

THE ROLE OF THE DICASTERY FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH AND THE DIOCESAN BISHOP IN DISCERNING ALLEGED SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA IN LIGHT OF THE NORMS OF 17 MAY 2024

ROLA DYKASTERII NAUKI WIARY I BISKUPA DIECEZJALNEGO W ROZESZNAWANIU DOMNIEMANYCH ZJAWISK NADPRZYRODZONYCH W ŚWIETLE NORM Z 17 MAJA 2024 ROKU

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Abstract

In May 2024, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith published new Norms for the discernment of alleged supernatural phenomena in the Catholic Church. These replaced the previous 1978 Norms. This document broadly specifies the competences and tasks of this Dicastery and diocesan bishops in the matter in question. A detailed procedure was outlined to be carried out by the diocesan bishop in three stages: investigation, evaluation, and the conclusory phase. The process of discerning a phenomenon can finish in one of six ways through the issuance of the terms: *Nihil obstat*, *Pre oculis habeatur*, *Curatur*, *Sub mandato*, *Prohibetur et obstruatur*, or *Declaratio de non supernaturalitate*. The diocesan bishop's ultimate decree has to be approved by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, which currently accompanies the bishop in his discernment of a phenomenon.

Keywords: Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, diocesan bishop, alleged supernatural phenomenon, revelation, discernment

Abstrakt

W maju 2024 r. Dykasteria Nauki Wiary opublikowała nowe Normy dotyczące rozeznavania domniemanych zjawisk nadprzyrodzonych w Kościele katolickim, zastępując wcześniejsze z 1978 r. W dokumencie szeroko ukazano kompetencje i zadania tej

Dykasterii oraz biskupów diecezjalnych w omawianej materii. Wytyczono szczegółową procedurę, którą przeprowadzić ma biskup diecezjalny w trzech etapach: dochodzenie, ocena, etap końcowy. Proces rozeznawania zjawiska może zakończyć się na jeden z sześciu sposobów poprzez wydanie stwierdzenia *Nihil obstat*, *Pre oculis habeatur*, *Curationur*, *Sub mandato*, *Prohibetur et obstruatur* bądź *Declaratio de non supernaturalitate*. Ostateczny dekret biskupa diecezjalnego musi być zatwierdzony przez Dykasterię Nauki Wiary, która obecnie towarzyszy biskupowi w rozeznawaniu zjawiska.

Słowa kluczowe: Dykasteria Nauki Wiary, biskup diecezjalny, domniemane zjawisko nadprzyrodzone, objawienie, rozeznawanie

Introduction

“Throughout the ages, there have been so-called ‘private’ revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ’s definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history. Guided by the Magisterium of the Church, the *sensus fidelium* knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church”.¹

The quoted words from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* express the fact that, apart from God’s Public Revelation, the content of which is contained in the Bible and Apostolic Tradition, there are also alleged extraordinary phenomena in the history of the Church, which include so-called ‘private revelations’. Discerning these phenomena is the task of the ecclesiastical authorities [Plata 2024; Dola 2023; Laverda 2021; Sakowicz 2018; Ciereszko 2013; Losada 1981; Pawluk 1977].² Therefore, on 17 May 2024, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith presented a document entitled *Norms for Proceeding in the Discernment of Alleged Supernatural Phenomena*.³ In this way, the 25 February 1978 Norms of the Sacred

¹ *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae* (11.10.1992), Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano; English text: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano, no. 67.

² Cf. Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum Secundum, *Constitutio dogmatica de Divina Revelatione Dei verbum* (18.11.1965), AAS 58 (1966), p. 817-30, no. 2-6.

³ Dicasterium pro Doctrina Fidei, *Norme per procedere nel discernimento di presunti fenomeni soprannaturali* (17.05.2024), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240517_norme-fenomeni-soprannaturali_it.html [accessed: 18.11.2024] [hereinafter: Norms 2024].

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith regarding this matter were replaced.⁴ The guidelines for the discernment of alleged supernatural phenomena are an extra-code norm and are guided by the special law issued by the highest ecclesiastical authority. They apply to the entire Catholic Church. Therefore, when referring to the competences and tasks of the diocesan bishop, eparchial bishops should also be taken into account.

This article's purpose is to present the role of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the diocesan bishop in the canonical process of the discernment of new supernatural phenomena, based on the latest document from the Roman Curia. In the Presentation, which precedes the text of the current Norms, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández – Prefect of the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith stated that the latest form of the document aims to better explain the role of this Dicastery and the diocesan bishop. These new Norms, as the Cardinal Prefect wrote, are a concrete way in which the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith wishes to serve pastors in being obedient to the voice of the Holy Spirit, acting for the faithful People of God (Norms 2024, *Presentation*). Having defined the purpose of this study, the following research questions should be asked: Why were new Norms regarding the matter in question issued? What are the most significant differences between both documents? What are the current tasks and competences of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the diocesan bishop during this process?

