

The Great Miracle

Today we recall the climactic apparition at Fatima of 13th October 1917. At the start of the vision, Mary at last explicitly stated who she was: **“I want a chapel to be built here in my honour. I am the Lady of the Rosary. Continue to say the Rosary every day...People must amend their lives and ask pardon for their sins. They must not offend Our Lord any more for he is already too much offended.”**

The Rosary’s centrality shines forth, not just in this sixth request for its daily recital, but now in her statement of her very identity. To be ‘the Lady of the Rosary’ is to be the one acclaimed by each ‘Hail Mary’: full of grace, blessed among women, who leads us to Jesus, the blessed fruit of her womb, through contemplating the mysteries of his Incarnation, Death and Resurrection; she is Holy Mary, Mother of God, who prays for us sinners.



And we must ask pardon for our sins and amend our lives, not simply to avoid hell, as she had emphasised in July, but above all to stop offending Our Lord. The first is ‘imperfect contrition’ motivated by fear, but the second is ‘perfect contrition’ motivated by love. Even imperfect contrition is God’s gift (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 1453), but he leads us through the imperfect to the perfect.

As Our Lady rose into the sky, Lucia cried out, “Look at the sun!”, and the Miracle of the Sun began. Three months in advance, Mary had promised an (unspecified) miracle at this exact time and place, and now, her words were fulfilled. The crowd of some 70,000 was able, for about ten minutes, to look directly at the sun, as it spun violently in the sky, changing colours and casting these colours over the landscape; at the end, very many witnessed the sun seeming to plunge towards the earth. (Fairly obviously, the sun didn’t *truly* move around – the miracle consisted in God causing the local *appearance* of this.)

(An interesting coincidence is that by the sun, Fatima is 2 hours 55 minutes behind Jerusalem. The vision started about solar noon – not legal noon, which in Portugal was earlier – and if the miracle itself began some five minutes in, it would be three o’clock in Jerusalem: the Hour of Mercy.)

There were two brief interruptions in which the sun resumed normal brightness and could not be looked at – dividing the miracle into three parts. This may have corresponded to a triple vision in the sun seen by the visionaries, as the crowd watched the ‘dance of the sun’. This seems to represent the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries.

First, fulfilling Mary’s promise in August, the children saw St Joseph, Our Lady and the Child Jesus, with the Child and St Joseph blessing the world. Devotion to St Joseph is thus highlighted – yet another aspect of Fatima. Lucia alone then saw Our Lady of Sorrows with Our Lord, who again blessed the world. And lastly she saw Our Lady of Mt Carmel, holding the Scapular. That detail was surely not placed by God for no reason, so the practice is affirmed of wearing the Brown Scapular of Carmel (an expression of devotion to Mary). (According to a tradition which has much motivated the Scapular’s use, Mary promised St Simon Stock that those who die wearing the Scapular will not suffer the fires of hell; one must be enrolled in the Scapular, blessed by a priest.)

Mary said the miracle was “so that everyone can believe” (13 July), so God’s working the miracle amounted to endorsing the message as reported by the children. Indeed, miracles such as this can help lead people, not just to acceptance (as here) of Fatima’s specific message, but to Christian Faith more broadly. It’s useful for us as evangelisers to know how to present the evidence well to non-believers.

The *Catechism* recalls the relationship of faith to rational evidence, from miracles in particular: “What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason: we believe ‘because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived’. (Vatican I *Dei Filius* 3) So ‘that the submission of our faith might nevertheless be in accordance with reason, God willed that external proofs of his Revelation should be joined to the internal helps of the Holy Spirit.’ (*Dei Filius* 3) Thus the miracles of Christ and the saints, prophecies, the Church’s growth and holiness, and her fruitfulness and stability ‘are the most certain signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all’; they are “motives of credibility’, which show that the assent of faith is ‘by no means a blind impulse of the mind’. (*Dei Filius* 3; Cf. *Mk* 16:20; *Heb* 2:4)” (*Catechism* n. 156)

So faith is not *directly* motivated by ‘external proofs’ such as miracles, yet these are helps intended by God, which we should use appropriately. With the Miracle of the Sun, presenting detailed eyewitness accounts is helpful; it’s also good to be able to tie these together by ruling out alternative hypotheses:

1. This is not some vague legend – the event is documented in the Lisbon newspapers of the time as being experienced by the crowd, and we possess numerous eyewitness accounts, agreeing at least in substance.
2. Tens of thousands of people would not all lie, so they reported what they truly at least *thought* they saw.
3. Tens of thousands of people do not have simultaneous hallucinations, so this was not just in their minds but something objectively real. Further, (a) various eyewitnesses testify to not believing beforehand in the apparitions – taking precautions against being swept up in any illusion – being in a serene state of mind; (b) we have eyewitness accounts from observers several kilometres away, so it was not simply ‘mass hysteria’ at Fatima; (c) various accounts tell of the swift drying, during the miracle, of rain-drenched clothes and ground – confirming again this was something objective (not just an internal experience like a delusion or an optical illusion).
4. The solar phenomena are clearly contrary to natural scientific laws, so this is only possible by direct action of *supernatural* power. Specifically, supernatural *intelligence* must be involved to have communicated the prediction to the children in the first place. (Or, even if we supposed the event was just some natural phenomenon never heard of before, it is impossibly unlikely this would happen at just the right moment to fulfil the children’s prediction from three months earlier.)

True, proof of miracles may not immediately convince nonbelievers, taken in isolation from other factors – yet it is one precious help God provides, which we should not neglect, that may just plant the seed of doubt in the sceptic’s mind. And for ourselves, already blessed with Catholic Faith, the miracle can only remove all hesitation from our accepting the message of Fatima, and living it fully.