

The Pope and Fatima

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The admirable work edited by Fr Alberic Stacpoole OSB, *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue* (St Paul Publications, 1982), makes no mention of Fatima. Even Archbishop Eugenio Cardinale's paper on 'The Mariology of Pope Pius XII' does not allude to it, which is strange because in Portugal he is known as 'the pope of Fatima'. Clearly, Fatima has no place on the agenda of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary whose papers are collected in this volume. The reason for the omission is evident: Fatima represents the kind of mariology that most alarms and scandalises our Christian brothers and sisters. With its banal 'messages', its improbable miracles and its resolute anti-communism, it makes the faith 'risible', and St Thomas says we should not do that.

Yet Fatima received a great boost when Pope John Paul visited it on 13 May last. He went there specifically to thank Our Lady for saving his life twelve months previously. There is a slight puzzle here. Our Lady of Fatima, of Walsingham, of Czestochowa, of Altötting and of Lujan, Argentina (where she holds the honorary and embarrassing rank of captain-general of the Argentinian armed forces) refer evidently to one and the same person. There are many shrines, but only one Mother of the Lord. Hence the attribution to Our Lady of Fatima of special concern for the state of health of the pope needs explanation. Why precisely Fatima?

No sooner asked, the question is answered by noting the date: 13 May. On 13 May 1917, Our Lady appeared for the first time at Cova da Idra to the three peasant children (and on the same day Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pius XII, was ordained Bishop, a fact I put in for the record). On 13 May 1981, Mehemet Ali Agba tried to shoot John Paul. An experienced killer, he got his man, but just missed the vital organs. 'Logically', the Pope should have been dead. But he was 'miraculously' saved by Our Lady of Fatima. A single coincidence is a slender base to build on. But John Paul does not believe in 'coincidences'. Here is how he explained his presence in Fatima on 13 May 1982:

I would like to make a confession to you. I have wanted to

come to Fatima for a long time. . . . But since the attempt upon my life in St Peter's Square a year ago, from the very moment I regained consciousness my thoughts turned to this shrine, so that I might lay down in front of the heavenly mother's heart my gratitude for having spared me. I saw in everything that happened a special motherly protection of Our Lady – there being no coincidences in the ways of Divine Providence.

It is difficult, unwise and impious to argue with the ways of Divine Providence.

Let me rather suggest that there are two types of mariology, the sound and sober mariology of Vatican II and the extravagant mariology exemplified by Fatima. A sketch of the former will permit us to 'place' the latter.

Vatican II stresses that Mary is with us, one of us, on our side. Like us, she is and remains a believer. 'Blessed are you because you have *believed*', says her cousin, Elizabeth. There is no reason to think that she was dispensed from the 'darkness' of faith, especially when her Son was in agony and she stayed while the others fled. This fidelity at the foot of the cross makes Mary a model *disciple* and the type of the Church. Jesus entrusts the beloved disciple to his mother (John 19) and this sets up a relationship of maternity *vis-à-vis* all future disciples. She is *Mater fidelium* because she leads us in faith. There can be no question – as crass Protestants used to suggest – of placing Mary above her Son, because we remember the text of the *Magnificat*: 'He that is mighty has done great things unto me'. So Mary does not claim the credit for what is self-evidently the work of grace. This I propose to call a Mary-in-the-Church (MIC) mariology; it is contrasted with what may be called a Mary-above-the-Church (MAC) mariology.

Now here is a curious fact. When John Paul spoke at Wembley Stadium on 29 May, he used MIC. A statue of Our Lady of Walsingham had just been carried into the arena by the Anglican and Roman Catholic chaplains of the shrine. John Paul said:

Today Walsingham comes to Wembley, and the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham, present here, lifts our minds to meditate on our Mother. She obeyed the will of God fearlessly, and gave birth to the Son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Faithful at the foot of the cross, she then waited in prayer for the Holy Spirit to descend upon the infant Church. It is Mary who will teach us how to be silent, how to listen to the voice of God in the midst of a busy and noisy world. It is Mary who will help us to find time for prayer. Through the rosary, that great Gospel prayer, she will help us to know Christ. We need to live as she did, in the presence of God, raising our minds and hearts to him in our daily activities and worries.

It was the eve of Pentecost, and so the reminder of Mary praying in the midst of the disciples was particularly appropriate. But the Pope's emphasis on the Mary-who-prays placed her firmly on our side. It was an admirable epitome of MIC mariology, crisp, restrained, theologically accurate, spiritually helpful.

