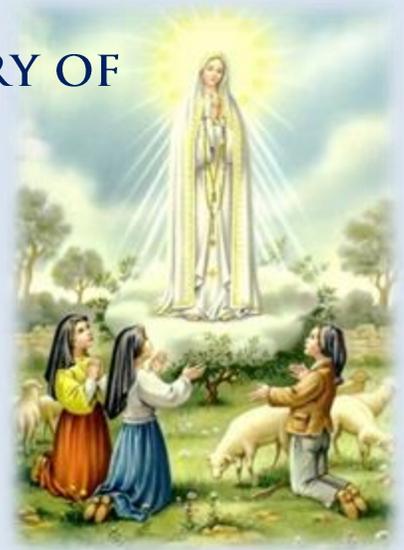


CELEBRATING THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF *Our Lady of Fatima*



June 20, 2017

The Third Secret and Divine Mercy

We all have things that connect us to our generation. For my parents' generation, one of their common experiences was the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. In meeting someone their age, they may ask the question: "where were you when JFK was shot?" Since it was such a powerful experience, they can easily recall the circumstances and location where they were when they heard the news of the assassination of the president. For my generation, those of us who grew up in the late seventies and early eighties, we were too young to know Kennedy but we lived during the time of the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II as well as the Challenger explosion. I remember talking to others who recall distinctly that fateful day when we heard the news of the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II on May 13, 1981. For me, I was a second grader at St. Margaret Mary grade school in Wichita; I don't remember what filled our day at that point in our instruction but I remember being told that the Pope had been shot and that we needed to go down to the church to pray for him. I later saw the video of the Pope-mobile going through St. Peter's square. I have a vivid image of the Holy Father handing a child back to her parents, shots ringing out, the Holy Father falling back, being assisted by his secretary Monsignor Dziwisz and people crying in St. Peter's square. All of this was a powerful memory for a young child. I was left with many questions. How could this happen to someone so good? Were

there really people out there who did not want the Pope to live? It was only later that the story made more sense to me.

So as I reflect more on the story, the apt question is not where were you when Pope John Paul II was shot but **where was our Lady**. So we will go to the person that has the best answer to this question; of course, that is the Pope himself. The date of May 13th was not lost on John Paul. After some reflection he stated, "One hand shot, and another guided the bullet" (Gaitley, 108). Or another way: "it was a mother's hand that guided the bullet's path and in his throes the Pope halted at the threshold of death" (Bertone, 48-49).

For the next several months and actually for the rest of his life, John Paul II suffered from the effects of this attempt on his life. After multiple surgeries and hospital stays, not being able to be as active as he once had been, he never blamed God for what happened to him; as a matter of fact, he viewed this event as another example of God's protection over him and our Lady's love and solicitude. But we do wonder how this could this happen to one who so loved our Lady? Wouldn't it have been better if he had never been shot in the first place? Other assassination plots had been uncovered beforehand but this one was allowed to go through to its end. Or did it go through to its end?

Mehmet Ali Agca was so certain of his ability that he had no doubt that he would be successful. He told the Holy Father who came to his prison cell two years later, "I know I was aiming right. I know that the bullet was a killer. So why aren't you dead" (Gaitley, 108)? It was at this point that the Pope told Ali Agca that it was Our Lady of Fatima who spared his life. This immediately put fear into the heart of the Pope's would-be assassin; he wondered if Mary would then target Ali Agca. The Holy Father assured him that she had already forgiven him.

So how did we get from May 13, 1917 to July 13, 1917 to May 13, 1981? Where does the third secret fit in? It is in this event that the third part of the secret of Fatima or better known as the “Third Secret” makes sense.