In order to answer the research questions, the study was divided into four sections: the legal nature of the Norms in question and the abrogation of the previous ones; the purpose of the current Norms and their differences from previous ones; the competences and tasks of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith; and the competences and tasks of the diocesan bishop. When addressing the issue of the bishops' competences and tasks, the procedure they should carry out will be analyzed. The article uses the dogmatic-legal and comparative methods. Due to the point that the document in question is new, there are no specific studies in canonical literature on this topic. However, there are scientific articles on the 1978 Norms [Prisco 2013;

⁴ Sacra Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei, *Normae de modo procedendi in diiudicandis praesumptis apparitionibus ac revelationibus. Nota previa* (25.02.1978), "Communicationes" 44 (2012), p. 109-12 [hereinafter: Norms 1978].

Foster 1995; Jelly 1993] and popular scientific articles on the new Norms placed on the Internet [Caridi 2024; Declue 2024; Modrić 2024].

1. The Legal Nature of the 2024 Norms and Abrogation of the Previous 1978 Norms

The text of the discussed Norms of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith was published in several languages on the website *www.vatican.va* on 17 May 2024. The basic text was in Italian, accompanied by translations to French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Polish. These norms were adopted at the ordinary session of the Dicastery on 17 April 2024 and then later approved by Pope Francis during the audience with the Dicastery's Prefect and Secretary on 4 May 2024. By papal decision, the document was to be published and enter into force on 19 May 2024, on the feast of Pentecost (Norms 2024, *Conclusion*; cf. Canon 8 CIC/83).⁵ These Norms were signed by the Prefect, Cardinal Fernández, and the Secretary of the Doctrinal Section of the Dicastery – the Most Reverend Armando Matteo. It seems, therefore, that we can speak of an approval of the document *in forma communis*. It is therefore a general decree of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith that was endowed with the appropriate legislative competences by the Roman Pontiff (Canons 29, 30 CIC/83) [Gómez-Iglesias 1993; Viana 2000; Pietras 2023a, 98-100].⁶

As a result, through the promulgation of the new Norms on the Discernment of Alleged Supernatural Phenomena, the 1978 regulations of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith were abrogated (Norms 2024, II, 27; Norms 1978; cf. Canon 20 CIC/83) [Jelly 1993; Foster 1995]. The previous Norms were approved by Pope Paul VI in a restricted form (*in forma riservata*) and only sent to the bishops (Norms 2024, *Presentation*). This document was made public on 14 December 2011, i.e. 33 years later, when the text became known [Prisco 2013].⁷

⁵ *Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus* (25.01.1983), AAS 75 (1983), pars II, p. 1-317 [hereinafter: CIC/83].

⁶ *Secretaria Status, Regolamento Generale della Curia Romana* (30.04.1999), AAS 91 (1999), p. 630-99, nos. 110, 125 § 2, 126; *Franciscus, Constitutiones Apostolicae de Curia Romana eiusque servitio pro Ecclesia in mundo Praedicate Evangelium* (19.03.2022), AAS 114 (2022), p. 375-455 [hereinafter: PE], nos. 30, 69-78.

⁷ *Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei, Normae quoad proceduram in discernendis opinabilibus*

2. The Purpose of the Norms and Main Differences between both Documents

At the beginning of the Roman Curia's discussed Norms, the Presentation of these rules, written by Cardinal Fernandez, was placed. The Prefect revealed that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's work on the amendment of the 1978 Norms had begun in 2019. The hierarchy further explained that finally, in 2023, the Dicastery had decided on the need to completely revise the scheme, which had developed since 2019. Consequently, a new outline of the document was prepared. This was done in order – as already stated in the introduction – to more deeply present the role of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the diocesan bishop (Norms 2024, *Presentation*). The Cardinal Prefect noted that the previous Norms were insufficient and inadequate to guide the work of the Dicastery and the bishops. The alleged supernatural phenomena occurring today often go beyond a specific diocese and spread to other regions or countries mainly because of the media. These modern conditions – in the opinion of the Dicastery – justify the intervention of the Catholic Church's highest authority in the matter of discerning phenomena (Norms 2024, *Presentation*, 6-7 (*Introduction*); Norms 1978, 1). Past experiences – as the Prefect claims – also show that the bishops were frequently asking the Apostolic See for an opinion in assessing the alleged supernatural phenomena (Norms 1978, IV, 1).

