

Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta
The children seers of Fatima

Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta, aged ten, nine and seven respectively, were favoured with a series of apparitions of Mary, Mother of God during the year of 1917 at Cova da Iria not far from Fatima. The supernatural had irrupted into the temporal order. This caused a lot of consternation. The first apparition in 1916 was that of an angel “who was more brilliant than crystal,” who introduced himself as “the Angel of Peace,” He told the children that Jesus and Mary had plans for them and that they should pray and make sacrifices for the conversion of sinners, for the ingratitude and indifference of people. These prayers he said, would bring peace to Portugal.

Now Portugal was in turmoil. King Carlos had been assassinated in 1908. Portugal was declared an anti-Christian Republic in 1910. The government of the day seized church property, persecuted church personnel and even drove many religious into exile, including the Patriarch of Lisbon

The Republican State was intensely hostile to the church and its rituals. Catholic processions were forbidden. Apparitions at Fatima were considered a “ridiculous comedy” (Walsh 153). The sarcastic anti-clerical press offered an explanation of the apparitions as “psychosis, epilepsy and collective suggestion.” It claimed that this whole Fatima spectacle was an invention of the clergy (Walsh 84). The entire situation was exacerbated by the fact that Portugal was involved in the World War in 1916. The country was in disarray. The entire Europe was in the throes of war. This prompted Pope Benedict XV to urge all the people of goodwill to repent and direct their prayers to Mary, the Queen of Peace.

APPARITIONS

In 1917 Our Lady appeared in six consecutive months from May to October, on the 13th of each month. She appeared to Lucia dos Santos, Francisco and Jacinta Marto. The appearances of Our Lady were generally heralded by some celestial signs. A lightening-like brilliant flash of light would appear in the sky. Then a globe of fire would descend on top of a small evergreen tree (azinheira). Our Lady is said to have been draped in a white light more brilliant than the sun and her face was indescribably beautiful. She emanated light and was surrounded by light (Walsh 50, 69) Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta were startled, fascinated, swept off their feet. The curious crowd was intensely overwhelmed but did not see Our Lady. But they sensed that

something extraordinary had occurred (Walsh 69).

On the occasions of the appearances of Our Lady, the sun was considered the forerunner of the apparitions. Some say the sun detached itself from the clouds, that it trembled and “danced” and like a globe of snow, that it revolved on itself and even appeared to threaten to fall on the earth (Walsh 147, 149). It was amidst this flood of light that Our Lady made her appearance. Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta were favoured with this remarkable encounter. The curious crowds on the other hand, could only imagine that something extraordinary was afoot.

MESSAGE FROM OUR LADY

In the apparition, Mary asked the shepherd children whether they would be willing to be her messengers. Such a role entailed pain and suffering. The pain that they would endure will be an act of reparation for the sins of many and an open call to conversion. The children’s “yes” echoed Mary’s own “Fiat.” Little did they know the harshness and cruelty with which they would be treated. In view of the fact that Europe was engulfed in war, Our Lady also asked the young missionaries to pray the Rosary every day for the cessation of hostilities and for world peace.

Rather than the Augustinian picture of hell as the restlessness of the heart and the eternal longing to see God, Lucia in her Memoir IV of 1941, writes that Our Lady showed them the spectacle of hell as presented in Christian tradition. The children were shown “a sea of fire” in which demons “in loathsome forms of animals” and human souls were being consumed by unrelenting flames. There were groans and cries of pain and despair. After this horrific scene of hell, the children were terrified, exhausted, drained and without breath (Walsh 81). This, the children were told, is where sinners go. Sinners could however be saved if they repented and dedicated themselves to the Immaculate Heart of Our Lady. Our Lady also asked that Russia be consecrated to her Immaculate Heart. Russia then, had become the reigning symbol of unbelief. It embraced and aggressively promoted an unrepentant ideology of Marxism that sought to overthrow and violently suppress the Christian order. Communism sought to put an end to Christianity. It was against this background that Our Lady said that “in Portugal the dogma of the faith will always be kept” (Walsh 82). In Portugal ‘terra da Maria,’ every girl’s second name was “Maria.” Now many are born outside the faith or have voluntarily suppressed the name of Mary in line with the reigning ideology of the time. It was at the third apparition of July 13, 1917, on the feast day of

the Patron saint of Portugal, San Antonio, that Our Lady told a secret to Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta.

