand other people present, and none of them saw anything. St. Thomas Aquinas says that the best explanation of this is that she had an 'inner experience,' because otherwise you gotta have ten thousand miracles. What Bernadette experienced was an apparition, but it was not a theophany."



Theophany? I asked. I'd never heard the term. A theophany was a supernatural event of the highest order, Groeschel explained, "literally a divine manifestation." The greatest theophany in modern times, he told me, had occurred at Fátima in 1917, with the appearance of a whirling sun. "Which was not the sun," he pointed out. "The Greenwich Observatory is not very far away, and they didn't pick up anything, but over an area of about forty square miles, everybody who was there—everybody—believers and nonbelievers, attentive people and inattentive people, saw this thing that looked like a whirling, multicolored sun descending toward them. Many people present actually fell to the ground. There were cases like that of a Freemason, a socialist who had gone there to laugh, and afterward he had to be hospitalized for three days. He was taken away from the scene in shock. That's what a theophany does, because it registers in the external world."

There had been another theophany during the nineteenth century at Knock, Ireland, Groeschel said. "Nineteen people, not related, directly saw these visions, and—perhaps more tellingly—people in the distance saw the lights, and thought it was some kind of fireworks." There no doubt had been others, at Zeitun in Egypt, perhaps, and possibly at that peasant village in the Ukraine. But even with a theophany, he noted, the result was determined largely by how those who had received the revelation dealt with it. Externally, the phenomena at Fátima were more impressive than the phenomena at Lourdes, but Bernadette had been a better, a more reliable, a more exemplary vessel than the Fátima seers, in his opinion, and therefore had yielded more impressive fruits. I was mulling this over when Groeschel startled me by announcing that he was skeptical—"to say the least"—about the Fátima Secrets. "I believe what happened at Fátima was the most astounding theophany in modern times, but I don't believe they were given any Secrets," he said. "If you look at the documents closely, it's obvious the Secrets came later. I think the nun came up with them. But who knows. I certainly wouldn't want to make an official, binding pronouncement on Fátima, or on the Secrets. I've stated my opinion, and the pope has decided I'm wrong. He can do that, you know. It's a perk of the job."

Groeschel surprised me again by stating that the Church had long ago recognized novelty as a feature that marked an apparition or locution as authentic. Never once in any of my interviews at the Vatican had this been mentioned. "For their own, essentially political reasons, the priests in Rome don't want to spread the word on this, but one of the signs of a

divine revelation is that it departs from the accepted notions of the moment," he explained. "It goes a bit against the time. Otherwise it's assumed to be derived." He wasn't talking about exotic descriptions or fanciful forms, Groeschel cautioned, but about the actual content of a reported communication from a heavenly being. Originality was among the qualities that had most distinguished *The Chaplet of Divine Mercy*, produced by the Polish nun Faustina Kowalska during the years between the First and Second World Wars. "Polish Catholicism of the early twentieth century was not known for its emphasis on divine mercy. It was pretty heavy-handed, almost fascistic. And yet it was in this atmosphere that this simple peasant child, with three years of formal education, delivered this incredibly deep book, which she obviously does not understand on an intellectual level." Groeschel read aloud the long passage titled "Conversation of the Merciful God with the Despairing Soul" in which Jesus calls again and again to a soul that "remains deaf and blind, hardened and despairing." In a grant of "final grace," the mercy of God "exerts itself without any cooperation from the soul," and only if even this is refused does the soul pass into an eternal separation from God, the passage explains. "Today, just about anyone who reads this knows they are hearing something both totally original and profoundly true, but it was startling to the Polish Catholics of that period," Groeschel said. "Faustina was accused of heresy at the time, and the book was banned. Only later, when it was read more carefully, did the Church recognize that the book contains not a single theological error. Faustina walks right up to heresy, but she doesn't fall in, and the subtlety with which she navigates these distinctions is astonishing, especially when it comes from a woman with three years of education. And today Faustina's description of Prevenient Grace, by which the divine mercy gets to exert itself without any cooperation from the soul, has become dogma."