Mary revealed the secret in three parts on July 13, 1917; the children referred to it as a secret because they were not supposed to tell it to anyone, which made everyone want to know even more what it was. However, it was not until August 31, 1941, that Sister Lucia included in her third memoir the first two parts of the secret (World Apostolate of Fatima, 20). Then two years later, in September of 1943, the Bishop of Leiria ordered Sister Lucia to write down the third part of the secret as Sr. Lucia was very ill and needed surgery (World Apostolate of Fatima, 22). The Bishop feared that she would die before revealing the last secret of Fatima (if he only knew that she would be around for another sixty years he might have not panicked). On January 3, 1944, Mary appeared to Sr. Lucia and gave her permission to write the third part of the secret. Sister Lucia wrote it out and gave it to the Bishop for safekeeping. She had in mind that it would be better for the Bishop or the Patriarch of Lisbon to wait until after 1960 to read its contents; our Lady did not make this requirement but Sr. Lucia thought it would be better understood after that date (Bertone, 80).

Then on April 4, 1957, with Lucia’s knowledge, it was taken to Rome and put in the secret archives of the Holy Office. There is no thought that Pope Pius XII read it as he was close to death. So on August 17, 1959, the first Pope to read the contents of the envelope was Pope John XXIII. “‘After some hesitation’, His Holiness said: ‘We shall wait. I shall pray. I shall let you know what I decide’” (Sister Lucia, 200-201). The Pope then returned it to the Holy Office without publishing the secret. The next Pope to read the secret was Pope Paul VI on March 27, 1965, who also decided not to publish the contents of the envelope (Sister Lucia, 201).

Next we come to the events of May 13, 1981. It is interesting to note that Pope John Paul II was shot at the exact hour that our Lady appeared to the three children sixty-four years previously (Gaitley, 105). While recovering in the hospital, John Paul II requested the envelope with the secret and, on July 18, 1981, he read the third part of the secret of Fatima. Of course, Pope John Paul II did not reveal the contents of the envelope at this time but he did make plans to go to Fatima on the anniversary of the first apparition in order to thank our Lady for sparing his life; he even gave one of the bullets to be placed in a crown for the statue of Our Lady. The closest we have to learning about the secret at this point is on May 12, 1982, Sister Lucia wrote a letter to the Holy Father: "The third part of the secret refers to Our Lady's words: 'If not [Russia] will spread her errors throughout the world, causing wars and persecutions of the Church. The good will be martyred; the Holy Father will have much to suffer; various nations will be annihilated'" (Sister Lucia, 204).

While much speculation had been made about the third secret (as we will call it), the next step in the history involves a visit to Sr. Lucia by Cardinal Bertone, Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly known as the Holy Office), sent by Pope John Paul II on April 27, 2000. He gave her the envelope: "Immediately, touching it with her fingers, she said: 'This is my letter', and then while reading it: 'This is my writing'" (Sister Lucia, 217). The Bishop of Leiria-Fatima was present at this reading of the text and Sr. Lucia gave her thoughts on the secret. She saw this vision as prophetic and was certain that it pointed to the sufferings that the Church and the faithful would undergo as a result of atheistic Communism throughout the twentieth century. Also, Sr. Lucia verified at this meeting that the main character in the vision was the Pope; at the time, however, the children did not know which Pope. When one reads about the children after the apparitions, they always expressed a concern to pray for the Holy Father for they knew that he would have much to suffer. It was especially Jacinta

who took on this special intention; she said, “Poor Holy Father, I am very sad for sinners!” (Sister Lucia, 217). They suffered because they knew that the Pope was suffering.

The meeting between Sr. Lucia and Cardinal Bertone was critical because on May 13, 2000, the secret was read at the beatification ceremony of Jacinta and Francisco Marto; it was then published on June 26, 2000 with a theological commentary. Before the secret was made known, speculation was quite varied. One sensed that there could be many possibilities; all of these possibilities led people to contrive multiple conspiracy theories surrounding the third secret. When the secret was made known, some people persisted in alternate ideas. Since it was not anything spectacular but something straightforward, a point made by Cardinal Ratzinger, people thought that something was being withheld. Sr. Lucia did not agree that the Church was suppressing anything; from the time the secret and commentary was given, she supported the Church’s understanding of the secret. The secret actually is very important to understanding the twentieth century.