In light of the previous 1978 Norms, it was the duty of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to judge and approve the course of the local Ordinary's action. The Dicastery could also re-examine the phenomenon separately from the process that had been carried out by the local Ordinary (Norms 1978, IV, 2). Moreover, the practice of deciding on a specific phenomenon in the key of the *Constat de supernaturalitate* or *Non constat de supernaturalitate* according to the 1978 Norms resulted in an excessively long procedure and a small number of resolved cases. This procedure also generated some pressure on the Dicastery and diocesan bishops (Norms 2024, *Presentation*; cf. Norms 1978, 2) [Jelly 1993, 48; Foster 1995, 143-44]. As a result, the Apostolic See generally did not publish the decisions made regarding alleged supernatural phenomena. An example is the ruling of the *Constat de non supernaturalitate* on

apparitionibus necnon revelationibus datae. Prefazione (14.12.2011), "Communicationes" 44 (2012), p. 106-108.

the alleged apparitions in Amsterdam, the Netherlands (1945-1959), which was reviewed in 1974. The decision was announced on 11 July 2024.⁸ Another example is the *Nihil obstat* regarding the widely – known apparitions in Medjugorje (Bosnia and Herzegovina). On 19 September 2024, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a Note containing an extensive explanation on this matter.⁹ On the www.vatican.va website there are also other responses of the Dicastery regarding alleged supernatural phenomena, issued in light of the discussed Norms.¹⁰ The number of documents issued after the promulgation of the current Norms confirms the thesis that the previous procedure was characterized by a certain type of *rigidity* connected to the possibilities of the final decision. Therefore, in doubtful cases which did not constitute any threat to the good of the Church, the competent ecclesiastical authority was to refrain from any assessment and direct action. However, this authority was to keep watch and intervene if necessary (Norms 1978, II, 4; cf. Norms 2024, II, 7 § 2). Moreover, the earlier Norms were characterized by their *brevity* and the Dicastery noticed a need to introduce a more detailed procedure, which would be enriched by a more extensive commentary by the Roman Curia.

Therefore, while taking into account the above-mentioned circumstances, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith has proposed six optional ways

⁸ Dicasterium pro Doctrina Fidei, *Comunicato stampa* (05.04.1974), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240711_comunicato-apparizioni-amsterdam_it.html [accessed: 20.12.2024].

⁹ Dicasterium pro Doctrina Fidei, *'La Regina della Pace'. Nota circa l'esperienza spirituale legata a Medjugorje* (19.09.2024), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240919_nota-esperienza-medjugorje_it.html [accessed: 20.12.2024]. See esp. no. 38.

¹⁰ See for example: Dicasterium pro Doctrina Fidei, *Comunicato circa gli scritti di Maria Valtorta* (22.02.2025), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20250222_comunicato-scritti-valtorta_it.html [accessed: 14.05.2025]; Ibid. *'Nostra Signora della Misericordia ci porta al Cuore di Cristo' Lettera all'Arcivescovo di Bourges (Francia) sull'esperienza spirituale di Estelle Faguet* (22.08.2024), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240822_lettera-faguet_it.html [accessed: 22.12.2024]; Ibid., *'Una Luce nella Spagna'. Lettera all'Arcivescovo di Mérida-Badajoz (Spagna) circa l'esperienza spirituale di Chandavila* (22.08.2024), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240822_lettera-chandavila_it.html [accessed: 22.12.2024]; Ibid., *'Sulla Santa Montagna'. Lettera al Vescovo di Caguas (Porto Rico)* (01.08.2024), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240801_lettera-vescovo-caguas_it.html [accessed: 22.12.2024].

for the process's resolution, which provide greater *flexibility* and the *possibility* of concluding the process more quickly. Importantly, the positive conclusion of the procedure for the discernment of alleged supernatural phenomenon is to end with the issuance of the *Nihil obstat* and not the *Constat de supernaturalitate* (Norms 2024, *Presentation*) [Caridi 2024; Declue 2024; Modrić 2024]. In consequence, according to the current Norms, the granting of the *Nihil obstat* by the Dicastery and the diocesan bishop no longer presupposes a judgment of the *supernatural nature* of the phenomena under verification. As a rule, therefore, in ordinary cases, the *supernatural nature* or the *divine origin* of the phenomenon is not declared. However, the Roman Pontiff can always authorize the procedure in this regard (Norms 2024, I, 11, I, 23).¹¹ The Norms specify that the *Nihil obstat* may be issued even if there is no certainty about the supernatural authenticity of the phenomenon. It is noted that the condition for granting the *Nihil obstat* is the recognition of many signs of the Holy Spirit's action in a spiritual experience and the fact that no particularly critical or risky aspects have been detected (Norms 2024, I, 17). Basically, it is only a confirmation that the phenomenon does not contain anything contrary to the content of Public Revelation, i.e. to the principles of the Catholic faith and morality. As a result, this phenomenon can be used in pastoral care in a prudent way (including by disseminating the content). However, the faithful are never obliged to recognize and accept phenomena that have been given the *Nihil obstat* or that have been found to be *supernatural* (Norms 2024, I, 12-13) [Prisco 2013, 321-22]. This is consistent with the principle regarding the approval of private revelations, which was contained in the message of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith regarding the Fatima apparitions of 26 June 2000. This was referred to by Benedict XVI in the 2010 apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* [Prisco 2013, 320].¹² According to the current Norms, the possibility

¹¹ Cf. Dicastery pro Doctrina Fidei, *Appunto per l'udienza. Sig. Gioacchino Genovese Presunto Veggente – Diocesi di Como* (04.10.2023), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_dpc_20230925_risposta-vescovo-como-ca-genovese_it.html [accessed: 19.11.2024].

