

Fatima and Miracles of Conversion *by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.*

Fatima is the principal Marian shrine in the world whose avowed purpose is conversion. Moreover, Fatima provides us with what I dare call, the formula for miracles of conversion. What are we saying? We are saying that the directives revealed by Our Lady to the three seers of Fatima are the divinely ordained conditions for converting a world that desperately needs to return to God.

My plan is to cover the following areas of a vast subject.

- The essential message of Fatima in the light of papal teaching.
- The principal means of fulfilling this essential message.
- The basic reason for expiating miracles of conversion in the modern world.

Essential Message of Fatima

We begin by making a simple statement. The message of Fatima adds nothing new to the divine revelation which was completed at the end of the apostolic age, about the year 100 A.D. But this raises a question: Why, then, does God periodically communicate certain messages to the world, through such mystics as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Catherine of Siena and St. Theresa of Avila? He does this, not in order to reveal something unknown before, but to alert people to a revealed truth that had been ignored and that desperately needs to be met at certain periods of human history.

What is the single greatest need of our day? It is radical conversion from self-idolatry to faith in a loving God who became man and died on the Cross out of love for us, so that we might be willing to die to ourselves and out of love for Him. There is no real understanding of the essential message of Fatima unless we realize how deeply the modern world is steeped in sin.

Pope John Paul II expressed this fact in the clearest possible language during his three-day stay in Fatima in 1982. "Today," he said, "the successor of Peter...presents himself before the Mother of the Son of God at Fatima. In what way does he come?" The pope answered his own question.

He presents himself reading again with trepidation the motherly call to penance, to conversion, to the ardent appeal of the Heart of Mary that resounded at Fatima, sixty-five years ago. Yes, he reads it again with trepidation in his heart because he sees how many people and societies - how many Christians - have gone in the opposite direction to the one indicated in the message of Fatima. Sin has made itself firmly at home in the world, and denial of God has become widespread in the ideologies, ideas and plans of human beings.

No words can describe the havoc worked on millions of once believing Christians by the modern media of communication. It is as though the evil spirit had a field-day in sowing

errors in the minds of whole nations. These errors given to become such massive evils as the world has never experienced before.

To name just four:

- Scores of once civilized nations now legalize - in fact, legislate - the murder of close to a hundred million unborn children every year.
- Sexual perversions, like sodomy, are now so widely practiced that, again, civil laws are being enacted to defend the perversity and to penalize those who still believe in the sixth and ninth commandments of the Decalogue.
- Family life in once Christian nations is in shambles, where contraception has been reduced to an exact science, and infidelity has been elevated to a fine art.
- Pride, ambition and lust for power have made the twentieth century the bloodiest in human history. The wars of this century have killed more people than all the wars in the annals of mankind, put together, during all the previous millennia before the year 1900.

Surely, the pope was not exaggerating when he said that “sin has made itself firmly at home in the world” today. The essential message of Fatima is, therefore, the most fundamental need of the modern world. It is conversion, or turning away from sin and returning to the obedient service of God.

The Principal Means

We know that the Fatima message does not stop with identifying the world’s greatest need. It also provides the most effective way to meet this need. Here we must pause for a moment and ask ourselves: What is the root cause of this cosmic spread of sin, even to the denial of God and of His right to obedience from the creatures whom he made? The root cause is not only human weakness, or even human malice. It is nothing less than the mysterious activity of the evil spirit. Satan and his minions are at work in the world with a power and cunning that have no counterpart, I believe, since the dawn of Christianity.

That is why the message of Fatima is a living commentary on St. Paul’s teaching that our struggle is not only against flesh and blood. No, we are in conflict with the evil principalities and powers in high places. We are literally at war with the devil. That is why the underlying strategy of Fatima is to urge the followers of Christ to use superhuman means to overcome the superhuman forces of evil that have been let loose on the world in our day.

We have become so used to speaking of the supernatural powers of grace that we are liable to miss seeing the obvious. What does this mean?

