

[Traslation of **Fatima e la modernità: Profezia ed Escatologia** by António Dos Santos Marto, courtesy of Urbaniana Press, 2003]

## **FATIMA AND MODERNITY: PROPHECY AND ESCHATOLOGY**

by *Antonio Dos Santos Marto*

*\*Lightning and thunder need time, the light of the stars  
needs time, actions need time for them to be seen and heard\*.*

(Nietzsche)

This phrase of Nietzsche, although it refers to a different context, may well be applied to the message of the apparitions of Our Lady at Fatima in 1917. Only distancing ourselves in time, at the beginning of a new century, we are able to grasp its full extent, depth and relevance.

An English historian, G.J.Hobsbawn, defines the '900 as a "short century": he makes it start in 1914 with World War I and end in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Just this length of time is embraced by the message of Fatima in a special way.

The apparitions draw their special meanings from the historical, political, cultural and religion moment which they direct their questioning to, and which they want to illuminate with their message. According to the doctrine of St. John of the Cross the apparitions are the wrapping of the message. The primacy belongs to the message of love. The church considers them "private revelations" that can not be compared to the revelation given in Scripture. They do not have the role of founding the faith, but of serving it. They add nothing to the unique revelation, but they can be a humble reminder of it. They form sensible signs in which God is giving Himself according to the capacity of the one who receives Him. And we could accost their role to that of icon which, according to Eastern theology' 'is a true objectification, inspired by the Holy Spirit [...] generator and bearer of presence" **79**.

They belong to the order of the charisma, namely a gift of God to a member of the body of Christ for the good of the whole body. Like all the charisms of exceptional character, they should not be looked upon, but welcomed with thanksgiving, in spirit of discernment and prudence.

In the expression of K. Rahner, a private revelation is not an innovation, which means a new interpretation of the reality of the faith, rather it is the revelation of a gospel imperative in a particular historical situation of the church and of the world, to be implemented with urgency at a specific time as required by the same historical situation, and in agreement with the general principles of the official revelation and of the faith of the church **80**.

Thus, private revelation is a implementation of epic proportions, a historical application of revelation founded in a certain period, in order to insert that revelation in the consciences and in the culture as grace, promise, existence, and judgment, so that auditors and recipients are faced with a direct call of God that invites all the obedience of faith.

The apparitions are a sign of God for our generation. And Mary appears as the handmaid of the Lord, available at the service of the church in the world. The apparitions also want to prepare the Church for the future, sometimes in apocalyptic tones.

I think you should do this premise as an introduction because, in regard to the apparitions, we often find a curiosity sometimes unhealthy that is likely to stop on peripheral details without grasping the fundamental.

The apparitions and the consequent revelation cannot forget the dramatic historical situation in which the community of the christian is inserted. Then, only in the measure in which the appearances relate to the daily story, and with the great provocations that depart from the humanity, we may think of to be in front of a message that is given to help regenerate again a faith that has become lukewarm and indifferent.

A theological reflection in this regard may not be discharged from a careful analysis of the socio-cultural context in which the apparitions occur, for example, the peculiar conditions of the church in a particular moment in which she lives.

## 1- ON THE THRESHOLD OF MODERN TIMES

It is clear that the message of Fatima refers to the new era of modern times, with particular incidence on the age of the two great conflicts that mark the history of the XX (twentieth) century, with all the context in which they fit and with everything of which they are expressions.

The first and the second world war represent almost *a prism of evil* in this century, in which from various corners are reflected and you can observe the main aspects of evil and its perverse effects:

- the tragic novelty of the political form of totalitarian versions of stalinism and nazism, typical of the XX century;
- the use of lies systematically deployed to fabricate a truth, and rewrite history;
- a program of negation of God and of ejecting Him from the public life, and from the same human consciousness, carried on by a militant atheism and secularism;
- the annulment and the death of the human being and the total disregard of the dignity of the person, expressed numerically by tens of millions of victims, in the name of the radical purity of the ideology, of the revolution or of the race, elevated to the category of new deity;
- the novelty of what was to be called the "total war" that, in defiance of the traditionally accepted codes, gave the green light to the liquidation of civilians and innocents, using all the most modern scientific-technological tools. This means bringing up to the extreme the arbitrary power, which does not know limits, no limit at all.
- the collective phenomenon of hatred and violence, that has taken hold of individuals and peoples.