¹² Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei, *Il messaggio di Fatima. Commento teologico* (26.06.2000), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000626_message-fatima_it.html [accessed: 19.11.2024]; Benedictus XVI PP., *Adhortatio Apostolica de Verbo Dei in vita et in missione Ecclesiae Verbum Domini* (30.09.2010), AAS 102 (2010), p. 681-787, no. 14. Cf. Benedictus XIV PP., *De Servorum Dei beatificatione, et Beatorum canonizatione*, vol. II, Sumptibus Remondinianis, Venetiis 1766, p. 32.

of declaring the absence of *supernatural*ity (*Declaratio de non supernaturalitate*) also remains unchanged. This may be employed when the situation is confirmed by specific, verified facts and evidence. This happens, for example, when the alleged seer declares that he has lied or when credible witnesses provide elements of judgment that allow to falsify the phenomenon, false intention, or mythomania (Norms 2024, *Presentation*, I, 22; cf. II, 25).

In addition to the situations described above for granting the *Nihil obstat* and *Declaratio de non supernaturalitate* (Norms 2024, I, 17, I, 22), the ecclesiastical authority may choose from four other variants to resolve the discussed process. The first is the term *Prae oculis habeatur*, which is used when positive signs are recognized. However, elements of confusion and risk are perceived, which require a careful discernment or doctrinal clarification (Norms 2024, I, 18). Another situation is the term *Curatur*, which is employed when different or significant critical elements are noticed, but at the same time the phenomenon is already widespread and there are spiritual fruits associated with it. However, issuing a ban could disturb the faithful (Norms 2024, I, 19). The *Sub mandato* is a case in which the phenomenon itself is rich in positive elements, but a person, family or group of people make improper use of it. This can be done for financial gain, in order to commit immoral acts, or in parallel to pastoral activity without an acceptance of the ecclesiastical authority's indications (Norms 2024, I, 20). Another way of resolving the matter is called the *Prohibetur et obstruatur*. This is used in such a situation as in which – although there are legitimate requests and some positive elements – there are critical components. Therefore, in order to avoid additional confusion or scandal, the phenomenon is prohibited (Norms 2024, I, 21).

3. The Competences and Tasks of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith

The task of discerning alleged supernatural phenomena is assumed by the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith's Doctrinal Section. Its task, in cooperation with diocesan bishops – according to the apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* – is to care for the purity of the Catholic faith and morality. In addition, this Section of the Dicastery examines those writings and opinions that seem to be contrary to the faith and morality or harmful to them. This Section also seeks dialogue with the authors of such writings and proposes appropriate remedies to be utilized. It ensures that

the erroneous and dangerous teachings that may spread among Christians are not left without a proper negative evaluation (PE 72-73) [Visioli 2022; Metta 2008].¹³ Therefore, when presenting the new Norms, Cardinal Fernández emphasized that they clearly show the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's competences, which will now act publicly, engage in dialogue, and accompany the diocesan bishop in discernment of phenomena and making the final decision in the process. According to the previous Norms, the bishop was asked not to mention the Dicastery in his final decision. Moreover, the current document states that the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith may intervene, by its own initiative (*motu proprio*), at any stage of the process of discernment of the phenomenon (Norms 2024, *Presentation*, 9 (*Introduction*), I, 15, II, 26; cf. Norms 1978, III, 3).¹⁴ The Dicastery also reserves to itself the possibility of evaluating the doctrinal and moral elements of the spiritual experience and the way of using it (Norms 2024, I, 15).¹⁵

It is important that, in each case, it is up to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith to evaluate the course of the diocesan bishop's action and to approve or not approve the decision that should be attributed to the specific case presented by him (Norms 2024, II, 2, II, 7 § 2, II, 23 § 1). For example, the Dicastery authorizes the diocesan bishop to declare that the phenomenon under study has been recognized as *non-supernatural* (Norms 2024, I, 22). Therefore, the Dicastery's task is to examine the doctrinal and moral elements of the experience and its usage, as well as to respond to the case files and the *Votum* written by the bishop. For this reason, the Dicastery may provide the diocesan bishop with additional guidelines for action, request additional information from him or ask for other opinions. In light of the examination carried out, the Dicastery confirms or rejects the final decision proposed by the diocesan bishop. It may also, in extreme cases, proceed to a new verification of the case, which is separate from the procedure carried out by the diocesan bishop (Norms 2024, II, 2, II, 19, II, 20). The Dicastery also consults the diocesan bishop regarding the manner and content of presenting the final assessment of the phenomenon

¹³ Cf. Franciscus PP., *Litterae Apostolicae Motu Proprio datae quibus structura interna Congregationis pro Doctrina Fidei mutatur Fidem servare* (11.02.2022), AAS 114 (2022), p. 287-89, no. 2.

