

ALLOCUTIO, LEGION OF MARY, MELBOURNE SENATUS, 7 MAY 2017

This Saturday, 13th May, is the centenary of Our Lady's first appearance at Fatima. Pope Francis will be in Fatima, where he'll canonise the visionaries Francisco and Jacinta Marto as saints of the Church. In the coming months I'll reflect on the six appearances of Mary in 1917 and the message she gave at each one. Once we've accepted the reality of Our Lady's appearances, as the Church encourages us, and as all the evidence strongly leads us, it only makes sense for us, especially as legionaries, to pay the fullest attention to Mary's words.

Sometimes there's the strange attitude that 'Yes, Mary appeared at Fatima, but it's only a private revelation, so we shouldn't take too much notice' – almost as though Our Lady was somehow out of line for appearing there and saying what she said. At the Summer School I spoke about the Church's teaching on the attitude we should have towards authenticated private revelations – that is, neither overvaluing them nor undervaluing them, and of course always keeping them, as God wants, in the context of Christ's definitive public revelation, that concluded with the death of the last Apostle.

So, at the first appearance at noon on 13th May 1917, the three children were alone tending their sheep, when they saw above a small oak tree, in Lucia's words, 'a lady, clothed in white, brighter than the sun, radiating a light more clear and intense than a crystal cup filled with sparkling water, lit by burning sunlight.'

And the Lady says to them, '**Do not be afraid. I will not harm you.**' An echo of the reassuring words of the angel Gabriel to Mary herself: 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.' (Lk 1:30)

Then Lucia asks her, 'Where do you come from?' – '**I come from heaven.**' – 'What do you want of me?' – '**I have come to ask you to come here for six months on the 13th day of the month, at this same hour. Later I shall say who I am and what I desire. And I shall return here yet a seventh time.**'

We know the appearances in the six months from May until October took place as promised. May, of course, is the special month of Mary, and October of the Rosary, so we can assume this was the symbolism that God intended by that timing. The seventh visit Mary promises might refer to an appearance she made in 1921 to Lucia, who was leaving Fatima for boarding school; or maybe, it's about an appearance that's still in the future even now.

Lucia then asks her: 'And shall I go to heaven?' '**Yes, you will.**' 'And Jacinta?' '**She will go too.**' 'And Francisco?' '**Francisco too, but he will have to say many Rosaries first.**'

Maybe we can't help smiling at that last statement, because we assume it's ridiculous to think Francisco could have been at any risk of missing out on heaven. And yet – we need to remember every person has free will, and people don't go to heaven just for having a vision of Our Lady.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n. 2744) quotes St Alphonsus: 'Those who pray are certainly saved; those who do not pray are certainly damned.' So Our Lady was actually giving the reassuring statement that Francisco *would* certainly reach heaven, precisely by freely choosing to use the normal and necessary means of prayer that all of us have to use.

Really, a joyful revelation for Francisco – yet a caution to the rest of us that salvation isn't automatic! We have free will, and God respects our freedom – even our freedom to reject him. I think when people have hang-ups about the doctrines on punishment after death, it's often because they don't take human freedom seriously.

Lucia next asks about two young women in the village who have recently died. Our Lady replies that one is in heaven, but that the other will be in purgatory until the end of the world. Again, a daunting statement, one we might feel is a bit extreme. But we don't know the secrets of souls, and we recall Our Lord's own words, 'Truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.' (Mt 5:26)

It does remind us of the evil of sin; the need for expiation in union with Christ; and the reality of divine justice, if we've refused to open ourselves to the mercy God is always offering. In Pope Francis' words, 'Everyone, sooner or later, will be subject to God's judgment, from which no one can escape.' (*Misericordiae Vultus* 19) So we always pray for those who have died. And of course, those in purgatory do in the end experience the fullness of God's mercy in heaven.

Next Our Lady asks the children, **'Will you offer yourselves to God, and bear all the sufferings which He sends you, in reparation for the sins which offend him, and in supplication for the conversion of sinners?'**

So, not just doing voluntary penances, but especially, accepting the sufferings God allows in our lives: those are the best penances, because we don't choose them ourselves. They come purely from the loving will of God, who knows what's best for us. And accepting those sufferings both makes reparation to God and intercedes for the conversion of sinners, the salvation of souls.

And Lucia responds to Mary's request, 'Yes, we will.' And Mary answers, **'Then you will have much to suffer, but the grace of God will be your strength.'**

Then, Lucia tells us, "As she pronounced these words, she opened her hands and bathed us in a very intense light, which was like a reflection coming from them, and which penetrated our hearts and our intimate souls so that we saw ourselves in God, Who was this light, more clearly than in a mirror. Then by an impulse which was also interiorly given, we fell on our knees and repeated inwardly: 'O Holy Trinity, I adore you. My God, My God, I love you in the Blessed Sacrament.'" (That Trinitarian and Eucharistic prayer that God inspired them to say also reflects the prayers taught to them by the Angel of Peace in 1916.)

Then finally, Mary tells them, **'Say the Rosary every day, to bring peace to the world and the end of the war.'** That instruction to say the Rosary daily is repeated in every single one of Mary's six appearances, so we can take it as the outstanding feature of the spiritual message of Fatima.

So: the daily Rosary, adoration, Eucharistic devotion, giving ourselves to God and offering up the sufferings he sends – already part of the Church's spiritual tradition and the teaching of popes and saints, now confirmed again by the Queen of Heaven herself.