

"Men must offend God no more. He is already greatly offended."

With these words, our Lady brought to an end a series of apparitions that had begun six months earlier in the small village of Aljustrel in the parish of Fatima, Portugal. It was October 13, 1917.

The visions at Fatima have rocked the world for over a century. They have been the fodder of much speculation and sensationalism on one hand, and dismissed as the hallucinations of simple peasant children on the other. They have been hailed as the prophetic voice for our times, revealing the terrible end times that have fallen upon mankind, and they have been portrayed as a pious call for obedience to God above all else (including the Church). Of special interest is the purported "Third Secret" given to the children in July of 1917. This, in itself, has caused a furor both within and outside the Church, which has been accused of "conspiracy" and "cover up" in not revealing the truth of this secret to the public.

In the midst of all this furor, one simple thing has been lost. The message of Fatima is, and always will be, a call for Repentance and Conversion and change in the way we live our lives. It is not about some cataclysm that is befalling our modern world. It is not about a conspiracy in the Church. It is about our relationship to God and to each other.

THE PRELUDE



The visions of Fatima do not begin with our Lady in 1917. They began almost a year earlier as three children (often referred to as shepherds) began to see extraordinary things. The children are Lucia dos Santos, aged 9 in 1916, her cousin, Francisco Marto, aged 8 and his sister, Jacinta, aged 6.

The world in 1916 was engulfed in a great war—the War to end all wars, World War I. Portugal, like the rest of Europe, had been drawn into the conflagration. But for these children of so tender an age, war was a distant reality—something whispered about in

adult conversations—but certainly of little concern to children. The greatest concerns for Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta were what to do once their chores were complete.

Most of what we know about the apparitions at Fatima come to us from Lucia's memories, written down almost 30 years later. Even so, what she relates has confounded saints and theologians ever since.

Lucia, as a "responsible" girl of 9 was given the task of tending to her family's meager "herd" of sheep. In April of 1916, she relates that she and her two cousins were leading the flock to some pasture land owned by her family outside the village of Aljustrel in the parish of Fatima. The day had been dreary and the children were seeking some place to shelter themselves from the spring drizzle. They sought refuge under one of the rocky overhangs that jutted out from the mountain. From this cave, Lucia relates that they saw a bright light form on the horizon and glide gently over the fields until it came before them. In the brilliance of the light stood a luminous young man. "I am the Angel of Portugal," he said. "I will not harm you. Have no fear. Pray with me." Then he bowed his head to the ground and prayed "My God, I believe, I adore, I trust, and I love You. I beg pardon for those who do not believe, do not adore and do not trust You."

Then he turned to the children and said: "Pray in this manner. The hearts of Jesus and Mary have merciful designs on you." And he vanished.

Lucia relates that the children remained fixed to the ground continuously saying the prayer they had learned for some time, until, waking from their reverie, they went out to seek the lost sheep, which had wandered off.

Again in mid summer, as the children were playing beside a well in Lucia's family garden, the Angel of Portugal appeared to them and said; "What are you doing here? You must pray, the hearts of Jesus and Mary have merciful designs on you. You must pray and offer sacrifices for sinners." "But how are we to sacrifice?" Lucia asked. The angel responded: "In every way you can offer sacrifice to God in reparation for the sins by which He is offended, and in supplication for sinners. In this way you will bring peace to our country, for I am its guardian angel, the Angel of Portugal. Above all, bear and accept with patience the sufferings God will send you." Again, he bowed his head to the ground and prayed the prayer he had prayed previously. As the children began to join in, he vanished from their sight.

The third apparition of the Angel occurred in October of 1916. Once more, Lucia and her cousins were tending the flocks at a meadow called Cabeho. They knelt to say the prayer the angel had taught them. Suddenly, he appeared before them, more radiant than before. In his hands he held a Chalice and a Host from which blood was flowing. As he bowed to pray with the children, the Chalice and Host remained suspended in mid-air. "Most Holy Trinity," the angel said, "Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I adore you profoundly and I offer You the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, present in all the Tabernacles of the world, in reparation for the sacrileges, outrages and indifference by which He is offended. Through the Infinite merits of His Sacred Heart and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I ask the conversion of poor sinners." He repeated this prayer two more times. Then he rose and said "Eat and drink the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ terribly outraged by the ingratitude of men. Offer reparation for their sakes and console God." To Lucia, who had already received her First Communion, he offered the Sacred Host. To Francisco and Jacinta, who had not yet received their First Communion, he offered the contents of the chalice.



He bowed to the ground, and three times repeated the prayer he had said. Then he said to the children: "Pray in this fashion and make reparation for sinners. The hearts of Jesus and Mary have merciful designs for you." And he vanished from their sight.

THE BEAUTIFUL LADY

The winter of 1916-17 passed without incident. The children saw the angel no longer and his visitations seemed a distant memory. As Spring brought new life to the fields around Aljustrel, the children returned to their normal activities. There were chores to be done and sheep to herd. Lucia, now aged 10, Francisco, 9, and Jacinta, 7 looked forward to their time alone in the field. When they were together, they often spoke of the angel and his strange words and they tried to find ways to "make sacrifices" - giving their lunches to poorer children along the road, eating the bitter acorns, and Jacinta's acquisition of a hemp rope, which she wore as a belt under her clothing, seemed to fulfill the angel's request for sacrifice.

