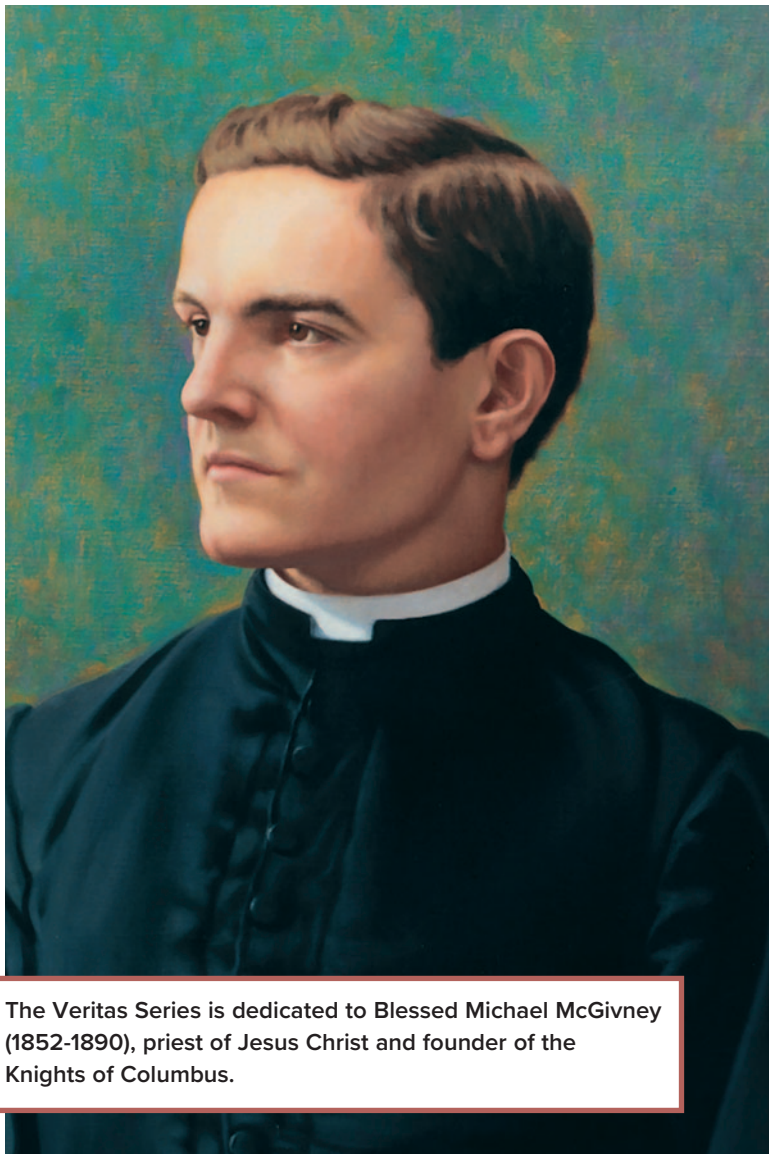




The Message of Our Lady of Fatima

Father Frederick L. Miller



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The Message of Our Lady of Fatima

by
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OUR LADY OF FATIMA

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the course of his pontificate, His Holiness Pope John Paul II frequently invited the members of the Church to contemplate the significance of Mary's apparitions at Fatima. John Paul first journeyed to Fatima, Portugal in May of 1982, to thank the Blessed Virgin for what he believes to be her direct intervention in the brutal attempt on his life that took place in Saint Peter's Square on May 13, 1981.

On the Solemnity of the Annunciation, 1984, Pope John Paul II, after having invited all the bishops of the world to join him in an act of entrusting the world to the Virgin of Fatima, renewed the consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary made previously by Pope Pius XII and Pope Paul VI. Five years later, on May 13, 1989, the Holy Father signed the decree declaring two of the seers of Fatima, Francisco and Jacinta Marto, "venerable."

Pope John Paul II returned to Fatima on May 13, 1991, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the attempted assassination. He came again to thank Our Lady of Fatima for her maternal mediation. Upon his return to Rome, the Pope said: "My pilgrimage to Fatima this year had a particular purpose: to give thanks for saving the Pope's life on May 13, 1981 – exactly ten years ago. I consider this entire decade to be a free gift, given to me in a special way by Divine Providence – a special responsibility was given to me that I might continue to serve the Church by exercising the ministry of Peter."

The Pope made that journey in 1991 also to thank God for the political events that had recently transpired in Russia and Eastern Europe. He noted that there appeared to be a providential opening for a “new evangelization” of those countries that had experienced many years of religious persecution. He attributed these changes to the intercession of Our Lady of Fatima and those who had heeded her plea for prayer and penance. At Fatima, the Holy Father entrusted the “new evangelization” to the care of the Blessed Virgin:

Mary’s message at Fatima can be synthesized in these clear, initial words of Christ: “The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mark 1:15). The events that have taken place on our European continent, particularly in central and Eastern Europe, give this gospel appeal a contemporary meaning on the threshold of the third millennium. These events compel us to think in a special way about Fatima. The heart of the Mother of God is the heart of a Mother who cares not only for individuals, but also for entire peoples and nations. This heart is totally dedicated to the saving mission of her Son: Christ, the redeemer of the world, the Redeemer of men and women.

