



INVESTIGATIVE FILES

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The Real Secrets of Fatima

Among the intriguing mysteries of modern Catholicism are the “miracles” and “secrets” supposedly imparted by the Virgin Mary at Fatima, Portugal, in 1917 (Oliveira 1999). In addition to an allegedly miraculous “dance of the sun,” there were three major secrets, two of which were revealed at the time. The third and final one—kept in an envelope by the Vatican—was not made public until mid-2000, provoking much interest and controversy. I was involved in the media debate over the release of the third secret, appearing on a documentary for the History Channel series *History’s Mysteries* titled “Fatima: Secrets Unveiled” (which aired January 4, 2001) as well as being interviewed for newspaper articles (e.g., Valpy 2000; Barss 2000). Here is my investigative take on the entire Fatima phenomenon.

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The Lady Appears

The reported visits of the Virgin Mary to Fatima occurred in a time of trouble. After the fall of the Portuguese monarchy in 1910, there came a wave of anti-clerical sentiment and persecution, followed by various revolutionary conflicts and Portugal’s involvement in World War I.

On May 13, 1917, three shepherd children were tending their flock about two miles west of Fatima in a town near Ourém. The children were Lucia Santos, age ten, and her two cousins, nine-year-old Francisco Marto and his seven-year-old sister, Jacinta. A sudden flash of lightning sent the children fleeing down a slope, whereupon the two girls beheld the dazzling apparition of a beautiful lady, radiant in white light, standing among the holly-like leaves of a small holm oak.

Lucia was the only one who talked with the figure, who promised to identify herself at the end of a six-month period, during which time the children were to return to the site on the thirteenth day of each month. The woman said that all three of them would go to heaven but that Francisco, who could not see her, would have to recite many rosaries. When she instructed Lucia to have Francisco say the rosary, the boy became able to see the apparition, but he was still unable to hear her speak. After she instructed the children to pray for an end to the war, the lady vanished into the sky.

Even though the children had agreed that they should keep the event secret, once home, little Jacinta blurted out to her parents that she had shared in a vision of the Virgin Mary. News quickly spread throughout the town, and when the children revisited the site on June 13, they were accompanied by some fifty devout villagers. Kneeling in prayer at the oak, the children saw the woman glide down from heaven and take a position amid the oak’s foliage (Arvey 1990, 66; Rogo 1982, 221–223).

Thus began a pattern that was repeated each month during the specified period, although the children were absent on August 13 (having been detained by secular authorities who disbelieved their tale and held them briefly for questioning in the public jail at Ourém). On July 13, the children claimed to have received a special revelation that the lady forbade them to disclose. The apparition remained invisible to the onlookers, but some reported seeing a little cloud rise from (or from behind) the tree, together with a movement of the tree’s branches “as if in going away the Lady’s dress had trailed over them” (Dacruz n.d.).

When the period ended on a stormy October 13, as many as seventy thousand people were gathered at the site anticipating the Virgin’s final visit, many anticipating a great miracle. Again, the figure appeared only to the children. Identifying herself as “the Lady of the Rosary,” she urged people to repent and to build a chapel at the site. After predicting an end to the war and giving the children certain undisclosed visions, the lady lifted her hands to the sky. Thereupon Lucia exclaimed, “The sun!” As everyone gazed upward to see that a silvery disc had emerged from behind the clouds, they experienced what is known in the terminology of Marian apparitions as a “sun miracle” (Arvey 1990, 69–71).

Miracle of the Sun

This Fatima “miracle” has been described in many very different ways. Some claimed that the sun spun pinwheel-like with colored streamers, while others maintained that it danced. One reported, “I saw clearly and distinctly a globe of light advancing from east to west, gliding slowly and majestically through the air.” To some, the sun seemed to be falling toward the spectators. Still others, before the “dance of the sun” occurred, saw white petals shower down and disintegrate before reaching the earth (Larue

1990, 195–196; Arvey 1990, 70–71; Rogo 1982, 227, 230–232).

Precisely what happened at Fatima has been the subject of much controversy. Church authorities made inquiries, collected eyewitness testimony, and declared the events worthy of belief as a miracle (Zimdars-Swartz 1991, 90). However, people elsewhere in the world, viewing the very same sun, did not see the alleged gyrations; neither did astronomical observatories detect the sun deviating from the norm (which would have had a devastating effect on Earth!). Therefore, more tenable explanations for the reports include mass hysteria and local meteorological phenomena such as a sundog (a parhelion or “mock sun”).

