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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FATIMA: A SEVENTY-FIVE-YEAR PERSPECTIVE

by
Frederick L. Miller, S.T.D.*

Introduction

Throughout the course of his pontificate, His Holiness Pope John Paul II has frequently invited the Church to contemplate the significance of the phenomenon of Fatima. He first journeyed to Fatima in May of 1982, to thank the Blessed Virgin for what he believes to be a direct intervention in the brutal attempt on his life that took place in Saint Peter's Square on May 13, 1981. Describing his "introduction" to Our Lady of Fatima in 1991, Pope John Paul II said: "Ten years ago I was introduced into the experience of Fatima which the Church has lived. That happened on the afternoon of May 13 in St. Peter's Square: the attempt against the Pope's life. At the same time in Fatima the crowds of pilgrims were recalling the event which had taken place there on May 13, 1917."¹

On the Solemnity of the Annunciation, 1984, Pope John Paul II, after having asked the College of Bishops to join him in a special act of entrusting the world to the Virgin of Fatima, renewed the consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary made previously by Pope Pius XII and Pope Paul VI.

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¹All papal quotations are taken from *L'Osservatore Romano* (Eng. Ed.) and/or *The Seers of Fatima* (Fatima: Office of the Postulation, May, 1991 and May 1992).

For a recent interpretation of Pope John Paul II's relationship to the mystery and message of Fatima see, Timothy Tindal-Robertson, *Fatima, Russia and Pope John Paul II: How Mary Intervened to Deliver Russia from Marxist Atheism, May 13, 1981—December 25, 1991* (Devon: Augustine Publishing Company, 1991).

Five years later, on May 13, 1989, the Holy Father signed the decree declaring two of the seers of Fatima, Francisco and Jacinta Marto, "Venerable."²

John Paul II returned to Fatima on May 13, 1991, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of his attempted assassination by thanking Our Lady of Fatima for her mediation on his behalf. Two days after this second pilgrimage to Fatima, Pope John Paul II said: "My Pilgrimage to Fatima this year had a particular purpose: to give thanks for saving the Pope's life on May 13, 1981—exactly ten years ago. I consider this entire decade to be a free gift, given to me in a special way by Divine Providence—a special responsibility was given to me that I might continue to serve the Church by exercising the ministry of Peter."

The Holy Father also made that journey to Fatima in 1991 to thank the Blessed Virgin for the political events that had recently transpired in Russia and Eastern Europe. He noted that there appeared to be a providential opening for a "new evangelization" of those very countries that had experienced many years of religious persecution. He attributed these changes to the intercession of Our Lady of Fatima and those who have heeded her plea for prayer and penance. At Fatima, the Holy Father entrusted the "new evangelization" to the care of the Blessed Virgin:

Mary's message at Fatima can be synthesized in these clear, initial words of Christ: "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15). The events which have taken place on our European continent, particularly in central and eastern Europe, give this gospel appeal a contemporary meaning on the threshold of the third millennium. These events compel us to think in a special way about Fatima. The heart of the Mother of God is the heart of a Mother who cares not only for individuals, but also for entire peoples and nations. This

²Congregatio pro Causis Sanctorum, *Canonizationis servi Dei, Francisco Marto, puer (1908-1919): Positio super virtutibus* (Rome, 1988). Congregatio pro Causis Sanctorum, *Canonizationis servae Dei, Hyacinthae Marto, puellae (1910-1920): Positio super virtutibus* (Rome, 1988). Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, *The Heroic Virtues of Jacinta and Francisco Marto* (Washington, NJ: Ave Maria Institute Press, 1990).

heart is totally dedicated to the saving mission of her Son: Christ, the redeemer of the world, the Redeemer of men.

These facts alone, as well as the several profound addresses of the Holy Father on the topic of Fatima, are enough to draw the attention of the Church to a new consideration of the apparition. Pope John Paul II's homilies on the subject point both to a spiritual and pastoral program for our time that unfolds in a systematic way from the actual content of the Fatima message.

In this paper I shall attempt to attain three related ends: I shall first provide a synopsis of the apparitions and the message of Our Lady of Fatima. Then I shall consider the propagation of the message in our country over the course of the past seventy-five years and the emphases that would seem to need some correction in view of the direction provided by Pope John Paul II. In conclusion, I shall advance a spirituality and plan of pastoral action suggested by the Holy Father's analysis of the phenomenon of Fatima that might serve to correct some vexatious contemporary aberrations in the area of popular piety. It is my hope that this brief journey into the area of a private revelation that has received the full approbation of the Universal Church will highlight the timeliness and significance of the "mystery of Fatima" for the Church in North America at the conclusion of the twentieth century.

I

THE MYSTERY OF FATIMA

Sister Lucia, the surviving seer of Fatima, recorded in her memoirs several visions of angels prior to the appearances of the Blessed Virgin.³ On three of these occasions, an angel spoke to her and her young cousins, Jacinta and Francisco, directly outside of the small village of Aljustrel—a short

³Sister Mary Lucia of the Immaculate Heart, *Fatima in Lucia's own Words: Sister Lucia's Memoirs*, ed. by Louis Kondor, S.V.D.; trans. by the Dominican Nuns of the Perpetual Rosary of Fatima (Fatima, Portugal: Postulation Center, 1976). All citations from the *Memoirs* of Sr. Lucia are from this source.

walk from the parish church of Fatima. The heavenly messenger prepared them not only to see, but also, more importantly, to heed the message of the Mother of God. In these visions which Lucia later understood as catechetical, there was a marked call to penance and union with Christ truly present in the Eucharist.

Sister Lucia has stated that the Blessed Virgin appeared to her on two occasions after the six celebrated apparitions at the Cova da Iria of 1917. The first of these visitations took place in the Dorothean convent in Pontevedra, Spain, on December 10, 1925. On that occasion, Our Lady, accompanied by the Christ-child, asked for reparation through the devotion of the Five First Saturdays. Sister Lucia claims that the Virgin again appeared to her in Tuy, Spain, in June of 1929, requesting that the Holy Father in union with all of the Bishops of the world consecrate Russia to her Immaculate Heart. It was as a result of this apparition that Lucia came to understand and articulate the Blessed Virgin's role in the communication of divine grace.

Although these apparitions have been widely popularized through the publication of Sister Lucia's journal and have elicited a response from at least three popes and scores of bishops, the core of the Fatima message is found in the six apparitions that took place at the Cova da Iria on the thirteenth day of each month from May to October of 1917. These six heavenly interventions, strictly speaking, comprise the "mystery of Fatima." It is specifically the message of the Lady of the Cova that has won the approval of the Bishops of Fatima and the esteem of the Universal Church.

