

Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary
As lived in the lives of the Fatima children

“I thank you, Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to little children” (Mt 11:25). This scripture verse was the focus of John Paul II’s homily at the Beatification Mass for Blesseds Jacinta and Francisco Marto, two of the children who saw Mary at Fatima. Indeed, it is amazing that such young children came to practice such heroic virtue and such great love of Our Lord and Our Lady. Not only that, but they did so with great joy and fervor. “They are not simply heralds of the Mother of God, they were also the first to live her message faithfully” (Silva). The way things have developed, it appears as if Our Lady has given us the children as guides. We would do well to become like them. What was the cause of such a life of sanctity? Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta lived normal lives before Our Lady appeared to them. Before going further, let’s clarify what “normal” was in Fatima, Portugal. The children were brought up to be very obedient, with a great love for the Church, Our Lady, the Eucharist, Prayer, the Rosary, and family. They, along with every member of their families, worked hard, enjoyed each other, played together, and shared what they had. Even before the apparitions, parish activities and religious devotions were the center of their lives. Lucia wrote about the nightly Rosary in her home, which included not only her family, but usually several neighbors. She also recounted how her family assumed the obligation to always help those less fortunate than themselves. They regularly set aside food from their stores so they would have a ready supply for anyone in need. The evening Angelus marked the time to stop work for the day. Any kind of sin or fault observed by their parents was quickly and strictly addressed, while at the same time, affection was abundant for each of these children. The children were told when they

took the sheep to pasture for the day that they were to pray the Rosary together every day after lunch. We can see, and Lucia attests to how a good Catholic family life lays the foundation for great sanctity. What would our country be like if these practices were “normal” for every family?

Besides their life of regular sanctity, the children received some extraordinary preparation for their visits with the Immaculate Heart of Mary. An Angel appeared to them, instructing the children to adore the Blessed Trinity, adore the Eucharist, to offer sacrifices to God, and to beg God for the conversion of sinners. At one visit, the Angel gave them Holy Communion. This was a very powerful experience for the children, and for the rest of their lives they pondered this wonderful experience of having God within them.

In the first apparition at Fatima, Mary asked the children to pray the Rosary and to offer sacrifices for the conversion of sinners. She promised to reveal more to them in the visits to follow. It was in the second apparition in June that Our Lady revealed her Immaculate Heart to the children. Lucia recounts that during this apparition the children were infused with a special knowledge and love for the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Lucia writes: “From that day onwards, our hearts were filled with a more ardent love for the Immaculate Heart of Mary.” It was after this apparition that Jacinta would at times exclaim, “The Lady said that her Immaculate Heart will be your refuge and the way that will lead you to God. Don’t you love that? Her Heart is so good! How I love it!”

In the July apparition, Our Lady said that God wished to establish in world devotion to her Immaculate Heart, that a future consecration of Russia to her Immaculate Heart could prevent a future war, and asked for the Communion of Reparation to the Immaculate Heart on the First Saturdays. All three children took these messages to heart, but Jacinta seemed to be the

most expressive of the three. She would often say, "I so love the Immaculate Heart of Mary! It is the heart of our dear Mother in Heaven! Don't you love saying many times over: 'Sweet Heart of Mary, Immaculate Heart of Mary?' I love it so much, so very much." She also had a little song she made up, which went, "Sweet Heart of Mary, be my salvation! Immaculate Heart of Mary, convert sinners, save souls from hell!" Jacinta said that it was a great suffering for her that she was too young to receive Communion so she couldn't offer the Communion of Reparation on First Saturdays.