¹⁴ Dicasterium pro Doctrina Fidei, *Appunto per l'udienza*.

¹⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*

to the People of God (Norms 2024, II, 21 § 1). The Dicastery may also intervene in the event of the further development of the discerned phenomenon after the diocesan bishop announces the final decision (Norms 2024, II, 22 § 3). The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's tasks focus mainly on the third stage of the process (*conclusory phase*), which will be described in more detail in the next section of the article (no. 4.4).

Another task of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith is to participate in consultations when it is necessary for diocesan bishops to establish an interdiocesan commission. If the phenomenon concerns the bishops of province, the Dicastery gives a special mandate to the metropolitan. If the phenomenon concerns an ecclesiastical region, the Dicastery gives a mandate to the bishop presiding over the commission. Moreover, in the case of establishing such a commission, the Dicastery may provide additional instructions on the procedure (Norms 2024, II, 4-6; Canons 433-434 CIC/83). The Dicastery also provides consultation in such situations as when phenomena are easy to control in the circle of the people directly involved. It also issues an opinion if the faithful from different dioceses are involved in the case, and the alleged phenomenon originates in one place. This will be analyzed in more detail regarding the competences of the diocesan bishop (Norms 2024, II, 7 § 2-3).

4. The Competences and Tasks of the Diocesan Bishop

4.1. General Principles

In the Presentation of the new Norms, the unchangeable fact was emphasized that the discernment of alleged supernatural phenomena is the competence and task of the diocesan bishop. This mainly results from a bishop's *munus docendi* (Norms 2024, *Presentation*; cf. Canons 386, 392, 394, 397, 756, 823, 826, 838, 839, 1186, 1188 CIC/83) [Foster 1995, 130-42; Coriden 2008; Prisco 2013, 321]. It is worth noting that the 1978 Norms referred to the local Ordinary (*ordinarius loci*), which, apart from the diocesan bishop and those equal to him in law, also included the vicar general and the episcopal vicar (Norms 1978, III-IV; cf. Canon 134 § 1-2 CIC/83). Under the current Norms, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith emphasized the participation of the diocesan bishop, which also assumes all those equal to him in law, but exclude episcopal vicars and vicars general. Therefore, personal Ordinaries have not been taken into account

in the process of discerning phenomena (Canons 134 § 2-3, 368, 381 § 2, 620, 622 CIC/83). The Dicastery has therefore clearly specified that, from the very beginning of the discussed procedure, it is the diocesan bishop, in dialogue with the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, who makes the discernment of alleged supernatural phenomena (Norms 2024, I, 15).

The situation changes, however, if the phenomenon being discerned goes beyond the diocese. Then, the concerned bishops – after consulting with the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith – can set up an interdiocesan commission. The task of this commission is to conduct an examination under the direction of one of these bishops. The relevant offices of the bishops' conferences can help in this process. A different situation occurs when alleged supernatural phenomena concern the competences of diocesan bishops of the same ecclesiastical province. In such cases, the metropolitan, after consulting with the bishops' conference and the above-mentioned Dicastery, by its delegation, can undertake the task of constituting and chairing the commission. If the phenomenon under examination concerns an ecclesiastical region, then the presiding bishop asks the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith for a special mandate to proceed, which was already mentioned in the previous section when discussing the competences and tasks of the Dicastery (Norms 2024, II, 4-6; Canons 433-434 CIC/83; cf. Norms 1978, III, 2, IV, 1b).

At the very beginning of the described procedure, the Dicastery stated that it is the duty of the diocesan bishop (in consultation with the bishops' conference of the country) to examine cases of alleged supernatural phenomena that occur in his own territory and to formulate a final judgment on them. This assessment is to take into account the possible promotion of a cult or devotion related to the phenomena (Norms 2024, II, 1). The procedural norms of the discussed document indicate that after examining the phenomenon, the diocesan bishop should forward the results of the discernment with his *Votum* to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and act in accordance with the guidelines provided by this Dicastery (Norms, II, 2). The diocesan bishop should refrain from making a public declaration regarding the authenticity or supernatural nature of the phenomenon being investigated, only intervening when necessary. He should stop unclear manifestations of religiosity or the dissemination of any materials related to the alleged supernatural phenomenon. When forms of piety appear, even without actual worship, the diocesan bishop has a serious obligation to initiate a thorough canonical procedure as soon as

possible in order to protect the faith and prevent abuse (Norms, II, 3). The process of the discernment of alleged supernatural phenomena is divided into the investigatory phase (Norms 2024, II, 7-12), the evaluation phase (Norms 2024, II, 13-17), and the conclusory phase (Norms 2024, II, 18-24).

