

The Greatest Miracle

On October 13, 1917, in the Portuguese village of Fatima, there occurred a miracle that is far and away the most stunning event of modern times because it was witnessed by an estimated 70,000 people, atheists included; also because the facts in question were acknowledged by Portugal's anti-clerical press.

The Story

What happened may be simply told. On May 13, 1917, a ten-year-old shepherdess by the name of Lucia Santos, accompanied by her cousins, Jacinta and Francisco Marto (aged 7 and 9), came home after pasturing their sheep and reported that Mary, the mother of Jesus, had appeared to them, urging prayer and mortification in reparation for sin. She had said, additionally, that she would return on the 13th day of each succeeding month and work a great miracle on October 13 so "that all may believe."

The Circumstances

The faith of the people was under heavy siege at the time because the Portuguese government had fallen into the hands of totalitarian leftists. Priests and nuns had been jailed. Celebration of the Mass had been severely restricted — to the point where it was practically extinct in urban areas. Portugal was well on its way to becoming the first Communist state.

Mary Keeps Her Word

The Blessed Mother came every month, as promised, and though she was not seen by the vast majority of spectators, she manifested her presence in subtle ways. Some of the bystanders saw a cloud formation resembling the burning of incense. Others saw rainbow colors, along with a luminous globe in a cloudless sky.

On one occasion, there was a flash, on another a faint buzzing sound. Witnesses told of hearing the roll of thunder in fair weather. There was a rattle of ice, as well, to the sight of scattering blossoms and flower petals falling from heaven. Lucia's radiance was particularly telling. The fact that she actively glowed during the apparitions brought more and more people to her side. On the 13th the crowd was estimated at 500.

By July 13, the number had risen to 2,000, and by October 13, the day of the miracle, 70,000 had

come from near and far. Agnostics, hard-bitten journalists, "doubting Thomas" academicians, anti-clerical officials — all were on hand awaiting what they confidently expected would be a non-event.

The First Miracle

It rained long and hard the night before October 13 — so hard that many were soaked to the bone. Around 1 PM on the 13th, Lucia called out: "Put down your umbrellas!" and many did so in spite of the downpour. Suddenly, as if by magic, everyone was dry as a bone. Scientists tell us that the amount of energy required to dry the clothes of 70,000 spectators in a matter of moments is enormous — so great, in fact, that it should have killed all present.

The Miracle of the Sun

With everyone comfortably dry, the sun, spinning rapidly and changing of a variety of colors, appeared to zigzag and huge a tremendous speed toward the earth, causing many to fall to the ground. Some fainted. Objects swept as objects turned all colors of the rainbow. Eyewitnesses testified that they had seen the sun look directly at a ship sinking in the sea against the background of a blue sky.

Press Reports

On October 15, the anti-clerical, left-wing editor of Portugal's most influential newspaper, *O Seculo*, published an account in which he called "a spectacle unique and incredible" in which the sun resembled "a silver globe." He would say that an eclipse had occurred," he wrote, describing the crowd as "like a forest" and the sun as trembling, "with a group of movements never seen before and outside a cosmic laws."

Two days later, on October 17, *O Dia*, another Portuguese paper with a high circulation, published a second account that dovetailed neatly with the first: "the silver sun . . . [was] seen to whirl . . . people fell on their knees . . . the light turned to a beautiful blue." Eventually, hundreds of eyewitnesses were interviewed.

Some of them had been miles away from Fatima when they observed the gyrations of the sun, and the recollections, which were in substantial agreement, have since been published. An atheist on the faculty of Columbia University wrote a vivid description of the miracle, and there is a massive volume in Portuguese containing a treasure trove of

information yet to be translated into English.

The Credibility of the Children

The credibility of the children is unimpeachable owing to the miracle itself. But there is more. Lucia's family grew poorer in its aftermath, and she had to face angry, unbelieving parents, as well as a skeptical pastor who didn't want trouble from the state.

Then, too, secular authorities used every ruse and threat they could devise to get the children to retract their story. After abducting them on August 13, the day they were to meet Mary for the fourth time, local officials threatened to throw them into a cauldron of boiling oil unless they changed their tune.

The youngsters were then separated and each told that their parents had undergone madness. Again, they stuck to the line, risking a cruel death. In the end, they would be in jail with hardened criminals, some of whom upon seeing them fall to their knees in prayer, did the same out of sympathy. One was even executed!

What They Endured

Small wonder that photographs taken of the children show them looking unhappy and scared. Their parents, clueless as to their whereabouts on August 13, suffered terribly, and in the aftermath, the Santos and Marto families were targets for ridicule. Doctrinaire anti-clericals kept on insisting that the miracle of the sun had been invented, that simple people had been deceived by means of collective suggestion.

Furious at the thought of a religious groundswell, the secularists did everything in their power to block Fatima processions, going so far as to threaten violence. Four bombs were placed in the Fatima chapel and a fifth by the holm oak where Our Lady had appeared. The tree bomb failed to explode, but the chapel roof was blown off, and Lucia was seriously endangered — so much so that she had to leave town.

Two Other Reasons

Two other reasons for crediting the children stem from things reported long before October 13. First, after meeting the Virgin on July 13, they quoted her as having said that without prayer and mortification, Russia would fall into error and spread lies around the world . . . nations would be