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The centenary of Fatima

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On May 13, 1917, a remarkable series of events began to unfold. Three little shepherd children, Lucia dos Santos, Francisco Martos, and Jacinta Martos, witnessed the first of several apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Fatima, Portugal. These apparitions continued once a month until Oct. 13, 1917, and later were declared worthy of belief by the Catholic Church. Since that time, millions of people have made pilgrimages to the site of the apparitions in Fatima, and millions more have adopted the spirituality of Fatima into their own personal spiritual lives.

In her appearances to the children of Fatima, Mary made several important exhortations and promises. She repeatedly urged all believers to pray the rosary every day for peace. She exhorted them to do penance and to make reparation for sinners by their own sacrifices. She revealed to them the terrible reality of sin and hell, but she also assured them of the power of prayer for the conversion of sinners. And, she promised that, in the end, her Immaculate Heart would triumph.

Mary came to visit the world at Fatima at a time when many had grown forgetful of God and his loving plan for our salvation. Many had rebelled against the law of God and had become alienated from him through sin, error, and the horrors of war. Entire nations turned to atheism, and World War I ravaged the earth. Our Blessed Mother, always concerned for our salvation, came in that moment to remind us of the love and mercy of God. But, she also called us to turn over our lives to our Lord Jesus Christ through prayer and penance and to do whatever he tells us.

Some have doubted the truth of these incredible events, and others have questioned the fulfillment of our Lady's instructions. But one thing is quite clear: the message of Fatima is just as timely now as it was one hundred years ago. Our world continues to experience the tragedy of war and the indiscriminate destruction of innocent human lives. Many people have fallen away from the Catholic faith and have entirely lost faith in God. Materialism and secularism have become the new idols of our time, tearing us away from virtue and from the mercy of God. And, the family as the building block of our society is under severe assault.

How then are we to respond to these messages of our Blessed Mother? First, by living good Christian lives. We do this by obeying God's commandments, by growing in virtue and avoiding sin, and by readily confessing our faults. Mary also urges us to pray every day, especially the rosary. Prayer places us in direct communion with God and allows us to receive the grace he wishes to give us. In a special way, the rosary is a prayerful meditation on the mysteries of Christ and our redemption. Pope St. John Paul II taught us that, by praying the rosary, we look on the face of Jesus along with his mother Mary.

Our Lady also asked us to observe the devotion of the Five First Saturdays to bring about the complete conversion of Russia, peace in the world, and the triumph of her Immaculate Heart. This monthly practice of prayer to our Lady, Confession, Holy Communion, and personal sacrifice is a powerful means of grace.

Finally, Mary asks us to make sacrifices for the conversion of sinners and to accept suffering in reparation for our sins and those of others. By his passion and death, Jesus brought us back to God, and he invites us to join our own sufferings to his for the sake of those souls that are far from him.

Pope Francis has been very clear about his own devotion to Our Lady of Fatima. Only seven months after he was elected pope, the Holy Father publicly consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in St. Peter's Square before 150,000 people.

As he stood before the image of Our Lady of Fatima, he asked Mary to welcome the consecration "with the benevolence of a mother." He continued: "Guard our lives in your arms. Bless and strengthen every desire for goodness; revive and grow faith; sustain and illuminate hope; arouse and enliven charity; guide all of us on the path of holiness." Pope Francis recognizes that Mary always leads us to her Son,

Jesus, and she “takes us with the hand of a mother to the embrace of the Father, to the Father of mercy.” On the 100th anniversary of the apparitions, Pope Francis will travel to Fatima, and there he will once again celebrate Mary’s loving intervention in our world, and her constant desire to lead us to holiness through Jesus.

In the Diocese of Fargo, we too will mark the centenary of the apparitions of Mary at Fatima in a special way. I will celebrate Mass at Shanley High School in Fargo on May 13 to conclude a day of prayer in commemoration of this anniversary. And, at all Masses on the weekend of May 13-14, I ask all the clergy and faithful to join me in consecrating the Diocese of Fargo to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. By placing ourselves under the holy protection of Mary, our mother, we cannot help but draw closer to the Heart of Jesus, her Son. No one was closer to Jesus than Mary, and by uniting ourselves in spirit to her, we share in the intimacy that she enjoys with him.

The message of Mary at Fatima is quite simply a call to prayer, conversion, and holiness of life. This is the perennial message of the Gospel, and it is a message of great hope for our times. As we observe this anniversary, let us renew our devotion to Mary, our mother, and through her Immaculate Heart come to know the triumph of God’s divine love for his children.