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Foreword by EDWARD SRI

FATIMA
100 QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ABOUT THE MARIAN APPARITIONS

IGNATIUS
FATIMA - 15 QUESTIONS

Where is Fatima? What was it like there in 1917?
Fatima is a town in Portugal, about a hundred miles north of Lisbon, the nation’s capital. In 1917, Fatima was a small village. The heart of the town was the parish church, Saint Anthony, where the three Fatima visionaries—Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta—were baptized, and where Lucia received her First Holy Communion. The townspeople were by and large Catholic, and ardently so, which meant that the church was one of the most important buildings in town. Clusters of small homes, called hamlets, surrounded the church. One of these hamlets was known as Aljustrel, and this is where the families of the visionaries lived. Another nearby hamlet, Valinhos, would become the site of one of the apparitions. The three children often grazed their sheep in the Cova da Iria, a small pasture more than a mile outside Aljustrel, owned by Lucia’s parents. This is where the other five apparitions occurred. The people of Fatima were mostly farmers, peasants who worked hard to earn a living. They were devout, with a profound yet simple faith. This faith was unshakable, and for many this steadfastness even led to skepticism when it came to the possibility of apparitions in their own town. To them, the tenets and subjects of the faith were so profound, so transcendent, that they could not fathom something like a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary taking place in their own village. That sort of thing may happen in Lourdes and Tepeyac, but not in Fatima. So they thought.

Our Lady repeatedly told the children how important it was to pray the Rosary, and even identified herself as “the Lady of the Rosary”. What is the Rosary, and how did it come about?
The Rosary is a method of meditative prayer, structured around reflecting on certain events in the life of Jesus Christ. Mary, the Mother of God, wants nothing more than to lead people to her son. In the Rosary, we pray dozens of Hail Marys while meditating on the mysteries of Our Lord’s life. The Hail Mary is an ancient Christian prayer based on phrases from the New Testament and the early Church Fathers: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.” It is not exactly clear where the Rosary came from. The use of beads to count prayers is a practice dating back to pre-Christian times; during the Middle Ages, strings of beads called “paternosters” (the Latin for “Our Father”) were used to count Our Fathers and Hail Marys. There is a tradition that Saint Dominic developed the Rosary in its current form, after a vision of Our Lady. The reliability of this tradition is questionable, but nevertheless, Saint Dominic did greatly help to spread the use of the Rosary, particularly its use in battling the Albigensian heresy. The Dominican order to this day retains a particular devotion to the Rosary. In 1569, Pope Saint Pius V gave official approval to what we now recognize as the standard format of the Rosary: fifteen mysteries (five Joyful, five Sorrowful, five Glorious), with each mystery lasting the space of one Our Father, ten Hail Marys, and one Glory Be (another ancient prayer), or one “decade”. While reciting a decade, the person praying keeps in mind one particular event in the life of Christ or of the Church, such as the Nativity, the Crucifixion, or the descent of the Holy Spirit. In 2002, Pope Saint John Paul II added the five Luminous Mysteries, which focus on the earthly ministry of Jesus.
What is an apparition?
An apparition is a supernatural vision of sorts, where the seer (the person who claims to have had such a vision) sees something appear to him in his own surroundings. As opposed to a vision—which often brings the person out of himself, watching something as if removed from the scene—an apparition happens “here and now” and is even evident to the senses, although many apparitions are perceived by the seers alone. If deemed necessary, the proper Church authorities will investigate claims of an apparition and make a judgment as to whether or not the apparition is “worthy of belief”.

What was going on in Europe when the Fatima apparitions began?
At that time, Europe, and indeed the entire world, was embroiled in the most devastating and (up to that time) deadliest conflict the world had ever seen. In July 1914, the continent was plunged into a war that caused such destruction and so disrupted the lives of millions that it became known as the Great War, or the War to End All Wars—later, the First World War. Nations throughout Europe, and eventually all over the world, were pulled into the conflict that was sparked by the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the archduke and heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Portugal did not enter the war at first, remaining officially neutral, although its treaty alliances aligned it with Great Britain. However, in March 1916, Germany declared war on Portugal, and despite the country’s small size and population, many Portuguese soldiers joined the war effort. Thousands of young men across the nation were called up to fight in this conflict. This was the deadliest war the world had ever seen, resulting in the deaths of around twenty million people worldwide. The pope called it “the suicide of civilized Europe”.

