

“Fatima: A Call to Spiritual Arms for the Salvation and Peace of the World”
Homily for the Mass of Consecration of the
Archdiocese of San Francisco to the Immaculate Heart of Mary
Memorial of Our Lady of the Rosary
Readings: Isa 9:1-5; Judith 13; Jn 2:1-11

Introduction

At this significant moment in world history, as we mark the 100th anniversary of the apparitions at Fatima, understandably, much attention has been given to this supernatural phenomenon. I believe, though, that it is easy for us to get distracted by the sensational elements of this apparition: predictions of wars and disasters, a dancing sun, a vision of hell. We are easily intrigued with that part of the story, perhaps so much so that we miss the whole point of it, which, of course, is the message itself.

A Vision of Hell and the Last 100 Years

The vision of hell is a well-known moment in the story of the Fatima apparitions: the three shepherd children saw souls tormented there with agony beyond description, a vision so horrible and gruesome that they shrieked out loud with fear. It was immediately after this vision that our Lady asked for the spreading of devotion to her Immaculate Heart. Now, there are some, I’m sure, who might want to dismiss all of this as fanciful; there are even some who deny the very existence of hell. But if we think about what has transpired over these last 100 years since the revelation of this message, coupled with our failure to heed it, does it not tell us that the century through which we have just passed was nothing other than an experience of hell?

To be sure, in many ways there has been great progress over the past century: one thinks immediately of improvements in technology that have increased ease and speed of communication, commerce and travel; progress in the treatment and alleviation of physical and mental illness; progress in civil rights. Yet, there have also been horrendous setbacks in other areas, and even in those very areas where progress had been made. If we think about the century we are now concluding, does it not show itself to be one that in so many ways has been a living reflection of hell, one that on so many fronts has roundly mocked God?

The examples are too numerous to list here, but many come to mind immediately, beginning with two great wars that enveloped the entire world in violence and bloodshed. There have been the death camps and the genocides – not genocide, but *genosides* – most notoriously, the one perpetrated against the people God first chose to be His own. Who would dare to say that such barbarity is not a mocking of God? It is a century that produced the most brutal regimes in world history, and all over the face of the earth. And then there is the persecution of the Church in every decade of this century and all over the world, and now the oppression and extermination of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East and elsewhere, whose pleas for protection and justice from the international community fall on deaf ears. But we do not have to look so far away in time and space. Still fresh in our minds and heavy on our hearts are victims of the atrocity in Las Vegas just a few days ago, which tragically is only the latest and most devastating mass shooting in a whole string of such senseless violence in our country for many years now. And then there is the attack on innocent human life: our own land has been soiled by the blood of innocent children in what has become a deadly epidemic tantamount to a genocide on life in the womb; and now we are increasingly witnessing the abandonment of our suffering brothers and sisters at the other end of life’s journey. And even in

our own city of St. Francis, we see in our streets people suffering from the ravages of addiction and mental illness, as well as the celebration and even exaltation of the vulgar and the blasphemous, mocking God's beautiful plan in how He created us, in our very bodies, for communion with one another and Himself. God is roundly mocked in our very streets, and it is met with approval and applause in our community – and yet, we remain silent.

What is happening to our world? In so many different ways, what was once unthinkable has become routine. The century since the Fatima apparitions now ending has mocked God, but God will not be mocked: not because He delights in wreaking vengeance on us, but because turning our backs on God only bounces back to us, leading to our own self-destruction.

Now, one might argue that all this has happened, not because people are more morally depraved in our time than in times past, but rather because modern means of perpetrating violence, destruction and moral depravity are much more sophisticated and massive now than in times past. This may well be true, but if so, it points all the more to our need to heed the message of Fatima in imploring God for mercy.

Our Advocate

So we turn to our Lady, for at the root of all of this suffering and devastation is a spiritual disease, which, contrary to the physical and mental kind, has grown in our time and been largely left untreated. It is the disease that dethrones God and replaces Him with the “autonomous self,” making the self out to be God, creating one's own reality for oneself. It is a disease that refuses to recognize God's Son, Jesus Christ, as the ultimate truth and perfect icon of love.