In a theological reading about the signs of the times, the world war and the total war represent (which means they make present) a concentrate of evil, a real symbol of *the globalization of sin*

experienced for the first time in his monstrosity, in his horror at the planetary level. They highlight both the forms of *organized evil* of which our century is tragically full, and *the acceptance of the normality and of the banality of evil*, now rationally justified and legitimate, scientifically and technically well planned and executed. **81**

At the distance of time appear to us today with more clarity the metamorphosis, the rupture and the degeneration of the modern life and its potentially destructive outcome.

The novelty of modern times does not properly consist in the fact that man has decided to use freely and publicly the reason, according to the philosophy of Kant. This argument has its roots in Christianity, in the conviction that man is created in the image of God, capable of creative knowledge.

What marks the epochal break is the fact that modernity presents itself as the ambitious project of the salvation of man through the man, a project that has had its theoretical extreme expression in the XIX century with the "masters of suspicion" and their message, whose heir was Marxism: is it necessary for God to die so that man may live. The nineteenth century has left in the general consciousness, such as inheritance, this open plague which penetrated into the XX century: the grudge against God as the enemy of man, and which resulted precisely in the death of man.

To summarize with the words of John Paul II: "This message (i.e. the message of Fatima) is addressed in particular to the men of our century, a century marked by wars, hatred, by the violation of the fundamental rights of man, by the immense suffering of men and nations, and finally, by the struggle against God, even to the denial of his existence" **82**.

The message of Fatima looks with lucidity and bitterness at this tumultuous and dramatic historical event. After the Scriptures, it is perhaps the highest and the most impressive complaint of the sin of the world, inviting the entire Church and the world to a serious examination of conscience. Only those who have a strong sense of the dignity of man before God, of his eternal destiny, can figure out how great is the tragedy of sin, and how the loss of the sense of sin, is in its deepest, the loss of the sense of everything that is truly human. "With the elimination of God from consciousness, man himself comes into danger. At the end of the century 'at stake and at risk not only the existence of God but also the dignity of man" **83**.

Faced with this situation of a wounded humanity, the message of Fatima is the spokesman of the victims' outcry, it invites to read the story starting from the victims, and to linger before the mystery of man in the sight of the mystery of God. It proposes vehemently the ancient and ever-present question of Genesis "Adam, where are you?" (3.9) - which means:

where is man? Where is man in the universe of the Auschwitz concentration camp or in the Soviet gulag? "How can you believe man or even how you can believe humanity- what a loud word - if at Auschwitz people had to experience what " man is terribly capable of? " **84**. The cynicism of the modern oppressors is not perhaps an expression of the wickedness of the modern world and of its appalling disregard and neglect of God? Who will save man from man himself?

## 2- CLOUD OF MERCY

The singular coincidence of those appearances with hours of extreme historical gravity (the war, the new Bolshevick creed and as a back reference, the new Nazi paganism) allows us to understand

them either under a psychoanalytic key of fateful premonition, either under a salvation history key of prophecy, which is of an irruption of the High Word, Word of Grace for non-institutional channels, but for charismatic ones.

The suggestive expression of St James Sarug (who died in 521) referred to Mary, "cloud of mercy that brings on herself the anxieties and hopes of the whole world" **85**, translates well the meaning of the apparitions of Fatima and the deep meaning of their message.

First, the appearance of the Virgin Mary with her message is perceived as an intervention from High Place to manifest and ensure the faithful about the non impassibility of God's heart, about his vulnerability, his pain and his cry of love facing the devastation of sin bent on destroying everything, and the suffering of the world and of the church: the compassionate God, the God for us.

The architectures of classical theology distanced God too much, metaphysically, from man: they induced believers to think about God in a way not very differently than the Destiny (Fate) of the pagans, a sovereign God, deaf, mute and distant. A false conception of God did not go much beyond the 'limits of a certain deism: God unmoved mover, first cause, "celestial monarch and patriarch of the universe" (Moltman), apathetic, impassibile - "a God reduced to an abstract postulate of the theoretical and practical reason, possibly coated with a Christian mantle" **86**. In this way we were hiding the genuine face of the God of Jesus Christ.

