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Saint Josemaría and Our Lady of Fatima

Saint Josemaría is the first pilgrim to Fatima raised to the altars. The story of Fatima as it impacted his life, and also the life of Saint John Paul II.

12/05/2024

A bit of history

Lucia, the oldest of the Fatima seers, was only 10 years old when our Lady appeared to them for the first time, on May 13, 1917. Her cousins Jacinta and Francisco were seven and eight

years old respectively. That apparition had been preceded by an earlier one. An angel had appeared to them three times in 1916 in the place called Laca do Cabeco, giving his name first as the Angel of Peace and later as the Angel of Portugal.

The presence of the Angel left a deep impression on the children. The first time, the Angel knelt down and, bowing and touching his forehead to the ground, repeated three times: *My God, I believe, I adore, I hope and I love you! I ask pardon for those who do not believe, do not adore, do not hope and do not love you.*

Sister Lucia said that *no one thought of speaking about this apparition, nor reminding the others to keep it secret. Silence was imposed by itself. It was such an intimate grace that it was not easy to say even the slightest word about it.* From then on, whenever they could do so without being seen

by others, the children repeated the prayer just as they had seen the Angel do.

The year 1917 was a special year. Europe was at war. On Sunday May 13, in a hidden corner of the Serra do Aire in the center of Portugal, three children led out their flocks after having attended Holy Mass. They headed towards the fields of Cova de Iria, guiding the flock to the higher reaches of the property at the top of the hill. There, without losing sight of the sheep, they began to play one of their favorite games, pretending they were building something. This time they were going to build a small wall around a beautiful white heather bush that their parents could use to make brooms. It was midday. Suddenly they saw a beautiful woman, more resplendent than the sun, standing above the foliage of a small holmoak, enveloped in a bright halo of light..

“Lady, where are you from?”

I am from heaven.

And so began the first conversation between our Lady and Lucia.

Between May and October our Lady appeared six times. She asked them to pray the Rosary every day and to do penance. This last request impressed the children so much that they sought ways to do penance and took advantage of all the small sacrifices that came their way.

In the third apparition, on July 13, our Lady asked that Russia be consecrated to her Immaculate Heart (the children didn't understand the meaning of the word “Russia”) and for Communion of reparation on the first Saturdays. *If this is not done, Russia will continue to spread her errors throughout the whole world . . . various nations will be annihilated. Portugal will always*

preserve the faith. In the same apparition our Lady also told them: *When you pray the Rosary, say after each mystery: Oh, my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, and lead all souls to Heaven, especially those in most need of your Mercy.*

During the last apparition, on October 13, our Lady told them:

I am the Lady of the Rosary. I ask that a chapel be built here in my honor.

For the sixth time, she asked that they continue praying the Rosary every day.

The first chapel that was built was destroyed a short time later by anarchists, who also burned the tree our Lady had stood on. The present Capelinha with the statue of our Lady stands on the site where the tree had been found.

As Mary had foretold, the apparition on October 13 was accompanied by the “miracle of the sun,” witnessed by the 70,000 people who had gone to the Cova da Iria. The next day detailed accounts were published in the press.

The 13th was a day of torrential rains. *All of a sudden the rain stopped and the black clouds that had been present since the morning dissipated. The sun appeared in the zenith like a silver disk that blinded the eyes. Around the disk a brilliant crown was seen. All of a sudden the sun began to tremble and “dance” with sudden movements and finally to spin like a wheel of fire, casting out in all directions rays of light of constantly changing colors.*

That same month the Bolshevik revolution began in Russia.

A centuries-old devotion and a universal message

Devotion to our Lady has been a reality in Portugal for many centuries. Since the end of the 10th century the region between the Douro and Vouga Rivers was called the *Land of Holy Mary*, a name that was later given to all of Portugal. Since ancient times many titles have been applied to our Lady.