4.2. The Investigatory Phase

During the first stage of the investigation, when the diocesan bishop receives information about an alleged supernatural phenomenon, he should personally (or through a delegate) collect the necessary information regarding the events and circumstances of the phenomenon (Norms 2024, II, 7 § 1). However, after consulting the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, the bishop does not take further action if the phenomenon is easy to control among those members of the faithful who are directly involved and there is no perceived threat to the community. Nevertheless, the bishop has the duty to be vigilant (Norms 2024, II, 7 § 2). When the faithful who are dependent on several diocesan bishops are involved, their opinions must be listened to. A specific phenomenon that begins in one diocese may be perceived differently in other dioceses. Therefore, each of these bishops – after consulting the Dicastery – has the right to decide what he considers to be prudent from a pastoral point of view (Norms 2024, II, 7 § 3). If the alleged phenomenon involves objects of various kinds, the diocesan bishop, personally or through a delegate, may order them to be placed in a safe and guarded place until the matter is clarified. In the case of a presumed Eucharistic miracle, the consecrated species must be kept in a reserved place and in an appropriate manner (Norms 2024, II, 7 § 4). If the collected elements seem sufficient, the diocesan bishop decides whether to start the evaluation phase of the phenomenon's examination (Norms 2024, II, 7 § 5).

If, by the decision of the diocesan bishop, the investigatory phase is to continue, he shall establish an investigative commission composed of at least one theologian, canonist, and expert related to the nature of the phenomenon being investigated. The commission's purpose is to verify the truthfulness of the facts and every aspect of the phenomenon in order to provide the bishop with analyzes that are useful for evaluation (Norms 2024, II, 8 § 1-2). The bishop also appoints a delegate chosen from among the members of the commission or from outside of it, whose task is to coordinate and chair its work and prepare its meetings (Norms 2024, II, 8 § 3). The diocesan bishop or his delegate also appoint a notary whose task

is to participate in the meetings, as well as to record the hearings and any other activities of the commission. A notary is also responsible for convening meetings and preparing documentation (Norms 2024, II, 8 § 4; Canons 483, 1437 CIC/83]. The examinations of witnesses should be conducted analogously to the norms contained in the Code of Canon Law [Canons 1558-1571 CIC/83; Canons 1239-1252 CCEO¹⁶], using questions formulated by a delegate after his consultation with other members of the commission (Norms 2024, II, 9 § 1). In the analyzed document, the Dicastery emphasized the maintenance of sacramental and extra-sacramental secrecy in given testimonies (Norms 2024, II, 9 § 3-4; Canons 983 § 1; 1550 § 2, 2° CIC/83; Canons 733 § 1; 1231 § 1, 2° CCEO).¹⁷ A notary also completes the material evidence with collected written texts or other elements presented in the media (after analysis by experts) regarding the people involved in the phenomenon (Norms 2024, II, 10). The commission should examine objects and organic materials related to the event, with the assistance of other experts, if necessary (Norms 2024, II, 11 § 1-2). In addition, the diocesan bishop should cooperate with civil authorities if the phenomenon under investigation causes problems to the public order (Norms 2024, II, 11 § 4).

At the end of the principles of the discussed stage, the situation of the ongoing phenomena under investigation was taken into account. It was specified that if the situation calls for a prudent intervention, the diocesan bishop should not hesitate to take these actions of good governance in order to avoid uncontrolled or questionable manifestations of piety or the activation of a cult based on, as of yet, undetermined elements (Norms 2024, II, 12).

4.3. The Evaluation Phase

At the stage of assessing the alleged supernatural phenomenon, the diocesan bishop performs a thorough evaluation of the collected material according to the principles and criteria of discernment described above; the Norms indicate that these criteria may be applied cumulatively. The bishop

¹⁶ *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus* (18.10.1990), AAS 82 (1990), p. 1045-363 [hereinafter: CCEO].

¹⁷ Cf. Congregatio de Causis Sanctorum, Istruzione per lo svolgimento delle Inchieste diocesane o eparchiali nelle Cause dei Santi *Sanctorum Mater* (17.05.2007), AAS 99 (2007), p. 465-510, nos. 101-102; Paenitentiaria Apostolica, *Nota sull'importanza del foro interno e l'inviolabilità del sigillo sacramentale* (29.06.2019), AAS 111 (2019), p. 1215-218.

is assisted in this by the members of the commission (Norms 2024, II, 13; cf. Norms 2024, I, 10-23) [Płusa 2020; Samiczak 2020; Miczyński 2011]. The discussed Norms specify the positive and negative criteria that the diocesan bishop must take into account when assessing the phenomenon being examined (Norms 2024, II, 14-15). It was also noted that the use of alleged supernatural phenomena or recognized mystical elements as a means or pretext for dominating people or committing abuses should be considered of particular moral gravity (Norms 2024, II, 16). The legislator emphasized that the evaluation of the results of the investigation undertaken by the diocesan bishop must be carried out with due diligence and with respect for the persons involved. The bishop may also order a possible technical and scientific study of the alleged supernatural phenomenon (Norms 2024, II, 17).

