

What Happened at Fatima



by Leo Madigan

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WHAT HAPPENED AT FATIMA

by Leo Madigan

For Lauri and Veronica Duffy who have introduced
so many to our Lady of Fatima

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CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY
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Blessed Francisco and Jacinta Marto, beatified by Pope John Paul II, 13 May 2000.

*... I am by birth a shepherd's daughter,
My wit untrained in any kind of art.
Heaven and Our Lady gracious hath it pleased
To shine on my contemptible estate.
Lo! While I waited on my tender lambs,
And to sun's parching head displayed my cheeks,
God's mother deigned to appear to me
And, in a vision full of majesty,
Willed me to leave my base vocation,
And free my country from calamity.*

William Shakespeare
(Henry VI Part I. Act I Scene II)

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INTRODUCTION

Portugal, in 1917, was a cauldron of political and religious thinking. Godless forces had taken the reins of government, and the Church was represented as a bulwark of superstition. The new thinking, emboldened by the Great War, was all for destroying her influence but it reckoned without the faith of the peasantry, and the concern of heaven, for in this year our blessed Lady stepped in to console, advise, admonish, promise, plead and leave a spiritual perfume that continues to draw millions to the fields where she set her feet.

She came to instigate a revolution and chose the most unlikely candidates imaginable to implement it - three illiterate children from a one-street backwater. These children had little except the values of family, the certainty of faith, and their innocence. It is on these foundations that the Blessed Virgin fashioned them for divine purposes.

Today two of them are among those beatified by Holy Church, indeed, the youngest ever to be honoured. Their joint feastday is observed on 20th February. The third, a cloistered nun in the Carmel of Coimbra, died on 13th February 2005.

But if the choice of peasant children as heaven's messengers is a paradox, that is in keeping with the Message of Fatima itself because heaven's values are opposite to ours. If you can accept that, read on. Indeed, read on even if you find believing difficult.

WHAT HAPPENED AT FATIMA

The stirring of wings

Some time in 1915 three girls and a boy, aged around 8, were watching their sheep in a rocky olive grove in the hills bordering the western shores of Europe. They ate the lunch they had brought in their shoulder bags then, urged by the natural leader among them, Lucia, they knelt to pray the Rosary.

They had scarcely begun when they saw a figure poised in the air above the trees. It was simply suspended there facing them, though it had no face that the children could see. It looked like a statue made of snow with the rays of the sun playing around it and giving it a patina of transparency.

The children were alarmed, but mesmerised. They continued with their prayer but with their eyes transfixed on the motionless figure above them, which dazzled them with its light.

As they finished their Rosary the figure vanished.

Lucia dos Santos told no one of this strange sighting, but her companions couldn't help but let it all tumble out once they were indoors with their families. In no time, word of the children's strange claim had travelled round Aljustrel, the small, peasant village where they lived. Before long Lucia's mother was questioning her daughter.

“They are saying you saw something up on Cabeço. What was it? What did you see up there?”

Lucia was perturbed as she herself didn't know what she had seen. It wasn't as if the figure had had a face with eyes and a nose and a mouth, or even arms or feet that could be described. Or perhaps it had had these things, but they couldn't be seen because of the light. In her confusion she said, “It looked like a person wrapped up in a sheet.”

Her mother, at this point maybe more amused than her show of irritation betrayed, pronounced the claim to be “childish nonsense” and dismissed it.

A week or so later Lucia, with two other children, local boys, was again grazing her flocks on Cabeço and the same white figure, almost transparent in the rays of the sun, appeared hovering above some other trees. The boys saw the vision first and called Lucia's attention to it. As with her previous companions, the boys could not help but tell of it.

And then again, a third time, when Lucia was with her cousin, João Marto, the mysterious form (unseen by João) presided over her prayer, a presence distant yet benign, solemn yet compelling, inexplicable yet accepted without question by the innocent shepherd girl.

Lucia, in her family the youngest of seven children and till this time always the darling, accustomed to the kisses and caresses of her sisters, was suddenly pained to find herself the butt of their jokes. “Are you seeing someone

wrapped in a sheet?” they would ask her as she prayed after her First, and subsequent, Communions. “Are these statues of snow skipping around behind your eyes?”

That rural community, Aljustrel in the parish of Fatima, could not possibly have known it, but heaven was schooling one of its children, Lucia dos Santos, preparing her for a role it had selected her to play in one of the most public manifestations of Divine Mercy in our world since Christ walked among us.

The unfolding of the wings

Some time later, in 1916, when Lucia’s favourite cousins, Francisco and Jacinta Marto, had permission to shepherd their family flocks, Lucia chose to graze her thirty sheep with theirs on land belonging to branches of their respective families.