The pilgrim to Aljustrel, Pontevedra and Tuy quickly discovers that, although a form of private cult does surround the site of the angel's apparitions in Aljustrel, Pontevedra and—even more markedly—Tuy have remained obscure convent chapels with little or no sign of any cult. In fact, the chapel in Tuy bears no visible acknowledgement of a heavenly visitation. The Cova da Iria, however, is unquestionably *the sanctuary of Fatima* and the font of the message. The Bishops of Fatima envision themselves as the guardians of this sanctuary and message. In commenting on Fatima, the

Bishops of Rome have consistently focused their attention on the content of these six apparitions. Consequently, the substance of these six apparitions should provide the proper matrix for discussion of the authentic message of Fatima.

Unlike a number of alleged apparitions in vogue at the moment, the phenomena and message of Fatima are notably simple. On six occasions, three uneducated children saw the Mother of God and experienced not only her tender maternal love for them but also the love of God that fills her Immaculate Heart. In fact, the children's first request of Mary in the May apparition was to be taken to heaven so that they might always be with her and the Lord whom they perceived in the "light that emanated from her heart."

Visually, the children encountered "a beautiful lady dressed in white, poised over a holm-oak sapling, more brilliant than the sun, radiating a sparkling light." On June 13, 1917, the Blessed Virgin revealed her heart to the children. On July 13, 1917, she showed them the reality of hell. The Blessed Virgin permitted the children to see the reality of salvation from two antithetical vantage points. In the heart of Mary, they recognized the beauty of grace and union with God. In the harrowing vision of hell, they experienced the emptiness of sin and the rupture it causes between Creator and creature and among human beings. These "visions" of Mary's heart and of hell, more than any other aspect of the phenomena, prompted the children to join Mary by prayer and acts of voluntary penance in the work of saving souls from the fires of hell and leading them into the light of God's love.

On October 13, 1917, more than seventy-thousand spectators witnessed a solar phenomenon that has come to be known as the "miracle of the sun." The children perceived the marvel as heaven's confirmation of the message communicated to them by the "Lady of the Rosary." They saw Jesus and St. Joseph with the Blessed Virgin and understood that, through the apparition, God was offering the world peace and reconciliation.

The message of Fatima is, likewise, simple and to the point. On each occasion, the Blessed Virgin asked the children to

pray the rosary for peace in the world. She pleaded that all people turn away from sin in order to love Jesus Christ and put his word into practice. She summoned the three children and, through them, every member of the Church to offer to God all of the sacrifices involved in the faithful performance of daily duty. She requested that all embrace the cross by accepting human suffering as a means of atoning for sins and leading others to union with God.

The Blessed Virgin also came with a word of prophecy. She spoke of Russia and a movement that would seek to spread atheism and revolt against God's law throughout the world. She revealed that the Church and, in particular, the Holy Father would have a great deal to suffer. She promised that in the end her Immaculate Heart would triumph over the forces of evil in the world and a period of peace would be granted to the human race.

A wonder of Fatima that is sometimes overlooked is the extraordinary response of the three small children to the Blessed Mother's requests. In their personal appropriation of the message of Our Lady, the children spent themselves in long hours of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, penance and regular acts of voluntary mortification. Everything they did became an act of charity offered to God in order to bring peace to the world and save sinners from eternal loss. It should be noted that Jacinta was nine years old when she died and Francisco, ten. By the time of their demise, each of the children had attained a high degree of sanctity as a result of their response to the message of the Blessed Virgin. As noted above, on May 13, 1989, the Church formally declared that Jacinta and Francisco Marto had practiced the theological and infused moral virtues to a heroic degree.

In a homily preached at the Shrine of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Washington, New Jersey, on May 13, 1989, Cardinal Edouard Gagnon, then President of the Pontifical Council for the Family, explained that the Church had proclaimed the virtue of Jacinta and Francisco heroic not because they had seen the Blessed Virgin nor the angel nor the Miracle of the Sun. "No, Jacinta and Francisco are venerable," the Cardinal said, "because they responded heroically to Our

Lady's plea for personal conversion, prayer and reparation, at the price of great personal sacrifices."

Following the lead of Pope John Paul II, the Fatima message may be interpreted and explained in terms of evangelization, catechesis and consecration to Mary—all of which are specifically addressed to the needs of our difficult century.

Evangelization

The Virgin of Fatima came to summon the members of the Church through Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco to a life of faith and repentance, terminating in union with her Son. During his first visit to the Cova da Iria, Pope John Paul II explained why the Church has so enthusiastically embraced the message of Our Lady of Fatima: "The first words that the Messiah addressed to humanity are: 'Repent, and believe in the Gospel' (Mk 1:15). The message of Fatima is, in its basic nucleus, a call to conversion and repentance, as is the Gospel. This call was uttered at the beginning of the twentieth century. The author of the message seems to have read with special insight the 'signs of the times,' the signs of our times."

Reflecting on his second visit to Fatima, Pope John Paul II again stressed the evangelical nature of the Fatima experience: "In its essential content, the message of Fatima, which was entrusted to simple children, is a reminder of Christ's words: 'Repent and believe in the Gospel; the Kingdom of God is at hand.' The call to conversion, penance and prayer is a fundamental truth of the Gospel. The Church confirms this again and again. Therefore, the message of Fatima has her approval. Centered on this fact, during our century, the Church's experience of Fatima has developed in connection with a special entrustment to the Heart of the Mother of the Redeemer."

In soliciting prayer and sacrifice at the beginning of the twentieth century to save "poor sinners" from the fires of hell and especially to lead "Russia" back to the faith, Our Lady initiated an extensive program of evangelization. At the end of the century, Pope John Paul II has committed all of the energies of the Church to a worldwide evangelical agenda

that has come to be known as the “new evangelization.”⁴ During his second visit to Fatima, Pope John Paul II related Fatima to this “new evangelization.” Speaking to the Episcopal Conference of Portugal, the Holy Father said:

In 1917, here at Fatima, Our Lady, with motherly persistence, called all of humanity to conversion and prayer. From a distance of seventy-five years, many things have changed on the European and global scene, and numerous events have taken place during the course of this century, especially in the last few years. Fatima, absorbed in the quiet listening to God which characterizes her, continues to be a constant point of reference and of appeal to living the Gospel.

From the Cova da Iria, a comforting light seems to spread, full of hope which gives light to the facts that characterize the end of this millennium. A light, first of all, directed to you, pastors of the Church in Portugal, the country at the western extreme of Europe and opening on to the vast Atlantic Ocean. This light persuades you to act with courage to promote a *New Evangelization* of the European continent, troubled by a broad theoretical and practical atheism which seems to want to build a new materialistic civilization. Moreover, it will be necessary to awaken and nourish in all of your communities an intense missionary awareness, so that, conscious of the gifts they have received, all of the members of God's people may give a total response to Jesus Christ, in imitation of Mary, patroness of your nation.

