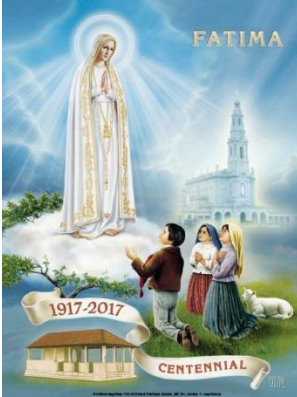


OBSERVANCE OF THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE APPARITIONS OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AT FATIMA, PORTUGAL



FATIMA. THE PLACE. THE MESSAGE.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of arguably the most consequential private revelations in the history of the Church. Our Lady appeared to three shepherd children in Fatima, Portugal, on six occasions, between May and October 1917, delivering a message that, to this day, converts hearts and casts shivers down the spine.

Dressed in white and “brighter than the sun,” Mary spoke to the children of the dire costs if the world continues to reject God. She foretold events that would soon come to pass. She showed them a vision of hell. She taught them that God has designs for each of us.

Six Popes have since proclaimed her specific and decisive call to conversion and repentance.

As his two predecessors did before him, Pope Francis, who had his papacy dedicated to Our Lady of Fatima upon his election in 2013 – and who subsequently consecrated the world to her – will underscore Fatima’s significance with a visit there in May to mark the centennial.

Fatima – 100 years ago a tiny hamlet, and now one of the most visited Christian pilgrimage locations in the world – is synonymous with the message Our Lady delivered there. At its core, the message is this: Without God, humanity walks in darkness, and we, individually, are called to be players in the salvation of the world.

‘Queen of Peace, pray for us.’ It was all as if Heaven had seen enough.

Our Lady put her foot down during the horrors of World War I, what Pope Benedict XV called the “suicide of Europe.” It was Pope Benedict, who on May 5, 1917, ordered that “Queen of Peace, pray for us” be added to the Litany of Loreto. On that day, he placed the peace of the world in Our Lady’s hands.

She responded eight days later.

At midday on May 13, in a field called Cova da Iria, in a rural backwater of Portugal, she appeared to three children pasturing their sheep and asked them to offer all their sufferings to the Lord for the sake of poor sinners. She told them they would have much to suffer. “Say the Rosary every day to bring peace to the world and an end to the war,” she told Lucia dos Santos, 10, and her cousins Francisco, 8, and Jacinta Marto, 7. Their young lives, which had centered on chores, play, and perfunctory prayer, would be radically reordered to the things of God. They were smitten with this lady encircled in light, this beautiful being who implored them, “Don’t be afraid of me.”

Our Lady instructed them to return to Cova on the 13th of the month for the following five months.

On June 13, she told the children to keep saying the Rosary daily. “And after each one of the mysteries, my children,” she said, “I want you to pray in this way: ‘O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fire of hell. Take all souls to Heaven, especially those who are in most need.’”

Our Lady told Lucia that Francisco and Jacinta would soon be taken to Heaven, but that Lucia would remain on earth to establish devotion to Mary’s Immaculate Heart. (Francisco and Jacinta died in 1919 and 1920 respectively. Lucia would live to the age of 97, dying in 2005).

In the third apparition, on July 13, Our Lady gave a secret in three parts that includes a vision of hell and prophesies that would eventually come to pass, such as a greater war to come if people did not cease offending God.

By August, news of the apparitions had spread to the outer precincts of Portugal and beyond. Christian faithful and curiosity seekers alike flocked to Fatima. Furious and distrustful of the children, the local mayor temporarily took the three children into custody, causing them to miss their rendezvous with Our Lady on Aug. 13. The children were released on the Solemnity of the Assumption, Aug. 15, and four days later Our Lady appeared to them on a hill a short distance from their homes. Among other things, Our Lady told them, “Pray, pray very much. Make sacrifices for sinners. Many souls go to hell, because no one is willing to help them with sacrifice.”

On Sept. 13, Our Lady repeated her instructions to pray the Rosary daily for peace.

Then, as Our Lady promised, the sixth and final apparition in Fatima on Oct. 13, proved startling. About 70,000 people gathered in the Cove da Iria where Our Lady proceeded to tell the children, "I am the Lady of the Rosary... People must amend their lives and ask pardon for their sins. They must not offend Our Lord anymore, for He is already too much offended." Many in the crowd and from miles around witnessed the so-called "miracle of the sun" – the sun spun, changed color, danced about, sank to the earth, and then returned to its place.

FATIMA TODAY

A tiny Chapel, the size of a potting shed, stands at the spot where Our Lady appeared in the Cova da Iria 100 years ago. Beside it is the thick-limbed evergreen oak under which the children would pray the Rosary and await Our Lady's coming.

Unlike the village nearby where the children lived, not much else in the Cova would be recognizable to the little shepherd children today. It's now all stone, statuary, and spires, stretching up toward the sky as if to meet Heaven half way.

The Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary was consecrated in 1953, 23 years after the Church declared "worthy of belief, the visions of the shepherd children." A second Basilica was dedicated in 2007, built to accommodate the millions of pilgrims who press upon Fatima each year to pray the Rosary, receive the Sacraments, and offer petitions to Our Lady.

About a mile away are the homes of the Fatima visionaries, in the tiny village of Aljustrel, where a fish truck announces its arrival each morning and the bells of the parish Church mark the hours.

At the edge of the village stands a hill of olive trees where Our Lady appeared when the children were unable to keep their Aug. 13 appointment in Cova da Iria. Only a few hundred yards from that point is a rock outcropping where an angel appeared to the children in 1916 to prepare them for Our Lady's visits. Just beyond that, an unmarked trail leads to a tiny cave where Francisco used to hide out.

The hill has a Stations of the Cross ending at a Chapel from which one can oversee all of Fatima, its Basilicas, its hotels, and the commotion of commerce.

Fatima the place and Fatima the message both welcome the stranger – all those confused and frightened by the events of the world and the events in their own lives, all those who seek to understand God and the implications of His existence.

As Pope Benedict XVI said, the crisis of the world into which Our Lady of Fatima appeared 100 years ago "has not been resolved. From a certain point of view, it is still as serious as it ever was, as it is primarily a crisis of Faith, hence a moral and social crisis."

Our Lady, ever attentive to history, has appeared to peasant children elsewhere since Fatima – Rwanda in the 1980's for instance, where, with deadly accuracy, she prophesied "rivers of blood" if people did not mend their ways. Rivers of blood – literally – would flow soon enough during the Rwandan genocide that left more than a million people slaughtered.

All the while, our Lord, through Our Lady, shows us the way out of this crisis: Pray, fast and do penance for the conversion of poor sinners and to make reparation for the sins of the world.

As late as 2005, Lucia, who had become a Carmelite nun, would express frustration that the *true* message of Fatima was being ignored – that people dwelled on Fatima's miracles and secrets. She said, "We are going to be judged on the 10 Commandments when we die. We must stop offending God. We must know God." She summed this up in what she called her 11th Commandment: Do whatever God tells you. That is what Our Lady wants."

Fatima today stands as a rebuke to a world that still conducts itself as if there is no eternity. It serves as a reminder that we are not powerless against advancing evil. It teaches that God the Father loves with the heart of a mother and that He *wants* this world to be saved.

From three shepherd children 100 years ago to 7 billion people today, Fatima is nothing less than an invitation to Heaven.