In the Fatima message, misfortune and sin do not leave God indifferent, and Rachel continues to mourn her children (cf Mt. 2, 18). For this, from the beginning to the end, the profound value of the message lies in the pressing invitation to bring to the center of the Christian life and to the world the worship of God, the Lord of history, the loving presence of the Lord, the recognition of his leadership, the adherence to his saving will, the invitation to turn on the desire to love God and to push the praxis of a love that mends anything. Everything else has here its center of unity and irradiation.

Secondly, and in a certain connection with the previous aspect, the message reflects a paradox that, is a constant in the history of salvation: it is the extreme and mysterious contrast between the "great" history of nations and their conflicts, the history of the great and powerful with its history and geography of power, and the "small" history ignored of the humble and the lowly, the poor, deprived of knowledge and power, on the outskirts of the world **87**. And from here, from the periphery, they are called upon to intervene in history in favor of peace with other forces, other powers, other means, seemingly useless and ineffective to human eyes: the power of prayer spoken with fervor by the just man, the constancy in prayer to obtain the gift of peace through the adoration, the reparatory devotion, the conversation and the sacrifice according to the costumes of piety of each time are in perfect consonance with what has been revealed in Scripture. "The walls of Jericho fell at the sound of the trumpets of prayer," said La Pira in 1959, coming back from the first trip that a western politician had made in Russia, after the war.

Within this context, the message of Our Lady is an appeal for us to be open to another dimension of history, fed by another Presence, supported by another Force, led by another Light, oriented towards another Destination, all mysteriously and silently present and operating in the chain of generations that retain the Promise (the Promises) of the Lord and transmit (transmit) from generation to generation.

The same thread of Marian spirituality inherent in the message of the Virgin Mary finds in her a welcoming light for contemplation of the mystery of divine benevolence and his condescension.

The devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Maria introduces us to the "humanity and kindness of our God and Lord Jesus Christ. He calls us to the simple and always present faith of the one who believed in the fulfillment of the words of the Lord" (Lk 1: 45) It accompanies the drama of the "mystery of iniquity" in the world as well as the mystery of the gestation of the believers and the risk of disbelief and apostasy.

In these two central aspects now reported (the non impassivity of God and the intervention in the history of the humble through worship and intercession) we can find the axis that allows to organically coordinate the various elements typical of the message of Fatima:

- the sacrificial element, centered on the Eucharistic Sacrifice and offering oneself with Christ;
- the eschatological element (vision of hell and conversion of sinners) of an impressive urgency - at first glance, almost inhuman - is able to emphasize the strong emphasis assumed by the misfortunes hanging on humanity and the Church, because of sin. It translates, in its way, the evangelical warning: "Unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way." **88**

- the Marian element of devotion and consecration to the Immaculate Heart, as a path towards a profound adoration of the mystery of God, expressed in the immaculate yes of Mary to His plan of love, and at the same time [as a way] towards the achievement of the Gift of peace ;

-the ecclesial element, as supportive communion of the whole Church for intercession for peace in the world and in the persecuted Church itself;

- the educational-religious element, which takes the form of exercises in piety (prayers, devotions, sacrifices) from popular sources (such as a simple spiritual journey accessible to all the people) according to the customs of the time, and inside of a language register psychological and affective (repair, console, alleviate ....).

### 3- IN AN HORIZON OF CHRISTOLOGICA AND TRINITARIAN FAITH

We say, finally, that all the Fatima message is presented to us in a horizon of Christological and Trinitarian faith. Here we find the next context in which is inserted the Eucharistic dimension.

The Message of Fatima in its entirety consists of three cycles: the angelic cycle (apparitions of the Angel - 1916), the Marian cycle (apparitions from May 13 to 13 October 1917) and the cycle of the Heart of Mary (apparitions of Pontevedra 1925- 1926 and of Tuy – 1929) **89**.

In my opinion, the apparitions of the Angel and the last apparition in Tuy constitute respectively the atrium and the keystone in the light of which must be framed and put into perspective the whole message. It is in them that appears especially the Eucharistic mystery in an intimate relationship with the mystery of the Trinity.

In the first appearance, the angel informs and inspires in the seers the spirit of reparative adoration in faith, hope and charity, through a simple and beautiful prayer: "My God, I believe, I adore, I hope and I love you; I ask forgiveness for those who do not believe, do not adore, do not hope and do not love You."