Catechesis

A casual journey into the Fatima event reveals that the Blessed Virgin came not only to evangelize all of the people of the world through the three children; she came also as a teacher, to confirm, enliven and strengthen the faith of all the members of the Church in a century marred by atheism, philosophical relativism, materialism and hedonism.

The Church's *General Catechetical Directory* defines catechesis as that form of the ministry of the word that “is intended to make one's faith become living, conscious and

⁴Two Papal Documents are indispensable in any consideration of the concepts of “evangelization” and the “new evangelization”: Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* and Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter *Missio redemptoris*. The latter document is, in a sense, the “Magna Carta” of John Paul II's program of the “new evangelization.”

active, *through the light of instruction.*" The children of Fatima clearly grew in their knowledge and practice of the faith as a direct result of the Blessed Virgin's catechetical instructions. After the very first encounter with the Blessed Virgin, the one driving motivation of their lives was to lead others into the light of the true faith through prayer and penance.⁵

The Virgin appeared to Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco to reaffirm the sacred deposit of faith in a Church assaulted by the modernist heresy, that lethal form of dogmatic relativism which had been identified and condemned by Pope Saint Pius X several years before the apparitions at Fatima. Mary's Fatima catechesis gave emphasis to the fact that the Church is unable to bear witness to the resurrection of her Lord, Jesus Christ, apart from her faithful adherence to and proclamation of that sacred deposit entrusted to her by the Lord himself. In a maternal and catechetical mode of instruction, the Blessed Virgin presented a lesson on the essential role of doctrine in the Christian life to an age that had already grown hostile to the notion of revealed truth by the year 1917.

It is certainly worthwhile to contemplate Mary's wonderful pedagogical manner in each of her encounters with the children. Her methodology has already been noted in our discussion of the phenomena of the apparitions: their vision of Mary's heart, their momentary perception of the sufferings of hell and the spectacular miracle of the sun. It is likewise helpful to enumerate the various truths that Our Lady presented to the children in the course of what we might call her six catechetical instructions. In an exceedingly simple manner, Mary accented each article of the Creed and taught the children to respond to the God of love who divulges his mind and heart to his children in the revealed doctrine of the faith.

Father René Laurentin has noted that, although genuine private revelations do not transmit truths to the Church that are not already contained in the deposit of faith, they none-

⁵See my "Mary, Catechist at Fatima," in *Exploring Fatima*, ed. by Frederick L. Miller, S.T.D. (Washington, NJ: Ave Maria Institute Press, 1989).

theless highlight and accentuate certain truths of the deposit that may be eclipsed or ignored at a particular moment of history, thereby causing harm to the spiritual life of the people of God. Consequently, it might be legitimately suggested that each authentic instance of private revelation contains a dogmatic truth or truths specifically needed at a particular moment in the life of the Church.⁶

The following are several among the many catechetical truths, dogmatic, moral and spiritual, taught to the children by Our Lady of Fatima—truths that certainly need to be accentuated and articulated as the Church approaches the beginning of the twenty-first century:

- 1) Although many people in the twentieth century are indifferent and even antagonistic toward Christ and his teachings and in spite of the initiation of a worldwide movement bent on destroying the Church, God the Father continues to offer his merciful love to all in the gift of his Son.
- 2) The mission of Christ is essentially redemptive. He came into the world to offer his life in sacrifice for the salvation of all people. In Christ, God suffers as a result of sin. In him, the Almighty loves the fallen race with a human heart and yearns for human love in return.
- 3) In conversion from mortal sin, the human person begins to love the good God. This love continues and grows to perfection as each individual seeks to make reparation for sin through acts of charity. When Christians surrender unreservedly to Christ, they console the Lord and satiate his thirst for souls.
- 4) Through the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit working in the Church, the Christian, through union with Christ becomes “perfectly willing to spend all and to be expended in the interest of souls” (2 Cor. 12:15) and makes up in his or her “own body what has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the

⁶See René Laurentin’s “Sacred Scripture and the Fatima Message,” in *Exploring Fatima*, ed. by Frederick L. Miller, S.T.D. (Washington, NJ: Ave Maria Institute Press, 1989).

Church" (Col. 1:24). In other words, every Christian is called to share without reservation in Christ's redeeming work. This is achieved by conversion, fidelity to daily duty, prayer (especially the rosary), acts of charity, acceptance of sufferings permitted by God and voluntary acts of penance.

- 5) The Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, following Mary as model and guide, unites her self-sacrifice to Christ's and becomes his co-worker in the world. The collective suffering of the Church as a body, and of each individual Christian, joined as it is to the passion of Christ through the sacraments, brings the saving grace of the Lord to souls. The Church's active role in the application of the grace of redemption is perhaps the major stress of the Fatima message. It might be noted that herein one discerns the specific pneumatology of the Fatima catechesis. (Parenthetically, it might also be noted that the theme of the Church's role in the redemption of the world is often conspicuously absent from many formulations of contemporary ecclesiology and is all but forgotten in certain quarters as an essential component of the Church's ascetico-mystical doctrine. This tragic deficiency leads to either the denial or the devaluation of the Eucharist as the redemptive sacrifice of Christ and his Church. Hence, the call to Eucharistic reparation is at the heart of the Fatima catechesis.)
- 6) Every dimension of the spiritual world is underscored in the Fatima message: the Trinity, angels, demons, the existence of the immortal human soul, heaven, hell, purgatory, the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come (in which the Blessed Virgin already participates).
- 7) Our Lady of Fatima unambiguously reaffirmed the doctrine of hellfire (i.e., the pain of the senses) and the real possibility of eternal damnation as a result of sin.
- 8) Our Lady of Fatima taught the children the essential importance of the Vicar of Christ in the daily life of the Church, as well as the Holy Father's mystic iden-

tification with Christ, the crucified bridegroom of the Church.

- 9) The Blessed Virgin led the children to understand that union with Christ in his suffering, death and resurrection leads to true peace in this life, perfect union with him in heaven and physical resurrection on the last day.
- 10) Mary revealed that her spiritual motherhood is the way to fidelity to Christ and eternal life. Through total consecration to her, the Christian accepts and benefits from this “motherhood in the Holy Spirit” and is drawn progressively deeper into the mystery of Christ.