On August 13, 1385, the Constable Don Nuno Alvares Pereira (later Blessed Nuno of Santa Maria) solemnly invoked Mary's protection for the area around Fatima, and since then it has been under our Lady's special care. And since May 13, 1917, this spot has been indissolubly linked to Our Lady of the Rosary as a place of prayer and penance.

The message of Fatima contains a universal demand of our faith: the need to make reparation to our Lord for all the sins committed, to do

penance, to pray the Rosary, to spread devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and to pray a lot for the Pope. It also includes some special revelations from our Lady:

—The war will soon come to an end, but if people do not stop offending God, an even worse war will begin during the pontificate of Pius XI.

—I will come to ask for the consecration of Russia to my Immaculate Heart and for Communion of reparation on the First Saturdays.

—Good people will be martyred and the Holy Father will have much to suffer; several nations will be annihilated.

The three children also had a vision of hell: *Our Lady showed us a great sea of fire that seemed to be beneath the earth. 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.

Our Lady's apparitions led to an increase in popular devotion to Mary. Between the months of May and October, on the 12th and 13th large crowds flock to the Cova da Iria. The roads are filled with pilgrims not only from all over Portugal but from every corner of the world.

Jacinta and Francisco, as our Lady herself had foretold, went to heaven shortly after the apparitions. Lucia, following our Lady's explicit desire, learned to read and write, and in 1926 she entered the Institute of the Sisters of Saint Dorothy in Oporto. Later she would join the Carmelites in Coimbra.

As our Lady had predicted, the Second World War was even more violent than the First. Portugal, through Mary's favor, was not directly involved in the conflict. On October 31, 1942, Pope Pius XII consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Saint Josemaría in Fatima

In 1945, when the war came to an end, Saint Josemaría met Lucia for the first time, in Tuy.

Sister Lucia, he told her; *if you, who have received so many graces from*

God, and I, who have also received so many graces from God, are not faithful, what a disaster! We might not get to heaven!

I too have often thought about that, was the seer's humble reply.

In 1945 the Founder of Opus Dei returned twice to Portugal, in June and September. On February 5, 1946, exactly one year after his first visit, the first faithful of Opus Dei arrived in Coimbra, where they set up the first tabernacle of the Work in that country. Saint Josemaría returned to Portugal in October 1948. After spending a few days in Coimbra, on the 15th he went to Fatima to pray in the Capelinha. He returned again in March 1949.

In 1951, amid serious difficulties for the apostolic work of Opus Dei, Saint Josemaría traveled to several Marian shrines. In January he went to Fatima and returned there again in

October, after the first General Congress of the Work. In the Capelinha, on October 19, he renewed the consecration to the Most Sweet Heart of Mary that he had made in Loreto on August 15 that year. From there he sent a post card to his sons and daughters with the aspiration *Cor Mariae dulcissimum, iter para tutum!*, which he had been repeating for several months. As always when he went to Portugal, he visited Sister Lucia in the Carmel monastery in Coimbra.

On May 9, 1967, just before Pope Paul VI made his pilgrimage to the Fatima Shrine for the 50th anniversary of the apparitions, Saint Josemaría went to pray before our Lady. There he was moved to see the penitential acts of so many groups of people who were walking along the road in the rain on their way to Cova da Iria. When he returned, he remarked:

This country is being renewed by faith in Jesus and in his blessed Mother. I was deeply moved by those multitudes that I saw along the roads: men, women and children, going along the roads towards Fatima, doing penance. I raised my hand to bless them and said: may God bless you for the love you have for his Mother.[1]

In the fall of 1968 and in the spring of 1969, Saint Josemaría traveled to several Marian shrines in Italy, Spain, France and Switzerland. On April 14, 1970 he was once again in Fatima. Several years later, recalling that occasion, he said:

I often go to Fatima and to other Marian Shrines in Europe and America, because I experience the joy of loving Holy Mary and this land of Holy Mary that is Portugal. The best compliment I ever received was given me by one of my Portuguese sons who saw me praying the Rosary in Fatima.