"Faustina is about the best example you could find of how powerful what Poulain calls an 'intellectual vision' can be. This is a vision that comes up from within oneself in response to grace. It's ecstasy. And what is ecstasy? I like Aldous Huxley's description: 'Ecstasy is the tribute the mind pays to that which is beyond it.' That may be an incomplete definition, but it's cute."

Unfortunately, new and original ideas were rarely a feature of the purported supernatural phenomena that were brought to his attention, Groeschel sighed. "I get dozens and dozens of letters about supposed divine revelations, and it's the same old stuff, over and over," said the



priest in a voice that was hilariously soporific. "But these are people who read this kind of literature, and they conjure up these kind[s] of intellectual experiences. You can't dismiss them, even when they put you to sleep, but you don't have to read their letters twice either."

We had been talking for more than an hour by then, and Groeschel seemed to be avoiding the subject he knew I most wanted to discuss. "I'm deeply perplexed by Medjugorje," he said with a heavy sigh. "It might be the most puzzling of all these phenomena. Clearly a profound event occurred there, but I couldn't tell you what it was."

He had visited Medjugorje just once, in 1986, and while there spoke to only one of the visionaries. "Even that was an accident. A bunch of us were on the Hill of Apparitions, and we got caught in a sudden rainstorm, so we retreated back downhill and sought refuge in the first building we came to, which just happened to be Marija Pavlović's house. I didn't ask her a lot of questions, didn't do the sort of formal interview I might have, because she didn't know why I was there, and so I thought it was unfair. Actually, I had decided before I went not to seek out any of the seers. But I did ask Marija, through an interpreter, 'How long has the Blessed Mother been appearing to you?' And she said, 'About five years.' I said, 'How do you feel when She comes?' And she said, 'Happy, very, very happy.' I said, 'Does that mean you've been happy for the whole past five years?' And she said, 'Don't be silly.' That, I thought, was a great answer."

My conversation with Vicka back in the summer of 1995 immediately came to mind, but I didn't share it with Groeschel, especially after he began to describe his experience of the group apparitions he had witnessed during his stay in Medjugorje. "Without introducing myself, I sat in on several," he explained. "And yes, I was impressed by the synchronicity. You had the feeling you were looking through a closed window and that you couldn't see who they were talking to, but that there was someone there. It was almost a physical sensation. But at the same time I was troubled that they were reacting in totally different ways. It was as if each was having his or her own individual experience. Their gestures and facial expressions were very different from one another. Vicka sort of upstaged the others, I thought."

How did he explain that, again and again, the seers reported hearing the same words from their vision of the Madonna, even when they were separated from one another immediately after an apparition? I asked. "As I said, I find Medjugorje extremely puzzling," he answered. "There are a lot of inexplicable elements, but that can mean either that the phenom-

ena is supernatural, or that people haven't been able to explain it. I know I can't. I only know that there are a lot of things that bother me." For the first moment since I'd met him, Groeschel seemed uncomfortable with a subject, and more than a little hesitant about explaining why. After several ambiguous replies to my questions, he finally blew out a deep breath and said, "It would seem to me that there very well may have been an original supernatural phenomenon, perhaps a very powerful one. It may have been an apparition, but I don't think it was a theophany. Then again, it may have been. There are people I respect who believe so. Whatever it was at the beginning, though, I'm inclined to believe it changed into something else."

I was reluctant to ask why he believed that. I found Groeschel in some way a threatening presence. Not forbidding or even intimidating, but daunting, nevertheless. I already liked, admired, and trusted him more than any priest I'd met since Slavko, yet from the moment we'd first looked into each other's eyes, I'd been filled with apprehension. My fear was of that "gray mist" Groeschel had described. I felt that if I became disoriented one more time, I might actually be lost. Still, there was no choice but to let him explain his "perplexity."