It means that nature is no match for coping with the deluge of sin in our day. Only divine grace can provide the light and strength that the world needs to return in repentance to the

God from whom it has strayed. Can I be more clear? Yes. We can talk about repentance until we are blue in the face. We can write thousands of words in periodicals and books about conversion, and spill tons of ink in deploring the sinful conduct, not only of millions of ordinary people, but of leaders in society who become the idols of the media because they are such geniuses in the propagation of error and the perpetration of crime.

But all of this will do no good unless we use the channels of superhuman grace made available to by Jesus Christ.

What are these channels of grace? They are primarily

- Faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who became the Son of Mary.
- Prayer to Jesus Christ, especially through His Mother, Mary.
- Penance as the voluntary sacrifice of what is naturally pleasant, in reparation for sin and in union with the sufferings of Jesus Crucified.

As you read the story of the original Fatima apparitions and the Church's explanation, you are struck by their utter simplicity. There are no subtleties, and no theological speculations. Three little children could understand - why? Because they had faith, they prayed, and they had a spiritual instinct for self-denial as a means of expiating sin.

Among those three: faith, prayer and expiation, the most fundamental is faith. But it has to be the true faith. The Roman Catholic faith, as revealed by the Son of God became man, and entrusted to the Church whose visible head on earth is the Bishop of Rome and the Vicar of Jesus Christ. To talk about overcoming sin in the absence of the true faith is wasted effort. It is nonsense.

That surely must be one reason why Our Lady chose such simple persons as the three children of Fatima, to share with them her concern over the sinfulness of mankind. These children were academically untrained, and in the eyes of a sophisticated world, three nobodies. Yes, but they had the faith.

Given the faith, prayer was the spiritual atmosphere they breathed and reparation the most obvious way that we can appease an offended God who punishes sin by temporal suffering in this life, and even eternal pain for the stubborn rejection of mercy from a loving God.

Why Miracles of Conversion

The need for conversion from sin in today's world is the theme of all the popes of modern times. It is the towering need of our age. It is also the basic message of Fatima. So we ask ourselves: How can this be done? Or are we talking in fables and myths and speaking the language of poetry? Yes, a world estranged from God can be converted, but not by any ordinary human means at our easy disposal. It will take a miracle, in fact a series of miracles to achieve.

Are we expecting God to work these miracles of conversion to faith from unbelief and to virtue from a life of sin? Yes, we are. But how? Behind the answer to this question lies the secret of Fatima. It is the presence on earth of Jesus Christ, the infinite God who assumed human flesh and blood from His Mother Mary.

If there is one thing that characterized Christ's visible stay on earth, it was the marvelous signs and wonders He worked in Palestine, which we call His miracles. He restored sight to the blind, and hearing and speech to the deaf mutes, He gave paralytics the power to walk, and healed the bleeding and sick and lame with a word and the touch of His hand. He stilled the storm at sea and told Peter to come to Him walking on the waters.

He made sure that Lazarus was dead and decaying in the grave, and then called him back to life again. All of these miracles Christ performed by His divine power as God, but through his humanity as man. He spoke with human lips, used human spittle, used human words, and exercised His own patience through His human nature.

Yet, and this is the key to unlock the treasures of Christ's divinity. Jesus the Son of Mary is now on earth in the Holy Eucharist. He is here to work the same, in fact, greater wonders than He did during His visible stay on earth. But what is greater: to heal the sick or to convert sinners? St. Augustine tells us it is a higher marvel of divine power to restore a sinner to friendship with God than to raise the dead Lazarus back to life. A miracle, by definition, is a visible effect produced by God which surpasses the powers of nature.

In physical miracles, God surpasses the powers of physical nature, like the wonders that take place at Lourdes. In moral miracles, God surpasses the powers of the human will in bending the will to the will of God

- from unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ
- from sinful estrangement from God to humble submission to God's love.

This is the principal mission of Fatima....