



BLESSED FRANCISCO AND JACINTA MARTO

BULLETIN OF THE LITTLE SHEPHERDS – OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2007 (45th YEAR)

CONCLUSION OF THE NINETIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE APPARITIONS

For two consecutive years, the Fatima Shrine has commemorated the apparitions of the Angel (1916) and of Our Lady (1917) to the three little Shepherds of Aljustrel. The celebrations to mark the closing of the ninetieth anniversary culminated in the dedication of the new church in honour of the Blessed Trinity. Among other initiatives, they also included an International Congress, from 9th to 12th October, entitled: «Fatima for the 21st Century» Sub-themes for the Congress included: the apparitions themselves, their meaning; arguments for their credibility and their continuing relevance for today.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, representing the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, presided at the liturgical celebrations for the dedication of the new church and also at the concelebrations of 12th/13th October. Following a brief ceremony of arrival at the Chapel of the Apparitions, where he was awaited by 40 Cardinals and Bishops together with thousands of pilgrims, the Cardinal Legate presided at the rite of dedication of the new Church dedicated to the Blessed Trinity. On the morning of 13th October, exactly ninety years since the last apparition of Our Lady to the three little Shepherds, Cardinal Bertone also presided at the solemn concelebration in the Sanctuary area. In his homily, from which we reproduce an extract, he spoke of the relevance of the Virgin's message: «Fatima is not represented merely by signs, but by gestures of conversion, a change of life-style, a turning away from sin, reparation for those who offend against God; this is Fatima». This is the Message of Fatima, which today, too, must be fulfilled in order to comply with the requests of the Apparition.



On 14th October, the Cardinal Legate again presided at the Sunday Mass in the new Church of the Most Blessed Trinity. In his homily he declared: «The good Lady appeared to the little Shepherds gleaming with light, but in her words and also in her face, which was at times veiled in sorrow, there is a constant reference to the reality of sin. She showed the children her Immaculate Heart crowned with thorns, and explained that prayer and sacrifice are needed in order to make reparation for the many evils that offend

God, to bring an end to war and to obtain peace for the world.

Mary's language is simple, suited to children, without being toned down or fanciful. Indeed, in very realistic terms, She introduced them to the drama of life, asked for their co-operation and, finding that Jacinta, Francisco and Lucia were full of generosity, She said to them: 'Then you will have much to suffer, but the grace of God will be your comfort'. The Virgin chooses innocent children

as her privileged collaborators in order to combat the terrible leprosy of sin which is corrupting mankind with the weapons of prayer and penance. Dear pilgrims, without denying the value of voluntary sacrifices and penances, you should know that the true penance of Fatima is the meek acceptance of the will of God in our lives. We cannot but speak of what we have heard and seen! Let us do penance and make reparation. Let us pray for those who persecute us; let us keep in our mind and heart an unshakeable faith in the merciful love of God. May his gaze rest kindly and mercifully upon our lives which we have entrusted to the Virgin Mary for the greater glory of the Most Blessed Trinity.»

THE LITTLE SHEPHERDS, A SINGULAR GIFT

On October 12th, during the International «Fatima for the 21st Century» Congress, Cardinal José Saraiva Martins, Prefect of the Congregation of the Saints spoke of the gift of the little Shepherds to the Church and to the world, in the context of the New Evangelisation. We have taken the theme «The little Shepherds, a singular gift» from his conference:

«If the Saints are a gift to the Church and to the world, so too, and in a very special way, are Blessed Francisco and Blessed Jacinta. And this for two basic reasons, which I will explain briefly: the fact that Jacinta and Francisco are the first two children who were not martyrs to be raised to the honour of the altar, and the special characteristics of their holiness.

The first children who were not martyrs to have been beatified

The two little Shepherds are a singular gift to the Church above all because they are the first children who were not martyrs to have been beatified in the two thousand year history of the Church. Their elevation to the honour of the altar, carried out by Pope John Paul II on 13th May 2000 here in the Cova da Iria was an important event of incalculable historical significance.

In fact, it is known that, prior to 1981, the Church had never declared heroic the virtues of children who were not martyrs, such a declaration being a prerequisite for an eventual beatification or canonisation. The reason for this was quite simply that it was thought that, owing to their tender age, children were not capable of practising the Christian virtues to a heroic degree.

However, something of extreme importance happened. In spite of the customary practice of the Church as I have described it, Rome received an extraordinary number of «letters of postulation» asking that the children be beatified as soon as possible. The letters came from all five continents and, in the immense majority of cases, were not mere conventional letters, but texts extremely well argued and documented.