Acting as legate of Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Sodano preached at the Sanctuary of Fatima on May 13, 1992—the seventy-fifth anniversary of the apparitions. In his homily, the Vatican Secretary of State situated the specific “charism” of Fatima in the Mother of God’s evangelizing catechesis. He said:

It is now seventy-five years since Mary, from this place of Fatima, has been educating not only believing persons but also the nations of the earth, to conversion, concord, communion, solidarity, fraternity, peace, the synthesis of all good and the precious gift for which we should make supplication to God for humanity. This is the “charism” of Fatima, transmitted by Mary to three simple and poor children, privileged interlocutors of the wonders of the Kingdom of God.

Consecration to Mary

Pope John Paul II envisions Fatima as a penetrating manifestation of the Blessed Virgin Mary’s spiritual maternity. He notes that Our Lady came visibly into our world in order to draw all people away from sin and to her Divine Son. On each of his papal visits to the Cova da Iria, the Holy Father has evoked the memory of Mary standing at the foot of the cross: Mary, the mother of God’s Son and the mother of all of the disciples (Jn. 19:25-27). Her role, he has observed, the very *raison d’être* of her appearances at Fatima, is to draw the

human race maternally into the mystery of redemptive love. Within the context of his reflection on the consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Pope challenges each of the faithful to entrust him- or herself to Mary's "motherhood in the Spirit," so as to be introduced deeper into the mystery of Christ and his healing and transforming love. He suggests that an intimate self-abandonment to Mary and her motherhood is the specific way to a saving relationship with Christ in our difficult times. For instance, during his first visit in 1982, John Paul II stated:

Consecrating the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary means drawing near, through the mother's intercession, to the very fountain of life that sprang from Golgotha. This fountain pours forth unceasingly redemption and grace. In it, reparation is made continually for the sins of the world. It is a ceaseless source of new life and holiness.

Consecrating the world to the Immaculate Heart of the mother means returning beneath the cross of the Son. It means consecrating this world to the pierced heart of the Savior, bringing it back to the very source of its redemption. Redemption is always greater than man's sin and the "sin of the world." The power of the redemption is infinitely superior to the whole range of evil in man and the world.

The heart of the mother is aware of this, more than any other heart in the whole universe, visible and invisible.

And so she calls us.

She not only calls us to be converted: she calls us to accept her motherly help to return to the source of redemption.

During his second visit to Fatima, the Holy Father again carried the world back to the foot of the cross, solemnly consecrating all peoples to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. He likewise entrusted the movement of the "new evangelization" to her maternal care:

For the second time, I am before you in this shrine to kiss your hands because you stood so firmly near the cross of your Son which is the cross of the whole history of humankind, and also of our century.

Now, as ever, you rest your gaze on your sons and daughters who already belong to the third millennium. Always and now, you watch with the greatest motherly care, defending with your powerful intercession the dawn of Christ's light in the midst of peoples and nations.

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Always, and forever you remain, because the only Son of God, your Son, entrusted all humanity to you when, dying on the cross, he brought us into the new beginning of everything which exists. Your universal motherhood, O Virgin Mary, is the sure anchor of salvation for the whole of humankind.

Himself formed in the school of St. Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort's *True Devotion to Mary* and well-versed in St. Maximilian Kolbe's brilliant theology of Marian consecration, Pope John Paul II understands entrustment to Mary in terms of the "perfect renewal of the Baptismal vows" through her maternal mediation. In the mind of the Holy Father, a person entrusts him- or herself unreservedly to Mary so as to fully embrace the consecration to Jesus Christ effected through the sacrament of baptism. Giving all to Mary—body, soul, material possessions and spiritual treasures—the believer places him- or herself in the hands of the Virgin and thereby begs the Holy Spirit living and working in and through Mary to accomplish the healing and transformation that has as its term a true disciple and co-worker of Jesus Christ. In the context of the Fatima message, this total abandonment to Mary's motherhood in the Spirit opens the Christian to her evangelical and catechetical "ministry." Not only is the believer formed in the Christian life by the message of Fatima, but he or she is also formed to evangelize and catechize others in the Catholic faith. Consecration to Mary is the mysterious milieu in which this maternal formation takes place.⁷

In summary, it might be stated that the "charism" of Fatima includes a personal spiritual dimension as well as an ap-

⁷Pope John Paul II has spoken frequently on the topic of consecration to the Blessed Virgin. The major papal text, however, remains the encyclical letter *Redemptoris mater*. See esp. no. 48: "I would like to recall, among the many witnesses and teachers of this [Marian] spirituality, the figure of Saint Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort, who proposes consecration to Christ through the hands of Mary, as an effective means for Christians to live faithfully their baptismal commitments. I am pleased to note that in our own time too new manifestations of this spirituality and devotion are not lacking."

For a thorough survey of Pope John Paul II's thought on Marian consecration, see Arthur Calkins, S.T.D., *Totus tuus: John Paul II's Program of Marian Consecration and Entrustment* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992).

ostolic component that is communal in nature. Through the Fatima message, individual Christians are challenged to turn more resolutely from sin and its allurements and to live by faith in the Son of God. The challenge leads them to sense their own helplessness and seek the aid of the Lady of the message to obtain grace. It is specifically in abandonment of self to Mary's "motherhood in the Spirit" that one hears the deeper resonances of her call at Fatima to faith and conversion. This challenge and instruction, within the context of a filial relationship with the Mother of God, prepares the disciple of Christ for the work of the "new evangelization," that is, the feat of calling the people of our age to faith, conversion and a life of charity. In short, Mary evangelized and catechized at Fatima precisely to form those who will play an effective role in the "new evangelization," that movement to which Pope John Paul II has invited the Church to devote all of her energies.

II

THE TRANSMISSION OF THE MESSAGE AND PASTORAL DIFFICULTIES

On October 13, 1930, His Excellency José Alves Correia da Silva, Bishop of Leiria, concluded a twelve-year investigation of the apparitions at Fatima. As ordinary of the diocese, he discerned, with the assistance of a group of renowned priests and theologians, that the events reported by Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco were authentically supernatural and worthy of belief by the Christian faithful. The cult that had grown up at the Cova da Iria thereby became official and began to exert an even greater influence on the Catholic people of Portugal.

From the days of the apparitions, the Portuguese people embraced Our Lady of Fatima as their Queen and visited the impoverished village of Fatima, often at great personal expense. In the thirties, forties and throughout the fifties—years of intense enthusiasm for Marian piety—a number of people from Europe and North America began to journey to Fatima on pilgrimage. As a result of these pilgrimages and a

number of publications on the apparitions in various languages, spiritual movements were initiated throughout the world by those who had received the news of the apparitions and sought to respond to the demands of the message. Naturally, the objective of these movements was to promote knowledge of the events that had taken place at the Cova da Iria and to stimulate a response.