On a beautiful Sunday in May, after morning Mass and

catechism, the children were sent off to the fields with the sheep. The sun was brilliant in the sky and they had not a care in the world. They ate the lunch their mothers had prepared for them and hastily said their rosary so that they could get back to the project at hand—building a hut out of the fields stones they garnered from the fields. Suddenly, the skies turned black, as if a summer storm were approaching. The children dropped their stones and hastened to gather the sheep, scattered across the hillside. As they ran down the hill, they passed a small holm oak. They stopped in their tracks and gazed into the eyes of the most beautiful woman they had ever seen. She was dressed in white edged in golden light and seemed to hover over the small tree on a gilded cloud.



"Do not be afraid, I will not harm you." The Lady began to speak. Lucia heard the voice and could respond. Jacinta heard only. Francisco only saw. "Where are you from?" Lucia asked. "I am from heaven," the Lady responded.

This began a conversation that would expand over the course of the next six months. The beautiful Lady would not reveal who she was. She only asked the children to do two things. To make sacrifices for sinners and to return to that spot on the thirteenth of the next six months. The children hastily agreed. Then the Lady opened her arms, and from her hands fell luminous rays that enveloped the children. Years later, Lucia, recalling this moment, would write:

we were bathed in a heavenly light that appeared to come directly from her hands. The light's reality cut into our hearts and our souls, and we knew somehow that this light was God, and we could see ourselves embraced in it. By an interior impulse of grace we fell to our knees, repeating in our hearts: "Oh, Holy Trinity, we adore You. My God, my God, I love You in the Blessed Sacrament."

The Lady spoke to the children once more: "You will pray the Rosary every day, to bring peace to the world and end the war." Then she folded her hands and disappeared into the immensity that is space.

Over the course of that summer, news of the apparitions spread throughout the parish of Fatima, the countryside of Portugal, and even as far away as Spain. People began to flock to the place hoping to witness the miraculous happenings. The revelations seemed to reach a fever pitch in July of 1917. At that time, Lucia later

revealed, the children had seen a vision of Hell "where poor sinners go because they have no one to pray for them." The Lady spoke of wars and persecutions of the Church: "The good will be martyred, the Holy Father will have much to suffer," but she countered, "in the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph and there will be peace."

IN THE END

So what relevance does all this have for us today? In our sophisticated, high-paced, technologically advanced age of science and reason, we have little room or patience for the tales of peasant children of a century ago. Yet, the words uttered at Fatima continue to reverberate throughout the world, even today. "Men must offend God no more, for He is already greatly offended."

Many articles, speeches, discussions, and blog spaces deal with the sensational aspects of Fatima: the miracle of the sun, the secrets, the hidden agenda of the Church, the conspiracy, and myriads of other peripheral issues that do not touch the heart of the matter. Despite the threats of war (World War II did break out as predicted at Fatima), persecutions of the Church (when has the Church not been persecuted?), and the annihilation of several nations (the map of Europe is constantly changing), one thing stands out. It is the promise of PEACE. "In the end"—after all these things take place — our Lady tells us — IN THE END, there will be PEACE."

St. Luke, in his Gospel, records that Jesus, on making his final approach to Jerusalem, began to weep over the city and said "If only you had known the path to peace this day, but you have completely hid it from view." At Fatima, Our Lady, too, has shown us the path to peace, yet, how many of us have followed it.

What can we glean from Fatima? What lessons have we yet to learn?

THE LESSONS OF FATIMA



HELL by Salvador Dali

The first lesson is that SIN is a reality and that it wounds the very heart of God. God created us in love. He only asks that we love in return. Yet the love of many has grown cold. We do what we want with little thought of the consequences. Our Lady warns us that, unless we recognize this fatal flaw and work to correct it, our lives are doomed.

The second lesson is that God has great compassion for us. He does not desire the death of a sinner, but rather, that the



sinner turn to him and live. The call for repentance and conversion that issues from our Lady at Fatima is a direct response to this compassion of God. "God loves us so much that He gave us His only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal Life. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but rather, that the world be saved through him." (John 3:14-15).

The Love of God is made manifest to us through the Eucharist. It may not be obvious at first, but the visions of Fatima begin and end with the Eucharist. The Angel of Peace turns the hearts of the children toward the Eucharist and Our Lady comes to ask for Communions of Reparation on First Saturdays. The Eucharist is the sacrifice of Calvary made present on our altars. Through the Eucharist, we obtain the grace Christ won for us by His suffering, His death and His resurrection. The Eucharist, as the Second Vatican Council reminds us, is the SOURCE and SUMMIT of our Christian lives.



People of Faith can access God through prayer. At Fatima, that prayer is primarily the Rosary. Unfortunately for many Catholics, the Rosary is a "dry prayer" consisting of too many repetitious "Hail Marys". It is unfortunate, because, when used

properly, the Rosary affords every person the means to meditate and think about the mysteries of the life of Christ (traditionally known as the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries, with the Luminous Mysteries added by Pope St. John Paul II). Instead of rushing through the prayers, the Rosary invites us to sit with Jesus and enter into the mystery of salvation.

And the final lesson of Fatima is this: PEACE is possible. It is attainable. If we listen and respond generously. Our Lady came to Fatima to remind us of the basics of our Faith at a time when that Faith is in danger of fading from the face of the earth. To "offend God no more" is to recognize His sovereignty over our lives and to turn to Him with trust. This is the only true means to peace. It is the peace promised at Fatima when the "Immaculate Heart will triumph."