In the second appearance, it raises the sacrificial spirit through the daily sacrifice. And last, it makes explicit and concrete the spirit of sacrificial adoration in a Trinitarian and Eucharistic dimension, through prayer and communion, giving it an intention of reparation. It is extremely illuminating the prayer of the Angel:

"Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I adore you profoundly and I offer you the most precious Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, present in all the shrines of the world, in reparation for the outrages, sacrileges, and the indifference with which he is offended. And through the infinite merits of His Most Sacred Heart and the Immaculate Heart of Mary I beg the conversion of the poor sinners " **90**.

Already in the first appearance of Our Lady on May 13, when the grace of God was revealed and communicated to them in the form of "so intense a Light ... that penetrating us in the chest and in the innermost of the soul made us see ourselves in God Which was that light, "the visionaries prayed in the intimacy:" Oh Holy Trinity, I adore you. My God, my God, I love you in the Blessed Sacrament " **91**.

Finally we have the last appearance at Tuy. Almost like once, he closes and synthesizes all the message that summarizes in a single glance the mystery of the Trinity, the sacrifice of the Cross, the Eucharistic sacrifice and the unique presence and participation of Mary under the Cross, present with His Immaculate Heart In all this mystery of the salvation of the world:

"I had asked and obtained permission from my superiors (?) And from the confessor to make the Holy Hour from 11am to midnight, from Thursday to Friday. When I was alone one night, I knelt in the center of the balustrade, in the chapel, reciting , genuflected, the angel's prayers. Feeling tired I got up and continued to recite them with my arms crossed. The only light was that of the lamp. Suddenly all the Chapel was enlightened by a supernatural light, and above the Altar appeared a Cross of Light that reached the ceiling. Within a lighter light one could see, at the top of the Cross, a figure of man with a body up to his belt, with a dove of light on his chest, and nailed to the cross, the body of another man. A little under the belt, suspended in the air, they saw a large chalice and host, on which some drops of blood spilled from the face of the Crucifix and from a chest injury. Sliding over the host, those drops fell on the chalice. Under the right arm of the Cross there was the Madonna (it was the Madonna of Fatima with her Immaculate Heart ... in her left hand ... with no sword or roses but with a crown of thorns and flames ....), with His Immaculate Heart In His Hand ... Under his left arm, some great letters, like crystalline water running *over the Altar*, formed these words: "Grace and Mercy."

I understood that the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity was shown to me and received light on this mystery that I was not allowed to reveal. **92**

It is interesting to note how this representation of the Trinity in the Cross is called in the Christian iconography "Throne of Grace" **93**, as it recalls Eb 4: 14-16: "Since we have a great high priest, who has crossed the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, we keep the profession of our faith firmly. In fact, we do not have a high priest who can not understand our infirmities, since he has been tested in everything, just like us, excluding sin. Let us therefore come with our fullest confidence to the Throne of Grace, to receive mercy and to find grace and to be helped at the right time". And how not to evoke, by association, the prologue of St. John in the part in which he presents the Incarnate Word as the "only Son full of grace and truth", that is, of merciful and faithful love, from whose "fullness we all have received grace on grace. " **94** (Gv 1, 14-16)?

In addition, iconographic art has sometimes expressed this mystery with more depth and skillfulness of certain academic theologies.

This happens in the iconographic tradition of the West, when it represents the trinitarian mystery on the wood of the Cross. And like a plastic synthesis of this theology: *the Father delivers the Son in solidarity with men, and he suffers in the pain of his love; the Son who gives himself totally for the multitude of the brothers; the dove of the Spirit of Love that sustains the Son in his giving and which, in turn, is offered by the Son to mankind as a gift of his suffering love.* This is the mystery of love that we celebrate in the Eucharist.

## CONCLUSION

Grace and Mercy, Grace of the Merciful Love - here is the synthesis of the message of Fatima and of the revelation of the compassionate God who, in His Trinitarian Love, bows on all human suffering, on mankind, to make it feel all his tenderness, to manifest himself as the loving Father of every creature.

We understand then how Pope Wojtyla, recalling the eighteenth anniversary of the apparitions of Fatima, in a message to the local Bishop could write:

"At the gates of the third millennium, observing the signs of the times in this twentieth century, Fatima is certainly counted among the major ones, also because it announces many of the following signs in its message and invites to live its appeals: signs like the two world wars, but also great assemblies of nations and peoples under the sign of dialogue and peace; the oppression and revolutions lived by different countries and peoples, but also the voice and opportunity offered to populations and peoples which have in the meantime arisen in the international arena; the crisis, the disruption and the many suffering of members of the Church, but also a renewed and intense sense of solidarity and mutual interdependence in the mystical Body of Christ that is being consolidated with all the baptized ....., the departure from God and the abandonment of him by individuals and societies, but also an uproar in the hearts and communities of the Spirit of Blood which came to the immolation and martyrdom to save "the image and likeness of God in man" ( Gen 1, 27), to save man from man.