He frankly blamed the Franciscans for a lot of what troubled him about Medjugorje, Groeschel said, and then distressed me to no end by focusing most of his criticism on Slavko. "I don't think the priests there could have made more mistakes if they tried," he said. "They fell into every hole there is. The Franciscans could have read a book on this, but they're Croatians, and God forbid that they could learn anything. But they should have read Poulain." Like him, Poulain would have been scandalized by "the monthly and weekly bulletins after the apparitions, the interpretations, which were done by Father Slavko," Groeschel said. "This is completely useless material. Worse than useless. I mean," he explained through a thick Jersey City catarrh, "you gotta get the real stuff." And he found it incredible that "these simple Croatian peasants were capable of articulating such complicated ideas about ecumenism, which is a pet cause among the Franciscans." The disobedience of the bishop troubled Groeschel also, although he was no defender of Žanić: "All he ever proved is that he was not the man to pass judgment on Medjugorje. Calm objectivity clearly was not his approach. But I find it very, very difficult to believe the Blessed Mother would criticize him. This simply isn't the sort of thing that happens." The duration of the purported apparitions was unprecedented also, as was the change in the nature of the apparitions over time. Furthermore, he considered "this



whole story about the secrets" to be "pure hooey." And yet, and yet . . . Based on his own observations, he felt certain the six seers weren't frauds, Groeschel allowed. And the results of the scientific and medical testing "made a very convincing case that these kids were not mentally ill."

I told the priest that I had never been able to convince myself that there were more than the three choices I had given myself at the beginning about what was taking place in Medjugorje: Either they were faking it, or they were crazy, or they were telling the truth. "Well, I would say those are the three *categories* of choice, along with the possibility of a diabolical plot," Groeschel responded, "but what you seem not to recognize is that these elements can be mixed. Religious visionaries can be a little dishonest or a little crazy, or both, at the same time they are experiencing and reporting genuine apparitions. It can happen. It *has* happened."

He hesitated, then opened a subject he seemed to find even more difficult than Medjugorje. When he had described the events in Bosnia as the most puzzling phenomena of this kind that he knew about, he probably should have said "Catholic phenomena," Groeschel confessed. Because he was certainly no less perplexed by what he had witnessed more than thirty years earlier, when he had been present at the inception of a book now considered to be the "New Age Bible." He had been a graduate student in psychology at Columbia University during the late 1960s when one of his professors, a woman named Helen Schucman, had written—"which is not to say authored"—*A Course in Miracles*.

Helen Schucman was nearly sixty when they met, and Groeschel, who was then almost forty, knew her not only as a teacher but also as a friend. "Helen was a very scientific lady," he recalled, "a Jewish intellectual who considered herself to be an extreme agnostic, though not quite an atheist, and very skeptical about everything having to do with religion or spirituality." Schucman was also witty and engaging, and Groeschel, who was writing his dissertation on the relationship between science and theology, found her to be one of the most stimulating conversationalists he had ever encountered. The older woman became a good deal more fascinating to him when she announced in 1969 that she was taking dictation from a disembodied voice she knew only as the "Son of God."

It had all started one day when she was riding the subway uptown and experienced a vision, Schucman explained: A beautiful light suddenly filled the car and shone on the faces of the people all around her. A short time later she felt compelled to begin writing page after page of blank verse that eventually grew into *A Course in Miracles*. Groeschel still could

vividly recall his "dizzy astonishment" as the professor explained that she knew the meaning of each sentence she was writing, but had no idea what was coming next. "The interesting thing is that it scanned," the priest remembered. "It was written in iambic pentameter, and some of the passages were quite beautiful." The result was a series of discourses by the "Son of God" in which the narrator/teacher/protagonist came across as the figure Jesus Christ might have been if born a Hindu rather than a Jew. Sin, sacrifice, and suffering all were dismissed as illusory, the maya (though this word was never used) of those chained to earthly existence. Only forgiveness is real, and all things, even the most heinous acts, are forgiven, the "Son of God" says again and again, without any need for penance or punishment.

He eventually came to understand the book as the product of "an intellectual experience called 'sequential words,'" Groeschel said. "It's actually very common and probably the least impressive of all these things. St. John of the Cross nailed it. He said, 'They're calling the words of God the thoughts that they address to themselves.' Now, there's an ice-cold glass of hot water."