He wrote to me saying: Father, it made me very happy to see you pray the Rosary because you kissed the medals just like the little old ladies do. You see? I was very happy because they told me I was like a little old lady, like one of those marvelous grandmothers, full of piety, of supernatural outlook, who know that this life isn't all that important, and who are waiting with love for the other life.[2]

In Portugal in November 1972, during his catechetical trip through the Iberian Peninsula, he was asked this question in one of the get-togethers:

“Father, can I ask you an impertinent question? What aspiration is the Father repeating now more frequently?”

The others will not find out because they are not so impertinent. Look, my daughter, many times each day I say

to our Lady, with different tones (at times asking for her help, at other times giving thanks, but always with Love): Mother, my Mother! I say that to Our Lady of Fatima.

On November 2, 1972, accompanied by hundreds of people who united themselves to his prayer, Saint Josemaría prayed the Rosary with deep piety in Fatima. It was the last time he was present at the site of the apparitions.

Blessed Alvaro and our Lady of Fatima

On May 13, 1979, in a get together in Rome, Blessed Alvaro remarked:

Our Founder passed through Portugal many times and he always made an effort to go to Fatima even if he had to go out of his way. When he was younger and frequently traveled by night (later he stopped doing this, and also forbade his children from doing

so in order to avoid accidents), we would sometimes arrive at Fatima around midnight. And there, close to the “Capelinha” we would kneel down and pray the Preces.[3]

And in 1985, when Don Alvaro was in Fatima, he said:

Fatima is a treasure for the entire Church. It is not luxurious, because everything has been done with great dignity and without ostentation. But it is a treasure. Here hearts and souls are made tender; here you can feel the Church’s presence, you can feel the presence of the Blessed Virgin. It’s something impossible to explain, but here you realize that our Lady’s intercession is very effective.[4]

The fall of the Berlin Wall

On May 13, 1981, Pope John Paul II suffered a grave attack in St. Peter’s

Square. On that same date a year later, the Holy Father went to Portugal to thank our Lady for her protection and to renew the consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

This world of people and nations I too have before my eyes today, as I renew the entrusting and consecration carried out by my Predecessor in the See of Peter: the world of the Second Millennium that is drawing to a close, the modern world, our world today!

[5]

On Sunday March 15, 1984, shortly before closing the Jubilee Year of the Redemption, John Paul II decided to renew again the consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

In addition to the consecration of the world to Mary, the Jubilee of Families was also being held in St. Peter's Square. The Pope celebrated the

Mass which was presided over by the image of Our Lady of Fatima to the left of the altar. The Holy Father gave the Shrine at Fatima the bullet that doctors had removed in the surgery after the attempt on his life. It was placed in the crown that our Lady wears on special days, among the pearls and other precious stones.

In October 1945, a few months after the Second World War ended, the pastor of a parish in Berlin arranged to have the pilgrim statue of Our Lady of Fatima visit certain capitals in Eastern Europe. The image began its journey on May 13, 1947, but it was forbidden entrance to the Communist zone and had to be brought back.

In 1978 this pilgrimage was again attempted. The image traveled through Hungary, passed over Czechoslovakia and entered Poland, stopping at the Shrine of Our Lady of

Czestochowa. On May 8th, eve of the 33rd anniversary of the pact that cut off the eastern part of Berlin, the image passed close to the Iron Curtain. That same year a Pope from Eastern Europe was called to the Chair of Peter in Rome.

