

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

WHY CHILDREN?



It's a fair question. Of all the people in the world to whom Our Lady could have appeared back in 1917, why choose three everyday shepherd children?

“We see throughout history God choosing the small and humble – the shepherds who travel to Bethlehem, King David, Mary herself, and many others,” says Sr. Marta Marques Mendes of the Fatima-based Alianca de Santa Maria, a congregation helping to spearhead the canonization cause of two of the Fatima visionaries. “In Fatima, that’s what happened. God chooses three humble children from a humble home exactly to emphasize that [this powerful message] doesn’t come from man, but from God.”

By all accounts, nothing was particularly remarkable about Lucia dos Santos and her cousins Francisco and Jacinta Marto before the heavens opened before their very eyes. They were good kids, playful. They would dutifully pray the Rosary. Sometimes they’d sneakily recite only the first lines of the Hail Mary and the Our Father to fast-track the whole affair. That way they’d have more time for play.

Jacinta, 7 years old at the time Mary first appeared, was known to be hardheaded, even a bit bratty. Francisco, 8, was kindhearted, a bit aloof. Lucia, 10, precocious and cheerful, liked to dance and to organize games.

The apparitions brought about a decisive change to their personalities.

In her first apparition, Our Lady asked the children, “Will you offer yourselves to God, and bear all the sufferings He sends you? In atonement for all the sins that offend Him? And for the conversion of sinners?”

“Oh, we will,” they responded, “we will!”

And they did.

“They suffered without complaining, because they wanted their suffering to be pure,” says Sr. Stella Guza of the Oblate Sisters of the Virgin Mary of Fatima, who helps educate pilgrims at Fatima.

No more cutting corners – all three would spend hours each day in prayer. Before the Blessed Sacrament, Francisco was driven to console Jesus because of the sins in the world committed against Him. Jacinta was so profoundly moved by the vision of hell during the July 13 apparition that no penance seemed too great. Lucia led her two cousins in devising penances – such as foregoing food and drink – to the point where Our Lady instructed them to go a little easier on themselves.

They hardly needed to devise sufferings.

Despite the children’s agreement to keep Our Lady’s first visit to them a secret, Jacinta spilled the beans. Many in their village of 25 families, including, for several months, Lucia’s own mother, were distrustful of their claims and especially didn’t take kindly to the overwhelming attention brought upon Fatima. The children were at one point kidnapped by the mayor who then harshly interrogated them and threatened to immerse them in boiling oil.

As Our Lady prophesies, Jacinta and Francisco would soon be taken by the Lord – both victims of the Spanish flu. Jacinta’s illness took a rather gruesome turn. Inflammation around her lungs prompted doctors to remove two of her ribs – without anesthesia. She died alone in a hospital bed, offering her pain for the conversion of sinners, for peace in the world, and for the Holy Father.

Francisco died at home.

“People would visit him, and they said it was like they were in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament,” says Sr. Stella.

Saint John Paul II beatified Jacinta and Francisco in 2000, on the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima. In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI authorized opening the cause for Sr. Lucia’s beatification, just three years after her death.

Jesus said, “Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (Mt 18:3).

One sure way to become like children? Like the Fatima visionaries, joyfully put away childish things and become apt pupils of Our Lady.