What Groeschel found to be at once most thrilling and confusing about Helen Schucman's process was that, during the time she wrote *A Course in Miracles* (a book that any number of fundamentalist Christian ministers have called the most dangerous ever published), she became intensely attracted to the Catholic Church, attended Mass regularly, and was devoted to the Virgin Mary. Only under close questioning did Schucman admit that, many years earlier, she had briefly been a Christian. This had resulted from an "accidental" childhood visit to Lourdes, where she had been so moved that she received baptism upon her return to the U.S. She also had prayed the Rosary for years afterwards, Schucman claimed, until she adopted scientific skepticism as her creed, and lived by it for most of her adult life.

When he suggested she apply for membership in the Catholic Church, Schucman replied that this was unnecessary because, as a Jew, she had been Catholic before "you Gentiles came along and made all these rules." No less fascinating to the priest was the sharp distinction between Schucman's own stated convictions and the content of *A Course in Miracles*. "I hate that damn book," she often told him, and regularly disavowed its teachings.

Groeschel continued to try to "open the doors of the Church" to Schucman, but his influence was subverted by her husband. William



Thetford, also a Columbia professor, was a mysterious character, and "probably the most sinister person I ever met," the priest recalled. Only after he retired from teaching did Thetford's Columbia colleagues (who knew him best as a rare-books expert) discover that all during the years they worked with him, the man had been employed as an agent of the CIA—one who was, among other things, present at the first fission experiment conducted by physicists assigned to the Manhattan Project. Thetford also was "the most religious atheist I have ever known," Groeschel recalled, and conceived a great enthusiasm for *A Course in Miracles*, personally arranging for its publication. Schucman was embarrassed, Groeschel remembered, and confided to the priest her fear that the book would create a cult, which of course it did.

Groeschel initially read the *Course* as "religious poetry," but grew steadily more negative in his assessment of it as the years passed and sales of the three volumes passed into the millions of copies. From his point of view, *A Course in Miracles* served to undermine authentic Christianity more effectively than just about any other work he could recall, and while he was inclined to reject the position of St. John of the Cross that "these things are diabolical unless proven otherwise," doubts had crept in over the years. Most troubling to him by far was the "black hole of rage and depression that Schucman fell into during the last two years of her life," the priest explained. She had become frightening to be with, Groeschel recalled, spewing psychotic hatred not only for *A Course in Miracles* but "for all things spiritual." When he sat at Schucman's bedside as she lay dying, "she cursed, in the coarsest barroom language you could imagine, 'that book, that goddamn book.' She said it was the worst thing that ever happened to her. I mean, she raised the hair on the back of my neck. It was truly terrible to witness."

Only during Schucman's last weeks of life did Groeschel learn that the woman's mother had been a Christian Scientist, one who read to the girl from the writings of Mary Baker Eddy all during her childhood. This information had contributed to the appraisal of the woman he found easiest to live with, the priest said: "I decided that *A Course in Miracles* was a fascinating blend of poorly understood Christianity inspired by her visit to Lourdes and poorly understood Christian Science inspired by her memory of Mary Baker Eddy's writings, all of it filtered through some profound psychological problems and processes." Yet doubts persisted. The morning Schucman died, Groeschel said a funeral Mass for her. "Only when I opened the missal did I discover that it was the Feast of Our Lady

of Lourdes," the priest recalled, "and I tell you, I shivered. The odds are one out of three hundred and sixty-five."

He had been sifting his experiences with Helen Schucman through his mind for more than three decades now, Groeschel said, and over the years had realized that any attempt to define them was futile. "What I learned, I think, is that these things can be both real and imaginary, paranormal and spiritual, divine and diabolical. And that when you enter the world of the supernatural, the worst mistake you can make is to impose a ultrarealist point of view. You can't make those kinds of distinctions about experiences that are beyond our comprehension. You have to do as Moses Maimonides instructed and teach your students to say, 'I don't know.'"

He was inclined to apply the same wisdom to his consideration of Medjugorje, and felt it was his duty to warn me that the truth might be more complicated than I would prefer. "Some of these things that the seers manifested, like the ability to run up that hillside at an impossible speed, for example, are as likely to have a paranormal explanation as a supernatural one," said the priest. And while he agreed that stories like the one Dr. Margnelli told about the silence of the birds during the apparitions were "very affecting, and clear evidence of the profundity of what has taken place there," they were not, Groeschel told me, "proof that it is miraculous."