On the other hand, several eyewitnesses of the October 13, 1917, gathering at Fatima specifically stated they were looking “fixedly at the sun” or “tried to look straight at it” or otherwise made clear they were gazing directly at the actual sun (qtd. in Rogo 1982, 230, 231). If this is so, the “dancing sun” and other solar phenomena may have been due to optical effects resulting from temporary retinal distortion caused by staring at such an intense light or to the effect of darting the eyes to and fro to avoid fixed gazing (thus combining image, afterimage, and movement).

Most likely, there was a combination of factors, including optical effects and meteorological phenomena, such as the sun being seen through thin clouds, causing it to appear as a silver disc. Other possibilities include an alteration in the density of the passing clouds, causing the sun’s image to alternately brighten and dim and so seem to advance and recede, and dust or moisture droplets in the atmosphere refracting the sunlight and thus imparting a variety of colors. The effects of suggestion were also likely involved, since devout spectators had come to the site fully expecting some miraculous event, had their gaze dramatically directed at the sun by the charismatic Lucia, and excitedly discussed and compared their perceptions in a way almost certain to foster psychological contagion (Nickell 1993, 176–181).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, sun miracles

have been reported at other Marian sites—at Lubbock, Texas, in 1989; Mother Cabrini Shrine near Denver, Colorado, in 1992; Conyers, Georgia, in the early to mid-1990s; and elsewhere, including Thiruvananthapuram, India, in 2008. Tragically, at the Colorado and India sites, many people suffered eye damage (solar retinopathy)—in some instances, possibly permanent damage (Nickell 1993, 196–200; Sebastian 2008).

At the Conyers site, the Georgia Skeptics group set up a telescope outfitted with a vision-protecting Mylar solar filter, and on one occasion I participated in the experiment. Becky Long, president

written by Lucia in the convent [where she later resided] between 1935 and 1941, many years after the series of experiences that constitute the apparition event” (Zimdars-Swartz 1991, 68). Indeed, Lucia recorded her first “prediction” of the children’s deaths in 1927—several years after the fact!

As to the other predictions, they were supposedly part of three secrets that had been delivered to Lucia by the apparition on July 13, 1917 (Gruner 1997, 290–291). Lucia’s *Third Memoir* gave the first secret as a vision of hell. The second was a statement that World War I would end, “but if people do not



Photo by Joe Nickell

Figure 1. At the Conyers, Georgia, Marian apparition site in 1994, skeptic Rebecca Long—using a telescope with a Mylar solar filter—looks in vain for a “sun miracle.”

of the organization, stated that more than two hundred people had viewed the sun through one of the solar filters and not a single person saw anything unusual (Long 1992, 3; see figure 1).

The Secrets

Those who believe in the Fatima “miracle” also cite certain predictions the apparition allegedly made to Lucia, one being that Jacinta and Francisco would soon die. Both did soon succumb to influenza: Francisco in 1919 and Jacinta the following year. However, Zimdars-Swartz observes, “much of what devotees today accept as the content of the apparition comes from four memoirs

cease offending God, a worse one will break out during the pontificate of Pius XI” (who was pope from 1922 to 1939). However, since the *Third Memoir* was penned in August 1941, the so-called predictions were actually written after the fact (Zimdars-Swartz 1991, 198–199).

Before considering the important third secret of Fatima, and to fully comprehend the entire Fatima experience, we must look more closely at its central figure—not the Virgin Mary but Lucia de Jesus Santos. Born on March 22, 1907, to Antonio and Maria Rosa Santos, Lucia was the youngest of seven children. Five years younger than her next-oldest sibling, Lucia was a petted

and spoiled child. Her sisters fostered in her a desire to be the center of attention by teaching her to dance and sing. At festivals, Lucia would stand on a crate to entertain an adoring crowd. Among her other talents was a gift for telling stories—fairy tales, biblical narratives, and saints' legends—which made her popular with village children, as well as an ability to persuade others to do her bidding.

Two years before the famous series of apparitions occurred at Fatima, eight-year-old Lucia and three girlfriends claimed to have seen apparitions of a snow-white figure on three occasions. Lucia's mother called the experiences "childish nonsense." The following year, Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta were thrice visited by an "angel."

Lucia's own mother was convinced that her precocious daughter was, in her words, "nothing but a fake who is leading half the world astray."

