

5th Sunday of Eastertide (A)

14th May 2017

'Message of Fatima — 100 years on'

Acts 6: election of 7 deacons Ps 32: *the Word of the Lord is faithful*

1Pt 2: *you, the holy priesthood, ... living stones making a spiritual house.*

Jn 14: 1–12: *I am going now to prepare a place for you ...*

On Friday night, with the candlelit Rosary, and yesterday morning with the sun-bathed outdoor Mass, Pope Francis led the centenary celebrations of the first of the Fatima apparitions in 1917. On the 13th day of 6 consecutive months, Our Blessed Mother appeared to 3 little shepherd children in rural Portugal. They were only 7, 9 and 10 years old, and yet the Lord chose these humble children to be the recipients of this message from Our Lady, for the Church and the world. The youngest two of the visionaries, Francisco and Jacinta Marto (brother & sister) who died young, in 1919/1920, were canonized (declared saints) by the Holy Father yesterday in Fatima — these are the youngest saints ever, in the Church, of those who were not martyrs for the faith. Along with their slightly older cousin, Lucia Santos who went on to live a very long life as a nun, they were given a very special message for the world. It was a time of great suffering in Europe: the Great War was

raging, and claiming millions of lives; and Russia was about to fall to the Communist revolution and lead to 7 decades of atheistic repression of huge swathes of Eastern Europe in the Soviet bloc. But whilst Our Lady did make many references to praying for Russia, and the conversion of those opposed to Christ, yet her message was not just something for a hundred years ago and irrelevant to us.

It's hard to sum up in a few words the whole of the import of the Fatima message. Certainly there are world-changing events connected to the Fatima message. On the 13th May 1981, the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, John Paul II, the Pope from Poland, was shot in St Peter's Square, but survived, and he went on to continue inspiring Catholic Poles, and then others, to rise up against the repressions of Soviet Communism. He interpreted his survival to Our Lady, in connection with a prophecy contained within one of the "secrets" of the Fatima message. Shortly after Pope John Paul consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on 25th March 1984, a new leader arose at the top of the USSR political establishment, Mikhail Gorbachev, who

within a few years would have introduced such reforms in Russia as to lead to the total collapse of East-European communism and the system of repressive Soviet republics. But quite apart from these elements on a global level, the Fatima message is also personally meaningful to each and every Catholic. We might consider this under three titles: Prayer; Penance, and Peace:

1. PRAYER. Our Lady repeated many times to the Fatima visionaries the need to be constant at prayer, and the children accepted her encouragement and were very faithful to their prayers and in particular the holy rosary. We each should take seriously this command from heaven to be constant in our prayer and to value highly the sacred tradition of the Rosary.
2. PENANCE. A second strand of the message of Our Lady to the children was an invitation to accept and perform penances as a tool of spiritual warfare. The children themselves adopted certain penitential practices in order to offer up reparation to God for the lack of holiness amongst much of mankind. Lucia reported Our Lady seeming very sad at the August apparition, and saying to the children:

“Pray! Pray very much, and make sacrifices for sinners; for many souls go to hell because there are none to sacrifice themselves and to pray for them.” It reminds each of us that penance can be irksome, and something we are probably not very good at: but that we can offer up things that are discomforts as a physical prayer, for the good of ourselves, and others, especially those who choose not to love God.

3. PEACE. Much of Our Lady’s focus at Fatima was in encouraging prayers for peace. At the time, with the Great War, and the Communist Revolution, there was great need for an outpouring of prayer for peace. But we know perfectly well that there are huge forces of evil working in our own day to disrupt human happiness, world peace, and family life. So let’s make sure that we never give up on praying for peace, and acting as peacemakers in our own vicinity. Pray for peace! — as Our Lady says. Maybe it is not a coincidence that the place of the apparitions has a Muslim name, after a princess who converted to Catholicism from Islam: may those particularly who would offend God by atrocities in the name of fundamentalist Islam be touched by Our Lord’s holy Mother Mary, joined in prayer by ourselves for peace and the holy reign of Christ our Lord.