Father Groeschel had investigated inexplicable phenomena about as thoroughly as any priest in the Catholic Church, and continued to believe that the paranormal and the supernatural were separate realities, but that it would be difficult to distinguish between them now and for a very long time into the future. When I asked what exactly he meant by paranormal, he went silent for a moment, then answered, "The paranormal are physical and psychological phenomena that are not comprehensible by our present understanding. Now, I firmly believe that some things we can't understand are of supernatural origin, but a good deal is not. One of the things I've learned is that because a phenomena is inexplicable does not make it miraculous. You can't make that jump. I've dealt with poltergeists, and I know they're real. I agree they're inexplicable. But I don't believe they're supernatural." As it happened, Westchester County was the poltergeist capital of the country, Groeschel said, and he had been called in to consult in quite a few local cases. One involved a house nearby, where the walls were full of dents, "but they don't go in, they go out," the priest explained. "I had a tube of Prell thrown at me in



one house. It went right over my shoulder. That could be diabolical, I suppose, but I don't think so." He then told me a long story about a thirteen-year-old boy who recently had been traumatized when his father abandoned the family to run off with a younger woman. Since that event, the boy's home had been filled with strange phenomena—lights turning on and off, faucets doing the same, cassette players exploding and spewing out tapes that unraveled in long streams. "One night, he and his brother and their mother are in bed, and this étagère moves across the floor, then falls forward in a loud crash," Groeschel recalled. "They called and I went over to meet with them. I spoke to the boys, and the one kid says, 'I know it's me.' His mother had already told me it happened only around him, and that it happened even in his sleep. And I think it *was* him, even though he didn't know how and had no intent to do these things. It was just something that was generated by the psychic energy of his distress. Yet no one can say it doesn't have a spiritual component."

For his money, the fullest and most admirable consideration of the paranormal had been that of the noted psychologist Benjamin Wohlmann, Groeschel said, then insisted that I listen while he read, very slowly, a long passage from Wohlmann's *Handbook of Parapsychology*: "There are at the present time two guiding philosophies within parapsychology. According to one, the concept of the paranormal has no permanent validity, but is simply an expression of our ignorance. In the fullness of time, parapsychology will be integrated into a unified consensual framework embracing all the sciences. Such a framework may have to be extended in various unexpected ways, but there is no danger of it being stretched to the breaking point. According to the other school of thought, the significance of the paranormal is precisely that it signals the boundary of the scientific world. Beyond that boundary lies the domain of the mind liberated from its dependency on the brain. In this view, parapsychology, using the methods of science, becomes a vindication of the essentially spiritual nature of man, which must forever defy any strict scientific analysis. Which of these two antithetical philosophies will prevail remains a question for the future. In the meantime, there is no reason whatever why both parties should not cooperate in furthering our knowledge of this, the most perplexing field of inquiry ever to engage the curiosity of our species."

Groeschel let that sink in for a few moments, then remarked that he had been reading a great deal of Einstein lately and found the man's ideas to be of great use in contemplating "the subjects, plural" that we were

discussing. "Einstein understood that it's important to have a well-developed sense of the mysterious before considering any truly important matter," the priest explained. "And that you must respect the mystery enough to understand that you are never going to solve it. As he grew older, he understood better and better that science is limited to the measurable. Einstein recognized that science can never affirm or deny the existence of God, and that only stupid people put their ultimate faith in science." When I observed that Einstein had rejected the idea of a personal God, Groeschel waved me off. "He may have said so when he was younger, but as a mature man, he became, I believe, quite a religious person. He was fascinated by the Blessed Sacrament. He surrendered to his sense of mystery more and more as he approached the end of his life." Groeschel couldn't help but contrast Einstein to Alexis Carrel, whose *Voyage to Lourdes* he had been recently rereading: "I believe Carrel actually witnessed two miraculous healings in his life, and yet he remained trapped in this limited mentality that tries to reduce things to the orderly study of the interactions of physical qualities or entities on each other. Unlike Einstein, he didn't grasp the fact that truly great scientists are the ones who understand the limitations of their fields."