It is fruitless, though fascinating, to speculate about who worked on this text. The fact that the Pope was prepared to read it out means that he endorsed it and made it his own. But it does not reveal all that he thinks, or even his most characteristic thoughts on the subject. For those we have to turn to his Fatima homily, delivered only a fortnight before. (I reject the hypothesis that John Paul 'changed his mind' in two weeks.) In Fatima he presented a MAC mariology which stresses not so much her links with us as her difference, not her community of destiny with us but her uniqueness, not the fact that she is a believer so much as the fact that she is privileged. Thus, imperceptibly, Mary 'slides over to the other side'. The iconography bears this out: Mary becomes a remote, quasi-divine figure on a gilded pedestal with a crown on her head and the world at her feet. She provides the feminine principle for the quaternity which Jung thought so superior to the lop-sided notion of the trinity: the quaternity reflects the mandala, symbol of integration. It is this mariological style that dominates at Fatima, and John Paul did nothing to discourage it.

Indeed, he advanced a doctrine in which Mary, for all practical purposes, takes over the role of the Holy Spirit. Here is the argument:

Mary's motherhood has its beginnings in her motherly care for Christ. In Christ, at the foot of the cross, she accepted John, and in John she *accepted all of us totally*. Mary embraces us all with special solicitude *in the Holy Spirit*. For, as we profess in the creed, he is the 'giver of life'. It is he who gives fulness of life, openness towards eternity.

Mary's spiritual motherhood is therefore a *sharing* in the *power of the Holy Spirit*, of the giver of life (italics in the text).

This is a type of mariology not unfamiliar to students of Grignon de Montfort. It conforms to the very worst 'Protestant' expectations, as Elie Gibson wrote: 'When I began the study of Catholic theology, wherever I expected to find an exposition of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, I found Mary. What Protestants universally attributed to the Holy Spirit was attributed to Mary' (quoted in Stacpoole, p 70). True, John Paul's language is relatively cautious: Mary 'shares in' the power of the Holy Spirit, and is not its source. She remains, therefore, subordinate. But these are subtle distinctions which easily get lost in the 'popular religiosity' encouraged at Fatima.

To say that Mary is the mother of anyone but Jesus is to use an analogy. Mary is not our mother in the same sense that she was the mother of Jesus.

After all, most people are aware that Mary is not their mum. If she is called 'mother', she is so in some yet-to-be-defined 'spiritual' sense. So the use of analogy in this realm is perfectly permissible – and inevitable. But there is a problem. The development of the analogy (what you actually do with it) depends upon your understanding and interpretation of the human relationship (mother-child) in which it is anchored.

Now at Fatima, John Paul made a number of assertions about the son-mother relationship which are not borne out by experience. He said that the son 'opens his heart to his mother and speaks to her about everything'. Well, he may open his heart on certain questions, but he is likely to maintain a large area of privacy for concerns about which his mother is ignorant or by which she might feel threatened (e.g. when he falls in love with 'another' woman). The notion of complete transparency between son and mother is a myth. But John Paul went on to say that 'the son takes her to his own home, that is to say, he brings to her all his problems, which at times are difficult. His own problems and those of others'. Even supposing, which I do not, that a son is going to bring all his own problems to his mother, it seems unlikely that he would bring along everyone else's as well. But John Paul brings along all the problems of the entire world, 'the problems of the family, of societies, of the nations and of the whole of humanity'.

I do not doubt that Pope John Paul, in his prayer, does what he was here recommending. The difficulty is that it soars away completely from any human experience. As Peter Nichols noted perceptively, 'The family means to him something that is natural, but which he never had' (*The Times*, 1 June 1982). It is not irrelevant to point out that John Paul lost his mother when he was nine years old; and what may be alright at nine can become a handicap at nineteen. A mother-dominated teenager is regarded as immature. He can only truly love his mother when he is freed from dependence on her.

But the relationship can be looked at the other way round – no longer son-mother but mother-son.* Of this relationship John Paul said: 'Since Mary is the mother of us all, her care for the life of man is *universal*. The care of a mother for her child embraces her child *totally*'. Once again, if we consult the human side of the analogy, there is considerable exaggeration here. The mother's care for her *baby* in the first few months of life may well possess this characteristic of 'totality': she is, for the time being, the well-nigh universal provider of food, comfort, warmth and love (though the

father can make his own irreplaceable contribution). But this relatively total and exclusive mother-son relationship eventually ceases, and must do so, unless permanent babyhood, a tiny tot Peter Pan, is to be made the norm and the ideal. A mother who clings to her son and will not let him go is a menace.