Since Our Lady of Fatima had spoken of the outbreak of a war more devastating than the one that raged as the apparitions were taking place and predicted the spread of communism throughout the world, great interest was generated in the significance of Fatima in the light of impending world events. As these prophecies became realities, several acts of the Church generated further interest in what had taken place in the obscure village of Fatima in 1917. On October 31, 1942, His Holiness Pope Pius XII consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. On May 4, 1944, he instituted the Feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Two years later, on May 13, 1946, through a papal legate, he crowned an image of Our Lady of Fatima and proclaimed her "Queen of the World." On July 7, 1952, the same pontiff consecrated the Russian people to the Heart of Mary. It was widely understood throughout the Church that each of these events had been inspired by the message of Our Lady of Fatima.

After the conclusion of the Second World War, and throughout the early years of the "Cold War," enthusiasm for Fatima spread rapidly among Catholics in the United States. The major Fatima movement in North America was founded by the Reverend Monsignor Harold Colgan, a priest of the Archdiocese of Newark and pastor of St. Mary's Church in Plainfield, New Jersey, in 1947. What began as a simple parish sodality, dedicated to the daily rosary and voluntary acts of penance offered to God for peace in the world and the conversion of Russia, became, through John M. Haffert's expertise in promotion, public relations and the use of the media, a national and then an international organization known originally as the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima and more recently as the World Apostolate of Fatima.

In a short span of time, an insignificant parish society developed into a major national Catholic organization. Recently, a student researching the history of the Church in New Jersey explained the reason for the phenomenal growth of the Fatima Apostolate in the United States:

Although the Blue Army began as a means toward personal holiness through devotion to Mary in a single New Jersey parish, it quickly became a mass movement of international scale. This had never been the original intention of its founder or those first parishioners who joined him in his zeal for Fatima. However, this simple movement's appeal to an age fired by marian piety and anti-communist sentiment, and desirous of a return to a peaceful and secure America, cannot be underestimated. These deep religious and political convictions, coupled with shrewd selling-power and the development of mass media, insured that the message of Fatima and, consequently, the Blue Army would be known by millions of people throughout the world."⁸

Devotional in its orientation, the World Apostolate of Fatima continues to promote a response to the Fatima message. One becomes a member by: (1) pledging to pray the rosary each day; (2) offering to God the sacrifices demanded by daily duty; and (3) wearing the brown scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel as an act and sign of consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

The Apostolate seeks to promote knowledge of the apparition and a response to its message by introducing youth to Fatima through various programs, establishing prayer groups known as "Fatima Cells" in parishes, initiating the First Saturday Devotion and the dissemination of literature. New members are recruited by veteran members and also through the "Pilgrim Virgin Program." An image of Our Lady of Fatima travels from diocese to diocese and parish to parish. The "visit" is an occasion for catechesis on the Fatima

⁸Michael Muller, "An Example of the Place of Marian Devotion in the Church of New Jersey in the Period after the Second World War: The Origin and Early History of the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima" (unpublished paper; South Orange, NJ: Seton Hall University, 1993).

message and an opportunity to make the Apostolate's "Pledge." *Soul Magazine*, the Apostolate's bi-monthly publication, is the major journal in North America devoted to the advancement of Fatima. The Shrine of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Washington, New Jersey, the center of the movement in the United States, is visited by tens of thousands of pilgrims each year.

Two other notable Fatima movements function in the United States today: The Fatima Family Apostolate, founded and led by the Reverend Robert Fox, seeks to strengthen family life by encouraging parents and children to live the Fatima message in a positive and legitimate postconciliar way. Throughout the years, Father Fox has remained in close touch with the sanctuary in Portugal, winning the confidence of the officials whose task it is to preserve the authentic message of Fatima. The movement's bi-monthly journal, *The Fatima Family Messenger*, is a reliable source of uplifting information on the subject of Fatima and family spirituality.

The Reverend Nicholas Gruner's Fatima Crusader movement, on the other hand, lacks ecclesiastical support and has made criticism of the pope and bishops its central theme. The self-appointed mission of Fr. Gruner is to encourage people to petition the Holy Father to consecrate Russia *properly* to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, as requested by Our Lady at Tuy, Spain, in 1929. Several other groups dedicated to the promotion of Fatima and several minor sanctuaries of Our Lady of Fatima are spread through the United States.

Looking back over the history of the various Fatima movements in the United States over the past forty years, it would seem that a great amount of good has been accomplished for individuals and for the Church through the promotion of the Fatima message. It is not an exaggeration to state, for instance, that millions of people have made the "Pledge" of the World Apostolate of Fatima. May we doubt that some of these have entered into new and previously unrealized depths of prayer and charity as a result of their discovery of the charism of Fatima? I personally am aware of a number of

young priests and religious in North America who claim to have discovered their priestly and/or religious vocation through their contact with the Fatima message. My five-year experience as director of the National Center of the World Apostolate of Fatima and Shrine of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Washington, New Jersey, confirms my conviction that many Catholics, including the young, continue to be aided spiritually by the Fatima message.

It must be admitted, however, that there are various dangers hidden in nearly every good thing. I shall point out what I consider to be several obstacles that may possibly damage or even destroy the supernatural effectiveness of the promotion of the Fatima message. These hazards seem to menace many of the Marian movements of our times, especially those founded on private revelation, and even threaten to devastate their credibility in the postconciliar Church.

As noted above, the core of the charism of Fatima is a personal call to faith in Jesus Christ and conversion from sin. The charism also includes formation in the apostolate of leading others to Christ through prayer and penance. Understood in this light, few in the Church would hesitate to embrace the propagation of the Fatima devotion. After all, is it not simply the call to live faithfully the grace of baptism and confirmation? Obviously, the personal and apostolic formation that results from the practice of the Fatima message is perfectly suited to the service of the Church and her apostolate. Those attitudes and contemporary tendencies which threaten to distract people from the full evangelical force of the Fatima message and to destroy a charism given to the Church specifically for our difficult times must, then, be examined.

First of all, one discovers a tendency, especially among those not well-catechized in their faith, to become too absorbed in the external events and details of apparitions. This certainly has been the case of a number of overly enthusiastic devotees of Fatima. It is important to explain that the vision of Our Lady's Immaculate Heart surrounded by thorns, for instance, or the harrowing vision of hell, or the Miracle of the Sun are not ends in themselves but rather facets of the

Fatima charism that point toward and support the core of the message: the call to union with Christ through faith and conversion.