Who witnessed the apparitions at Fatima? Who were the visionaries?
There were three visionaries who experienced the apparitions of Our Lady of Fatima: Lucia dos Santos, Francisco Marto, and Jacinta Marto. Francisco and Jacinta were brother and sister, and they were cousins of Lucia. When Our Lady first appeared to the children on May 13, 1917, Lucia was ten years old, Francisco nine, and Jacinta just seven.

Did the children witness any other apparitions before the Lady came in May 1917?
Yes. In the spring and summer of 1916, the children were visited by the “Angel of Peace” three times. The angel did not explicitly mention the subsequent apparitions of Our Lady, but he did set the stage and prepare their hearts to hear what Our Lady had to say. He taught them that peace would be reached through prayer, sacrifice, and suffering and that the children themselves would need to experience a great deal of suffering, make many sacrifices, and pray a great deal before they could expect it of others.
Were the children the first visionaries in history to have a vision of hell?
No, and as a matter of fact, visions of hell are reported quite often among visionaries, including a number of saints, such as Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint John Bosco, Saint Faustina Kowalska, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Hildegard of Bingen, and others. These visions all seem to have been for the same purpose: to chastise, to remind the visionary and the world of the reality of hell, and to warn against the sins that offend God.

What is the Second Secret?
Following the vision of hell came the Second Secret. As the vision was ending, Our Lady told the children that God wanted devotion to her Immaculate Heart to be established throughout the world, in order to save souls from hell. If this was done, she said, many souls would be saved, and peace would reign. Our Lady told the children that the war would end if this was done. However, she said, if this was not done, an even worse war would break out during the pontificate of Pius XI. (At the time, the pope was Benedict XV, and there was no such thing yet as a Pope Pius XI.) Our Lady told of a sign that would precede this worse war: a night illumined by an unknown light, which would be a sign that God is about to punish the world for its crimes, through war, famine, and persecutions of the Church. The idea of a war worse than the Great War would have been unthinkable at the time—but worse it would indeed turn out to be. During the papacy of Pius XI, the Second World War broke out, which would prove far more devastating than the First, affecting a much greater part of the world and resulting in the deaths of up to fifty million people, with numerous unspeakable atrocities. The wars, famines, and persecutions of which Our Lady spoke she attributed to Communism, which that year was suddenly on the rise in Russia. She told the children that she would return at a later time to request that Russia be consecrated to her Immaculate Heart, as well as request the “Communion of Reparation” (or the First Saturdays Devotion, as it would later be called). She said that if her requests were heeded, Russia would be converted and there would be peace; if not, Russia would spread its errors throughout the world, which would result in even more wars, persecutions, and great suffering. But, in the end, she told them, her Immaculate Heart would triumph. the July apparition and the three secrets.

Why was the Third Secret held for so long?
When Sister Lucia wrote down the Third Secret, she sealed it in an envelope and wrote that it was not to be opened before 1960 and was to be read by either the patriarch of Lisbon or the bishop of Leiria. She indicated that it could also be read at her death, if that came first. The date of 1960 was not set by Our Lady, but Lucia felt that it would allow time to understand the secret better. She also said that it was not her place to interpret it, but rather the pope’s. Each successive pope who chose not to reveal the contents apparently thought it was not the opportune time to do so, although we cannot know for sure what their motivations were.
The Lady had promised that she would tell the children who she was and perform a miracle during the October apparition. What were people expecting?
The crowds at the Cova da Iria had been growing rapidly each month. All over the country, people were telling stories about the shepherd children in Fatima who were speaking with a woman from heaven. All sorts of people—believers, nonbelievers, the curious, the disdainful, the supportive, the mocking—came to see. The secular government and anti-clerical newspapers were expecting a huge letdown for the believers; they expected no miracle, which would cause tremendous outrage among the people, and possibly even a violent reaction against the self-proclaimed seers. Believers, on the other hand, expected exactly what the Lady had said. They expected that she would tell them who she was indeed—Mary, the Mother of Our Lord—and that she would perform a spectacular miracle for all to see and believe.