One morning when the three children and their sheep were on the hill called Cabeço, a light rain caused them to seek shelter beneath some overhanging rocks. Even when the rain stopped they remained in the comfort of the rocky recess where they ate their lunch and began to say their Rosary. Lucia later recalled that they had got into the habit sometimes of saying only the words Hail Mary! or Our Father! on each bead, so anxious were they to get to the game they called “pebbles”. She wasn’t sure whether they employed this abbreviated form of the Rosary on this occasion, but soon they were at their game.

Then, without warning, a strong wind began to shake the trees. Since the light rain earlier the sun had been shining and there hadn't even been a breeze. Startled, they looked up and there, above the trees, just as Lucia had seen it before, was the effulgent figure like a statue made of snow.

Neither Francisco nor Jacinta had been with Lucia on the previous occasions when the strange shape had appeared, so they were dumbfounded. The three remained absorbed in this light above the tree tops and, instead of disappearing as it had done before, it began to approach them, floating down from among the branches. As it drew nearer it became clear that it was not a being wrapped in a sheet but a very beautiful youth, about 14 or 15 years old, immaculately white and as transparent as crystal when the sun shines through it.

When his feet touched the ground and he was standing among them he said, "Do not be afraid," just as angels had said to other shepherds near Bethlehem. "I am the Angel of Peace. Pray with me," whereupon he knelt down, bowed until his forehead touched the ground, and said, "My God, I believe, I adore, I hope and I love You! I ask pardon of You for those who do not believe, do not adore, do not hope, and do not love You." He taught the children to repeat the words three times. When he had risen from the ground, and before disappearing, he said to them, "Pray thus. The Hearts of Jesus and Mary are attentive to the voice of your supplication."

This prayer, and the admonition of the angel, penetrated to the very core of their beings so that, thereafter, they spent much of their time in the pasture lands with their sheep prostrate in adoration, repeating its salutation, homage and request over and over again.

Fortunately Lucia, having already suffered on account of the ready tongues of companions, strictly forbade her young cousins to speak to anyone of this encounter and they, despite their tender years, promised silence and maintained it.

It is right to admire their restraint, yet there might be a more subtle reason for their silence than fear of Lucia and that is that their experience, like their intense prayer, though real, was unreal in their daily world. It could have been that on the level of the familiar they were inclined to forget, or at least compartmentalise it. They might have imagined, without specifically thinking it, that conversing with angels was not uncommon, but as nobody spoke about it, neither would they.

Angel at prayer

At the bottom of the garden behind Lucia's home stood a well which the family called Arneiro, which means a dry, barren place. One day during the following summer as Lucia was playing there with Francisco and Jacinta they found, suddenly, that the angel was standing in the midst of them.

“What are you doing?” the angel demanded to know. “Pray, pray very much! The most holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary have designs of mercy on you. Offer prayers and sacrifices constantly to the Most High.”

Lucia was understandably puzzled. “How are we to make sacrifices?” she asked.

“Make of everything you can a sacrifice, and offer it to God as an act of reparation for the sins by which he is offended, and in supplication for the conversion of sinners. You will thus draw down peace upon your country. I am its Angel Guardian, the Angel of Portugal. Above all, accept and bear with submission the sufferings which Our Lord will send you.”

Whether the Angel of Portugal was the same angel who referred to himself as the Angel of Peace on Cabeço - Lucia thought it was, presumably because they looked the same - we don't know. Some maintain it could have been the Archangel Michael because that celestial figure had long been regarded as National protector by the Portuguese and, given what we know from biblical sources, could also well claim to be an Angel of Peace.¹

All the time the children kept these things to themselves. They were caught up in a beam of the Divine spotlight that neither they, nor others, not even intimate family, could be expected to appreciate. It is interesting to note that no one seemed to suspect anything out of the ordinary during these months either. Even though the

children might have been a little more serious at times, they were equally full of joy and mirth when the time was fitting, as is the way with souls attending to the voice of the Spirit.

So again there was a period of some weeks, perhaps even months, before the angel appeared among them again. This time they had just finished their lunch and had climbed up to their oratory under the overhanging rocks on Cabeço. As soon as they arrived they knelt with their foreheads to the ground, as the angel had shown them, and started praying the Believe, Adore, Hope and Love prayer.

All at once they realised that they were in the midst of a glorious, unearthly light. On raising their heads they saw the angel directly in front of them. In his left hand he held a chalice. Suspended above the chalice was a Sacred Host and from this suspended Host drops of Blood fell into the chalice.