In view of this, the Holy See, through the Congregation of the Causes of the Saints, resolved to investigate the matter, and entrusted an in-depth study of ‘the suitability of children in relation to the practice of heroic virtue’ to a group of specialists in the ascetical-mystical, moral, psychological, medical, pedagogical and juridical fields.

The conclusions reached by these specialists were as follows:

1) There can be no doubt that children are capable not only of performing ‘heroic acts’ but also of possessing ‘heroic habits’ and, hence, of practising the Christian virtues to a heroic degree.

2) This declaration is based on the certainty that natural growth is such that it makes it possible for children, too, to make the kind of heroic choices that are required for it to be possible to proceed to a beatification.

3) In the last resort, all depends, as in the case of adults also, on the openness and fidelity of the person to divine grace which, obviously, is at work in children too.

4) Hence, there is no valid reason for denying the possibility of the beatification of a child.

It was on the basis of these conclusions, which were approved by the Holy Father, that the next step was tak-

en, that of examining the causes of the beatification of Francisco and Jacinta from the theological and historical point of view. The theologians charged with this task declared categorically that the Servants of God had indeed practised virtue to a heroic degree.

Referring to the case of Jacinta in particular, one of the theologians concluded his study with these words: “The way in which she faced heroically the great suffering of the illness that led to her death was truly impressive. She never complained, offering all to God in order to “console Jesus” and Our Lady, for the conversion of sinners, for the Church, for the Pope, and for suffering humanity. How many adults (the theologian continued), even good Christian adults, would have endured such suffering and faced death with such a genuinely supernatural and heroic spirit, animated by the confident yearning to find Jesus and to be with Him and the Virgin Mary for ever?”

In relation to Francisco, another theologian wrote as follows: “We were surprised and entranced by our contemplation of a creature with such tenderness, such an ability to pray so fervently and at times even ecstatically, such an admirable spirit of mortification and penance accompanied by such transparent humility. What was especially impressive was his desire to suffer: his suffering is not in vain as in the case of hardened sinners, nor yet expiatory, as in the case of those who have turned away from sin, but imitative, that is uniting his innocent soul with the passion of Christ the Lord, as a pure and sweet-smelling oblation.”

The heroicity of the virtues of the two little Shepherds was proclaimed officially by Pope John Paul II, thereby opening the way for the beatification of other children.

The beatification of Jacinta and Francisco fulfilled a prophecy uttered by Pope Pius X. Referring to the criticism which had been expressed in France concerning his decision to allow young children to receive Communion, Pius X declared: “In France there is bitter criticism of the early Communion which we have authorised, but We declare that, by this means, there will be children who will be saints. And you will see it happen”.

Pius XII, whose cause for beatification is now under way, made his own this same prophecy. I quote his words: “You must not think that a tender age is an obstacle in the way of consummate perfection, holiness. Our predecessor Pius X declared that there will be saints among young children when he opened to them the Eucharistic Tabernacle. He knew, as we ourselves know, that physical age does not stand in the way of the soul, so that the human being, even a young human being, can attain the perfection of spiritual age (St. Thomas, *Summ. Theol.* III, q. 12, sed contra and ad 2). If Jesus calls for spiritual childhood as a condition for entering into heaven, and then goes on to say: ‘Let the little children come unto me’, how can one deny that children are able to attain evangelical perfection?”

No. In no way. To prove it, we have the example of the two little Shepherds who, in accordance with the Church’s most recent practice, inaugurated precisely with them, were solemnly raised to the honour of the altar. These two who, in a sense, originated this new practice, were also, one might say, the first to benefit from it.

Particular characteristics of the holiness of the little Shepherds

The two Blessed little Shepherds are a gift for the Church and also for the world, above all on account of their holiness, which makes of them two extraordinary figures in the hagiography of contemporary Christianity, two particularly fascinating figures for the faithful of the whole world, who have recourse to them with great love and immense confidence in their powerful intercession.

The charm of the holiness of the two children of Cova da Iria comes from their special characteristics. All the Saints are both different and unrepeatable, each one gifted with different charisms. God, who created them, entrusted a special treasure to each one so that they could make it bear fruit and transmit it to the entire human family (cf. the parable in Mt. 25, 14-30). This treasure is the special way in which each Saint was called upon to live out in his or her life one or other passage from the gospel, thereby transmitting a clear and urgent message to all men and women so that they can make it their own.

In fact, by beatifying a Servant of God, the Church does nothing other than place him or her on a candlestick so that the light of their life of absolute fidelity to the Gospel can illuminate all those who seek God and his Kingdom in the midst of the vicissitudes of their lives, and also so that they can hear their 'voice' which is the voice of God, and can accept their message, which is the message of God himself.