Not many years later, on November 9, 1989, the Berlin wall was torn down, which since 1961 had caused so much death and desolation. In his January 1990 letter, Blessed Alvaro mentioned these happenings:

Everything has its time. You can already see what is happening in the countries of Eastern Europe. Regimes that had tried to close their iron gates to God, today seem to be opening up to freedom, and consequently to evangelizing action. These are events in which one can clearly perceive God's Providence and the maternal love of our Mother the Virgin Mary.[6]

Four years later, on June 13, 1994, during a meeting with the College of Cardinals in preparation for the great Jubilee of the year 2000, Saint John Paul II said: *I have personally come to understand in a special way the message of Our Lady of Fatima. The first time, on May 13, 1981, in the attempt on the life of the Pope. Later, at the end of the 80's, with the fall of Communism in the countries of the Soviet block. I think this should be clear to everyone. We trust that the Holy Virgin, who walks before the pilgrim People of God throughout history, will help us to overcome the difficulties that even after 1989 are still very present in the nations of Europe and on other continents.*[7]

On August 13th of that year a Monument to Peace, consisting of a piece of the Berlin Wall, was inaugurated before the Capelinha. Beforehand the Pope was given a rosary made of small pieces of

cement from the wall. The rosary was then left at the Shrine to commemorate those historic changes in Eastern Europe.

Later Fatima would again be the scene of important events. On May 13, 2000, John Paul II beatified Francisco and Jacinta there and renewed his gratitude to our Lady for her protection during his pontificate. At the end of that ceremony, the third secret revealed by our Lady to the shepherd children during the apparition on July 13, 1917 was made public. At the insistence of the bishop of Leiria, Sister Lucia had written it down in Tuy, on January 3, 1944:

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 splendor 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, a Bishop dressed in white. We had the impression that it was the Holy Father. Other bishops, priests, men and women religious were 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 container 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.[8]

In the theological commentary that was published with the text, Cardinal Ratzinger interpreted the figure of a Bishop dressed in white climbing up to the Cross as a symbolic representation of the Popes who guided the Church during the 20th century, a period of martyrs. And referring to John Paul II, he remarked: *When, after the attempted assassination on 13 May 1981, the Holy Father had the text of the third part of the “secret” brought to him, was it not inevitable that he should*

see in it his own fate? He had been very close to death, and he himself explained his survival in the following words: “it was a mother’s hand that guided the bullet’s path and in its throes the Pope halted at the threshold of death” (13 May 1994). That here “a mother’s hand” had deflected the fateful bullet only shows once more that there is no immutable destiny, that faith and prayer are forces which can influence history and that in the end prayer is more powerful than bullets and faith more powerful than armies.[9]

Sister Lucia died in the Coimbra Carmelite monastery on February 13, 2005, after a long life dedicated to spreading the message of Fatima. Now her mortal remains lie in the basilica of the Shrine next to those of Francisco and Jacinta. A few weeks later, on April 2, 2005, our Lord called John Paul II to himself.

Fatima, altar do mundo, is a common expression in Portugal. All the world's roads meet in Fatima. Like Saint Josemaría, the first pilgrim to that shrine raised to the altars, we too have gone there in our mind and heart to pray to our Lady. Bishop Javier Echevarría, during one of his stays in Fatima, urged us to place ourselves under the maternal protection of Mary Most Holy in all the circumstances of our life:

Mother, how good it is to be close to you! What serenity we feel in our soul when we realize that you know us, that you understand us, that you help us, and that you are going to present to God all our needs much better than each of us could do on our own! We have recourse to you who are Omnipotent Supplication.[10]

- [1] Saint Josemaría, Notes taken in a get-together, 10 May 1967.
- [2] Saint Josemaría, Notes taken in a get-together, 4 November 1972
- [3] Blessed Alvaro, Get-together with some faithful of Opus Dei, 13 May 1979.
- [4] Blessed Alvaro, Get-together with some faithful of Opus Dei, 15 November 1985.
- [5] John Paul II, Consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, 13 May 1982.
- [6] Blessed Alvaro, Pastoral letter, 1 February 1994.
- [7] John Paul II, Discourse to the Cardinals in the 5th extraordinary Consistory, 13 June 1994.
- [8] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *The Message of Fatima*, 26 June 2000.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Javier Echevarría, Homily, 31
May 1995.

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