The angel removed his hand from the chalice so that it, too, was suspended in the air and knelt down with them praying. "Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I adore You profoundly and offer You the most precious Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, present in all the tabernacles of the world, in reparation for the outrages, sacrileges and indifference with which He Himself is offended. And, through the infinite merits of His most Sacred Heart, and the

Immaculate Heart of Mary, I beg of You the conversion of poor sinners.”

Three times the children repeated this prayer at the direction of the angel after which the heavenly being rose, took the chalice, presumably in his left hand again, and the Sacred Host in his right. The Host he placed on Lucia's tongue and he shared the Blood from the chalice between Francisco and Jacinta.

As he administered the Sacred Species the angel said, “Eat and drink the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, horribly outraged by ungrateful men! Make reparation for their crimes and console your God.”

The children remained prostrate repeating the Most Holy Trinity prayer until darkness dispersed the light of day over Cabeço at which time they rose and rounded up their sheep to lead them home.

From lunch-time to nightfall! That must have been at least 4-5 hours. 4-5 hours spent in prayer with one's forehead to the ground would suggest a form of ecstasy in a spiritually mature person. In 7 to 10 year olds it couldn't be anything else.

The Lady

And so we come to the late spring, early summer of 1917. 13th May was the day appointed by Providence for the doors of heaven to be unlatched so that the Queen herself might visit earth.

The children took their flocks down the hillside to the north of Aljustrel and across moorland to an area belonging to Lucia's father called Cova da Iria - translated as *peaceful hollow*, or perhaps even as *valley of peace*.

What with the distance - it was a 2 kilometre journey from Aljustrel to Cova da Iria - and the fact that the sheep were grazing on the way, it was getting on for midday before the shepherd children and their flocks arrived at the Cova.

With the sheep settled, the children climbed the slope to the east - where the Basilica now stands - and played at a game of building miniature walls and houses, a pastime for which abundant materials were provided on that rocky terrain.

Suddenly a flash of light arrested them. Although the sky was blue and clear they thought, naturally enough, that it was lightning presaging a summer storm. Their concern was for the sheep and they quickly decided to get the flocks together and lead them home to pen.

Halfway down the slope there was another flash like lightning. A few steps further on and there before them, standing on top of the branches of a young holm-oak tree no more than a metre high, "was a lady all dressed in white. She was more brilliant than the sun and radiated a light clearer and more intense than a crystal glass filled with sparkling water, when the rays of the burning sun shine through it."

The children stopped, nonplussed. They were only a few feet from the lady and bathed in the light which radiated from her.

The lady said, "Do not be afraid, I will do you no harm."

The children did not know that the lady before them was the glorified Mother of Christ herself. They were probably too astounded at this sight which was beyond anything experience or imagination could have prepared them for to have any reaction except stark wonder. Lucia, with hindsight comparing the apparitions of the angel with the Apparitions of Our Lady, spoke of both as transmitting the same intimate joy and peace and happiness; but whereas the angelic presence called for physical prostration, annihilation in the Divine Presence and an awe that rendered her tongue-tied, the presence of Our Lady gave an expansive ease of movement, a joyful exaltation and a communicative enthusiasm.

Lucia said that they were not afraid of the lady but of the thunderstorm they thought was approaching. And yet the lady said, "Do not be afraid, I will do you no harm." There is a strong echo here of the words of the Angel Gabriel to Mary herself at the Incarnation. Now, however, it was her own maternal solicitude that was speaking.

Whatever the children's emotions were, Our Lady's words rallied them, for soon enough Lucia was asking, "Where are you from?" The blunt use of the word "you"

doesn't do justice to the Portuguese *vossemecê*, which is an expression of respect from a lower social order to a higher - your worship, your honour, your ladyship.²

Lucia's question is delightfully practical. A professional scriptwriter would almost certainly be asking the lady who she was, but for a peasant girl who has just used the word *vossemecê* such a question would be precocious, rude even. But the curiosity of childhood was aroused. Clearly the magnificent being didn't hail from that part of the Ribatejo or even in remote Fatima, or they would have heard of her before. Could there possibly be people as splendid as this in Lisbon, or in other countries?

"I am from heaven."

That must have seemed perfectly reasonable and satisfactory to Lucia. Given the circumstances she may even have suspected it without having had time to register the suspicion. It must also have been clear, too, that this wasn't a social visit. Beings didn't come from heaven to pass the time of day. The lady had something definite to say. And she had chosen to say it to Lucia and her companions. So Lucia asked:

"What do you want of me?" *Vossemecê* again.

"I have come to ask you to come here for six months in succession, on the 13th day, at this same hour. Later on I will tell you who I am and what I want. Afterwards I will return here yet a 7th time." This 7th time is thought to refer to an Apparition which Our Lady is said to have

made to Lucia on the eve of her departure for the convent school of Vilar de Porto, 16th June 1921. On that occasion Our Lady had a private message for Lucia.