So, yes, we turn to our Lady. Now, we don't need Mary to point the way to Christ for us. We know where he is: he's in the tabernacle, in the sacraments, in his word, he is present in the Church. Rather, what we need is someone to pick us up and carry us to him, because we are too weak to get there on our own. And so as Mary had a special role in mothering God's Son, so she has a special role in mothering us into life in her Son. This twofold ministry of the maternity of our Lady – in the life of her Son and in the life of his believers – was explained insightfully by Pope St. John Paul II in his Encyclical letter *Mother of the Redeemer* (n. 24):

... there is a unique correspondence between the moment of the Incarnation of the Word and the moment of the birth of the Church. The person who links these two moments is Mary: Mary at Nazareth and Mary in the Upper Room at Jerusalem... Thus she who is present in the mystery of Christ as Mother becomes – by the will of the Son and the power of the Holy Spirit – present in the mystery of the Church. In the Church too she continues to be a maternal presence, as is shown by the words spoken from the Cross: ‘Woman, behold your son!'; ‘Behold, your mother.’

In her maternal presence, Mary is there to advocate for us. We see this in a subtle depiction in the image of our Lady of Fatima. At the bottom of her robe is a star. The star can be seen as a reference to Esther in the Old Testament, whose name means “star.” Esther is the one who pleaded with the Persian king to spare the life of her people, and at great risk to her own life. The king, who had taken her as his queen, was deceived into issuing a decree ordering a massacre of the Jewish people, and in order to ask him to spare her people she had to reveal to him her Jewish identity. By her pleading with the king she saved her people. Our Lady, Star of the New Evangelization, likewise does not cease to plead for us to our King, just as she did for

the poor newly married couple at Cana. This is not because we would be treated harshly by her Son if we were to approach him directly. No; rather, we must recognize that God will deal with us in strict justice unless we ask for mercy. God wants us to ask for mercy, and He wants us to ask the Mother of His Son to help us, just as she helped that couple at Cana.

Heeding the Requests and the Next 100 Years

For 100 years we ignored the message of Fatima; or, perhaps, it is not so much the *message* we ignored, for we are well aware of the warnings and the history that resulted. Rather, it is the *requests* we ignored. But we cannot afford to do so any longer. We have to pay attention. We have to do what she told the waiters at Cana: do whatever he tells you. And what does Christ tell us to do? He reveals this in the requests our Lady made at Fatima. It is now time to heed those requests. We might not have the power to change world history, but we can change what happens in our own families and communities if we heed the message. This next century can be radically different from the last one, but only if we heed the message and respond to the requests.

Which means that what we are doing today cannot be relegated to being simply a moving event and pleasant memory in the history of our Archdiocese. Far from being something we check off on a to-do list, what we are about today is nothing less than a call to arms: to spiritual arms. We are living in a time and place of intense spiritual battle, and only in taking up spiritual arms will we alleviate the *spiritual* disease that is at the root of so much of the physical and mental suffering in the world today. It is time to leave the sensational aside, and respond to the requests of our Lady at Fatima.

What did she ask us to do? It should come as no surprise, because it is the central part of her message wherever and whenever she appears: prayer, penance and adoration. And she was very clear at Fatima about the two-fold purpose of this request: to save souls from hell, and to establish peace in the world. The message of Fatima was not only about the temporal order but, above all, the eternal order. In both orders, the stakes could not be higher: world peace and eternal salvation! I therefore call on all of the faithful of the Archdiocese of San Francisco to take to heart this threefold recipe for peace and salvation, as our Lady has asked us.

A Program of Action

First of all prayer: our Lady has asked us specifically to pray the rosary daily. I ask every Catholic in the Archdiocese of San Francisco, if you are not doing so already, to pray the rosary every day. And I ask all families to pray the rosary together at least once a week. Appropriately enough, we celebrate this Mass of Consecration of our Archdiocese to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on the Memorial of Our Lady of the Rosary, a poignant reminder to us of the power of the rosary to bring about peace and even to change the course of world history. It can certainly, then, change the course of history in our own families and communities.