It has been seventeen years since the secret has been published; during this anniversary of Fatima, it is a good time to review this apparition and to understand the Church’s interpretation. While it may seem to be something of the past, it is important to keep before us the lessons that we learn from it.

As we read the secret we will be guided by the insight of Cardinal Ratzinger; he was given the task of writing the theological commentary, a role very well-suited to the one who would become the next Pope, a true teacher. From the beginning, he calms his readers in regard to the contents. He states,

[it] will probably prove disappointing or surprising after all the speculation it has stirred. No great mystery is revealed; nor is the future unveiled. We see the Church of the martyrs of the century which has just passed represented in a

scene described in a language which is symbolic and not easy to decipher (Sister Lucia, 221).

One may wonder why the commentary of the secret comes from Cardinal Ratzinger and not from Sr. Lucia. It is very interesting to note that while Lucia was one of the seers of Fatima, she did not see herself as the one to provide the interpretation of the vision; she left that up to the Church to decide.

As you listen to the text, you will see the suffering of the last century laid before our eyes.

The third part of the secret revealed at the Cova da Iria-Fatima, on 13 July 1917.

I write in obedience to you, my God, who commands me to do so through his Excellency the Bishop of Leiria and through your Most Holy Mother and mine.

After the two parts which I have already explained, at the left of Our Lady and a little above, we saw an Angel with a flaming sword in his left hand; flashing, it gave out flames that looked as though they would set the world on fire; but they died out in contact with the splendour that Our Lady radiated towards him from her right hand: pointing to the earth with his right hand, the Angel cried out in a loud voice: 'Penance, Penance, Penance!'. And we saw in an immense light that is God: 'something similar to how people appear in a mirror when they pass in front of it' a Bishop dressed in White 'we had the impression that it was the Holy Father'. Other Bishops, Priests, men and women Religious going up a steep mountain, at the top of which there was a big Cross of rough-hewn trunks as of a cork-tree with the bark; before reaching there the Holy Father passed through a big city half in ruins and half trembling with halting step, afflicted with pain and sorrow, he prayed for the souls of the corpses he met on his way; having reached the top of the mountain, on his knees at the foot of the big Cross he was killed by

a group of soldiers who fired bullets and arrows at him, and in the same way there died one after another the other Bishops, Priests, men and women Religious, and various lay people of different ranks and positions. Beneath the two arms of the Cross there were two Angels each with a crystal aspersorium in his hand, in which they gathered up the blood of the Martyrs and with it sprinkled the souls that were making their way to God. Tuy-3-1-1944 (Sister Lucia, 215).

In the context of the three secrets given to the children by Mary, the first two parts of the secret are focused on saving souls from perishing; the third part of the secret shows that penance will be the means by which souls can be saved. The only audible statement in the vision is from an angel who cries out, "Penance, Penance, Penance!" For Christians this is not any great revelation; from the beginning, Jesus spoke of the need of repentance in order to accept the Gospel. Jesus' precursor, St. John the Baptist, also told his hearers to repent in order to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. The Fatima message is just an echo of the Gospel; accepting our daily duty fulfills what Jesus has asked of us. If our life is focused on ourselves, on sin, we are not turned toward our Lord. This turning to Jesus is a turning to the light, away from darkness. Yet it requires penance; we have to die to our old life. Penance is not about suffering and pain but rather about opening ourselves more to the love of God. If we just view penance as something negative, our faith life will be so empty and lifeless, lacking in joy. This is so contrary to the Gospel; it is a message full of life and of hope. We are turning to a person, one who loves us immensely and wants what is for our good. From the introduction to Cardinal Bertone's book, The Last Secret of Fatima, we read, "Fatima reminds us that penance is not at all the trivial petty sideline to which it is too often reduced, and Fatima helps us to recover the forgotten meaning of penance as an act of conversion, as a return to the gushing springs of life" (Bertone, xvi).

Also in the vision is an angel with a flaming sword, an image also found in Sacred Scripture.