The Pope returned again to Fatima on May 13, 2000. He came as a pilgrim to beatify Jacinta and Francisco. In the course of his visit, he announced that he would release the “third secret of Fatima.” On June 26, 2000, the Holy See revealed the long awaited “secret” to the world.

These facts alone, as well as the several profound addresses of the Holy Father on the spirituality of the Fatima message, are enough to draw the attention of the members of the Church to a new consideration of the apparition. Pope John Paul II’s homilies on the apparitions of Mary at Fatima point to a spiritual program for our times that unfolds in a systematic way from the actual content of the Fatima message.

In this reflection, I shall first provide a synopsis of the apparitions and the message of Our Lady of Fatima. I will then advance the spirituality and plan of pastoral action suggested by Pope John Paul II's analysis of the phenomenon of Fatima. Finally, I shall attempt to highlight the timeliness and significance of Fatima for the Church in North America at the beginning of the third millennium.

II. THE APPARITIONS AND THE MESSAGE OF OUR LADY OF FATIMA

Sister Lucia, the last living seer of Fatima who died in 2005, recorded in her memoirs several visions of angels prior to the appearances of the Blessed Virgin in 1917. On each of these occasions, an angel “appeared in the form of a young man, transparent and much brighter than crystal pierced by the rays of the sun.” During the first visitation, the angel told the children: “Fear not. I am the Angel of Peace. Pray with me.” Kneeling and then bowing his head to the ground, the angel taught the children a prayer: “My God, I believe, I adore, I trust and I love Thee. I ask pardon for those who do not believe, do not adore, do not trust and do not love Thee.”

During the second visit, the angel again directed the children to adore God and to love their neighbor: “Pray a great deal. The Hearts of Jesus and Mary have designs of mercy on you. Offer up prayers and sacrifices to the Most High.” Lucia asked: “How are we to make sacrifices?” The angel answered: “Make everything you do a sacrifice and offer it as an act of reparation for the sins by which God is offended, and in supplication for the conversion of sinners. Bring peace to your country in this way. Above all, accept and bear with submission the sufferings sent you by Our Lord.”

In the last apparition of the angel, some six months before the Blessed Virgin appeared to the children, the Angel of Peace taught the children to offer themselves with Jesus to the Father in the Holy Eucharist. He also taught them to adore Jesus’ Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament. The angel, bearing the Holy Eucharist, adored Christ with the children and gave them Holy Communion. The Angel taught them another prayer that they made their own:

Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I adore Thee profoundly. I offer Thee the most precious Body, Blood, Soul

and Divinity of Jesus Christ present in all the tabernacles of the world, in reparation for the outrages, sacrileges and indifference by which He is offended. And through the infinite merits of His most Sacred Heart, and of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I beg the conversion of poor sinners.

Then the angel gave the Host to Lucia, and the contents of the chalice to Jacinta and Francisco. For Jacinta and Francisco, seven and nine years old, this was their first Holy Communion. As he gave them the Eucharist, he said: "Take and drink the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, horribly outraged by ungrateful men. Repair their crimes and console your God."

Francisco was not aware that he had received Holy Communion from the hands of the angel. However, by the work of the Holy Spirit, he recognized and adored the Real Presence of Christ in his body and soul. A few days after the event he asked Lucia: "The angel gave you Holy Communion, but what was it he gave Jacinta and me?" She replied, "It was Holy Communion too. Didn't you see that it was the blood that fell from the Host?" Francisco answered: "I felt that God was within me, but I did not know how."

Lucia wrote of the impact the apparitions of the angel had had on her and her younger cousins: "The angel's words made a deep impression on our minds, like a light making us understand who God is, how He loves us and desires to be loved, as well as the value of sacrifice; how pleasing it is to Him and how, on account of it, He grants the grace of conversion to sinners."

On May 13, 1917, the children saw the Mother of God for the first time. Lucia's first impressions are noteworthy: "We beheld a lady all dressed in white. She was more brilliant than the sun, and radiated a light more clear and intense than a crystal glass filled with sparkling water when the rays of the burning sun shine through it."

The vision of the Blessed Mother was the first and, in a sense, the most important of Heaven's lessons to the young children who spoke frequently of Mary's beauty, her kindness, and especially of the wonderful light that shone all about her. They knew that she was from heaven. They perceived that the light she radiated was the effulgence of God Himself. They knew, without being able to articulate it, that Mary existed in a glorified body, sharing physically in her Son's triumph over sin and death. The children were not "annihilated" by her presence as they had been by the presence of the angel, but rather felt the joy and security of a mother's love. In her presence, they sensed the presence and love of God.

The first thing Mary did for the children was to steal their natural fear of death from them. They discovered that life exists beyond the confines of this world, beyond the barrier of the grave. Mary told them: "I am from heaven." Lucia, speaking for the three, said: "Will I go to heaven too? And Jacinta and Francisco?" Mary told them that they would. From that moment, the children no longer feared death and, in fact, began to long to be with God and Mary in heaven.

In the apparitions, the children experienced the presence of the Holy Trinity. Referring to the May apparition, Lucia said: "Our Lady opened her hands for the first time, communicating to us a light so intense that, as it streamed from her hands, its rays penetrated our hearts and the innermost depths of our souls, making us see ourselves in God, who is that light, more clearly than we see ourselves in the best of mirrors." Then, moved by an interior impulse that was also communicated to us, we fell to our knees repeating in our hearts: "O most Blessed Trinity, I adore you. My God, my God, I love you in the Most Blessed Sacrament."