Lucia, again the practical, enquiring child, asked “Shall I go to heaven too?”

“Yes, you will.”

“And Jacinta?”

“She will go also.”

“And Francisco?”

“He will go there too, but he must say many Rosaries.”

There has been much speculation as to what this means. Some commentators take it to imply that Francisco was a spiritual cut below the two girls and that as a consequence he would have to say half a dozen Rosaries for every one the girls said. But this makes the Rosary out to be a punishment, like lines after school, instead of the sweetest aria in the Marian hymnal. Furthermore, Our Lady’s statement that Francisco would have to say many Rosaries surely wasn’t tantamount to saying that the girls wouldn’t have to say as many as he.

It is important to realise that Francisco couldn’t hear what the lady was saying, just as he hadn’t been able to hear the angel who had prepared the children for her coming. We have no way of knowing the reason for this and it is fatuous to speculate, but perhaps this codicil of Our Lady’s about saying many Rosaries was a special

message for him, a message for the girls to pass on later, an earnest reassurance, so to speak, of his equal importance with the girls in the eyes of the Heavenly Visitor. Indeed, when the girls did tell him what Our Lady had said, he crossed his hands on his breast and said, “Oh, my dear Our Lady! I’ll say as many Rosaries as you want.” (Lucia related this many years later so the “Our Lady” was possibly in hindsight.) Another possibility is that this addition to Our Lady’s message for Francisco, far from being a qualification, might have been a diplomatic way of stopping Lucia, entranced like Peter at the Transfiguration, from asking if her mother, father, siblings, uncles, neighbours and Kaiser Wilhelm were going to heaven. As it was, her next question was on the same lines, though about a 16 year old who had died a short time before.

“Is Maria das Neves in heaven?”

“Yes, she is.”

“And Amélia?”

“She will be in purgatory until the end of the world.”

For most of us this is one of the most startling statements of the Apparitions. And it is all the more provoking because it is made without qualification. Amélia was a village girl, about 18 or 20. No one had any reason to doubt that she was any different from others of her age, class and culture. We can assume that she wasn’t heading a drug cartel or organising vice

rackets. So if an ordinary peasant girl in her late teens must undergo a purgation lasting till the end of the world, when will any of us get to heaven?

Some commentators tell us that “until the end of the world” might, like the biblical 40 days, mean ‘a long time.’ Others maintain that “till the end of the world” is conditional, that prayers and Masses and the intercession of the Church Militant would temper much of the purgation. This is more easily understood if purgatory is not seen so much as punishment for sin, as a necessary burning away of the foul accretions that sin visits on the soul, a purification of the soul before it can be admitted into the inner household of God. Sin has no substance, it can only be recognised by the pain it causes. We see that in this life and we will see it more clearly in purgatory. The remedy is love. We can only know that by Faith in this life; in purgatory we will understand it and although our love will be absolute according to our capacity, and confirmed, our love will not be able to purify our souls of the accretions because that would be loving ourselves. But the Church Militant, and the Church Triumphant will have powers of intercession here.

There is probably truth in both these explanations but we could do well also to remember that Our Lady is living in eternity and was speaking of something proper to eternity in terms of time. Neither the children nor you nor I could be expected to fully appreciate such measurements.

Our Lady had come to give us a message, and the import of that message is the avoidance of sin and, by implication, of the fires of purgatory, by conforming one's will here in time to the Will of God who dwells in the eternal Now.

One last consideration on this point: Our Lady's mention of purgatory is a stark rebuff to our world, many of whose religious leaders choose to teach that purgatory doesn't exist.

Next - and it could be considered as a comment on the fate of Amélia - Our Lady asked, "Are you willing to offer yourselves to God and bear all the sufferings He wills to send you, as an act of reparation for the sins by which he is offended, and of supplication for the conversion of sinners?"

Observe how Our Heavenly Mother doesn't demand, but asks, just as she was asked if she would bear the Messiah. The children could have refused; after all, she had already given her word that they were going to heaven.

"Yes, we are willing!" *Sim, queremos! Fiat!*

"Then you are going to have much to suffer but the grace of God will be your comfort."

At this point Lucia describes a gesture of the Blessed Virgin which was to be repeated at three of the subsequent Apparitions, the significance of which can only be understood in the classroom of prayer. Our Lady opened her hands and communicated a light from them. It

was in, and through, that light that the Mediatrix of graces communicated all that she wanted to tell the children. The human words were, in a manner of speaking, simply passing the time of day, a quote for the press. It is when we apply ourselves seriously to study what Lucia tells us about this light and how it affected her and her cousins that we begin to grasp the message of Fatima. It might also explain why Francisco wasn't perturbed about not hearing Our Lady's words - that is because he was fully included in the intense intimacy of these supernatural communications.