The Prayer said by Catholics world over, at the end of each decade of the Rosary, is a legacy of the three seers of Fatima. It was Our Lady who taught them this prayer which flowed from the spectacle of hell they had seen:

**“Oh my Jesus, pardon me, save us from the fire of hell
draw all souls to heaven, especially those in most need!”**

PAIN AND SACRIFICE

Both the Angel of Peace and Our Lady had warned the children about the suffering they would endure if they accepted the role of being Our Lady’s messengers. They were to make sacrifices for the conversion of sinners. At a tender age, with a child’s understanding, the children began to give up their lunches to the sheep or to the poor children and satisfied themselves with very little. But those small gestures of sacrifice were at their own initiative. Little did they know that accepting to be messengers of the invisible Lady would cause such a stir and impose a burden on their tender shoulders. While the Marto’s were generally, supportive of their children, Francisco and Jacinta, the Aboboras were less sympathetic towards their own daughter, Lucia. Throughout the six apparitions, the Maria Rosa took the events at Cova da Iria with a grain of salt. She was thoroughly skeptical and even hostile towards her daughter, Lucia. The ubiquitous gossip about Lucia and her imaginary Lady frustrated her to no end. She accused her of lies and deception and of misleading the Marto children. Maria Rosa blamed Lucia of bringing their family name into disrepute. She beat her with a broomstick, kicked her and screamed at her. The woman was beside herself. Lucia’s sisters were eager for the fray. They ridiculed her. Lucia’s father Antonio became hostile after discovering that the crowds trampled his field and destroyed his vegetables. The pain and suffering predicted by both the Angel of Peace and Our Lady were more than what Lucia anticipated. Throughout all this testing by fire, she remained strong and calm. Her courage was extraordinary for a ten year old girl. But this was not the end of it all.

SKEPTICAL CLERGY

Some priests were not impressed by the apparition stories. They were skeptical,

sarcastic and even hostile. In their view the apparitions simply poisoned the anti-clerical, anti-catholic atmosphere that was increasingly becoming dominant in Portugal.

The mere “sight of a black soutane.” was a signal for the children to run and hide lest they be taunted and ridiculed. This also applied to the curious and mischievous people. The children “could tell them at a glance from a distance” (Walsh 85).

UPSETTING INTERROGATIONS

On August 11, 1917 the Administrator of the Council of Ourem which included Fatima, sent for the children to appear before him. He was a non-believer who summoned Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta on the grounds that they disturbed the peace. Both Lucia’s parents, unhappy with their daughter, thought that going to the court would teach Lucia a lesson. Lucia on the other hand was distraught to hear her own parents speak that way. She prayed: “I expect to have to suffer more for Thy love, O my God and it is for the conversion of sinners!” (Walsh 85).

The Administrator, at his offices, questioned Lucia about the secret and demanded that she should promise never to return to the scene of the apparition in Cova da Iria. In spite of the threats, Lucia, though frightened, remained resolute. The three children were kept for two day at the Administrator’s house. At some stage they were put among the prisoners in order to put fear into their hearts. The prisoners, once practicing Catholics, mumbled the Rosary along as the children prayed. The Administrator failed to extract anything out of the children.

Among the different investigators who questioned the children about their experiences of the apparitions was one Rev. Dr. Manuel Formigão. In his report of 1921 he observed that Lucia “was a robust healthy, normal looking girl, with no indications of vanity and no pathological traits whatever” (Walsh 129). The various investigators concurred that “the children were truthfully reporting what they had actually seen and heard” and were not hallucinating. (Walsh 129, Carroll, M. p.181).

THE LEGACY OF FATIMA

The impact of the apparitions on the children was a strong sense of the presence of God in their lives. They willingly accepted and cherished the apostolate of prayer.

Their ordeal at the hands of family, (in the case of Lucia) clergy, government officials and cynical people did not dissuade them from their mission. They were courageous to a heroic degree. They bore the taunts with the grace of children. They did not recruit the crowds to come and see. And yet the people came in huge numbers, genuine believers, skeptics and even curious non-believers. Cova da Iria became a rendezvous for those in search of some favours of conversion, of a cure, of forgiveness, of consolation, of faith and blessing from Our Lady. Today marks 100years since the apparitions of Our Lady in 1917. A pilgrimage of a million people led by Pope Francis himself gather at Fatima to pay homage to the Mother of God, the Queen of Peace. We too, at a distance, share in the devotions to Our Mother and draw inspiration from Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta.

“Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief” (Mk 9: 25)

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