

MOTHER: GOD'S GIFT

It was early Sunday afternoon one hundred years ago today outside a Portuguese town called Fatima that three children (a brother and sister and a female cousin) were shepherding their family's herd of sheep and playing a game. Suddenly Our Lady appeared to them. She told them not to be afraid and that she would do them no harm. She asked them if they would come back to this exact spot for six months in a row on the 13th of the month and she would come to visit them and tell them her requests. Eventually the Lady would reveal that the children were to pray, especially the rosary. They were to do penance, make penitential acts of sacrifice specifically for those souls in danger of being lost forever. They were to pray for the conversion of sinners, conversion of hearts of those who disobey the commands of God.

It wasn't until 1930, thirteen years later that the local bishops and the Church at large accepted the apparition as real. Mary had made some promises to the children. That the war would end. World War I was raging in Europe at that time—1917. It was a terrible war. All told 37 million people died. It was the first time chemical weapons were used in warfare. Later chemical weapons would be banned in the Geneva Protocols of 1925. The same kinds of chemical weapons we hear about today. Our Lady told the children that a second war, worse than the first, would follow though if people did not change the way they were living and return to the way of the Lord. People did not change their ways and the Second World War occurred in which 80 million people were killed, gassed, murdered, eliminated, starved to death or died of disease.

Our Lady asked that the Holy Father should consecrate Russia to her Immaculate Heart and promised that Russia would be converted. In biblical language, the "heart" indicates the center of human life, the point where reason, will, temperament and sensitivity converge, where the person finds his unity and his interior orientation. According to Matthew 5:8, the "immaculate heart" is a heart which, with God's grace, has come to perfect interior unity and therefore "sees God". To be "devoted" to the Immaculate Heart of Mary means therefore to embrace this attitude of heart, which makes the *Yes of Mary*—"your will be done"—the defining center of our whole life.

She asked the children to pray the rosary, every day, specifically for peace. (If you do pray the rosary every day perhaps consider praying a second one. If you do not, please begin. After the Eucharist it has become my go to prayer.) That was an urgent warning one hundred years ago. Look around the world. What do you see? Have we been so faithful and true to what Our Lady asks that our world has become a peaceful place? Not much else seems to be working. Why don't we at least give it a try?

Earlier today, in Fatima Pope Francis canonized the brother and sister, Francisco and Jacinta who died in the influenza outbreak in Europe in 1919 and 1920. Innocents. Unable to read or write. But the chosen instruments of Our Lady to bring a message to the world of the twentieth century and now the twenty-first century. Their cousin Lucia, lived until 2005 and became a nun. Her own cause for canonization has begun also.

On this same date in 1981, 64 years after the first apparition of Our Lady to the shepherd children, Pope John Paul was in his pope mobile in Saint Peter's Square in Vatican City when a gunman stepped close to him and fired four shots at point blank range to kill the pope. He was a trained assassin. A trained sniper. His name was Mehmet Ali Agca. Two bullets missed. Two hit the pontiff. One lodged in his abdomen. Doctors later say that the bullet twisted and turned inside the pope's body in such a way as to just miss every vital organ and blood supply.

That this happened on the feast day of Our Lady of Fatima, the Blessed Mother to whom Saint John Paul II had such great devotion ever since he lost his own mother at an early age, was not lost on the Holy Father. While recuperating from his gunshot wounds he asked for the file on Fatima to be brought to him, including the third secret revealed to Lucia but never revealed to the world. He read that secret as had Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI before him. Neither of those popes revealed the contents. Pope John Paul believed that the Third Secret referred to himself and that he was supposed to die but that Our Lady intervened on his behalf to save his life. As you know he lived another 23 years until 2004. And those who knew the Pope said that he was never afraid of anything after that day. When he recovered he went to Fatima to thank Our Lady for her intervention. Later on he gave the bullet they found in the pope mobile to the Bishop of Leiria who had the bullet placed in the crown on the statue of Our Lady of Fatima where it is to this day.

The third secret of Fatima was finally revealed at Fatima itself in the Millennium Year 2000 by Cardinal Sodano the Vatican Secretary of State for Pope John Paul II when Pope John Paul was visiting Fatima for the third time. As you know there were three secrets.

The first part is the vision of hell. "Our Lady showed us a great sea of fire ...and then she said : You have seen hell where the souls of poor sinners go. To save them, God wishes to establish in the world devotion to my Immaculate Heart. If what I say to you is done, many souls will be saved and there will be peace. The war is going to end: but if people do not cease offending God, a worse one will break out during the Pontificate of Pius XI. (The Pope in 1917 was Benedict XV).

The second warns of the errors of Russia, "I shall come to ask for the consecration of Russia to my Immaculate Heart, and the Communion of reparation on the First Saturdays. If my requests are heeded, Russia will be converted, and there will be peace; if not, she will spread her errors throughout the world, causing wars and persecutions of the Church. In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph. The Holy Father will consecrate Russia to me, and she shall be converted, and a period of peace will be granted to the world"

The third secret is: "...the Angel cried out in a loud voice: 'Penance, Penance, Penance!'. And we saw in an immense light that is God and in front of it' a Bishop dressed in White 'we had the impression that it was the Holy Father'. Other Bishops, Priests, men and women Religious going up a steep mountain, at the top of which there was a big Cross; before reaching there the Holy Father passed through a big city half in ruins and half trembling with halting step, afflicted with pain and sorrow, he prayed for the souls of the corpses he met on his way; having reached the top of the mountain, on his knees at the foot of the big Cross he was killed by a group of soldiers who fired bullets and arrows at him, and in the same way there died one after another the other Bishops, Priests, men and women Religious, and various lay people of different ranks and positions.

My friends, at the end of Mass tonight we will process with the statue of Our Lady of Fatima. Her message is more important today than 100 years ago. Russia, cultures all over the world who need not God and who heed not God's commandments. There is need for prayer, for penance and for a change of heart. I can only change mine. You alone can change yours. Please renew your dedication to the powerful gospel message of Jesus Christ. Mary points always to her Son and He alone can save the world. Let us pray for his intervention and for the conversion of many souls.