The phenomenon of experiencing God in the presence of Mary was repeated more strongly in the June apparition. Lucia observed: "As Our Lady spoke the words, 'I will be your refuge and the way that will lead you to God,' she opened her hands and for the second time she communicated to us the rays of that same intense light.

We saw ourselves in this light, as it were, immersed in God. In the front of the palm of Our Lady's right hand was a heart encircled by thorns that pierced it. We understood that this was the Immaculate Heart of Mary, outraged by the sins of humanity, and seeking reparation."

Francisco recognized and sought to explain the phenomenon of God manifested through Mary's Heart: "These people are so happy just because you [Lucia] 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 us in God, in her Immaculate Heart, in that great light?" On another occasion, Francisco said to Lucia: "I loved seeing the angel, but I loved still more seeing Our Lady. What I loved most of all was to see Our Lord in that light from Our Lady which penetrated our hearts."

In permitting the children to experience the mysteries of Mary's Immaculate Conception, her Spiritual Motherhood, and her Assumption into Heaven, God gave them a deep and penetrating knowledge of themselves. They described the "light" as piercing their hearts, causing them to know themselves in God. From this knowledge, they acquired a great hatred for sin as well as a desire to live only for God. God also communicated to the children a deep knowledge of Himself and a yearning for eternal life. Mary led them not only to know about God but to know him truly in a deeply interior, personal way. This knowledge gave birth to a love that weaned them instantaneously from fear of suffering and death.

In the July apparition, the Blessed Mother presented the children with a momentary vision of hell. She then foretold the end of World War I and the beginning of a worse war during the Pontificate of Pope Pius XI. She revealed that a plot was being hatched in Russia to spread atheistic materialism throughout the world. She begged the children to pray and offer sacrifices for the conversion of Russia. In this same apparition, the Mother of God gave the children a "secret" for the Pope. Here we are at the heart of the Fatima message:

Our Lady showed us a great sea of fire that seemed to be under the earth. Plunged in this fire were demons and souls in human form, like transparent burning embers, all blackened or burnished bronze, floating about in the conflagration, now raised into the air by the flames that issued from within themselves together with great clouds of smoke, now falling back on every side like sparks in a huge fire, without weight or equilibrium, and amid shrieks and groans of pain and despair, which horrified us and made us tremble with fear. The demons could be distinguished by their terrifying and repulsive likeness to frightful and unknown animals, all black and transparent. This vision lasted but an instant. How can we ever be grateful enough to our kind heavenly Mother, who had already prepared us by promising, in the first apparition, to take us to heaven? Otherwise, I think we would have died of fear and terror.

We then looked up at Our Lady, who said to us so kindly and so sadly:

You have seen hell where the souls of poor sinners go. To save them, God wishes to establish in the world devotion to my Immaculate Heart. If what I say to you is done, many souls will be saved and there will be peace. The war is going to end: But if people do not cease offending God, a worse one will break out during the pontificate of Pope Pius XI. When you see a night illumined by an unknown light, know that this is the great sign given you by God that He is about to punish the world for its crimes, by means of war, famine, and persecutions of the Church and of the Holy Father. To prevent this, I shall come to ask for the consecration of Russia to my Immaculate Heart, and the communion of reparation on the first Saturdays. If my requests are heeded, Russia will be converted, and there will be peace; if not, she 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. In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph. The Holy Father will consecrate Russia to me, and she shall be converted, and a period of peace will be granted to the world. In Portugal the dogma of the faith will always be preserved.

It was during this apparition that the Blessed Virgin gave the children the so-called “third secret” of Fatima that was specifically for the Pope. We shall return to this topic later.

The Blessed Virgin promised that God would perform a miracle on October 13 to highlight the truth of her message. Over 50,000 people, young and old, believers and skeptics, sick and dying people, reporters from all the regions of Portugal, gathered to see if there would be a sign. The families of Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco were apprehensive. They feared what might happen if no sign occurred.

The Virgin appeared on October 13 as usual. After telling the children one last time to pray the Rosary each day for peace in the world and do penance for the conversion of sinners, the Mother of God raised her hands towards the sun. The children riveted their focus on Mary and what she revealed to them. Sister Lucia described the apparition in her *Memoirs*:

As Our Lady ascended, the reflection from her person was projected on the sun itself. When she disappeared in the immense distance of the firmament, beside the sun, we saw Saint Joseph with the child Jesus, and Our Lady robed in white with a blue mantle. Saint Joseph and the child Jesus seemed to bless the world, for they made the sign of the Cross with their hands.

The people present saw only what has come to be known as the “miracle of the sun.” The following is a description that appeared in a secular newspaper in Lisbon, *O Dia* on October 17, 1917:

At one o'clock in the afternoon, midday by the sun, the rain stopped. The sky, pearly gray in color, illuminated the vast arid landscape with a strange light. The sun had a transparent gauzy veil so that the eyes could easily be fixed upon it. They gray mother-of-pearl tone turned into a sheet of silver which broke up as the clouds were torn apart and the silver sun, enveloped in the same gauzy gray light, was seen to whirl and turn in the circle of broken clouds. A cry went up from every mouth and people fell on their knees on the muddy ground....

