

Catholic Review Column: Repent and Believe

Earlier this week, I was at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal with the Knights of Columbus. 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 a.m., my mother found my 9-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. A century later, the messages that Our Lady confided to Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco are no less relevant in our world and in our lives.

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 lifelong 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 the 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 be open to it. So let us beg Our Lady of Fatima for repentant hearts. 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.

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 such as 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 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.

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.