Let us listen carefully to what Lucia has to say on the first of these experiences: "As she pronounced these last words ... 'the Grace of God will be your comfort' ... Our Lady opened her hands for the first time, communicating to us a light so intense that, as it streamed from her hands, its rays penetrated our hearts and the innermost depths of our souls, making us see ourselves in God, Who was that light, more clearly than we see ourselves in the best of mirrors. Then, moved by an interior impulse that was also communicated to us, we fell on our knees, repeating in our hearts... 'O most Holy Trinity, I adore You! My God, my God, I love you in the most Blessed Sacrament!'"

Notice how the children repeated their prayers in their hearts - not in spoken words.

They had been lifted into a realm that few of us reach in this life, even after long years of faithful prayer; a

realm where love is the climate and beauty the landscape, a land where adoration is the currency, the food, the reason for living and the delight of that life. The light showed them God. It showed them themselves in God. The light was God.

There are paradoxes here to cherish and wonder at, concepts to baffle and intrigue which at the same time give vibrant meaning to such phrases as “finding oneself in God” and “a life hidden with Christ in God”. Here are images without image, formed of the pure crystal of the spirit, free from the manacle of human words.

Alas, even those caught up in the folds of the mantle of the Queen of Heaven herself must return to feel material soil beneath their feet and hear words spoken from throats.

On the occasion of this first Apparition it was Our Lady who gently released the children from the embrace of ecstasy. She said, “Pray the Rosary every day, in order to obtain peace for the world, and the end of the war.”

This is like saying, You have just experienced something of a state of perfection, a peephole into heaven. But you do not live on that plane. You live in a very perilous valley beset by strife and evils. But you can do something about those evils, and strive towards the heaven you have glimpsed, and I'll tell you what it is - “Pray the Rosary every day ...”

Then, says Lucia, she began to rise serenely, going up

towards the east, until she disappeared in the immensity of space. The light that surrounded her seemed to open up a path before her in the firmament.

From May to June

After the Lady had departed the children were still bathed in the ecstatic glow of heaven; at the same time they were excited and marvelling. Lucia says that while they were rapt in wonder Jacinta kept breaking into enthusiastic exclamations like:

“Oh what a beautiful Lady!”

Lucia said, “I can see what’s going to happen, you’ll end up saying that to somebody else.”

“No I won’t, don’t worry.”

But she was no sooner home than it all came spilling out to the family. It is easy enough to excuse Jacinta because, after all, she was only a little girl and, although she couldn’t have told you, she had just been exposed to one of the greatest phenomena of all time.

But it might be wiser to avoid such condescension. In harmony with the adage, ‘Man proposes, God disposes’, perhaps her telling of the heavenly encounter was the working of the Holy Spirit. Nothing in her subsequent short life suggests that she was in any way flighty. On the contrary, she seems to have been as obdurate for sanctity as a Thérèse or a Bernadette, enduring a slow martyrdom that would send a mature adult panicking for the

morphine bottle. She was also a pre-adolescent child. As Jacinta herself said when reproached by Lucia the next day, "There was something within me that wouldn't let me keep quiet." There is a good argument for that "something" being the Holy Spirit Himself.

Alone with their flocks the children prayed their Rosaries and thought up sacrifices to make in the spirit of the Lady's request - forgoing water during the heat of the day, giving their lunch to other children, and even to their sheep. But for Lucia the most poignant sacrifice came at home because her mother insisted that she was lying and tried to force her to recant. Although the Marto family was not as harsh with Francisco and Jacinta, it is nonetheless clear to us, looking back on the events as recorded by Lucia, that a way of life was retreating for ever, that the satisfactory, tried and familiar were giving way to the public and the frighteningly unknown. Much misunderstanding, mistrust and emotional upheaval was to be undergone in Aljustrel before the village could accept that three of its children had been chosen as the agents of heaven. And the bulk of this misunderstanding, mistrust and emotional upheaval was to be suffered by the children themselves.

Wednesday, 13th June 1917

The 13th of June is the feast of St Anthony, Portugal's favourite son, and its patron. It is a time of festivity all

over the land but if the adults of Aljustrel had thought the children would forget their claim to have promised to forego the celebrations on that date to return to the Cova da Iria, they were disappointed. The children evinced no interest in the activities associated with the saint. They grazed their sheep in the morning, penned them and then set out by different routes for the Cova. There they waited for their appointment beneath the shade of a great holm-oak (the one that is still standing in the present-day Sanctuary) and reciting the Rosary with the 50 or so people from thereabouts who had joined them.

Promptly at midday they saw the flashes of approaching light. Then there was the Lady standing on the oak sapling, just as she had been a month before.