The light turned a beautiful blue as if it had come through the stained-glass windows of a cathedral and spread itself over the people who knelt with outstretched hands. The blue faded slowly and then the light seemed to pass through yellow glass. Yellow stains fell against white handkerchiefs, against the dark skirts of the women. They were repeated on the trees, on the stones and on the Serra. People wept and prayed with uncovered heads in the presence of a miracle they had awaited. The seconds seemed like hours, so vivid were they.

In that arid, desert-like landscape of Fatima, the Lord had spoken through His mother and authenticated the message by a solar miracle that was seen by scores of people – even at a great distance. Heaven had given the Church a great grace at Fatima: a tool to interpret the sad events that would follow right up to the present moment. The miracle of the sun sealed the entire phenomenon with the majesty of heaven, and with, perhaps, a glimpse of the apocalyptic events that will mark the end of the present world.

A wonder of Fatima that is sometimes overlooked is the extraordinary response of the three small children to the Blessed Mother's requests. In their personal appropriation of the message of Our Lady, Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco spent themselves in long hours of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, in penance and regular acts of voluntary mortification for the conversion of sinners, and, in particular, for the conversion of Russia. It is remarkable to recall

that Jacinta was nine years old when she died and Francisco, ten. By the time of their death, each of the children had attained a high degree of sanctity as a result of their grace-filled response to the message of the Virgin of Fatima.

Jacinta's main concern was to perform acts of love and voluntary penance to save sinners from the fires of hell. In the July apparition, the Blessed Virgin had told the children, "the Holy Father will have much to suffer." Jacinta developed a special love for the Pope and always included him in her prayers and sacrifices. When she was in the prison cell of Ourem with the other two seers, surrounded by hardened criminals and threatened with torture and death by Masonic state officials who opposed the explosion of devotion provoked by the apparitions, she prayed: "O my Jesus, this is for love of you, for the conversion of sinners, for the Holy Father and in reparation for the sins committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary."

Jacinta grew to love the Holy Father and to sense his spiritual identification with Christ in his headship over the Church. She intuited that the Pope shares uniquely in Jesus' agony over sin and, through that knowledge, gave herself to heroic acts of penance to save sinners from hell and thereby console both Jesus and the Holy Father. Love, loyalty, and dedication to the Pope are essential components of the Fatima message from the beginning. On June 26, 2000, when the Vatican released the third secret of Fatima, which deals with an attack on the life of the Holy Father, the relationship of Fatima and the Papacy became all the more apparent.

Francisco, like Jacinta, attained heroic charity by following the call of the Blessed Virgin. Contemplating the sorrow on the face of Mary during the July apparition, he came to understand that even the loss of one person in the fires of hell causes untold agony in the heart of Christ. This knowledge propelled him to console Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament.

Lucia wrote: “Francisco was a boy of few words. Whenever we prayed or offered sacrifices, he preferred to go apart and hide, even from Jacinta and me. If I asked him: ‘Francisco, which do you like better – to console Our Lord or to convert sinners – so that no more souls will go to hell?’ ‘I would rather console Our Lord,’ he said. ‘Didn’t you notice how sad Our Lady was that last month when she said that people must not offend Our Lord any more for He is already much offended? I would like to console Our Lord and after that, to convert sinners.’”

Francisco’s love for the Blessed Sacrament motivated him to spend long periods of each day in front of the tabernacle in his parish church. In her journal, Lucia observed: “Sometimes on our way to school, as soon as we reached Fatima, Francisco would say to me: ‘Listen. You go to school and I’ll stay here in the church close to the hidden Jesus. It’s not worth my while learning to read, as I’ll be going to heaven very soon. On your way home, come here and call me.’” Elsewhere, Lucia said: “Later when Francisco fell ill, he often told me, when I called in to see him on my way to school, ‘Look, go to the Church and give my love to the hidden Jesus. What hurts me most is that I cannot go there myself and stay awhile with the hidden Jesus.’”

The children’s response to Mary’s plea for prayer and sacrifice bears testimony to the work of the sanctifying Spirit of God in their young hearts. Our Lady, with all the gentle care of a mother, presented the rudimentary truths of the Faith to the children. As a master catechist, she appealed to their senses and deepest human emotions. In this way, the truth of the Gospel entered their minds and hearts, eliciting a response of charity.

From the day of the first apparition, the children experienced Mary’s tender love for them. They came, in a sense, to see and feel this love in their vision of her Immaculate Heart. The sadness the children witnessed on Mary’s face when she spoke about hell moved them to want to console the good God. It is striking that the

children were able to recognize in Mary's love the presence and love of God.

In the vision of hell, Mary again appealed to the children's senses and deepest sympathies. Besides engendering a horror for sin and a desire to preserve their baptismal innocence, the Virgin inspired the children to assist "poor sinners" by prayer and voluntary sacrifices. The children had no understanding whatsoever of Mary's words about communism. In fact, they believed that Mary was asking them to pray for an evil woman, named Russia. They did grasp, however, that people were consigning themselves to the fires of hell because of their willful revolt against God and His Commandments. They saw souls falling into hell and knew that this caused intense agony in the hearts of Jesus and Mary.

Their desire to spend their lives saving sinners had two related motives: They understood that Jesus had suffered on the cross for every human person. His "thirst" on the cross (John 19:29) was for our human love. His most awful suffering was caused by the thought of the loss of even one soul. After the apparitions, the only motive that directed the lives of the children was the desire to console Jesus who was so wounded by sin and human indifference. Directly related to their sensitivity to the pain in the Heart of Christ and flowing from it, was their simple longing to help people in danger of eternal damnation.