Cardinal Ratzinger writes, “This represents the threat of judgement which looms over the world” (Sister Lucia, 229). One without faith might look at this and say “I thought we were past the times of the Old Testament where God is wanting to wipe out his people.” And yet this is not the idea that is presented here or even in the Old Testament. Judgment comes when we separate ourselves from God by our own choices, when we say that we can do it on our own. Just like a child who wants to do it on his own, we soon realize the great mess we are in when we don’t trust in God’s plan for us.

Just opposite of the flaming sword is Mary; she stands in contrast to this image for she stands against the forces of destruction. Her splendor and the summons to penance will allay the threat of destruction. She is there with us but she calls us to cooperate in our future: accepting both voluntary and involuntary penances. This part reminds us that it is up to us and our human freedom. Cardinal Ratzinger comments,

The future is not in fact unchangeably set, and the image which the children saw is in no way a film preview of a future in which nothing can be changed. Indeed, the whole point of the vision is to bring freedom onto the scene and to steer freedom in a positive direction. The purpose of the vision is not to show a film of an irrevocably fixed future. Its meaning is exactly the opposite: it is meant to mobilize the forces of change in the right direction (Sister Lucia, 229).

This is to show that things can be changed; we have even experienced that with the “Bishop in white” not dying as the vision showed.

It is important to remember that the threat of destruction is not the result of God looking down on us, seeing what we are doing and wanting to punish us for enjoying life. Rather our actions lived

separate from God's plan bring this destruction. We cannot be truly happy when we live isolated from God; He gives us freedom but that is only a call to love.

It is interesting that human beings are represented as in a mirror and God is represented as an immense light. Since humanity does not appear as real figures but as a reflection, this shows that our destiny is not set; destruction does not have to be our fate, if we turn to God in repentance. We also see in this a contrast between ourselves and God; God is an immense light while we are in a sense shadows (Sister Lucia, 230).

There are three more images present in this vision: a mountain, a city in ruins and a large cross. The climb up the mountain represents our journey in this life and the city gives the stage on which the drama of human history is enacted. In our life we have the opportunity to flourish, to use the gifts God has given us and make this world a better place. Yet we know that not everyone has the same high ideals; many people use their gifts for destruction rather than growth. Cardinal Ratzinger states, "The city can be the place of communion and progress, but also of danger and the most extreme menace" (Sister Lucia, 230).

In the midst of our human activity, we cannot forget that the cross on the mountain is our focus; we look to the cross to guide us through our lives. In the face of the pain of this life, we have the cross as our reference point. Human destruction is not the last word; our Lord took upon our suffering on the cross and has transformed this pain into joy. We cannot forget this in the midst of the sufferings of life. The Cross of Jesus "stands as a sign of history's misery but also as a promise for history" (Sister Lucia, 230). In these three images we see where we have traveled in the last century; we have used our abilities for good things as well as for evil things. Looking back, we have the opportunity to renew, not to make the same mistakes of the past. If we keep our eyes focused on the cross, we will be able to transform our difficulties into something very beautiful.

The people in the apparition represent all the faithful in the Church being led by the Pope, “the Bishop dressed in white.” The Pope is noted to be trembling. This gives us two points for reflection: he sees all of the sufferings around him, all of the martyrs of the twentieth century, and it fills him with pain. He is not separated from the pain of his people but walks in the midst of it all (Sister Lucia, 230). Another interesting point is seeing in this the figure of Pope John Paul II as he approached the new millennium, suffering from Parkinson’s disease (Gaitley, 115). Yet it does not have to only represent Pope John Paul. If we look at this journey as a timeline, all of the Popes of the twentieth century traveled along the way of the cross. “Beginning from Pius X up to the present Pope, they all shared the sufferings of the century and strove to go forward through all the anguish along the path which leads to the Cross.” (Sister Lucia, 231).