How do we know so much about the apparitions, including what Our Lady said?
There are several sources that tell us what happened in Fatima over a century ago. The primary, and most complete and invaluable, resource is the memoirs of Sister Lucia, which she wrote off and on for many years. Sister Lucia lived to the age of ninety-seven, dying in 2005; but many decades before, when she was in her twenties, she began to record in great detail those most fateful events of her childhood. This is where we find personal information on the interactions between the visionaries, what was in their hearts and minds throughout all of this, and, perhaps most importantly, what the Angel of Peace and Our Lady said during their apparitions. Other details were provided by eyewitnesses and by those who came to the Cova da Iria, lived in the town, went to the parish, or knew the visionaries and their families. The family members of the visionaries passed stories down. There are many newspaper articles; there are memoirs and other records of people who were peripherally involved with the events but still have a great deal of information to contribute.

Are there apparitions that are officially approved by the Church?
Yes, and there are different levels of approval. The Blessed Virgin Mary has appeared many times to many people, and in several instances the Church has gone through its processes and determined that the apparitions are worthy of belief. There have been numerous apparitions, many specifically giving instruction or consolation to the individual seer. But over the last few hundred years, several of these apparitions have involved profound signs, messages for the whole world. Here are a few examples: Υ Guadalupe, Mexico (1531): Our Lady appeared to Saint Juan Diego and performed beautiful signs, including imprinting a miraculous image on Juan Diego’s tilma. Within ten years, over nine million natives were baptized, the worship of false Aztec gods was abandoned, and the practice of human sacrifice was brought to an end. Υ Rue du Bac, Paris, France (1830): Our Lady appeared to Saint Catherine Labouré, a novice of the Daughters of Charity, warning her of dangerous times that were to come in France, but giving her hope as well. The Miraculous Medal has its origins in this apparition, as Mary revealed to Saint Catherine how the medal should look and what it should say: “Oh Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee!” Τ Lourdes, France (1858):
Our Lady appeared to Saint Bernadette Soubirous, a fourteen-year-old peasant girl. She asked for penance and reparation for the sake of sinners, and referred to herself as “the Immaculate Conception”. Our Lady also provided a live spring, the waters of which have miraculous healing properties. There are many more: Knock, Ireland, in 1879; Quito, Ecuador, from 1594 to 1634; Beauraing, Belgium in 1932–1933; Akita, Japan, in 1973; Kibeho, Rwanda, in 1981–1983; and others.

Are the apparitions at Fatima approved by the Church?
Yes. The Church had maintained an official silence regarding the apparitions in the years that followed the Miracle of the Sun. Word continued to spread and popular devotion began to grow, but the Church did not take an official position on the apparitions. Then, in May 1922—five years after the first apparition—Bishop da Silva of Leiria (the diocese containing Fatima) issued a pastoral letter that indicated he would set up a commission to look into the apparitions. He wanted to be cautious, because the apparitions had such a high profile and accepting them without proper investigation could lead to problems. The commission was asked to emphasize thoroughness rather than speed. In 1930, he issued another pastoral letter, which was read before 100,000 pilgrims at Fatima, in which he stated: In virtue of considerations made known, and others which for reasons of brevity we omit; humbly invoking the Divine Spirit and placing ourselves under the protection of the most Holy Virgin, and after hearing the opinions of our Rev. Advisers in this diocese, we hereby: 1. Declare worthy of belief, the visions of the shepherd children in the Cova da Iria, parish of Fatima, in this diocese, from May 13 to October 13, 1917. 2. Permit officially the cult of Our Lady of Fatima. Thus, the apparitions were approved for belief, and this was done with the knowledge and consent of Pope Pius XI.