Mary affirmed Christ's commandment of love at Fatima, and the children learned the lesson well: "You must love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-38).

III. MARY'S CATECHESIS FOR THE MODERN WORLD

Father Rene Laurentin has observed that, although genuine private revelations do not transmit truths to the Church that are not already contained in the Deposit of Faith, they nonetheless highlight and accentuate certain truths of the Deposit that may be eclipsed or ignored at a particular moment of history, thereby causing harm to the spiritual life of the People of God. Consequently, it might be legitimately suggested that each authentic instance of private revelation contains a dogmatic truth or truths specifically needed at a particular moment in the life of the Church.

The following are several among the many catechetical truths, dogmatic, moral and spiritual, taught to the children by Our Lady of Fatima, truths that certainly need to be accentuated and taught at the popular level as the Church crosses the threshold of the Third Millennium:

1. Although many people in the modern world are indifferent and even antagonistic toward Christ and His teachings, and in spite of a worldwide movement bent on destroying the Church, God the Father continues to offer His merciful love to all in the person of His Son.
2. The mission of Christ is essentially redemptive. He came into the world to offer His life in sacrifice for the salvation of all people. In Christ, God suffers as a result of sin. In Him, the Almighty loves with a human heart the fallen race and yearns for human love in return.
3. In conversion from mortal sin, the human person begins to love the good God. This love continues and grows to perfection as each individual seeks to make reparation for sin through acts of charity. When Christians surrender unreservedly to Christ, they console the Lord and satiate His love-thirst for our love.

4. Through the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit working in the Church, the Christian through union with Christ becomes “perfectly willing to spend all and to be expended in the interest of souls” (2 Corinthians 12:15) and makes up in his or her “own body what has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of His body, the Church” (Colossians 1:24). In other words, every Christian is called to share without reservation in Christ’s redeeming work. This is accomplished by conversion from mortal sin, fidelity to daily duty, prayer, especially the Rosary, acts of charity, the acceptance of sufferings permitted by God, and voluntary acts of penance offered for others in charity.
5. The Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, following Mary as model and guide, unites her self-sacrifice to Christ’s and becomes His co-worker in the world. The collective suffering of the Church as a body, and of each individual Christian, joined as it is to the passion and death of Christ through the Sacraments, brings the saving grace of the Lord to others. The Church’s active role in the application of the grace of the redemption is perhaps the major stress of the Fatima message. The theme of the Church’s proactive role in the redemption of the world is often conspicuously absent in contemporary thinking about the Mystery of the Church. Many Catholics do not even realize that this teaching is an essential component of the Church’s teaching on the spiritual life. This tragic deficiency leads to either the denial or the devaluation of the Eucharist as the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. Hence, the call to make reparation for sins committed against the Holy Eucharist is central in the Fatima message.
6. Every dimension of the spiritual world was underscored by Mary at Fatima: the Holy Trinity, angels, demons, the

existence of the immortal soul, heaven, hell, purgatory, the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come in which the Blessed Virgin already participates.

7. Our Lady of Fatima unambiguously reaffirmed the doctrine of hellfire, i.e., the pain of the senses as well as the pain of the eternal loss of God. She also highlighted the real possibility of eternal damnation as a result of unrepented grave sin.
8. The Blessed Virgin led the children to understand that union with Christ in His suffering, death, and resurrection leads to true peace in this life, perfect union with Him in heaven, and physical resurrection on the last day.
9. Mary revealed that her spiritual motherhood is the way to fidelity to Christ. Through total consecration to her, the Christian accepts and benefits from this “motherhood in the Holy Spirit” and is drawn progressively deeper into the mystery of Christ.
10. The Mother of God taught the children the essential importance of the Vicar of Christ in the daily life of the Church, as well as the Holy Father’s mystical identification with Christ, the crucified Bridegroom of the Church.

These last two points are so important that they demand further commentary.

IV. CONSECRATION TO THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY: THE RESPONSE TO THE FATIMA CATECHESIS

It is not my intention to discuss the Consecration of Russia (and the whole world) that the Mother of God requested at Fatima. Pope John Paul II made this consecration in communion with all the bishops of the world on March 25, 1984 in Saint Peter's Square in Rome. Sister Lucia confirmed that this "solemn and universal act of consecration" corresponded to Our Lady of Fatima's request. Almost immediately after the Pope entrusted Russia and the World to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Soviet bloc and then the USSR crumbled. Communism as it has been known since 1917 no longer exists. It is obvious that any further questioning of the Pope or the validity of the 1984 consecration is not of God.

No, we need to speak about that personal consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary that is so essential a component of the Fatima Message. Pope John Paul II envisions Fatima as a startling manifestation of the Blessed Virgin's spiritual motherhood. He has observed that the Mother of God came visibly into our world in 1917 to draw all people away from sin to her Divine Son. On each of his papal visits to Fatima, Pope John Paul II has evoked the memory of Mary standing at the foot of the cross: Mary, the Mother of God's Son, and mother of all of His disciples (John 19:25-27).