4.4. The Conclusory Phase

In the third stage, the diocesan bishop's task is to prepare a report, with the support of a delegate. The report is written after a thorough analysis of the events and information gathered, taking into account the code principles for assessing the credibility of witnesses. The diocesan bishop should also take into consideration the impact that the phenomenon have had on the People of God entrusted to him and the spiritual fruits resulting from the piety that may have been born as a result of it. Finally, when taking into account all the facts of the case under discernment, both positive and negative, he draws up a personal and definitive *Votum* on the matter. In *Votum*, the bishop proposes to the Dicastery his final judgment, usually rendered according to one of the six formulas already described. This decision is to be made for the preservation of the faith of the Church and for the protection and promotion of the spiritual good of the faithful (Norms 2024, II, 7 § 5, II, 18; cf. I, 17-22; Canons 1572-1573 CIC/83; Canons 1253-1254 CCEO). The task of the diocesan bishop is to present and explain the truths of faith and morality to the faithful, as well as to defend the inviolability and unity of Catholic doctrine (Canon 386 CIC/83; Canon 196 CCEO) [Gidi 2008; Coriden 2008; Dyduch 2006]. Therefore, all files with bishop's *Votum* concerning the case being discerned are forwarded to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith for final approval (Norms 2024, II, 19). The diocesan bishop – as already mentioned – may be asked to provide additional information or opinions regarding the phenomenon [(Norms 2024, II, 20). After receiving the Roman Curia's response, the diocesan bishop (unless

the Dicastery indicates otherwise) presents to his faithful the assessment of the facts concerning the event in an understandable manner and in accordance with the Dicastery. He also informs the bishops' conference about the decision of the Dicastery (Norms 2024, II, 21). Therefore, when publishing a final decision, the diocesan bishop, while taking into account the opinion of the Dicastery, must include the statement: *In agreement with the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith* (Norms 2024, Presentation).

It should be added that for each of the six options discussed earlier, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith has defined the diocesan bishop's tasks. First of all, regardless of the decision taken, the bishop, personally or through a delegate, has the duty to continue to exercise vigilance regarding the phenomenon and the persons involved, in particular in exercising his ordinary authority (Norms 2024, II, 24). In the case of granting the *Nihil obstat*, the diocesan bishop should appreciate the pastoral value of the phenomenon and its fruits. He should also encourage the dissemination of this spiritual proposal, for example – through pilgrimages to a sacred place. In addition, the legislator obliges him to issue a decree in which he clearly indicates the nature of the permission and the limits of possibly authorized worship, specifying that it is done so by the faithful in a prudent manner. The diocesan bishop is to take care that the faithful do not accept this decision as a confirmation of the phenomenon's supernatural character (Norms 2024, I, 17; II, 22 § 1; II, 22 § 2).

If a *precautionary* decision is taken (*Prae oculis habeatur*; *Curatur*; *Sub mandato*), the necessary information must be announced to the faithful in an understandable language and formally made public by the diocesan bishop. It is necessary to consider the appropriateness of announcing the reasons for the decision made and their relation to the doctrinal foundations of the Catholic faith in order to support the development of a healthy spirituality (Norms 2024, II, 23 § 1). The term of *Prae oculis habeatur* requires careful discernment and dialogue with the recipients of the spiritual experience being examined by the diocesan bishop. If there are writings or messages, a doctrinal explanation may be necessary, as was already mentioned (Norms 2024, I, 18). When granting the *Curatur*, the bishop is required not to promote this phenomenon and to seek alternative forms of piety. He may also transform the spiritual and pastoral profile associated with the phenomenon being studied (Norms 2024, I, 19). In the case of the *Sub mandato*, the pastoral direction in the specific place where the phenomenon occurs

is entrusted to the diocesan bishop. This task can be entrusted to another person delegated by the Apostolic See, who, if he cannot intervene directly, should try to reach a reasonable agreement (Norms 2024, I, 20).