Lucia was the first to speak. She asked the same question she had asked in May. "What do you want of me?" *Vossemecê* again.

"I wish you to come here on the 13th of next month, to pray the Rosary every day, and to learn to read. Later I will tell you what I want."

The first two of these injunctions had already been given in the first Apparition. To learn to read is a surprising but practical charge in as much as Lucia was to be Heaven's instrument to communicate the Fatima message to the world.

Lucia asked for the cure of a sick person.

"If he is converted he will be cured during the year."

Lucia's next question, intriguingly, reveals something of the state of the children's minds. The Lady had beguiled them; the God they saw themselves in when the rays from the Lady's hands penetrated their hearts had beguiled them; heaven itself had beguiled them. The supernatural had kidnapped their every thought and affection. They had been promised heaven, had even been given a glimpse of it and now all else was insipid. They were hungry and there was no point in lingering outside the dining room when the food was already on the table.

"I would like to ask you to take us to heaven."

This is not a spontaneous, "Please take us to heaven," or an "I ask you to take us to heaven". It is a planned question. The words have been carefully thought out, chosen, because everything depends on their reception. The children, one could almost wager, had spent a great deal of time since the last Apparition formulating these words. They had no way of knowing, of course, that in their simplicity they had devised what could arguably be the most perfect of petitionary prayers - "I would like to ask you to take us to heaven."

The Lady answered, "Yes. I will take Jacinta and Francisco soon. But you are to stay here some time longer. Jesus wishes to make use of you to make me known and loved. He wants to establish in the world devotion to my Immaculate Heart. I promise salvation to those who embrace it, and those souls will be loved by

God like flowers placed by me to adorn his throne.” The true beauty and magnificence of such a statement can only be apprehended here by deep meditation on the words, and only fully appreciated when the promise itself is realised in heaven.

“Am I to stay here alone?” Not only is Lucia deprived of an early entry into the place where her heart is, but she is to be separated from the two companions who have shared the divine experience. There could be no others, not if she searched every house in the world. In that sense she would be as alone as if she had been abandoned in a far galaxy. One is reminded of the trial of Joan of Arc when the belligerent Bishop Cauchon asked, “Did you see the Archangel and the attendant angels in the body, or in the spirit?” and Joan answered, “I saw them with the eyes of my body, just as I see you; and when they went away I cried because they did not take me with them.”

But the Lady answered, “No my daughter. Are you suffering a great deal? Don’t lose heart. I will never forsake you. My Immaculate Heart will be your refuge and the way that will lead you to God.”

Comfort indeed, and endorsed immediately because, as in May, the Lady - I think we can say Our Lady now - opened her hands and communicated to the children the rays of the same intense light. Again they saw themselves immersed in God. “Jacinta and Francisco,” Lucia says, “seemed to be in that part of the light which rose towards

heaven, and I in that which was poured out on the earth. In front of the palm of Our Lady's right hand was a Heart encircled by thorns which pierced it. We understood that this was the Immaculate Heart of Mary, outraged by the sins of humanity, and seeking reparation."

Because he couldn't hear Our Lady's words Francisco didn't understand the significance of the Heart. He asked later, "Why did Our Lady have a Heart in her hand, spreading out over the world that great light which is God? You were with Our Lady in the light which went down towards the earth, and Jacinta was with me in the light which rose towards heaven!"

"That is because you and Jacinta will soon go to heaven while I, with the Immaculate Heart of Mary, will remain for some time longer on earth." Note how there is no longer talk of Lucia being alone.

"How many years longer will you stay here?"

"I don't know. Quite a lot."

"Was it Our Lady who said so?"

"Yes, and I saw it in the light that she shone into our hearts."

And Jacinta endorsed Lucia, "It is just like that! That's exactly how I saw it too!"

Francisco said, "These people are so happy just because you told them that Our Lady wants the Rosary said, and that you are to learn to read! How would they feel if they only knew what she showed to us in God, in

her Immaculate Heart, in that great light! But this is a secret. It must not be spoken about. It is better that no one should know it.”

From 13th June to 13th July 1917

The period between the June and the July Apparitions was one of doubt and perplexity for the children - not doubt about the reality of their experiences but, for Lucia, doubt as to their source and, for her cousins, perplexity at the contrary attitude of adults.

Lucia also appears to have borne the brunt of the taunts of siblings and peers. It was perceived that she, the eldest of the three and a natural leader, was spinning a web of intrigue, manipulating Francisco and Jacinta into it as if into a secretive clique. Lucia's mother was particularly opposed to her daughter's claims. She was adamant that Lucia was lying. She scolded, threatened and, at times, gave Lucia the silent treatment which distressed the sensitive ten year old, used to nothing but displays of trust and affection.