From the first apparition on May 13th onward, the children always had Our Lady on their minds. They marveled at her beauty and they pondered her message. They sought to give more and more as Mary asked. They never asked what was sufficient; they only asked her to help them do more and do it more perfectly. In fact, Mary told them with a smile that they did not need to wear their penance ropes at night. The children didn't ask for this relief; Our Lady was aware of their generosity and sought to temper their efforts just a bit. It is good for us to keep in mind that Our Lady did not think the other sacrifices were too much for children of 7, 8, and 10 years old. What made the children so dedicated and generous with their prayer and sacrifices? It wasn't fearful obedience; it was love. They loved Our Lady so much and marveled at her beauty; nothing was too much to give her. To Our Lady's request that Francisco pray many Rosaries, Francisco replied, "O, my dear Our Lady, I will say as many Rosaries as you want!" He would oftentimes separate himself from the two girls as if going for a walk. When Lucia called to him, he would hold up his Rosary as a response. When Lucia offered to pray with him later if he would play with them now, he responded, "I will pray afterwards, too. Don't you remember that Our Lady said I had to pray many Rosaries?"

When the children were in jail and suffering great mental anguish, the three agreed to offer this suffering for the intentions Our Lady asked: one would offer everything for sinners, another for the holy Father, and the third for sins against the IHM. When Jacinta was asked which intention she chose, she replied, "I offer for all of them, because I love them all."

The children desired to conform their entire lives to that of the Immaculate Heart. When one finds a hero, someone they admire absolutely, it is natural to imitate that person, and that is what the children did. They strove to become like the Immaculate Heart. This is one reason Our Lord has given her to us, and this is the strongest sign of true devotion to Mary – to seek to be like her so as to become more pleasing to God.

Our Lady's Immaculate Heart is marked by any number of perfectly lived virtues. For tonight we will focus on some key virtues found in her heart: intense love for God (including the Eucharist) and others, which is represented by the flame; and the roses of: Purity and sinlessness; obedience; and humility.

Intense love for God and others For the one who loves God, and the one who is aware of God's infinite love for him or her, there arises in the heart an intense desire for Heaven, to be united with God for all eternity, to answer Love with love. Not only that, but the person also shares in God's desire that ALL might go to Heaven. Jacinta expressed this thought very well to Lucia, "It will not be long now before I go to Heaven. You will remain here to make known that God wishes to establish in the world devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. When you are to say this, don't go and hide. Tell everybody that God grants us graces through the Immaculate Heart of Mary; that people are to ask her for them; and that the Heart of Jesus want the Immaculate Heart of Mary to be venerated at His side. Tell them also to pray to the Immaculate Heart of Mary for peace since God has entrusted it to her. If I could only put into the hearts of

all, the fire that is burning within my own heart, and that makes me love the Hearts of Jesus and Mary so!” Yes, let’s ask Blessed Jacinta to intercede for us and kindle that love within our hearts. What could be better than a life consumed with love for the Immaculate Heart of Mary. This love would be the driving force behind all of our decisions, and we would live life with no regrets.

Jacinta further expressed her love for others. Lucia recounts how she found Jacinta one day with her head in her little hands and a troubled expression in her face. When asked, Jacinta said she was thinking about hell and all the poor souls who go there. Lucia tried to console her by reminding her that Mary had promised Jacinta she would go to Heaven. “I know, but I want everyone else to go there, too!”

Francisco also had an ardent desire to make the Immaculate Heart of Mary known and loved in the world. He said: “These people are happy just because you told them that Our Lady wants the Rosary said, and that you are to learn to read! How would they feel if they only knew what she showed to us in God, in her Immaculate Heart, in that great light!” This desire to glorify God and to help others to get to Heaven is a strong imitation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Purity / Sinlessness Francisco: I love God so much! But he is very sad because of so many sins! We must never sin again... Once he was separated from the girls for an entire morning, by himself on a high rock. He answered Lucia that "I am thinking of God who is so sad because of so many sins! If only I could make him happy!" The O my Jesus prayer is a prayer asking for the forgiveness of sins, and the children prayed it often. Jacinta would say “Poor sinners! We have to pray and make sacrifices for them.” The children sought not only to avoid sin, but to only please Our Lord and Our Lady in all things. One last note on purity:

Jacinta showed a special concern for sins of the flesh, and prayed in particular for the conversion of people who struggle with this type of sin.