Two details of the message have proven to be a serious distraction to many Fatima supporters: the so-called “secret of 1960” and the nature of the collegial consecration of Russia to Mary’s Immaculate Heart. It is a well-known fact that many advocates of Fatima lost heart and abandoned all interest in the apparitions when Pope John XXIII decided not to divulge the “secret” that Our Lady gave to Lucia for him. As a result of the theory repeatedly presented by Father Nicholas Gruner in his *Fatima Crusader* as fact, many Catholics today harbor deep hostility toward Pope John Paul II for not demanding that each bishop of the world join him in consecrating Russia to Mary’s heart. An excessive emphasis on both the secret and the proper way of carrying out the consecration has led many to ignore or forget the essence of the message of Fatima and even to be angry at the Church for not satisfying raw human curiosity and willfulness.

Related to this is the danger of isolating the Blessed Virgin from Jesus and the sum of his salvific teachings. It has not been uncommon for Fatima devotees to speak of Our Lady in such a way that non-believers might be led to think that she is the object of Catholic worship and the sole director of world events.

Vatican II’s fundamental mariological guideline that Mary always be presented in her relationship to both Christ and his Church demands that a “catechesis” on Fatima tender Mary as the “Handmaid of the Lord” who came visibly into our world to perform a maternal service for the Church. Above everything else, it is necessary to insure that this “catechesis” not terminate in the rudimentary telling of the story of the apparitions or the details of the sensational events, but rather in a catechetical explication of the various dogmatic, moral and spiritual truths presented so simply by Our Lady to the three children.

As noted above, the specific “charism” of Fatima is Mary as evangelist and catechist, forming apostles who will work for the conversion of all people to Christ. Stated simply, it is un-

sound and even dangerous to envision the Fatima apparitions or, for that matter, any private revelation as the center of one's spiritual life and religious practice. The Fatima message is certainly not an end in itself. Rather, it was given to lead people, and, in a particular way, those who have fallen away from the Church, back to the ordinary path of Christian observance. Pastoral difficulties will be eliminated or at least minimized if Fatima (or any other approved private revelation) is presented within the general context of the Church's dogmatic, moral and spiritual teaching and used as a means of guiding people to live according to that teaching.

Another particularly serious obstacle is discerned in confusing and intertwining the Fatima event with other alleged apparitions and locutions that do not enjoy the approbation of the Church. In the United States, we are witnessing some rather strange and pathetic occurrences. A number of people are claiming to see the Blessed Virgin and receive messages from her for the rest of humankind—messages that lay claim to “inside knowledge” of future world events. In the past, it was those on the fringe of Christianity who regularly announced chastisement and impending doom. Today, many Catholics who are fond of apparitions are more than ready to believe reports of one catastrophe after another!

Sociologists claim that this sort of thing emerges whenever society is in crisis. Our history as a Church reveals that internal crises likewise bring apocalyptic hysteria to the surface. Clearly American society and the Church in our country face multiple crises in these times. There is no need to recite the long list of woes. We are all too familiar with our national problems. Simply consider the alarming percentage of our young people who come from broken families and never find a way out of their personal dysfunction. The Church experiences her own crippling form of dysfunction: secularism and dogmatic and moral modernism have infected many members of the Church, a number of whom continue to look for guidance and direction from their misguided leaders and are being misled.

National polls show that many Catholics no longer feel nourished and supported in their parish communities and

experience alienation from the clergy and religious. Consequently, it is not difficult for those self-proclaimed mystics who speak of heavenly visions and locutions from Our Lady to find followers among those who are starved for security and yearn for some experience of the supernatural. As a result of this contemporary form of gnosis, it becomes difficult to convince “the initiated” of the value of the ordinary Christian life, lived in an extraordinary way through the practice of the Fatima message.

Parenthetically, it might be observed that a number of people, including those who work for the media, are beginning to suspect that the “apparition market” is wide open and, indeed, a lucrative business with a host of credulous faithful for its prey. On more than one occasion, I have heard the Most Reverend Alberto Amaral, the recently retired Bishop of Leiria-Fatima, warn that the message of Fatima must never again be used as a means of personal financial gain.

As has already been stated, the proper end of an attraction to Fatima and its message is a life of faith and conversion focused on bringing the world to life in Christ. This “end” is compromised and even destroyed when an attraction to Fatima terminates not in the ordinary Christian life, but rather in an absorbing fascination with every and any alleged apparition and locution.

Another serious distraction to Fatima is politics. It is well known that the success of the Fatima movements in North America in the 1950s was in no small part the result of a politically motivated anti-communist mentality. Fatima, with its promise of the downfall of Marxism, became a means of buttressing the conviction that American capitalism would ultimately triumph over Russian communitarianism. In a sense, Fatima became both a bat in the hands of capitalists of a religious persuasion and a sort of parlor game—a pious method of fortune-telling the future of international politics.

The Blessed Virgin surely spoke of Russia at Fatima. Interestingly, the children presumed that “Russia” was an unfortunate individual who was in need of many prayers and sacrifices to be brought back to Jesus and his Church. In spite of their naivete, Mary did reveal to the Church through them

that a movement was being organized in Russia that would spread error, corruption and hatred of the Church throughout the entire world. She spoke without ambiguity of the effects that this movement would have on the twentieth century: "Russia will spread her errors throughout the world, causing wars and persecutions of the Church. The good will be martyred; the Holy Father will have much to suffer; various nations will be annihilated."

After seventy-five years, it becomes clearer that Our Lady came to Fatima not only for the people of Russia but also for all those in our times who would be caught in the snares of atheism and revolt against God's commandments and his Church. For over five-hundred years, the West has been the scene of a systematic and philosophical assault on God, the gospel of Christ and the Catholic Church. The Blessed Virgin came into a world and Church torn apart by the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, the Masonic movements of the eighteenth century, strong currents of philosophical and practical atheism in the nineteenth century—all arriving at a climax in the Marxism of the early twentieth century. The Mother of God came with a message of reconciliation and peace for all people. She came to show the way out of the darkness of unbelief and sin.⁹

As the Blessed Virgin foretold at Fatima, the philosophy of atheistic materialism has surely affected people and societies in manifold ways during the past seventy-five years. As the beginning of the third millennium approaches, it is no longer possible, if it ever was, to speak of Russia alone needing conversion. For the Christian at the end of the twentieth century, Russia becomes the symbol of the universal need for a new, fresh proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ: the symbol of the dire necessity of a "new evangelization."

When the Fatima message is presented within the general context of the Church's teachings and used as a means—Our Lady's means—of calling her children to a life of faith and conversion from sin and forming them for the apostolate of

⁹See Warren H. Carroll, *1917: Red Banners—White Mantle* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press, 1981).

the Church, a wonderful charism is placed at the service of the Church and her pastoral ministry. Individuals grow in personal holiness and become sensitized to the world's greatest need—the need for salvation in Christ.

