

Overview of the Apparitions of Fatima: the Revelation of Mary's Immaculate Heart

Most are familiar with the apparitions and the message of Fatima. Most, however, don't realize that it was at Fatima that Mary herself spoke of her Immaculate Heart. As you may know from having attended previous novena talks, the devotion to Mary's Immaculate Heart pre-dates the apparitions at Fatima. We see the beginnings of the devotion as we know it today as early as St. John Eudes in the 17th century, but in its seminal form even before that. The devotion to Mary's Immaculate Heart became more widespread and was very popular in the mid-19th century, when our religious institute was founded in Spain by Fr. Joaquin Masmitija and placed under her protection. In the early 20th century Mary came to Fatima with a very important message for the world – the Gospel message for today – and took that opportunity to encourage us to have recourse and devotion to her Immaculate Heart.

The essence of the devotion to the Immaculate Heart has not changed over the centuries. What St. John Eudes taught from the beginning, what was firmly implanted into the charism of our community, and what Mary encouraged at Fatima is all same. It is that message we hope to convey to you this year through our novena presentations, hopefully with some added insight and motivation to live this message even more deeply.

As an introduction to the talks my Sisters will be giving over the course of these nine days, I want to speak, briefly, of the overall message of Fatima and why it is relevant even today, almost 100 years after Mary's visits to Fatima and the three young shepherd children Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta.

In the summer of 1917 – which places us in the midst of World War I, the children were just old enough to begin sharing in the families' work having been entrusted with the care of their families' sheep. It was while they were out pasturing their sheep that the apparitions took place.

The chronicle of this account should, however, begin with the preceding year when the children saw an angel who told them he was the Angel of Peace and the Guardian Angel of Portugal. He exhorted the children to pray, and he taught them two prayers of Eucharistic adoration, modeling for them a position of prostrate adoration. He appeared again in the course of the year while the children were playing and watching the sheep; he again told the children that they needed to pray.

This time they truly heeded the message and prayed fervently and frequently. The third time the Angel of Peace came to them he found them praying. He prayed with them, and then gave them Holy Communion. This prepared them for the apparitions of Our Lady.

Our Lady first appeared on May 13, 1917. She asked the children to return to the same place on the 13th of every month for six months, and to pray the Rosary for the end of the war. She asked them if they were willing to offer themselves to Jesus. Lucia, speaking for all of them, said they were willing. Mary told them they would have much to suffer.

On June 13th, the children returned to the holm oak tree and prayed the Rosary. About 60 people followed and prayed with the children. Mary promised that Jacinta and Francisco would go to heaven soon while Lucia would stay on earth for quite some time to spread devotion to the Immaculate Heart.

In July, Our Lady showed the children hell and asked them to pray and offer sacrifices, particularly the sacrifices that naturally present themselves in every day life. This was when Our Lady taught the children the “O my Jesus” prayer and asked them to pray it at the end of each decade of the Rosary. The prayers and sacrifices of the people could prevent another even more terrible war. She promised to reveal her name in October, and perform a miracle to help people believe. She asked them to offer up their sacrifices for the conversion of Russia, for sinners, and for the Holy Father. It was in July that she spoke the most about her Immaculate Heart.

In August the children were kidnapped and held prisoner by the local authorities, so they were not present in the Cova on August 13th. The crowd that had gathered at the holm oak tree testified that, just as before, the sun dimmed and a little cloud appeared above the tree, and its branches bent slightly. After a few minutes, the cloud rose to the east and the sun returned to its midday brightness. On August 19th, while the children were shepherding the sheep, Our Lady surprised them with a visit.

In September she appeared again and repeated her plea for the Rosary, and asked for a Chapel to be built in Fatima, and for processions.

In October, more than 10,000 people crowded into the little pasture in the pouring rain, many of them traveling for days on foot to get there. They waited in the mud, praying the Rosary with the children. At the end of Our Lady's apparition that day, she revealed herself as Our Lady of the Rosary. Then the people experienced the miracle of the sun. It was seen more than three miles away. While the crowd saw the miracle of the dancing sun, the children were favored with various visions. They saw the Holy Family with Jesus and Joseph blessing the world, then Lucia saw Our Lady of Sorrows with Jesus, Who blessed the world, and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. At the end of the miracle the people and the muddy ground were perfectly dry.

Shortly after the apparitions, Francisco and Jacinta died; Francisco in 1919 and Jacinta in 1920. Lucia became a Carmelite nun. Mary continued to appear to her throughout her life in the Convent, further explaining the message of Fatima. One purpose of her visits was to direct Lucia in spreading devotion to the Immaculate Heart, which includes the daily rosary, devotion to the Eucharist, the First Saturday devotions, devotion to the brown scapular, and prayer and penance for the conversion of sinners and for the conversion of Russia.

So, why now, almost 100 years later, are we still talking about and studying the Fatima message? The Gospel message is never outdated; the message of Fatima is as relevant today as it was 93 years ago. Pope Benedict XVI's recent visit confirms this reality.

As he stated them, his reasons for visiting Fatima just last month center on the relevancy of the Fatima message. He said, among other things, that

- We can't just ask for forgiveness. We have to stop offending! Forgiveness does not replace justice. In a word, we need to relearn precisely the essentials which were reiterated by Our Lady 93 years ago in Fatima: conversion, prayer, penance and the theological virtues. (*Interview of Pope Benedict XVI with the Journalists during the flight to Portugal* Tuesday, 11 May 2010)
- Secondly, we are realists in expecting that evil will continue to attack, with attacks from within and without, yet the forces of good are also ever present and that, in the end, the Lord is more powerful than evil and Our Lady is for us the visible, motherly guarantee of God's goodness, which is always the last word in history. (*Interview of Pope Benedict XVI with the Journalists during the flight to Portugal* Tuesday, 11 May 2010)

- He had more to say in the year 2000 when he, at the direction of Pope John Paul II, revealed to the world the third secret and its meaning. At that time he emphasized
 - The exhortation to prayer as the path of “salvation for souls” and, likewise, the summons to penance and conversion. (Card. Ratzinger, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *The Message of Fatima*, May 13, 2000)
 - To reach this goal [the salvation of souls], the way indicated ... is devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. This means will be explained throughout the novena.

Common sense, informed with the light of faith, tells us that the message of Fatima is as necessary as ever. Just a few more examples.

- True, Russia has recently been released from the iron grip of Communism, but she has a long road ahead to undo the evil of over 70 years of Communist rule. Her errors did indeed spread to Western Europe, and Communism is still strong in certain Asian countries.
- We must admit that there is a real need to pray for the conversion of sinners. Today, many sinners won't pray for themselves, and many don't even recognize that their behavior is sinful. Hell is real and in the words of Our Lady, “It is where poor sinners go.” And again, “Many go to hell because there is no one to pray for them.”
- The intercessory power of the rosary has been forgotten by many.
- Our Lady asked the children to offer daily sacrifices, especially the sacrifices that naturally arise. The Gospel tells us that unless we do penance we will perish.
- In an age where authority tends to be either abused or scorned, the devotion to Our Holy Father taught by Our Lady to the children necessitates that we love, pray and sacrifice for our Holy Father
- And the last point I will mention tonight is the emphasis placed on Eucharistic devotion. From the beginning, that is, the apparitions of the Angel of Peace, the three shepherds were given the Eucharistic prayers; to the end, when in September, Mary asked for a Chapel and processions.

The message of Fatima is a promise from Our Loving Mother. She told us “My Immaculate Heart will be your refuge and the way that will lead you to God,” and “In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph.” Isn't that what we all want?