

4th Week of Lent: Knights of Columbus

Introduction

Let me begin by saying how happy I am to be with all of you here in this Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fatima. Like all of you, I learned about the Fatima apparitions when I was a child. The story of Our Lady's appearance to three Portuguese children, Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco and the three Fatima secrets captured my imagination, so much so, that on New Year's Day, 1960, at 5:00 a.m. my mother found my nine year old self outside, on our snow-covered front porch. "What on earth are you doing out here?" she wanted to know. I answered solemnly that I was looking for the newspaper. After all, my third grade teacher, Sister Mary Viator, had told us that the third Fatima secret would be revealed in 1960 and I wanted to be among the first to read all about it. At that point my mother revealed to me that I had better come in, and go back to bed!

My youthful enthusiasm for the Fatima apparitions was not misplaced. The appearances of Our Lady in 1916-17 to the three young people tending sheep in a remote place that few had heard about was deeply prophetic. The messages that Our Lady confided to Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco are no less relevant in our world and in our lives, a century later. What did she say to them and what does it mean to us as the family of the Knights of Columbus who have come here on pilgrimage?

The Danger of Presumption

The first secret which the Blessed Mother shared with the children was, of all things, a vision of the fire, the pain, and the despair of hell. a vision which Lucia vividly described in her memoirs. Suffice it to say that this vision of an eternity bereft of God was utterly frightening. Why did our Blessed Mother, so gentle and so mild,

share such a harsh and frightening vision with these young people?

She did this, I believe, to warn us against taking God and our salvation for granted. Then as now many people had come to believe that no matter how they lived their lives God owed them eternal happiness. And today, so many, including life-long Catholics continue to ignore the heart of Jesus' message: "Repent and believe." Many no longer see the need, let alone the urgency, of turning their lives around. Sadly, this is true of Catholics in all walks of life, including my own. Is it any wonder that Pope Francis speaks with such urgency about encountering Christ, about discipleship, about spreading Gospel, and helping those around us to rediscover the mercies of God?

During Lent the Church invites us, as Our Lady invited the three children, to do penance - to pray, to fast, to give alms - and to go to confession precisely so that we won't fall into the trap of taking God for granted. God's mercy is deep and powerful but we also have to open to it. So let us beg Our Lady of Fatima for repentant hearts. All of us brought luggage with us on this trip but here is the place to leave behind the baggage we all carry around with us in our lives. We beseech Our Lady of Fatima, the Mother of Mercy, to pray with us and for us that united with her Son we may open our hearts to God, the Father of Mercies.

World-Wide Upheaval

When Our Blessed Mother appeared to the three children, Europe was engulfed in the conflagration of world war. At the time it was thought to be the war to end all wars but through these three youth Our Lady of Fatima warned the world that another unimaginably violent war was in the offing. Two decades later, humanity was again consumed by another global war. So also, through her the world was warned of the dictatorships that would foment world-wide violence, most especially Stalinist Russia.

In response to these warnings, so many faithful Catholics prayed the Rosary daily, often as families, observed First Saturday devotions, and consecrated themselves and their families to Mary's Immaculate Heart. Pope Pius XII had a very deep devotion to Our Lady of Fatima and consecrated the world and Russia to Mary's Immaculate Heart. Interestingly, he died on the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, October 13, 1958. How can we not see Our Lady of Fatima's intercession as providential in raising up Karol Wojtyla to become Pope John Paul II. The iron curtain would never have fallen without his leadership - his mystical prayer, his deep understanding of the human person and culture, and his astute assessment of the Soviet bloc. On May 13, 1981, an attempt was made to assassinate Pope John Paul II. This saintly pontiff believed that Our Lady of Fatima saved his life. He returned here to thank her & to place the bullet meant to kill him into her crown.

The amazing exhibits at National Shrine of St. John Paul II in Washington capture the unrelenting efforts of this amazing Pontiff to build a civilization of truth and love, rooted in the dignity of the human person. In this sanctuary that was so near and dear to him, we need to ask for Our Lady's intercession for the world of today - a world that faces new and massive threats with the rise of radical Islamic jihadist groups like ISIS on the one hand, and the rise of anti-religious secularism on the other. In the Middle East, innocent people are being beheaded because they are Christians while in the West, Christians are giving up on their faith and joining the ranks of those who deem religion as either irrelevant or dangerous. On one side of the world we see bloody persecution. On the other side, we see widespread apostasy and, in its wake, the steady loss of religious freedom. Let us earnestly beseech Our Lady of Fatima to intercede for us, so that we might stand in solidarity with persecuted Christians by evangelizing, by spreading the Gospel of Jesus, in which the truth about human dignity and freedom is fully revealed. A good first step is for us to pray the Rosary daily, as a family, if at all possible.

Special Intentions

Finally, in addition to all these weighty considerations, I am sure we have brought a pocketful of special intentions to this Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fatima. While we are here, let us think about our loved ones near and dear to us. Let us think, for example, of those who are sick. I have in mind, for example, several priests who are seriously ill. Please pray for them even as I know that you, like myself, are here to pray for your families - perhaps your parents who are in their advancing years, your sons and daughters, your grandchildren, your friends and colleagues. Perhaps you are facing some intractable problem in your life. This is the place to present all these petitions. This is the place to beseech Mary's powerful intercession.

Yes, I'm so glad to be here with all of you! With you I pray that Our Lady of Fatima will open our eyes more widely to the glory of God shining on the face of Jesus, a light brighter than that of the sun, the light of truth and love for which we were created.

Our Lady of Fatima, pray for us!