



Sainthood at Fatima

When Our Lady appeared at Fatima on 13 May 1917, Francisco Marto was 9 years old; his sister Jacinta was 7. A century later to the day Pope Francis named them saints of the Church. What did such little children do in their short lives (both died before they reached 11) to merit universal veneration as models of Christian holiness? (The same question applies to the third visionary, Lucia dos Santos, 10 years old in 1917, who lived to be 97 and will likely be canonized soon.) A key incident from that memorable summer casts light on the answer.

The Woman clothed in white told the children to pray the rosary daily and make sacrifices for sinners, and these things they promptly set about doing. Then she invited them to go further: "Will you offer yourselves to God and bear all the sufferings He sends you?" The tiny voices answered in unison: "We will." And they proceeded to keep their promise to the Lady with courage beyond their years.

By mid-July, as word of the three monthly apparitions spread throughout Portugal, the virulently anti-Catholic government grew alarmed at the growing crowds of onlookers. Arturo de Oliveira Santos, head of the administrative council of the Fatima

area, was determined to prevent the expected recurrence of the mysterious events on the 13th of August. He pressured the children to tell him the Lady's "secret" (which they had refused to disclose to anyone) and to promise not to go back to the Cova da Iria, where the apparitions occurred. If they returned, Santos threatened, the wrath of the government would come down on the head of their parents. But his attempt at intimidation failed utterly: without the slightest hesitation, as if with one will, the children refused to yield.

Undeterred, Santos decided on a surprise attack. As the visionaries prepared to go to the Cova on August 13th, he snatched them off to Ourem, nine miles away, and put them in jail. Having displayed his power so starkly, he sternly urged them to reveal the secret and confess that the story had all been made up. The children said they would prefer to die, whereupon the visibly angry Administrator threatened to throw them alive into a vat of boiling oil. When one of the guards said the oil was ready, Jacinta was led out of the room, then Francisco, and finally Lucia. Seeing each other in the next room, the children were surprised to find that their exits had not led to the martyrdom they fully expected to undergo.

A hundred years later we look back on this scene with amusement at the Administrator's comeuppance. We know Santos never intended to kill the children;

we know there was no boiling oil. But the impressionable children did not know this at the time. Quite to the contrary, they firmly believed his threat to be true. They were ready to die for the faith, and they expected to die. Such unclouded courage invites comparison. When I was ten years old, would I have done as they did just to keep a heavenly secret? Would I today? Would you? How might we draw strength from Fatima-like confidence in the secret mission God entrusts to us, even in the face of death?

This question calls for further inquiry into other freely-accepted sufferings that came to the chosen children of Our Lady of Fatima. For, once released from their common imprisonment, each of them was given a cross uniquely fitted to the size of their shoulder. In a future column we will see how each of them carried it.