Obedience Each apparition, Lucia began the dialogue with, “What do you want of me?” Francisco would express his obedient heart as such, “It won’t be long now before I go to Heaven. When I’m there, I’m going to console Our Lord and Our Lady very much. Jacinta is going to pray a lot for sinners, for the Holy Father and for you. You will stay here, because Our Lady wants it that way. Listen, you must do everything she tells you.” Lucia asked him once when he got to Heaven to beg Our Lady to take her there soon. His response: “That, I won’t ask! You know very well she doesn’t want you there yet.” These weren’t curt responses, but tender, heartfelt helps to each other.

Lucia’s work for the rest of her long years on earth was one of constant obedience, even though she suffered much. She desired to go to Heaven with her two cousins; their absence was a great trial of loneliness for her. One time someone mentioned that Lucia would have to spend a long time in Purgatory to pay the price for remaining silent about parts of the Fatima story. Her response: “As for Purgatory, I am not in the least afraid of it, from this point of view. I have always obeyed, and obedience deserves neither penalty nor punishment. Firstly, I obeyed the interior inspirations of the Holy Spirit, and secondly I obeyed the commands of those who spoke to me in His name.” Lucia properly understood that obedience is to be expected from any follower of Christ, and there’s nothing to fear when we’re obedient.

Humility - When Our Lady communicated God's light to the children in May, Lucia describes the experience as seeing themselves in God and growing in understanding of His infinite greatness. This taught them the fear of the Lord: His greatness and their littleness, which in turn inspired them with a profound humility leading them to adore the Most High (Silva, 75).

Lucia recounts that no one taught the children the following prayer, but it welled up from them interiorly: "O Most Holy Trinity, I adore you, my God, my God, I love you in the Most Blessed Sacrament." Humility enabled the children to obey wholeheartedly, not using their wills to compete with God's.

Devotion to the Eucharist After all the apparitions of Our Lady, how else did the children conform their lives to the wishes of the Immaculate Heart? Devotion to the Eucharist. All three children had an insatiable thirst for what they called "the Hidden Jesus". Francisco would spend hours in the Church, kneeling very close to the Tabernacle, spending time with Our Lord. Jacinta begged and begged to be allowed to receive Holy Communion, but was told she was too young. Still, she became as close to our Eucharistic Lord as possible, praying the prayers of adoration. On her way home from Mass, Lucia often came to visit Jacinta who was sick in bed. Jacinta would ask Lucia to sit very close to her so Jacinta could be close to the Hidden Jesus whom Lucia had just received. Jacinta would tell Lucia, "Tell Jesus I love Him a lot! Tell Jesus I miss Him a lot!"

When Francisco's illness was worsening, he was walking very slowly to the Church. Lucia asked him: "What's the matter? You seem unable to walk!" "I've such a bad headache, and I feel as though I'm going to fall." "Then don't come. Stay home." "I don't want to. I'd rather stay in the Church with the Hidden Jesus, while you are at school." When Francisco was dying and in great pain, he expressed heartfelt joy and contentment that he would receive Holy Communion before he died. This was his only dying wish, and he asked Lucia and Jacinta to pray that the priest would agree to bring Viaticum to him before he died. He did, and it brought tremendous consolation.

Conclusion: What result have the apparitions had on the people of Fatima? Every evening, hundreds of people gather to pray the Rosary together. Many nights, there are thousands of people. The Eucharist is adored in several locations at the Fatima shrine. Every Sunday and Solemnity, hundreds gather for a Eucharistic procession. Every day of the year, there are eight Masses, each well attended. In many places, silent adoration of the Blessed Sacrament cloaks the entire day. We do not have to worry about the empty accusations that Catholics spend too much time focusing on Mary. Those who are devoted to her Immaculate Heart find themselves ever more deeply in love with our Eucharistic Lord. That is the way it has always been with Our Lady, and the same is true today.

“The message of Fatima remains a call to each of us. Mary asks us to give God the first place in our lives. More than anyone, the little shepherds of Fatima took this message to heart and lived it out. In their simple lives, with the innocence of children, they prayed and did penance as the Lady asked” (Silva, 216). They conformed their lives more and more to hers so as to be pleasing to God and grow closer to Him. Can we strive for anything less?