What, then, is this 'treasure', in other words, the special way of living the Gospel which is proper to the little Shepherds? What is the message which God wishes to transmit to us through their life and spirituality?

The reply to these two questions is to be found in the special characteristics of their holiness, which can be summed up in four words: faith, conversion, Eucharist and Rosary.

1) To begin with, *faith*. Observing the lives of the little Shepherds and the way in which they corresponded with the action of God, the first thing that strikes us is their faith. It is not an abstract faith, but concrete, vivid, existential. An adult faith, even though professed and lived by two small children. A simple faith, but firm, strong, unshakeable, capable of overcoming all obstacles, of surmounting all difficulties. Thanks to this faith, illuminated and strengthened by it, Our Lady's two visionaries lived with rare courage their wonderful adventure of the privileged 'confidantes' of the 'Lady dressed in white', and faithful transmitters of her message of salvation. Faith is the vital key for understanding in depth, and for interpreting correctly in the light of the 'signs of the times', everything that happened in such an extraordinary way in the Cova da Iria.

Such faith, illuminated and illuminating, is clearly visible in the entire conduct of the little Shepherds. Like the just in the Bible, they lived, "ex fide", 'by faith'. This shows particularly clearly when, at a word from the Angel, they prostrated themselves in profound adoration of the most Blessed Trinity. Who knows how many times they repeated the prayer which the Angel had taught them: "My God I believe, I adore, I hope and I love You! I ask pardon for those who do not believe, do not adore, do not hope and

do not love You"? A stupendous prayer, a perfect synthesis of Trinitarian faith, uttered by the little Shepherds more with their hearts than with their lips.

This faith in God one and three, inseparable from love for Him and hope in Him, produces in the hearts of the two children a desire to make reparation for the offences committed by those who live in ignorance of their own dependence on the Lord or who are against Him. Adoration and reparation are two inseparable attitudes which mutually illuminate and complete each other.

2) If we concentrate in particular on Jacinta, what most impressed her and filled her with fear was the fate of those who refused to repent, and thus placed their eternal salvation at risk. Overcome by this, Jacinta felt the urgent need to pray with renewed fervour for sinners.

The little Shepherdess united her burning love for God with a love for others, and a deep concern for their salvation. Her love was pure, tender and deep. In fact, love of God is inseparable from love for others. It is not a question of two different loves, but of one alone, with a double dimension: vertical and horizontal. When all is said and done, no-one has two hearts: one for loving God and the other for loving others. All human beings have only the one heart with which to love God and, in Him, everyone else, in other words all those we come into contact with throughout our lives. St John says it very clearly: "If anyone says he loves God and does not love others, he is a liar" (Cf. I John. 4, 19).

3) Turning to Francisco, we can say that both he and the other little Shepherds lived an intense *Eucharistic* life. Thanks to the action of the Spirit, they realised the great importance of devotion to the Eucharist in the Christian life. Their spirituality was essentially Eucharistic. Jesus present in the Tabernacle was the centre of their spiritual life, the source of their energy and of their incredible courage. Their greatest desire was to visit Him or, as Francisco put it, 'to keep Him company'. In fact, they had a deeply Eucharistic heart. Speaking of the relationship between the Saints and the Eucharist, John Paul II urged us all to enter into 'the school of the saints, great interpreters of true Eucharistic piety. In them, the theology of the Eucharist takes on all the splendour of a way of living which, we might say, is both contagious and inflames us'. And again: 'We have before our eyes the example of the Saints who found in the Eucharist the food for their way of perfection. How many times were they moved to tears in the experience of so great a mystery, and lived indescribable hours of 'spousal' joy before the Sacrament of the Altar?'

Jacinta and Francisco belong to this 'school of saints' of which the Pope speaks. Their love and devotion are also unquestionably contagious and "inflamm" the hearts of the faithful so that they become ever more Eucharistic, that is, in order to live increasingly in adoration, simplicity and faith in Jesus in the Tabernacle.

4) In addition to all this, if we examine so many episodes in the lives of the little Shepherds, we cannot but see the line which links them all together, namely *the recitation of the Rosary*. When we pay attention to this undoubted fact, we perceive that for them the Rosary is a reply of love to the Lady who came to visit them: in her

presence, their hearts were filled with serenity and goodness; when they recited the Rosary together, they felt themselves ever more united to God and to one another.

5) Finally, the little Shepherds way of praying is extremely moving. There was no element of human respect, even when they were being tormented by the prisoners in the prison in Ourém. Small children, truly in love with Mary and her Son, they lived sincerely what they carried in their heart and they expressed it in their prayer, in this way giving true and effective witness that induced even the people who up to that moment had been making fun of them to join them in prayer.»