Hardly anything about the contemporary Catholic Church depressed him more than the fact that the Vatican was now "full of people who worship science," Groeschel said. "The ones who have the brains to say that the emperor has no clothes don't have the guts to do it. The pope does, but the rest of them toady to the secularists. We've got the greatest case of wimpitude I've ever seen."

He wondered—and worried—about the future of the Church when it was without John Paul. Medjugorje, for example, had been spared a negative judgment only because the head of the Church was determined to protect the devotions in Bosnia. "I can tell you for a fact that the pope loves Medjugorje from afar and would go there in a minute if the theologians would let him," Groeschel said, then observed that it was clear to him I loved Medjugorje also.

Though I hadn't intended to, I found myself telling the priest about what had happened to me on the summit of Križevac back in July 1995. Since that time, I had lost virtually every vestige of the faith I imagined I had found in Medjugorje: I not only hadn't honored my pledge to formally join the Church, but within a few months found myself doubting almost every miracle that was at the core of Catholic dogma. I didn't know if there truly had been a virgin birth or if Jesus had really walked on water



or if he had actually cast out demons. And yet my experience of God's mercy on that mountaintop had never left me; nor had my knowledge of Christ's divinity. Those were with me in every moment, and even now I was more sustained by them than by anything else that I had ever felt, thought, imagined, or believed.

There were tears in my eyes by the time I finished, and Groeschel was a little choked up also. His intellectual rigor, however, was intact. "That is a religious experience," he told me. "But it doesn't necessarily validate Medjugorje. People have been converted in brothels. Still, I think it's fair to ask, 'Why did it happen there?' And I have to tell you that when I went to Medjugorje, what impressed me was the faith of the people who live there. To me it was more extraordinary than any of the phenomena reported by the visionaries. The prayerfulness of that place is mysterious beyond all analysis."

He sighed. "Look, I'm not anti-Medjugorje. Far from it. I believe God has used Medjugorje. I believe Medjugorje is part of the providential plan. But I also believe it would be a great mistake for you to hang your faith only on Medjugorje, or even on what happened to you in Medjugorje. I also think that you don't have to be afraid to be completely honest with yourself about what you believe has happened there and what you believe is happening there."

When I replied with a questioning expression, Groeschel said he wasn't trying to read my mind, but merely to interpret what he had seen and heard during the two hours we'd spent together. "It's obvious to me that you are convinced a major supernatural phenomenon, a breaking of God into this world, took place in this situation," the priest said. "You are not so sure it continued, however, and in fact strongly suspect that it got altered or corrupted or lost or replaced by something else." This was not so far from what he himself believed, Groeschel added, "except that, unlike you, I am willing to say I think that what goes on now, and has gone on for some time, may be a form of hysteria. A deeply devout hysteria, to be sure, almost a positive kind of hysteria, because it's an echo of the original event. Or it could still be real but somehow not pure and so not real in the same way. Not wholly real."

He believed that the apparitions might have begun—probably had begun—as a means of preparing the people there to survive, in a spiritual sense, the war that had commenced ten years later, Groeschel said. "You look back through history, and the number of times these events have taken place, especially the ones accompanied by apocalyptic prophecies,

and it's astounding how often they seem to have anticipated terrible and bloody events. Each time people believe they are preparing for the Apocalypse, because we tend to forget that apocalypses, lowercase, occur regularly. I think all this stuff about the ten Secrets is a crock, but I also think it may have been produced by the warning given to those six kids that something terrible was coming and that only faith in God would see people through it.

"Of course," Groeschel added with a smile, "I'm only talking about my belief here. I don't actually *know* anything. Nobody does."

He wanted to leave me with two pieces of counsel, Groeschel said in conclusion. "One, I believe that you will serve both God and yourself best if you end your book by leaving the question open. Don't try to answer it, because you never will. Two, I hope you come to understand that even if you were capable of making an airtight case about Medjugorje, that wouldn't result in true belief. True belief is a decision. It's also a gift. Accept the gift and you will make the decision."