

KNOW IT AS FAITHFUL FLOCK TO HOLY SITE

Thousands turn out for arrival of the Virgin Mary

IT WAS religion but not as we know it.

They had come expecting yet another hellfire and brimstone message from the Blessed Virgin – but for some of the 12,000 who came to Knock – it was Hell.

It was like an apocalyptic scene as the screaming crowd ran towards the doors, stepping on terrified children, pushing wheelchairs out of the way and knocking over tables.

Meanwhile the man who had predicted a Virgin apparition sat quietly in the front pew, surrounded by friends.

Terrified mum Lizzie Connors from New Ross, Co Wexford said she feared for the safety of her five little daughters. "There were ladies in wheelchairs being shoved across the floor by the crowd. The children wanted to go out and see what the fuss was about but I kept them with me.

"I come to Knock four times a year and I do believe in Our Lady – but I think she's always here. We don't need someone to bring her here to us.

"I don't think Our Lady would want little children to be hurt or people in wheelchairs to be knocked over."

Her little daughter Mag insisted: "I saw Our Lady on the Altar."

Crush

Geraldine Bourke from Charlestown, Co Mayo, said she was afraid her daughters Aofie (11) and Saorise (8) and niece Louise (13) would get hurt or lost in the crush.

"It was terrifying. You'd nearly get killed in the crowd.

"All I could hear was shouting." Her niece Louise (13) said: "I was frightened."

During the commotion, self-styled mystic Joe Coleman slipped out, surrounded by friends – but was mobbed on the way to his car. An estimated 12,000 were waiting for him to pass on commands from Heaven, Joe as he held a "private conversation" with the Virgin Mary.

The man who claims the Mother of God appears to him surrounded himself with human minders. Refusing an offer by the *Sunday World* to sit beside him as he had his supernatural experience, Coleman told us before the event: "I'm going to have protection around me. I don't think it would be possible to be with me while the apparition is happening because, when I'm talking to the Blessed Mother, I need some privacy."

But with thousands watching him closely in the packed Cathedral, it was anything but private.

His friend Brenda Walsh, who led the crowd in decades of the Rosary, told the *Sunday World*: "I asked Joe if he could see Our Lady and he said yes. He said she was here. He was in ecstasy."

The Galway woman, based in London, started the event by shouting at the murmuring crowd to "Keep quiet! Shss! Everybody stay shhsss!"

Coleman had predicted a massive "world media" event yesterday for what he claimed would be the second apparition of Our Lady this month.

He also claimed "pressure from the media" had forced the priests to open the Basilica for him so he could communicate with the Virgin. He insisted he had heard this from "a newsman on a country radio station" but could not



VISION: Coleman and Keith Henderson

By **GERALDINE COMISKEY** in KNOCK

remember which radio station. Knock Shrine spokesman Pat Lavelle pointed out. "The basilica is always open."

He also rubbished claims that the security guards were there to protect Joe and that the statue of the Virgin had been wheeled out of the basilica just before the event.

Mr Lavelle pointed out: "We don't have the statue here when the pilgrim season is finished. And we always have security guards here to protect people coming to the shrine."

The Co Mayo village of Knock has been a Marian shrine since 1879, when the Mother of God is believed to have appeared to 11 people.

While it has drawn millions of devout pilgrims from all over the years, this time round they were not just there to pray – but to see a Holy Show.

Crowds

This time round, there was no doubt that the crowd were followers of Mr Coleman – though not all the kind he wanted. Sceptics who had come "for a laugh" mingled with genuine believers.

And, judging by the traffic jams, packed car parks and booked-out B'n'Bs, it appeared that Mr Coleman had got at least one of his predictions right.

He had told the *Sunday World* he expected an even larger crowd than the estimated 8,000 who turned up earlier this month to see the "apparition" in the sky above the shrine – though he insisted the number of people who turned up on October 11 was closer to "15,500" and had initially predicted 50,000.

"Whatever about the Virgin, Joe Coleman has been great for tourism", a local B'n'B owner said. "He's single-handedly killed the recession in Knock

– you could say it's very Christian of him."

The self-styled "clairvoyant" and "spiritual healer", who charges €60 a pop for healing sessions in his room above a florist's in Ballymun, west Dublin, insisted: "I'm an honest man. I've been working 30 years and haven't a penny to my name. I don't even have a car – I travel to Knock on the train."

His messages so far from Our Lady have been less than ladylike. "Our Lady tells me she's very angry, and God the Father is very angry."

He's talking about the Gates of Heaven being closed if the people do not do what Our Lady wants. This will rock the church."

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FEARS: Ezzie Connors and her daughters were terrified by the massive crowds in Knock

NEWS IN BRIEF

APPRENTICE GETS ENGAGED

CRAIG Butler, the first participant to be fired from this year's *Apprentice* show has just got engaged to his fiancée.

The 25-year-old Kildare native who works as a sales rep for the Kelloggs Company of Ireland, was first off the show after he volunteered as a team leader.

Craig Butler was fired after the boys team failed at the task of selling ice-cream on the streets of Dublin.



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