THE HOLINESS OF THE LITTLE SHEPHERDS CAN BE THAT OF EVERYONE

«This is the will of God, your sanctification» says St Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians (I Thess. 4, 3).

With the passage of time, more and more men and women succeeded one another as examples of holiness and were recognised and made known with this honour by the Church. To begin with it was only martyrs, but soon great importance was given to Christians who had practised virtue to a heroic degree. From the 5th century onwards, the Church began a long and vigorous process of investigation into the heroic nature of the Christian life, so that someone could be called a saint universally. Later on, it became customary to commemorate the anniversary of their deaths, to venerate them publicly, and to erect churches and basilicas in their memory.

Ever since the three apparitions of the Angel in 1916 and the six apparitions of Our Lady in 1917, the three little Shepherds devoted themselves even more heroically to prayer and sacrifices, the basic requirement of the Message of Fatima, within a setting of faith, hope and charity, for the conversion of sinners and in reparation to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Then, in God's providence, both Francisco and Jacinta caught pneumonia. They became ill in October 1918, first Francisco and shortly afterwards Jacinta. When the moment came for her brother to depart for heaven, Jacinta gave him the following instructions: "Give my special love to Our Lord and Our Lady and tell them that I am suffering whatever They wish for the conversion of sinners and to make reparation to the Immaculate Heart of Mary». And she suffered a great deal on account of the death of her brother. The day came for Jacinta, too, to go to hospital in Lisbon where she was to die alone, as Our Lady had foretold. The parting from Lucia broke her heart. «We shall never see each other again! Pray a lot for me, until I go to heaven. Then I will pray a lot for you. Never tell the secret to anyone, even if they kill you. Love Jesus and the immaculate Heart of Mary very much, and make many sacrifices for sinners». From Lisbon she sent word to Lucia that Our Lady had come to see her there, and that she had told her the day and the hour of her death. And once again, she urged Lucia to be very good. Some time later, news came that Jacinta had departed for Heaven to be with Our Lady on the night of 20th February 1920. All this information comes

to us from Lucia. It had been Our Lady's wish that Lucia should remain on earth for some time longer, not only in order to make known the Message of Fatima, but also the hidden and heroic lives of her two little cousins. And this she did, so that the news spread rapidly throughout the world.

In spite of it being the Church's custom not to believe in the possibility of virtues being practised to a heroic degree by children, Rome received an impressive number "letters of postulation" from bishops, asking for the beatification of these two children, whose fame for holiness had already conquered the world. In view of this, the Holy See, by means of a rigorous process studying their short lives in depth came to the conclusion that both Jacinta and Francisco had indeed practised the Christian virtues to a heroic degree, a fact which was proclaimed officially by Pope John Paul II in 1989. It having been proved that a miracle due to their intercession had taken place, the way was now clear for them to be raised to the honour of the altar. Behind these holy figures we find the spiritual doctrine revealed by our Heavenly Mother which they had lived, thereby pointing out to us, too, the way to attain holiness in a short space of time.

At their tender age, they became revolutionaries, and even reformers, as was the case, in earlier times, with St Francis of Assisi, whose reform of the Church was a veritable revolution. «It is not enough to be holy today; the present moment calls for saints endowed with genius, just as a city afflicted with plague needs doctors» wrote Simone Weil.

And here we have the little Shepherds, who are capable of being a great gift for each one of us! They fulfilled heroically the most prophetic Message that God sent to his Church through his and our Mother, and they became saints. They also received the antidote against the great evils of our present-day world, and they call upon us to make reparation, as they did, for the offences against God, against Jesus Christ and against the Immaculate Heart of Mary. By means of the Message of Fatima, they became the great makers of reparation for the offences against God and intercessors for the conversion of sinners. In a word, they became models for all that Fatima is today and for how we too must live its Message.

Great masters teach us the way of holiness. Francisco and Jacinta, too, help us in our spiritual and temporal difficulties. Countless letters bear witness to their intercession before the throne of God: many have secured their own conversion and that of others; sick people have been cured, and so on...

Today we renew the request to anyone who has experienced a cure through the intercession of Francisco and Jacinta, more particularly a cure from an illness considered incurable, to inform us of it so that it can be studied as a possible miracle by the appropriate doctors.

**The Little Shepherds Secretariat
and all who work in it
wish all our readers a happy Christmas
and a New Year filled with grace and peace!**

BLESSED FRANCISCO AND JACINTA MARTO – Quarterly Publication. Price: 0.05 €

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– Printed in Gráfica Almondina, Zona Industrial, Apart. 29; 2354-909 Torres Novas –

Bank account: Millennium bcp – IBAN: PT50-0033-0000-45340426373-05 Swift Code: BCOMPTPL