

Sacrifice yourselves for sinners

We've been reflecting on the different appearances of Our Lady at Fatima, so today we look at the apparitions of August and September 1917. On 13th August, the children weren't present at the Cova da Iria for the vision, as they had been taken into custody by the anti-religious regional Administrator, and indeed put in prison for a short time. The Administrator in his interrogations even bluffed them with threats of boiling them in oil, which in their simplicity they believed – yet they didn't change their story or reveal the secrets to him. (He died in 1955, never denying Lucia's account of these events.)

Back in Fatima, the crowd of 18,000 witnessed unusual phenomena in the children's absence – in particular, a delicate white cloud that formed over the tree for ten minutes, then rose and disappeared. (On 13th September many in the crowd of 30,000 – maybe two-thirds – would also see extraordinary signs: a mysterious rain of 'flowers' that disappeared as they approached the earth, and especially, a luminous globe coming to the children before their vision and leaving them at the end. Such experiences are further evidence against the (already most implausible) hypothesis that the October miracle was merely some very rare natural phenomenon, that 'just happened' to occur at the right moment to fulfil the children's prediction: the improbability of that hypothesis is increased if we suppose that other rare natural events also randomly occurred at just the right moment in August and September.)

Following the missed apparition of 13th August, Our Lady made a special appearance to the children at nearby Valinhos on 19th August (Feast of St John Eudes, the great early proponent of devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary).

Mary's message on that day stands out for her urgent request: **'Pray, pray very much and make sacrifices for sinners; many souls go to hell because they have no one to pray and make sacrifices for them.'**

St John Paul II, in his homily for the beatification of Francisco and Jacinta, after quoting Our Lady's words about making sacrifices for sinners to save them from hell, spoke of how her request was carried out. 'Little Jacinta', the Pope said, 'felt and personally experienced Our Lady's anguish, offering herself heroically as a victim for sinners. One day, when she and Francisco had already contracted the illness that forced them to bed, the Virgin Mary came to visit them at home, as the little one recounts: "Our Lady came to see us and said that soon she would come and take Francisco to heaven. And she asked me if I still wanted to convert more sinners. I told her yes". And when the time came for Francisco to leave, the little girl tells him: "Give my greetings to Our Lord and to Our Lady and tell them that I am enduring everything they want for the conversion of sinners". Jacinta had been so deeply moved by the vision of hell during the apparition of 13 July that no mortification or penance seemed too great to save sinners.'

(*Homily*, 13 May 2000)

True, God's will isn't for us to go to extremes, and spiritual guides counsel a blend of generosity yet moderation in penances. So Our Lady told the children in September, concerning their practice of wearing a painful rope: **'God is pleased with your sacrifices. He does not want you to sleep with the rope on, but only to wear it during the daytime.'** And for ourselves, it's better to humbly persevere in a small but regular penance, than to choose something too hard that we quickly abandon.

This theme of penances to be offered to God for sinners was already present from May, and in July, Mary had told the children, **'Sacrifice yourselves for sinners, and say often to Jesus, especially each time you make a sacrifice: "O my Jesus, it is for love of you, in reparation for the offences committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and for the conversion of poor sinners".'** In the Third Secret, the Angel calls for penance from the whole world.

We may wonder that the salvation of others could possibly depend on our own prayers and sacrifices, but such is also the Church's teaching. Pope Pius XII wrote: 'This is a deep mystery, and an inexhaustible subject of meditation, that the salvation of many depends on the prayers and voluntary penances which the members of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ offer for this intention...' (Encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943) 44)

Naturally, if someone goes to hell it's for their own fault, not for our negligence. Yet our negligence might perhaps deprive them of a further undeserved opportunity of mercy they would otherwise have received. Our choice whether to allow ourselves to be God's instrument truly makes a difference to ourselves and to others: otherwise free will is meaningless.

'Many souls go to hell', Mary tells the children. Jesus seems to indicate the same. He tells us: 'Enter by the narrow gate; for the

gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.' (Mt 7:13-14) Some would assure us that very few go to hell, maybe even none – and so basically, we can relax. They do a great disservice. It's surely better to do all we can to help save souls, even if (let's suppose) we found in heaven our concern was exaggerated – rather than to be complacent, only to find at our judgement how many souls have been lost because of our negligence. And really, regardless of the unknowable proportions of the saved and the lost, even one soul in hell is one too many. No prayers or sacrifices are ever wasted, and if they save one soul, they will certainly have been well worth it.

It reminds us also that no suffering – physical, emotional or mental – need ever be wasted. What a privilege we are offered in every cross: to be able to offer it in union with Jesus and Mary as a means by which souls are brought to heaven.

Allocutio by Fr Justin Ford, Sēnatus Spiritual Dirētor, for 10th Sēptēmbēr, 2017 Sēnatus mēetīng