He has pointed out that the purpose of the apparition is to draw the human race into the mystery of Christ's redemptive love. Within the context of his reflections on the consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Pope John Paul II has challenged the faithful to entrust themselves to Mary's "motherhood in the Holy Spirit," so as to be introduced more deeply into the mystery of Christ and His healing and transforming love. He has suggested that an intimate self-abandonment to Mary is the specific way to a saving relationship with Christ in our difficult times. For instance, during his first visit in 1982, Pope John Paul II stated:

Consecrating the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary means drawing near, through the mother's intercession, to the very fountain of life that sprang from Golgotha. This fountain pours forth unceasingly redemption and grace. In it, reparation is made continually for the sins of the world. It is a ceaseless source of new life and holiness.

Consecrating the world to the Immaculate Heart of the mother means returning beneath the cross of the Son. It means consecrating this world to the pierced Heart of the Savior, bringing it back to the very source of its redemption. Redemption is always greater than man's sin and the "sin of the world." The power of the redemption is infinitely superior to the whole range of evil in man and the world.

The heart of the mother is aware of this, more than any other heart in the whole universe, visible and invisible. Therefore, she calls us. She not only calls us to be converted: she calls us to accept her motherly help to return to the source of redemption.

During his second visit to Fatima, Pope John Paul II again invited the faithful to go with him to the foot of the cross of Jesus. He again solemnly entrusted all people to the Heart of Mary. He also entrusted the "new evangelization" to the maternal care of the Mother of God:

For the second time, I am before you in this shrine to kiss your hands because you stood so firmly near the cross of your Son which is the cross of the whole history of humankind, and also of our century.

Now, as ever, you rest your gaze on your sons and daughters who already belong to the third millennium. Always and now, you watch with the greatest motherly care, defending with your powerful intercession the dawn of Christ's light in the midst of peoples and nations.

Always and forever you remain, because the only Son of God, your Son, entrusted all humanity to you when, dying on the

cross, He brought us into the new beginning of everything which exists. Your universal motherhood, O virgin Mary, is the sure anchor of salvation for the whole of humankind.

Formed in the school of the spirituality of Saint Louis Marie de Montfort's *True Devotion to Mary* and well versed in Saint Maximilian Kolbe's theology of Marian consecration, Pope John Paul II understands entrustment to Mary as the "perfect renewal of the baptismal vows" through her hands. In the mind of the Pope, a Christian consciously entrusts himself or herself to Mary so as to enter fully into the consecration to Jesus Christ that was effected through baptism.

Giving all to Mary, body, soul, material possessions, and spiritual treasures, the believer places himself or herself in the hands of the Virgin. In so doing, he asks the Holy Spirit, living and acting in Mary to accomplish the healing and transformation that leads the Christian to be a true disciple and "co-worker" of Jesus Christ. In the context of the Fatima message, this total abandonment to Mary's spiritual motherhood opens the Christian to her evangelical and catechetical "ministry." Not only is the believer formed in the Christian life by the message of Fatima, but he or she is also formed to evangelize and catechize others in the Catholic Faith. Consecration to Mary is the mysterious milieu in which this maternal formation takes place.

The "charism" or grace of Fatima includes a personal spiritual dimension as well as a call to share in the apostolic work of the Church. Through the Fatima message, the Christian is challenged to turn more resolutely from sin and its allurements and to live by faith in the Son of God. The challenge leads the Christian to a sense of his or her own helplessness. It prompts the believer to seek the motherly help of Mary. It is in abandonment to Mary that one hears the deeper resonances of her call at Fatima to faith and conversion from sin. This challenge prepares the disciple of Christ for the work of the "new evangelization," that is, the task of calling the people of our time to faith and conversion and baptism.

V. THE THIRD SECRET OF FATIMA

A Word of Knowledge and Discernment for the Popes of Our Times

It is important to consider the “third secret of Fatima” that the Holy Father revealed to the Church on June 26, 2000. The secret is, in reality, the third part of the message that Our Lady gave to the children on July 13, 1917. The first part was the awful vision of hell. The second part was the prediction of the end of World War I and the coming of a worse World War and, most importantly, the revelation of a plot against the Church and God Himself that had been organized by Russian Communists. The third part was an apocalyptic vision of a fierce attack on the Church in the person of the Pope himself.

It might be said that whereas the Fatima message is a very important catechetical lesson for all Christians in the twentieth century (and beyond), the “third secret of Fatima” contains a “tool” of interpretation and a challenge for the Popes of the later decades of the twentieth century who have had the responsibility of dealing with the threat of Russian Communism and atheistic materialism in various configurations.

The text written by Sister Lucia in 1944 was sent to Rome in 1957 and first read by Blessed Pope John XXIII in 1960. It reads:

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 command 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 splendor 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 rank 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.

This "vision" of the Fatima children is, in a sense, an icon of all the Church has suffered in the twentieth century at the hands of atheistic materialism in all of its varied forms, but particularly at the hands of Russian Communists. The vision is also an emblem of the attack on the life of Pope John Paul II that took place in Saint Peter's Square in the Vatican on May 13, 1981. There are significant indications that the would-be murderer, Mehmet Ali Agca, was on an assignment sponsored by the Russian secret police, the KGB. Interestingly, the Pope read the "third secret" for the first time during his period of recuperation. It was only then that he fully recognized the central place of the Fatima apparition in the history of the twentieth century and his own pontificate.