Penance: most especially we must take up the spiritual arm of penance, for it is a powerful weapon in our spiritual arsenal that we have woefully ignored for far too long. The reform of the discipline of penitential practice in the Church, far from denying the importance of it, was meant to instill a more mature spirit of appropriating this hallmark of Christian life in the life of the individual believer. In particular, Fridays are still days of penance, as they always have been in the Church, going back to apostolic times. The faithful, though, may now choose to do some other form of fasting in place of the traditional practice of abstaining from eating meat if such a penance would be for them a greater sacrifice. I ask every Catholic in the Archdiocese

of San Francisco to dedicate Friday as a day of penance in honor of the day that our Lord died for us, selecting one concrete form of bodily fasting to observe on this day, whether that be abstaining from meat or another type of food or from some type of drink they normally enjoy, or omitting a meal altogether. Our penitential practices, too, are meant to lead us to have more serious and frequent recourse to the *sacrament* of Penance. There can be no spiritual revival, and especially a revival of Eucharistic devotion, without a renewal in our practice of the sacrament of Reconciliation. I call on all of the faithful of the Archdiocese of San Francisco to increase the sincerity and frequency with which they avail themselves of this sacrament, and, as a minimum, to confess their sins in the sacrament at least once a month.

Adoration: our Lady advocates for us, she picks us up, in order to bring us to her Son. All of our devotion, just as all of our penitential practices, must lead to adoration of God. The adoration our Lady asks for is meant to purify us of our inclinations to worship the false gods of contemporary society, and to give ourselves over to single-hearted worship of the one, true God. As Lucia said in reflecting back on her childhood experiences of receiving the revelations at Fatima: "... our adoration must be a hymn of perfect praise, because, even before we came into being, God was already loving us, and was moved by this love to give us our being." Our consecration must therefore also bring about a renewal of our love for, and devotion to, our Lord in the most Blessed Sacrament. I ask every Catholic in the Archdiocese of San Francisco to dedicate some time each week to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. If it is not possible during the week, take some time before or after Sunday Mass to pray on your knees before our Lord present in the tabernacle. At least some time every week praying before the presence of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament – Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity – will fulfill his desire that we ask him for mercy. And of course, our Lady also asked us to observe the devotion of the First Five Saturdays, precisely right after the children received the vision of hell, when she also asked for devotion to her Immaculate Heart. The devotion consists of attending Mass and receiving Communion in reparation for sins on five consecutive first Saturdays of the month shortly after or before going to Confession, and spending a quarter of an hour praying five decades of the rosary. Again we see our Lady's concern to assist us in attaining eternal salvation: the point of the devotion is to make reparation for sins, especially the sin of blasphemy. I ask all of our faithful to make the First Five Saturdays a priority in their devotional life by observing it once a year.

From Darkness to Light

In the first reading for our Mass today, the prophet Isaiah speaks of the people who walked in darkness seeing a great light, the light that is the joy of God's salvation. God came to the aid of His people by destroying the instruments of Assyrian oppression and sending them a king to free them. Praying the rosary, bodily fasting, and adoration of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament: these are the spiritual arms of God that will destroy the spiritual oppression that has marred the last 100 years of world history, and that will bring us God's mercy, the mercy that is world peace and eternal salvation.

There is one more very important thing our Lady told the children after their vision of hell, not a request, but a promise: "In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph." Let us heed her message, let us grant her requests, in order to hasten that triumph, that triumph which is that of her Son over death, for she is inseparably linked to her Son, who came to win for us our eternal salvation. Her Immaculate Heart is the door that opens up for us entrance into that triumph. It is through that door that we walk from the darkness of sin and death to the light of

Christ's truth and mercy. There it is, on the other side of that door, a glorious, vast, light-filled paradise that is heaven. Her heart is the gate of heaven.

Conclusion

And so, appropriately, we will conclude our prayer today, after Mass, Procession and the Act of Consecration, with Adoration and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Mary is always there to pick us up and carry us to her Son; she wants to take us through her maternal heart from the darkness in which we walk to the light of her Son, and her Son wants us to allow her to do so. Let us then do that, by obeying her request to do whatever he tells us. That is, let us grant her requests, so that we may always keep our eyes fixed on him, her Son, the Son of God and Savior of the world. And so let us conclude these reflections today by making our own the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas, as cited by Pope St. John Paul II in his conclusion to his Encyclical on the Eucharist, turning, as the saintly Pope exhorts us, "in hope to the contemplation of that goal to which our hearts aspire in their thirst for joy and peace":

*Come then, good Shepherd, bread divine,
Still show to us thy mercy sign;
Oh, feed us, still keep us thine;
So we may see thy glories shine
in fields of immortality.
O thou, the wisest, mightiest, best,
Our present food, our future rest,
Come, make us each thy chosen guest,
Co-heirs of thine, and comrades blest
With saints whose dwelling is with thee.
[Amen.]*