Next we are faced with the fact that “the Bishop dressed in white” is killed. While everything else matches the history of the twentieth century, this piece is not fulfilled. What does this mean? Cardinal Ratzinger states: “That here ‘a mother's hand’ had deflected the fateful bullet only shows once more that there is no immutable destiny, that faith and prayer are forces which can influence history and that in the end prayer is more powerful than bullets and faith more powerful than armies” (Sister Lucia, 231). While this past century was horrendous and we deserved destruction as a result, many faithful people heeded the message of Fatima and began living a life of penance, living one’s daily duty. These practices did not go unnoticed but are a powerful testimony to what we can do to change our future.

There are more angels in the vision; these angels stand beneath the arms of the cross and are gathering up the blood of the martyrs. As they sprinkle this blood on the people, this shows that they are giving life to those who are trudging up the mountain to God. How closely connected the death of the martyrs is to the death of Jesus: “The martyrs die in communion with the Passion of Christ, and their

death becomes one with his” (Sister Lucia, 231). Their deaths are not in vain for they will yield great fruit. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity.” We might not be able to understand how their deaths could be hopeful. Cardinal Ratzinger states, “their suffering is the actualization of the suffering of Christ himself and a communication in the here and now of its saving effect” (Sister Lucia, 232). Our sufferings play an important role in the life of the Church. This is a message that we cannot forget as we reflect upon the third secret of Fatima.

So how does the third secret correlate with Divine Mercy? This is an interesting question. For so long, the public had waited for the third secret to be published only to find that it details the events of the last century, not something for the future. For us here and now, we can see some helpful lessons for us: evil does not have the last word and our lives can change history.

God is ultimately in charge; He does have the last word. While at times it might seem as if evil is winning, we should learn from the story of Fatima that God is in control and that He has given us a Mother who wishes for all her children to be in Heaven. In addition, we have a role to play. Let us go back to the story of Pope John Paul II. It seemed as if everything was over for him. While he was in the hospital after being shot, his secretary administered the last rites; they had even begun discussing the death certificate (Bertone, 51). To everyone’s amazement and delight, the Holy Father did not die. When it seems as if all is lost, we need to remember that there is a greater power at work, one that will not fail; it does not mean that we will never have to suffer but this suffering can be efficacious for ourselves, for our families and for the world. We can offer up our sufferings in union with Christ, living out our lives in a spirit of joy and love. The purpose of the Fatima apparition, all of the parts, “was to help people to grow more and more in faith, hope and love—everything else was intended to lead to this” (Sister Lucia, 229). Pope John Paul II worded it this way: “The insistent invitation of Mary Most

Holy to penance is nothing but the manifestation of her maternal concern for the fate of the human family, in need of conversion and forgiveness” (Sister Lucia, 220).

What else can we do? I think the words of Cardinal Ratzinger can help us. He calls us to turn to the heart of Mary; she can teach us how to respond to God.

The Heart open to God, purified by contemplation of God, is stronger than guns and weapons of every kind. The fiat of Mary, the word of her heart, has changed the history of the world, because it brought the Saviour into the world— because, thanks to her Yes, God could become man in our world and remains so for all time (Sister Lucia, 232).

Mary’s openness to God’s plan, her obedience, set into action what God initiated in the Garden of Eden so long ago. The devil thought he had been victorious, that he had triumphed over God. Yet God waited until the right time to ask a humble maiden to set forth His plan of love and mercy. Mary has not ceased helping her children draw close to the love of God. Even though evil may seem to be the stronger force, we know that it is not and cannot be the last word; God allows us to be purified through suffering.

Cardinal Ratzinger concludes his commentary,

The Evil One has power in this world, as we see and experience continually; he has power because our freedom continually lets itself be led away from God. But since God himself took a human heart and has thus steered human freedom towards what is good, the freedom to choose evil no longer has the last word. From that time forth, the word that prevails is this: “In the world you will have tribulation, but take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). The message of Fatima invites us to trust in this promise (Sister Lucia, 232-233).

May we turn to Our Lady in all of our needs and live out the Fatima message in our everyday lives.

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