Reflecting on the assassination attempt, the 1984 Consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and the subsequent demise of Russian Communism, Pope John Paul II said: “Perhaps this is why the Pope was called from ‘a faraway country’, perhaps this is why it was necessary for the assassination attempt to be made in Saint Peter’s Square precisely on May 13, 1981, the anniversary of the first apparition of Fatima – so that all could become more transparent and comprehensible, so that the voice of God which speaks in human history through the ‘signs of the times’ could be more easily heard and understood.”

The third part of the July 13, 1917 apparition, commonly known as the “third secret of Fatima,” was a message of consolation and warning for the Popes of the twentieth century. The message assured them that the manifold sufferings of the Church in the modern world and, in particular, the struggles with atheistic materialism are part of the drama of salvation, the unfolding of the one, perfect sacrifice of Christ. Each Pope, beginning with Blessed Pope John XXIII, was given a “tool” for the interpretation of modern history, and a challenge: The Church is the object of a fierce persecution. You must give leadership in a new age of martyrs and be ready yourself to suffer and die for the truth of Christ.

VI. FATIMA AND THE NEW MILLENNIUM

A Spirituality and Pastoral Program

The Blessed Virgin's message at Fatima was a call to faith in Jesus Christ and conversion from sin. She simply repeated the first words Christ spoke in His public ministry: "The time has come and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Good News" (Mark 1:14-15). During his first visit to Fatima, Pope John Paul II stated: "If the Church has accepted the message of Fatima, it is above all because that message contains a truth and a call whose basic content is the truth and the call of the Gospel itself. 'Repent and believe in the Gospel'; these are the first words that the Messiah addressed to humanity. The message of Fatima is, in its basic nucleus, a call to conversion and repentance, as is the Gospel."

As we have already indicated, the Mother of God taught the children of Fatima to believe in Christ and love Him above everything else. She helped them to perceive that His human agony was the result of sin and unrequited love. She makes them aware of their ability to console the Lord by working with Him for the salvation of others, especially those who are at odds with God and the Gospel.

The spirituality she proposed is deceptively simple. In presenting this "way" to young and illiterate children, the Blessed Mother revealed that any member of the Church who possesses the heart of a child will be able to join her in her work of cooperating in the restoration of supernatural life to souls. She asked that the faithful pray the Rosary every day and offer God all of the sacrifices involved in being faithful to daily duties. Soliciting acts of charity for the conversion of sinners, the Blessed Mother challenged all believers to work with her for the salvation of every human person.

The Rosary was the means proposed by Our Lady of Fatima for attaining deeper union with Christ. In each of the six apparitions, the Mother of God asked that all believers pray the Rosary each day.

In the meditation on the mysteries of the Rosary, Mary keeps her Son before the eyes of her children who renew and deepen their love for him. The Rosary is a tool that places the Christian in frequent, even daily, contact with the central teachings of the Catholic Church: the Incarnation of the Eternal Son of God and His atoning death and resurrection from the dead. Through this contact with Jesus Christ, the Christian experiences His love and grows in the desire to requite that love by avoiding sin and helping others to live the life of sanctifying grace.

The love of Christ in a sinful, self-centered heart propels the devotee to regular use of the Sacrament of Penance and also, in imitation of Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco, to voluntary acts of penance in reparation for sin. This spirituality, centered on the mysteries of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, leads to an affective relationship with Him in prayer, and especially in Eucharistic adoration. This personal relationship with Christ stimulates in each devotee an effective, apostolic love for those who are far from the Kingdom of God. It draws the Christian into the “new evangelization” as an active agent!

The Blessed Virgin did not ask the children specifically to consecrate themselves to her. They would not have immediately understood either the word or the concept. However, in asking them to offer themselves generously to Christ for the salvation of others, Mary was leading them on the path of total consecration to her Immaculate Heart. By asking the Holy Father to consecrate Russia to her, the Blessed Mother invited the Church in the twentieth century (and beyond) to follow the path of Marian entrustment. In his 1982 visit to Fatima, Pope John Paul II intimated that consecration to the Heart of the Mother of God is the special way to the Heart of her Son in our troubled times:

Mary not only calls us to be converted: she calls us to accept her motherly help to return to the source of redemption. Consecrating ourselves to Mary means accepting her help to offer ourselves and the whole of mankind to Him who is holy,

infinitely holy; it means accepting her help – by having recourse to her motherly heart, which beneath the cross was opened to love for every human being, for the whole world - in order to offer the world, the individual human being, mankind as a whole, and all the nations to Him who is infinitely holy.

Fatima does not present a unique “way” of Christian spirituality. What has been called the “charism” or grace of Fatima is, in fact, nothing beyond the charism of Mary’s spiritual motherhood that operates on behalf of all who believe in Christ. This real motherhood in the realm of sanctifying grace is consciously experienced through many different devotions. However, the simple presentation of the Fatima story, and the explanation of the message within the context of the Church’s teaching, is in itself evangelical in the sense that it puts Christians in contact with Mary as spiritual mother. Drawn by the Holy Spirit to the Immaculate Heart of Christ’s mother, the believer is attracted by Mary to seek union with her Son and participate in His saving work.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council amply described Mary’s spiritual motherhood in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #65. It is worthwhile to ponder this teaching in light of the Fatima apparition:

Devoutly meditating on Mary and contemplating her in the light of the Word made man, the Church reverently penetrates more deeply into the great mystery of the Incarnation and becomes more and more like her spouse. Having entered deeply into the history of salvation, Mary, in a way, unites in her person and re-echoes the most important doctrines of the faith; and when she is the subject of preaching and veneration, she prompts the faithful to come to her Son, to His sacrifice and the love of the Father.