However, the proper teleology of the Fatima charism may be, and has certainly in the past been, effectually neutralized by those who concentrate solely on the supernatural phenomena or one or another isolated detail of the message or who seek to use the message as a means of political analysis or fortune-telling. Perhaps the most deadly harm is done to the charism of Fatima by those who seek to intertwine the message with alleged apparitions and other so-called mystical phenomena that have not been discerned as authentic by the competent ecclesiastical authorities. Each of these tendencies renders the charism of Fatima sterile and certainly impedes the pastoral effectiveness of the charism in the realm of evangelization for which it was given to the Church.

III

FATIMA: A SPIRITUALITY AND PASTORAL PROGRAM

In October of 1992, leaders of the various Fatima movements throughout the world met at the Cova da Iria to reflect on the contemporary significance of the apparition and to discern the paths these Apostolates might pursue in the future. It was resolved that each of the movements should maintain a close alliance with the sanctuary in Fatima in order to remain in contact with the genuine message of the Blessed Virgin. There was a unanimous sense that the spirituality of the movements needed to be deepened in order to prepare the membership for involvement in the "new evangelization."

When the pitfalls discussed in the previous section of this paper are avoided, a vibrant spirituality is able to develop organically from an individual's response to the message of Our Lady of Fatima. This spirituality may be characterized as *kerygmatic*, *apostolic* and *Marian*. It is worthwhile to reflect briefly on each of these dimensions which must of

necessity be components of any authentic spirituality for our times.

The Blessed Virgin's message at Fatima was a call to faith in Jesus Christ and conversion from sin. She simply repeated the first words Christ spoke in his public ministry: "The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Good News" (Mk. 1:14-15). During his first visit to Fatima, Pope John Paul II stated: "If the Church has accepted the message of Fatima, it is above all because that message contains a truth and a call whose basic content is the truth and the call of the Gospel itself. 'Repent, and believe in the Gospel'; these are the first words that the Messiah addressed to humanity. The message of Fatima is, in its basic nucleus, a call to conversion and repentance, as is the Gospel."

In a maternal way and in the manner of a catechist, the Blessed Virgin taught the children of Fatima to believe in Christ and to love him above all. She helped them to perceive that his human agony was the result of sin and unrequited love. She made them aware of their ability to console the Lord by working with him and in him for the salvation of others—especially those who are at odds with God and the precepts of the gospel.

The spirituality she proposed is deceptively simple. In presenting this "way" to young and illiterate children who immediately began to practice it generously, the Blessed Virgin revealed that any member of the Church who possesses the heart of a child will be able to join her in her work of cooperating in the restoration of supernatural life to souls. She asked that the faithful pray the rosary each day and offer God all of the sacrifices involved in fidelity to daily duty. Soliciting acts of charity for the conversion of sinners, the Blessed Mother challenged all believers to work with her for the salvation of every human person.

The rosary was the means proposed by the Blessed Virgin for attaining deeper union with Christ. It is interesting to note that in each of the six apparitions, Our Lady asked that the rosary be prayed by all believers each day. In the meditation on the mysteries of the redemptive Incarnation, Mary

keeps her Son before the eyes of her children who renew and deepen their love for him through daily meditation on the mysteries of the rosary. The rosary is a tool that places the Christian in frequent contact with the content of the Apostolic kerygma—the simple means Our Lady uses to call her children from sin to love for the crucified and risen Christ. Through this contact with the Lord, the believer experiences Christ's love for him and grows in the desire to requite that love by avoiding all sin and helping others to live in the grace of the Lord.

This love of Christ in a sinful, self-centered heart propels the devotee to the regular use of the sacrament of penance and also, in imitation of the Fatima children, in particular, Jacinta, to perform habitually voluntary acts of penance in reparation for sin. This spirituality, centered on the mysteries of the life of Christ, leads to an affective relationship with him in prayer, and, as Francisco teaches all who study his short life, especially in Eucharistic adoration.

This living bond with Christ simultaneously stimulates in each devotee an effective, apostolic love for those who are far from the kingdom of God and the desire to work for their salvation. From the date of the first apparition, the children's one driving motivation was to console Jesus by helping the Blessed Virgin through their acts of prayer and penance to lead people to contrition and living faith.

At Fatima, it was the Blessed Virgin herself, in her role as spiritual mother of each of Christ's disciples, who drew her children into this union with him and his Church. The maternal activity of Mary in behalf of the disciples constitutes one of the specific "charisms" that the Holy Spirit poured out over the Church on Pentecost—a charism that operates with astounding clarity and effectiveness in the mystery of the Fatima apparition. The children of Fatima experienced Mary's "motherhood in the Spirit" so profoundly that during the course of the first apparition, having lost all fear of death, they began to experience the desire to be with her and her son in the light of heaven. It was the gentle strength of her motherhood that drew them to offer themselves to Christ in sacrifice for the salvation of others.

The Blessed Virgin did not ask the children specifically to “consecrate” themselves to her. Obviously, they would not have immediately understood either the word or the concept. However, in asking them to offer themselves generously and without reservation to Christ for the salvation of others through her motherly mediation, Mary was leading them on the path of total consecration to her Immaculate Heart. Furthermore, by asking the Holy Father to consecrate all people and especially Russia to her, the Blessed Virgin invited the Church of the twentieth century to follow the path of Marian entrustment, therein guiding all believers to secure union with Christ and apostolic zeal for the salvation of the world.

In his 1982 visit to Fatima, Pope John Paul II intimated that consecration to the Heart of the Mother is the special way to the Heart of the Son for our times. He said:

Mary not only calls us to be converted; she calls us to accept her motherly help to return to the source of redemption. Consecrating ourselves to Mary means accepting her help to offer ourselves and the whole of mankind to him who is holy, infinitely holy; it means accepting her help—by having recourse to her motherly heart, which beneath the cross was opened to love for every human being, for the whole world—in order to offer the world, the individual human being, mankind as a whole, and all the nations to Him who is infinitely holy.

It is important to note that Fatima does not, in reality, constitute a unique “way” of Christian spirituality. What we have called the “charism” of Fatima is, in fact, nothing beyond the charism of Mary’s spiritual maternity that operates on behalf of all who believe in Christ and is consciously experienced through many different devotions and movements. However, the simple presentation of the Fatima story, and the explanation of the message within the context of the Church’s teaching, is in itself evangelical in the sense that it puts the Catholic people in contact with Mary as spiritual mother. Being drawn by the Holy Spirit to the heart of the mother of Jesus, the believer is simultaneously attracted by Mary to seek union with her Son and to participate in his saving work.