Lucia's background is revealing. The seeds of her later visionary encounters were clearly contained in her childhood experiences and in her obviously fantasy-prone personality.¹ Her charismatic ability to influence others drew little Francisco and Jacinta into the Fatima fantasy. As Zimdars-Swartz says of Lucia:

It is clear that she played the leading role in the scenario of the apparition itself. All accounts agree that she was the only one of the three seers to interact with both her vision and with the crowd, carrying on conversations with both while her two cousins stood by silently. She has said, moreover, and probably not incorrectly, that Francisco and Jacinta had been accustomed to follow her directives before the apparition began, that they turned to her for guidance afterwards, and that it was she who convinced them that they had to be very careful in their experiences. (Zimdars-Swartz

1991, 68)

Further evidence that Lucia orchestrated the fantasy and manipulated the other children is provided by certain incidents. For example, when Jacinta first told the story, she stated that the Virgin had said many things that she was unable to recall but "which Lucia knows." Lucia's own mother was convinced that her precocious daughter was, in her words, "nothing but a fake who is leading half the world astray" (qtd. in Zimdars-Swartz 1991, 71, 86).

Third Secret Revealed

But there was a third secret of Fatima, possessed by the Vatican since 1957 and the subject of endless interest and speculation (Gruner 1997, 291). Certain

in wording Ratzinger characterized as "symbolic and not easy to decipher" (Valpy 2000)—Lucia had described seeing (at no specific time in the future) "an angel with a flaming sword in his left hand; flashing, it gave out flames that looked as though they would set the world on fire; but they died out in contact with the splendor that Our Lady radiated towards him from her right hand: pointing to the earth with his right hand, the angel cried out in a loud voice: '*Penance, Penance, Penance!*'"

The visionary continued describing the appearance of a "bishop dressed in white," who was "afflicted with pain and sorrow" as he made his way through a ruined city. Moreover, "he prayed for the souls of the corpses he met on his way; having reached the top of the mountain, on his knees at the foot of the big Cross he was killed by a group of soldiers who fired bullets and arrows at him, and in the same way there died one after another, the other bishops, priests, men and women Religious."

Now, many of the faithful have seen the text as having forecast the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II, who was shot and wounded by a Turk in 1981 (Fleishman 2000). However, nearly every aspect of the vision—if indeed it was supposed to predict the assassination attempt on John Paul—was in error. It described not a pope but a bishop, who was not killed, who was not shot by soldiers, certainly not by arrows (an implausibility attributable to a child's imagination); neither were all of the other bishops and priests killed.

The vision only seems accurate if one engages in "retrofitting"—after-the-fact matching that fits statements to facts once they are known. This is the same process used to claim that the prognostications of Nostradamus (1503–1566), the French seer, accurately described future events (see Nickell 1989, 45–47). In the case of the "third secret," the retrofitting involves counting the plausibly correct statements (e.g., the pope is "*Bishop* of Rome," was dressed in white, and was struck by a would-be assassin's bullet), while ignoring—or rationalizing—the many erroneous facts. Nevertheless, the Vatican statement claimed

Catholic notables have claimed to have the third secret, but their credibility is at issue because they seem to describe documents that were not first hand in their accounts. Nevertheless, they have hinted that the text predicted another world war and a great disaster of some kind (see Kramer 2006).

In mid-2000, the Catholic Church revealed the third secret that was supposedly imparted to Lucia in 1917, which she set down as text in a 1944 letter. It was forwarded in 1957 to the Secret Archives of the Vatican's Holy Office where it since reposed.

On Monday, June 26, 2000, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—then prefect of church doctrine, now Pope Benedict XVI—spoke in a nationally televised news conference at the Vatican. Scrawled with a thick-nibbed pen in Portuguese—

all three secrets represented authentic prophecy: "No one could have imagined all this" (qtd. in Valpy 2000).

In any event, many conspiracy-minded Catholics refuse to believe that the third secret has been fully revealed. They opine it may be "an indictment of most of the changes in the Church since Vatican II" (held 1962–1965) and would thus cause embarrassment to the current defenders of that council (Gruner 2006, 42). Meanwhile, the visionary who started it all, Lucia Santos—who became a Carmelite nun, Sister Lúcia of Jesus, and died on February 13, 2005—has been placed on the fast track to sainthood ("Lúcia" 2008). Certainly, the story will continue. □

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Note

1. For a discussion of fantasy proneness, see Wilson and Barber 1983.

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