One may speak of Fatima as a “charism,” a grace of God, for the Church at our particular period of history. It manifests

powerfully Mary's "motherhood in the Holy Spirit" which the Church has known from the beginning. Fatima however highlights the evangelical and catechetical dimensions of Mary's motherhood in the order of grace. In calling Christians to a greater knowledge and love of Christ, Mary at Fatima seems to point in the direction of the "new evangelization" that has been proclaimed so insistently by Pope John Paul II.

At the beginning of the new millennium, it is more evident than ever before that God willed the apparitions at Fatima to initiate a worldwide "plan" of evangelization. Through the seers of Fatima, Mary asked all the members of the Church to believe in her Son and love Him by praying the Rosary each day and generously offering sacrifices to God for the conversion of others. She promised that she would help the Church in her struggles with the forces of evil and guide her to ultimate victory: "In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph. The Holy Father will consecrate Russia to me and she will be converted and a period of peace will be given to the world."

As we enter the third millennium of Christianity, Pope John Paul II continues to challenge the Church to embark on a "new evangelization" of the world. In his encyclical letter, *Mission of the Redeemer*, he explains that there are many places in the world where the Gospel of Christ must still be proclaimed. He also points out that the faith has grown weak and become compromised in a number of the so-called Christian nations. These people, too, need to be led back to a living relationship with Christ and the Church. He states: "I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the Church's energies to a new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes*. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all people."

Those who receive the Fatima message with an open heart are themselves evangelized by the Mother of all Christians. Through the charism of Fatima, Mary draws the devotee to join her through prayer and penance in the work of leading all people to Christ and

His Church. For the true “practitioner” of the Fatima message, every situation and difficulty becomes an occasion of offering sacrifices for others. Likewise, all prayer, especially the daily Rosary, has the conversion of the world to Christ as its intention. Hence, the Fatima charism forms the believer to be a hidden source of fruitfulness for the new evangelization.

Might there not be a further consequence of living the Fatima message? Mary came not only to call the children and, through them, all believers to faith and conversion. She came also to teach the truths revealed by Christ for the salvation of the human race. A proper reading of the Fatima story reveals the Mother of God as a catechist who in the simplest way addressed issues of faith that have become increasingly problematic in the modern world.

Pope John Paul II has presented the Church with a new catechetical summary and explanation of all of the truths revealed by God in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In a time of doctrinal confusion and compromise, this *Catechism* is a tremendous resource for all Catholics and especially for those who are involved in apostolic work. It seems that the prayerful study of the *Catechism* is a natural development of the Fatima charism. It is the perfect way to know Jesus Christ and to deepen personal conversion to Him. It also prepares the Catholic to articulate, defend, and propagate the Faith in every form of evangelization and catechesis.

Following the clear vision of Pope John Paul II, evangelization and catechesis will characterize the life of the Church as she enters the new millennium. The Church of the twenty-first century will reveal to the world that she is indeed an immaculate virgin who adheres to Christ, her spouse, with an undivided heart. In spite of adversity and many internal storms, the Church has preserved the faith revealed by Christ in all of its integrity and power. She has maintained her ardent, single-hearted love for Him and is eager to draw all men and women into that love.

In her zeal for spreading the Gospel, the Church who cooperates with the Lord in His work of restoring supernatural life to souls, proves herself to be a loving “mother in the Holy Spirit” of the faithful and the entire human family. In her work of evangelization and catechetics, the Church opens her virginal and maternal heart to the world, beckoning all to salvation in Christ.

Might not the Virgin of Fatima, in her maternal role as evangelist and catechist, be the image and model of what the Church is always called to be – but in a singular way, the icon of the Church of the third millennium? Did she perhaps come to Fatima to remind each member of the Church of the urgent necessity of a new worldwide program of evangelization? Did the Lord send her visibly into our world to give emphasis to the contemporary need for a clear and unambiguous proclamation of the doctrine of Christ in a catechetical form? Did Our Lady of Fatima come simply to open the way for the “new evangelization,” to announce a new springtime for the Church of Jesus Christ?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Father Frederick L. Miller, S.T.D. was ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of Newark in 1972. After having served in various parishes and apostolates (Legion of Mary, Natural Family Planning, and Dominican Laity) in the Archdiocese, Father Miller was assigned as Executive National Director of the World Apostolate of Fatima, and Rector of the Shrine of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Washington, New Jersey, from 1986 to 1992.

Father Miller taught Dogmatic Theology and Spirituality at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary, Overbrook, Pennsylvania, from 1992 to 2002. He was also Academic Dean of the Religious Studies Division of Saint Charles Seminary. Father Miller has taught at Saint Joseph Seminary, Dunwoodie, New York, the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome, the Notre Dame Institute in Arlington, Virginia and the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio. He served as spiritual director of the Pontifical North American College in Rome from 2002 to 2005. A widely-known retreat master and author, Father Miller is presently Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Mount Saint Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

“Faith is a gift of God which enables us to know and love Him. Faith is a way of knowing, just as reason is. But living in faith is not possible unless there is action on our part. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to make a decision to respond to divine Revelation, and to follow through in living out our response.”

– United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, 38.

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Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 34
Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission
of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World

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