Those involved in the promotion of the Fatima devotion should frequently contemplate the Second Vatican Council's description of Mary's spiritual motherhood which explains the effectiveness of the "charism" of Fatima:

Devoutly meditating on her [Mary] and contemplating her in the light of the Word made man, the Church reverently penetrates more deeply into the great mystery of the Incarnation and becomes more and more like her spouse. Having entered deeply into the history of salvation, Mary, in a way, unites in her person and re-echoes the most important doctrines of the faith: and when she is the subject of preaching and veneration she prompts the faithful to come to her Son, to his sacrifice and to the love of the Father.¹⁰

The Fatima "charism," then, is nothing less than the Blessed Virgin herself, as spouse of the Holy Spirit and mother of all disciples, summoning Christians to know, love and serve her Son and teaching them to walk on the path of salvation. The knowledge of Mary's spiritual maternity obviously was not revealed at Fatima. This doctrine of the faith has been perceived and experienced by Christ's disciples since the day of Pentecost and perhaps even before the coming of the Holy Spirit. Fatima, however, does highlight the evangelical and catechetical dimensions of Mary as "Mother in the Holy Spirit" of all of Christ's disciples. It likewise seems to point clearly in the direction of the "new evangelization" proclaimed with such force and insistence by Pope John Paul II.

As noted above, the "spirituality" that develops out of the Fatima message is not meant to be an end in itself. It would certainly be unhealthy and even dangerous to base one's spiritual life exclusively on a private revelation. The "charism" of Fatima is, as recently stated, the Blessed Virgin in her role as spiritual mother summoning the disciple to believe in her Son and all that he has taught. It should lead the devotee into a more profound knowledge of the Church's teachings that bear testimony to the mystery of Christ and

¹⁰*Lumen gentium*, no. 65.

also into a personal encounter with that mystery within the context of the Church's spiritual tradition. In short, the charism of Fatima functions legitimately in a pastoral setting only when it leads people to the fullness of the faith and integrates them into the mainstream of Catholic spirituality and apostolate.

After seventy-five years, it is clearer than ever that God willed the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin at Fatima in order to initiate a worldwide program of evangelization and to prepare the members of the Church to participate in that movement. Through the children, Mary asked every member of the Church to believe in her Son and love him by praying the rosary each day and generously offering sacrifices to God for the conversion of others. She promised that she would help the Church in her struggles with the forces of evil and lead her to ultimate victory: "In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph. The Holy Father will consecrate Russia to me and she will be converted and a period of peace will be given to the world."

As the third millennium of Christianity approaches, His Holiness Pope John Paul II is challenging the Church to embark on a "new evangelization" of the entire world. In his encyclical letter *Missio Redemptoris*, he explains that there are many places in the world where the gospel of Christ has not yet been proclaimed. He also points out that the faith has grown weak and compromised in many of the so-called Christian nations. These nations, too, need to be led back to an authentic relationship with Christ and the Church through a "new evangelization." He states: "I sense that the moment has come to commit *all of the Church's energies* to a new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes*. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all people."¹¹

As we have observed, those who receive the Fatima message with an open heart are themselves evangelized by the Mother of all Christians. Through the charism of Fatima, Mary draws the devotee to join her through acts of prayer

¹¹*Missio redemptoris*, no. 3.

and penance in the work of leading the world to Christ. For the true practitioner of the Fatima devotion, every situation and difficulty becomes an occasion of offering sacrifices for others! Likewise, all prayer, especially the daily rosary, has the conversion of the world to Christ as its goal. Hence, the Fatima charism forms the believer to become a hidden source of fruitfulness for the new evangelization.

Might the Fatima movements, however, not perform a necessary service for the Church at this moment of history by preparing their members not only to pray and sacrifice for the conversion of others but also to be more consciously engaged in the work of evangelization, as are the Legion of Mary, the Knights of the Immaculata and other marian organizations? We recall Pope John Paul II's strong challenge: the Church must devote all of her energy to this work! With Our Lady of Fatima herself as model, each Fatima devotee should understand that he or she needs to be energetic in the work of leading others to Christ. A proper understanding of the finality of the Fatima message prepares the devotee to take up the work of proclaiming the sovereignty of Christ and the necessity of the Church for salvation in the manner that is proper to laypersons living in the world.

As we have noted earlier, the Blessed Virgin came not only to evangelize but also to instruct the children in the truths of the faith that bear witness to the full mystery of Christ. A proper reading of the Fatima story will reveal Mary as a catechist who in the simplest way addressed issues of faith that have become increasingly problematic in the modern world.

In the recent past, Pope John Paul II has presented the Church with a new catechetical summary and explanation of all of the truths revealed by God, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Just as the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* brought to completion and crowned the reforms of the Council of Trent, so this new compendium of the Catholic faith will complete and insure the proper implementation of the direction taken at the Second Vatican Council.

In a time of doctrinal confusion and compromise, the new catechism will be a tremendous resource for all Catholics and especially for those who are involved in apostolic work.

On occasion, members of the Fatima movements have been accused, and sometimes with some cause, of living within the confines of a preconiliar mindset. The new catechism will help them not only to be in touch with the authentic teaching of Vatican Council II, but it will also prepare them to transmit the faith as Our Lady did at Fatima.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* will help apostolate members understand in a more comprehensive way that Fatima is not an end in itself but rather a means to full participation in the life of grace. It is imperative that members of all apostolic movements obtain the new catechism, read it carefully with the help of those trained in theology and catechetics and, then, seek to transmit the content of the faith to others within the ambiance established by the catechism itself. When the new catechism is finally received and assimilated, the movements will have a marvelous "tool" that will empower them to enter more confidently into the work of the "new evangelization."

According to the clear vision of Pope John Paul II, evangelization and catechesis will characterize the life of the Church as she approaches and enters the third millennium. The Church of the twenty-first century will reveal to the world that she is indeed an immaculate virgin who adheres to Christ as his spouse with an undivided heart. In spite of adversity and many internal storms, the Church has preserved the faith revealed by Christ in all of its integrity and, with ardent love for him, is eager to share it with all people. In her evangelical zeal for the gospel, the Church who cooperates with the Lord in his work of restoring supernatural life to souls, proves herself to be the loving "mother in the Holy Spirit" of the human race. In her work of evangelization and catechetics, the Church opens her virginal, spousal and maternal heart to the world, beckoning all to salvation in Christ.

Might it not be suggested that the Virgin of Fatima, in her maternal role as evangelist and catechist, is the image and model of what the Church is always called to be—but, in a singular way, the icon of the Church in our difficult century? Did she perhaps come to Fatima to remind each member of the Church of the urgent necessity for a new worldwide pro-

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gram of evangelization? Did the Lord send her visibly into our world to give emphasis to the contemporary need for a clear and unambiguous proclamation of the doctrine of Christ in its purity and integrity through catechetical instruction? Did Our Lady of Fatima come simply to open the way for the new evangelization, to announce a new age for the Church of Jesus Christ?