When issuing a negative decision (*Prohibetur et obstruatur*; *Declaratio de non supernaturalitate*), the diocesan bishop is obliged to make it in writing and make it public to the faithful, as in the case of a *precautionary* decision (Norms 2024, II, 23 § 1). In the case of the *Prohibetur et obstruatur*, the Dicastery requires the diocesan bishop to publicly announce that the acceptance of this phenomenon is prohibited. At the same time, the bishop must provide appropriate catechesis that will help the faithful to understand the reasons for this decision and dispel the justified spiritual concerns that the faithful might have (Norms 2024, I, 21). Finally, the diocesan bishop, authorized by the Dicastery, may issue the *Declaratio de non supernaturalitate* (Norms 2024, I, 22). The Dicastery noted that when issuing a negative decision, the diocesan bishop may omit information that could cause unfair harm to the persons involved (Norms 2024, II, 23 § 2). In the event of the further dissemination of writings or messages, the diocesan bishop should be vigilant, reprimanding abuses and threats to the Catholic faith and good morals. For this purpose, he may impose ordinary measures, including penal precepts. This is particularly appropriate when the behavior to be reprimanded refers to those objects or places related to the phenomena being discerned (Norms 2024, II, 23 § 3-4; cf. Canons 823, 1319 CIC/83; Canons 652 § 2; 654, 1406 CCEO). However, in cases where the alleged supernatural phenomena can be attributed with certainty to a deliberate intention to mystify and deceive for various purposes (e.g. profit or other personal interests), the diocesan bishop should apply the applicable penal canon law, making an assessment in each individual case (Norms 2024, II, 25).¹⁸

Summary

The 17 May 2024 Norms of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith concerning the discernment of alleged supernatural phenomena, which were subject to analysis, aim to streamline the legal and administrative procedure carried out in this matter. It was an amendment to the 25 February

¹⁸ Dicasterium pro Doctrina Fidei, *Foglio per l'udienza. Falso misticismo e abuso spirituale* (22.11.2024), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20241122_falso-misticismo-e-abuso-spirituale_it.html [access:ed 20.12.2024].

1978 Norms of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The introduced Norms showed more clearly and more broadly the role of the Apostolic See and the diocesan bishop in this procedure. By changing the discussed matter of law, the legislator made it possible to make more precise decisions in the ongoing processes, and, consequently, to take greater care in relation to the phenomena being examined. It has also become possible to react more quickly to problematic phenomena, which is useful for the good of the faithful, considering the relatively easy dissemination of information about the phenomena in today's world. The new Norms also aim to facilitate the recognition, protection, and development of the spiritual and pastoral fruits arising from the phenomena under study.

It is significant that in the 2024 Norms, the legislator departed from ruling in these processes in the double key of the *Constat de supernaturalitate* or *Non constat de supernaturalitate*, which was practiced according to the 1978 Norms. Currently, the ecclesiastical authority has the possibility of resolving the examination in six ways, by choosing one of the following terms: *Nihil obstat*, *Pre oculis habeatur*, *Curatur*, *Sub mandato*, *Prohibetur et obstruatur*, *Declaratio de non supernaturalitate*. According to the current Norms, the term *Constat de supernaturalitate* is abandoned because this procedure was reserved for the Roman Pontiff. Other possibilities of ruling are introduced but each final decree of the diocesan bishop must obtain the approval of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. This greater decision-making of the Apostolic See was motivated by the fact that the analyzed phenomena often goes beyond the specific particular Church. Thus, a certain centralization of process related to alleged supernatural phenomena has been carried out. It can be noted that Pope Francis made a similar centralization regarding the establishment of an institute of consecrated life under the diocesan right (2020 *Authenticum charismatis*) and the use of the books of the 1962 Roman liturgy (2021 *Traditionis custodes*) (Canon 579 CIC/83) [Cabezas Cañavate 2020; Pietras 2023a; Idem 2023b; Idem 2023c].¹⁹

¹⁹ Franciscus PP., *Litterae Apostolicae Motu Proprio datae*. Quibus Can. 579 Codicis Iuris Canonici mutatur *Authenticum charismatis* (01.11.2020), AAS (2020), p. 1075-1076; Franciscus PP., *Litterae Apostolicae Motu Proprio datae de usu librorum liturgicorum instaurationem Concilii Vaticani II antecedentium Traditionis custodes* (16.07.2021), AAS 113 (2021), p. 793-96; Congregatio de Cultu Divino et Disciplina Sacramentorum, *'Responsa ad dubia' su alcune disposizioni della Lettera Apostolica in forma di Motu Proprio 'Traditionis custodes'* (04.12.2021), "Communicationes" 53 (2021), p. 515-26; Dicastrium

Through the 2024 Norms, the Doctrinal Section of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's competences and tasks were broadly defined. It is now to act publicly, entering into dialogue with the diocesan bishop, giving an opinion, and finally, approving his decree. It can intervene at any phase of the process and even conduct a separate process from that which is conducted by the bishop. The Dicastery also participates in the establishment of an interdiocesan commission in cases when the phenomenon transcends one particular Church.

The current Norms emphasize that the competence of the diocesan bishop is to discern alleged supernatural phenomena. Therefore, his task is to conduct a procedure that has three stages: the investigatory phase (the establishment of an investigative commission; gathering information and materials), the evaluation phase (examination of the phenomenon with the participation of the commission), and the conclusory phase (drafting a *Votum*, forwarding the *Votum* to the Roman Curia, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's decision, and making the decision public). For each of the six possible decisions, the Norms specify the guidelines that the diocesan bishop must make, while also taking into account the guidelines of the Dicastery in a specific case.

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