In other words a Mary-above-the-Church mariology attributes to the son-mother and the mother-son relationship features that we would find deplorable and harmful in the natural order. Since everything we say about Mary is analogous and based on human experience, whatever is false in the human order will also be false in the transferred 'theological' order. It is not enough to reply that this form of motherhood is 'unique' (which it is); it still has to obey the ordinary rules of analogy. It cannot prescind from the ordinary human support in which it takes its origin. A Mary-in-the-Church mariology raises none of these psychological problems.

But Fatima has not only a particular type of MAC mariology. It purports to have a content. It belongs to the literary genre of 'private revelations' and tells us something, presumably important, about the modern world. According to John Paul, it was just what the twentieth century needed. And so perspicacious was Our Lady of Fatima in 1917 that her vision of a world heading for perdition unless it says the rosary is the best diagnosis of the 'signs of the times' that we have. *That is why*, John Paul explained, the 1983 Synod of Bishops will be devoted to 'Penance and Reconciliation'. I am not making this up. The consequence is that the task of 'discerning the signs of the times', assigned by the Council to 'the whole Church' (*Gaudium et Spes* 4 and 44), had already been accomplished by Our Lady of Fatima sixty-five years ago.

This is a most extraordinary shift, explicable only as an instance of pontifical piety. For the most the Church can say of 'private revelations' is that they are 'worthy of credit'. No one instructing a convert can say: 'If you don't accept Fatima, then I cannot receive you'. John Paul knows this perfectly well. At Fatima he quoted the conciliar decree On Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, which says that revelation is closed with the death of the last apostle and that, therefore, 'no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of the Lord' (4). So this side of the great eschatological event, *der Tag*, nothing *more* and nothing *new* is awaited. What, then, is the status of 'private revelations'? John Paul replied: 'The Church evaluates and judges private revelations by the criterion of conformity to the single public revelation'. Good. But what are they *for*? John Paul again replies: '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*' (author's italics).

Here we reach treacherous ground. If the message of Fatima is merely a distant echo of the Gospel message, then it is redundant. If, on the other hand, it creates difficulties which the Gospel message does not set up, then it is a blind alley as well. Moreover, the claim that Fatima expresses the 'truth and the call of the Gospel' is acceptable only if one holds a very simplified version of them. John Paul was able to quote Mark 1:15 'Repent and believe the Gospel'. This is part of the Gospel message. But the Gospel also speaks of the coming kingdom of God, of eternal life, of the promise for the future, of the reversal of conventional values, of death and resurrection. To reduce the Gospel to 'repentance' is to confuse the forerunner, John the Baptist, with the Christ to whom he points. To leave out of account the whole *ministry* of Jesus is to perpetrate the very error for which Rudolf Bultmann has been so roundly blamed.

Again, the remedy for the world's ills announced in Fatima in 1917 is that we should say the rosary. Nothing wrong with that. What is harder to swallow is John Paul's contention that it is 'in a special way, Mary's prayer, the prayer in which she feels particularly united with us'. But one of the few certain things we know about Mary the Mother of Jesus is that she did not and cannot have said the rosary. It was not invented until twelve centuries later. Saying the rosary is a good thing, especially if presented (as it was at Wembley) as a way of meditating on the Gospels. But it cannot be the answer of the New Testament to Lenin's famous question – the year was, after all 1917 – 'What is to be done?' Yet this is the answer given by Our Lady of Fatima. Can Our Lady have gone to so much trouble to say something so jejune?

Ah! but there is the famous 'third secret' which keeps us all on tenterhooks. Cue for story. Outside the press centre in Lisbon I discovered one morning a Japanese film crew busily photographing nothing in particular. They all wore rucksacks inscribed: 'Third Secret of Fatima Project. Nippon TV'. I asked a corpulent American priest who appeared to be their theological advisor why they were engaged on what must be, for them, so outlandish a venture. He replied that I was obviously ignorant and that two best-sellers had already been written on the 'third secret' of Fatima. I forbore to say that if the third secret was anything like the first two, then it was hardly worth waiting for.