What have the popes said about Fatima?
The apparitions of Our Lady of Fatima have become so ingrained in the fabric of Catholic culture that it might be hard to imagine a time when that was not the case. Ever since the apparitions took place, even the popes have been intimately involved with them. Pope Benedict XV: He was pope at the time of the apparitions. As we discussed in question 7, he asked Catholics all over the world to pray a novena to Mary, Queen of Peace, on May 5, 1917. On that same date, he added a new intercession to the Litany of Loreto: “Queen of Peace, pray for us.” Eight days later, Mary appeared for the first time to the children. We do not have a record of his having said much about the apparitions, except in a letter to the Portuguese bishops on April 29, 1918, in which he called Fatima “an extraordinary aid from the Mother of God”. Pope Pius XI: On December 6, 1929, he blessed a statue of Our Lady of Fatima to give to the Portuguese Pontifical College of Rome. Then, on October 1, 1930, he granted a partial indulgence to pilgrims traveling to Fatima. Both of these events were before the bishop of Leiria declared the apparitions to be worthy of belief— which, reportedly, he did with the knowledge and consent of the Holy Father. Pope Pius XII: He has often been called the Pope of Fatima. His episcopal consecration (at the hands of Benedict XV) took place on May 13, 1917, the day of the first of Our Lady’s apparitions. He once famously said, “The time for doubting Fatima has passed; the time for action is now.” Pius XII spoke a great deal about Fatima, and in 1940 he entrusted a new diocese in Mozambique to the patronage of Our Lady of Fatima. On October 31, 1942, Pius consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary; in 1946, he sent a representative to Fatima to crown Our Lady as Queen of the World, before 600,000 pilgrims. Pius is said to have personally experienced the Miracle of the Sun repeated in Rome on four separate occasions, including the day that he solemnly defined the dogma of the Assumption. On July 7, 1952, the Holy Father consecrated Russia and her people to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, in a private ceremony. This is just a sampling of Pius’
actions and words on Fatima. He was buried in Saint Peter’s Basilica on October 13, 1958, the anniversary of the final apparition and the Miracle of the Sun. Pope Saint John XXIII: While he did not visit Fatima or speak publicly on it during his relatively brief papacy, Saint John XXIII (then Angelo Cardinal Roncalli) visited Fatima while patriarch of Venice on May 13, 1956. Pope Saint Paul VI: During the closing ceremonies of the third session of the Second Vatican Council in 1964, Pope Saint Paul VI renewed Pius XII’s consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart. On May 13, 1967, Pope Saint Paul VI visited Fatima to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the apparitions and the twentieth anniversary of Pius XII’s consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. He came as a pilgrim at the invitation of the Portuguese bishops and had the opportunity to meet personally with Sister Lucia. Pope John Paul I: John Paul I’s very brief, thirty-threeday papacy did not leave much room for pronouncements on the Fatima apparitions; however, about a year before his election, on June 10, 1977, Albino Cardinal Luciani, the patriarch of Venice, led a pilgrimage of about fifty people to Fatima, during which he met with Sister Lucia. Pope Saint John Paul II: After Pius XII, Saint John Paul II is probably the pope with the most profound connection to the Fatima apparitions. On May 13, 1981, an attempt was made on his life, and he credited his survival to the intercession of Our Lady of Fatima. He made three visits to Fatima, in 1982, 1991, and 2000. In 1984, he gifted the shrine at Fatima the bullet that came from his abdomen, which was put into the crown on the statue. During his visit on May 13, 2000, he beatified Jacinta and Francisco; he insisted on making the trip personally, in spite of his extremely fragile health. The Holy Father’s profound love for Our Lady of Fatima was evident throughout his life. Pope Benedict XVI: While he was still a cardinal, Joseph Ratzinger visited Fatima in May 2000, in preparation for Pope John Paul II’s visit and the beatification. Cardinal Ratzinger was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and as such, his responsibilities included the handling of and theological interpretation of the Third Secret of Fatima. In May 2010, a few years after his election as pope, Benedict XVI visited Fatima, said Mass, and spoke. Pope Francis: He has also said a great deal about Fatima in his relatively few years as pontiff, but the most consequential was on May 13, 2017—the centennial anniversary of the first apparition—when he traveled to Fatima to canonize Francisco and Jacinta as saints.

Have the visionaries been declared saints?

Francisco and Jacinta were beatified together on May 13, 2000, by Pope Saint John Paul II. On May 13, 2017, they were canonized by Pope Francis. The cause for canonization for Sister Lucia is open and in process, but at this time she has not yet been beatified.