Eventually Maria Rosa, Lucia's distracted mother, took her daughter - while her brother Ti Marto took his children Francisco and Jacinta - to be interviewed by the Parish Priest.

The outcome of that encounter was an agony for Lucia. Fr Ferreira reasoned that Our Lady would hardly come from heaven to tell people to say the Rosary every

day - a practice which was wide-spread in the area anyway - and furthermore that genuine communications from heavenly sources usually told visionaries to reveal every aspect of the encounter to a confessor as a guard against illusion. These children spoke of secrets and were far from willing to answer every question candidly. Their visions, he said, if indeed they were experiencing visions, may well be of satanic origin.

Lucia was devastated. Horrific doubts swamped her young mind. The suffering she had agreed to embrace had become a gargantuan reality. One paragraph in the memoirs brings this anguish into stark relief: "While in this state of mind, I had a dream which only increased the darkness of my spirit. I saw the devil laughing at having deceived me, as he tried to drag me down to hell. On finding myself in his clutches, I began to scream so loudly and call on Our Lady for help that I awakened my mother. She called out to me in alarm, and asked me what was the matter. I can't recall what I told her, but I do remember that I was so paralysed with fear that I couldn't sleep any more that night. This dream left my soul clouded over with real fear and anguish. My one relief was to go off by myself to some solitary place, there to weep to my heart's content. Even the company of my cousins began to seem burdensome, and for that reason, I began to hide from them as well. The poor children! At times they would search for me, calling out my name and

receiving no answer, but I was there all the while, hidden right close to them in some corner where they never thought of looking.”

She even considered agreeing with her mother and saying that the whole episode was a lie but Jacinta told her, “No, It’s not the devil! Not at all. They say that the devil is very ugly and that he’s down under the ground in hell. But that Lady is so beautiful, and we saw her go up to heaven!”

Lucia had decided not to go to the Cova on July 13th and she held to this decision right up to the moment when it was time for them to leave. “I suddenly felt,” she writes, “that I had to go, impelled by a strange force that I could hardly resist.”

Friday, 13th July 1917

Independent of the disbelief and hostility shown to the children, word of the alleged Apparitions had burst the bounds of the Fatima parish and some three or four thousand people had assembled in the Cova on the 13th of July. When the children arrived these pilgrims were saying the Rosary, many of them on their knees.

There was no waiting. As soon as they reached the sapling they saw light flashes signifying the approach of their heavenly visitor. A moment later and Our Lady was standing on the little tree.

Again Lucia asked, “What do you want of me?”

“I want you to come here on the 13th of next month, to continue to pray the Rosary every day, in honour of Our Lady of the Rosary, in order to obtain peace for the world and the end of the war, because only she can help you.”

The puzzling thing about this statement is the use of the third person. Our Lady is speaking and yet she refers to herself as if she was someone else. This may well be because she still hasn't told the shepherds who she is - though if Lucia's memory was accurate and not merely a slip of hindsight, they were already calling her Our Lady among themselves. Or, in a way that is difficult for us to understand, perhaps, in the hierarchy of heaven the various aspects of Mary are seen as individual as they are when we invoke them in the litanies. But if this is so we can be sure that they complement each other wholly. Or maybe the word “I” doesn't exist in heaven except in God's “I am who am” definition of Himself.

“I would like to ask you to tell us who you are, and to work a miracle so that everybody will believe that you are appearing to us.”

Here again the sentence sounds rehearsed. This “tell us who you are” could mean, “confirm that you are Our Lady” or “remove any doubts I have that you really are from heaven and not a diabolical illusion.”

The “work a miracle”, while rehearsed is, paradoxically, a spontaneous act of filial confidence glowing with the boldness of naivety. If you or I, or the

House of Representatives asked for a miracle, we shouldn't be surprised if the question was ignored and we were humiliated. With these children the answer is as candid as the question.

“Continue to come here every month. In October I will tell you who I am and what I want, and I will perform a miracle for all to see and believe.” True, Our Lady is using “I” here but she is, for the moment, on earth, speaking an earthly language to earthlings.

Many people had asked Lucia to ask Our Lady to cure their, or their families', ailments and she took this opportunity to petition the Apparition. Our Lady replied that these people must pray the Rosary in order to obtain these graces during the year. Then she added, though as a major part of the message rather than as a postscript: “Sacrifice yourself for sinners, and say many times, especially when you make some sacrifice: ‘O Jesus, it is for love of You, for the conversion of sinners, and in reparation for sins committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary.’”