In any case, it is not really secret any longer. There is a well-authenticated anecdote that Pope Paul VI, having opened the fatal envelope, turned pale, put it back in the drawer, and never talked about the matter again. Combine this with what is reported in Jean Guitton's *Paul VI's Secret*, and the 'third secret' is laid bare. Paul said that when he went to Fatima in 1967, the vast crowd –

the biggest that ever gathered to hear him – reminded him of the day of judgment and, he added, ‘After Hiroshima, we can understand Fatima better’. So the ‘third secret’ concerns a major nuclear catastrophe. Any further curiosity is misplaced. It was denounced in Acts 1:7 ‘It is not for you to know the times or dates that the Father has decided by his own authority’.

Sometimes, at this point, a counter-argument is produced to crush the critic. He is denounced as someone lacking the freshness and spontaneity of the children who saw the vision. They will precede the intellectuals into heaven. No doubt they will. In Fatima John Paul made rather a meal of this argument:

The words of the message were addressed to children aged from seven to ten. Children, like Bernadette of Lourdes, are particularly privileged in these apparitions of the Mother of God. Hence the fact that the language is also simple, within the limits of their understanding.

This is a most damaging admission, and no talk of childlike qualities can save it. At Fatima the assumption is made that these revelations have an importance that is universal and political, and that they speak to the entire adult population of the globe. But *quidquid recipitur recipitur secundum modum recipientis*, and that is a distinct limitation, not on the side of Our Lady, who is free to do what she wills, but on the side of the recipients of her message.

It is no longer possible to get into the minds of the three children. But something can be said about the mood of Portugal generally in the period before the first apparition on 13 May 1917. From the conversation of their parents they would have gathered that the world was rushing headlong into ruin and catastrophe. Portugal had contrived to stay out of the war until February 1916 when, at the insistence of Britain, the Portuguese commandeered the 36 German ships which happened to be in their harbours. This unfriendly act led to a German declaration of war on 9 March 1916. The Portuguese expected their involvement, if any, to be confined to Africa where their colonies were next door to German colonies. But pressured by the allies, they despatched an expeditionary force of 40,000 men to France in January 1917. It suffered terrible losses. April 1917 was also marked by strikes, industrial discontent, food shortages, and a government so unpopular that it was overthrown by revolution on 5 December of the same year. Any moderately imaginative child would have taken this all in. They would also have felt threatened by ‘socialists’, by which they meant the anti-clericals who held political power on the local level. Anyone predicting confusion and catastrophe ahead would have had a fair expectation of being proved right, *in the case of Portugal*, which was the only place they knew anything about. As the

historian of Portugal observes tartly: 'Post-war chaos reigned for seven years' (Livermore, *A New History of Portugal*, Cambridge, 1966, p 325). And it would not be a surprise if the parish priest, at his wit's end, recommended saying the rosary as the remedy for this mounting sea of troubles.

If the visions occurred at a time when 'doom and gloom' were understandable, they were officially 'received' by the Church at a time when the cold war was setting in and when anti-communism, for comprehensible reasons, was a stock Catholic attitude. In 1946 the Papal Legate, Cardinal Aloisi Masella, placed on the head of the statue of Our Lady of Fatima 'a valuable crown made of gold and precious stones'. Where did the crown come from? With wonderful symbolism, the precious crown was said to have been donated by three eighteen-year old and unemployed princesses: Mafalda, the niece of the Duke of Braganza (the royal house of Portugal), Maria Pia, daughter of the King of Italy (who had been removed by referendum the previous year) and Isabelle, eldest daughter of the Comte de Paris, the somewhat hopeless pretender to the French throne. There could hardly be a clearer expression of the link between Fatima, nostalgia, snobbery and political reaction.

At Lisbon airport I met a German Bishop pushing a large, six-foot high paper parcel in his trolley. There was no need to ask what it was. The bulge at the top indicated the precious crown. The Bishop was clearly worried about his statuesque companion. Did he pay its fare and seat it beside him in his Lufthansa plane? And what did he propose to do with it when he got back home? What need would it supply that his diocese had hitherto been lacking?

* Apologies to feminists for the concentration on the son-mother and mother-son relationship. It echoes the emphasis of John Paul and most mariologists, who have usually been male. Perhaps the reason why daughters are left out is simply that they can themselves become *mothers* and thus, having experience of both terms of the relationship, are less likely to be misled by fantasies about it.