It is not possible, except in the higher realms of infused prayer, to give God our full, moment by moment attention in this life, but we can give our full intention, and with this prayer Our Heavenly Mother seems to be implying this. Alas! the corollary is also true. It can be an intention to deprive God of His paternal rights over us - that is, to sin - and few things

could be more deeply hurtful to the heart of a mother than rebellion in the family.

Now, for the third time, Our Lady opened her hands to emit the light of God. This time the aspect of eternity the children were shown was not the rapturous sight of themselves plunged into the Will of God, but hell.

Lucia says, "The rays of light seemed to penetrate the earth, and we saw, as it were, a sea of fire. Plunged in this fire were demons and souls in human form, like transparent burning embers, all blackened or burnished bronze, floating about in the conflagration, now raised into the air by the flames that issued from within themselves together with great clouds of smoke, now falling back on every side like sparks in huge fires, without weight or equilibrium, amid shrieks and groans of pain and despair, which horrified us and made us tremble with fear. The demons could be distinguished by their terrifying and repellent likeness to frightful and unknown animals, black and transparent like burning coals. Terrified and as if to plead for succour, we looked up at Our Lady, who said to us, so kindly and so sadly:

'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. When you see a night illuminated by an unknown light, know that this is the great sign given you by God that he is about to punish the world for its crimes, by means of war, famine and persecutions of the Church and of the Holy Father.

‘To prevent this, 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. The good will be martyred, the Holy Father will have much to suffer, various nations will be annihilated. In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph. The Holy Father will consecrate Russia to me, and she will be converted, and a period of peace will be granted to the world. In Portugal, the dogma of the Faith will always be preserved...’

Then Our Lady showed the children a vision which was for long known as the third secret of Fatima. In the words of Cardinal Sodano: “It is a prophetic vision similar to those found in Sacred Scripture, which do not describe with photographic clarity the details of future events, but rather synthesise and condense against a unified background events spread out over time in a succession and duration which are not specified. The result must be interpreted in a symbolic key.”

Here is the official text of the letter written by Lucia on 3rd January 1944 referring to the third part of the “secret,” the prophetic vision revealed to the seers on 13th July 1917.

“I write in obedience to you, my God, who command me to do so through His Excellency the Bishop of Leiria and through your Most Holy Mother and Mine.

“After the two parts which I have already explained, at the left of Our Lady and a little above, we saw an angel with a flaming sword in his left hand; flashing, it gave out flames that looked as though they would set the world on fire; but they died out in contact with the splendour that Our Lady radiated towards him from her right hand: pointing to the earth with his right hand, the angel cried out in a loud voice: “Penance, Penance, Penance!” And we saw in an immense light that is God: ‘something similar to how people appear in a mirror when they pass in front of it’, and 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 of rough-hewn trunks as of a cork tree with the bark; 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. Beneath the two arms of the Cross there were two Angels each with a crystal aspersorium in his hand, in which they gathered up the blood of the Martyrs and with it sprinkled the souls that were making their way to God.

Cardinal Sodano said that the “Bishop clothed in white who falls to the ground, apparently dead under a burst of gunfire, is a prophesy of the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II in Rome on 13th May 1981.” The Pope himself has spoken of “a motherly hand which guided the bullet’s path enabling him to halt at the threshold of death.”

It is interesting to note that Karol Wojtyla, who was to become Pope John Paul II, was not born when the prophecy was made.

“Do not tell this to anybody. Francisco, yes, you may tell him.

“When you pray the Rosary, say, after each mystery: ‘O my Jesus, forgive us, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who are most in need.’”

After a silence Lucia asked, “Is there anything more that you want of me?”

“No, I do not want any more of you today.”

Again she rose towards the east and disappeared.



Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta in 1917. By kind permission of Dr Luciano Coelho Cristino, Fatima Sanctuary.

Although Our Lady has said that she will reveal who she is and what she wants in the October Apparition, she immediately speaks of her Immaculate Heart, which could hardly indicate any other woman, and gives some pretty blunt details of what she wants done. It is as if the matter is of such urgency, and her love so strong, that even the Queen of Heaven can't be constrained into keeping her own deadline.

The strongest impression made on Francisco in this Apparition was not so much the vision of Hell as the perception of God, the Most Holy Trinity, seen in that light from Our Lady's hands which penetrated their souls. Afterwards Lucia records him as saying, "We were on fire with that light which is God, and yet we were not burnt! What is God?... We could never put it into words. Yes, that is something indeed which we could never express! But what a pity it is that He is so sad! If only I could console Him!"

Monday, 13th August 1917

The children didn't see Our Lady on the 13th of that August because they were not at the Cova. It happened like this.

On the morning of the 13th August the Mayor of Ourem, the administrative centre of the area which included Fatima, sent a message to Lucia's house to say that he was waiting to interview her at the house of her

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