Among these and other signs of the times, as I said, it appears that Fatima helps us to see the hand of God, providential guide and Father patient and compassionate even of this twentieth century" **95**.

In the light of these hermeneutic keys, Fatima appears as a sign of God for our generation, a prophetic word for our time, a divine intervention in human history through Mary's maternal face.

When Mary starts on a mission received by God, it is never for small things or marginal matters, since it is always the grave problem of the fate (destiny) of the world and of the salvation of men.

To think well, the coordinates of Fatima's message are wide and theologically contain a prophecy in the light of eschatology. "Prophecy, in the biblical sense of the term, does not mean to foretell the future, but rather to apply the will of God to the present time, and, consequently, to set the straight path for the future" **96**.

On the other hand, the vicissitudes of humanity and church are subjected to the eschatological criterion or the ultimate end. Only by opening the horizons on the eternity and by proclaiming

theological hope, it is possible to enlighten the sense of a history opened to the future of God, and to oppose the evil that shames humanity. In that sense, in the Fatima's message, the premonition of judgment affecting the world as a possibility of infernal self-destruction, namely being reduced to ashes, is announced together with the hope of defeating evil starting from our conversion to God.

Fatima's message is therefore a warning and consolation of theological hope: evil is won by the Trinitarian love revealed to us in the cross and resurrection of Jesus and by the love of Mary who loves us.

(translation by Liana Sammartino)

---

79 B. BOBRINSKOY, *Les Apparitions de la Mère de Dieu dans l'orthodoxie*, Paris 1982, 56.

80 Cf. K. RAHNER, *Alcune note per una teologia della devozione al S. Cuore di Gesù*, in *Saggi di cristologia e mariologia*, Roma 1967, 291.

81 On the relationship between totalitarianism and the modern, and so also on the meaning of the "normality of evil", cf. the analysis of the acute and critical Hannah Arendt in his works *The origins of totalitarianism*, Milan 1989 (the first edition dates back to 1951), and *The banality of evil, Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Milan, 1964. The holocaust demonstrates how a structure of evil can become scaring, terrifying. It is what E. Wiesel makes us understand in one of his testimonies. A truck discharges its load of corpses in a ditch in flames. That night and those flames made of my life one night closed with the seven keys. I will never forget that smoke. I will never forget the faces of the children, whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke clouds on the dark blue silence. I will never forget that silence of the night, which for all eternity deprived me of the right to live. I will never forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and my dreams which took on the appearance of a desert. I will never forget it. Even if I were condemned to live as much as God himself. Never. (in *La noche, el alba, el dia*, Barcelona 1986, 44). Today are calculated in 25 millions the dead of the nazist barbarity, and in 100 millions more than the barbarism of communism. Cf. S. COURTOS, *Le livre noir du communisme. Crimes, urs, repression*, Paris 1997

82 *Homilia da Missa para a dedicacao do santuario de N.S. de Fatima em Zacobane (Polonia) in "Osservatore Romano"* (edizione in lingua portoghese) n. 24, 14.06.97, 16

83 O.G. CARDERAL, *La entrana del Cristianismo*, Salamanca 1997, 284

84 J.B. METZ, *Un hablar de Dios, sensible a la teodicea*, in J.B. METZ, *El clamor de la tierra. El problema dramático de la teodicea*, Navarra 1996, 27

85 Citato da S. DEORITTI, *Note sulla pietà mariana tra fede e visione*, "Il Regno" 1993. 2. 56

86 K. RAHNER, *Il significato dell'umanità di Gesù*, in *Saggi di cristologia...*, 247.



87 We could just remember Abraham, Moses, the ten righteous of Sodom and Gomorrah, David, Mary of Nazareth, Joseph and the shepherds of Christ in Bethlehem.

88 An echo of this warning is found in St. Paul, to the Galatians, which seems to mean that the works of man fall on him: "Do not be illuded, no one can make fun of God. Each of us will gather what he has sown. He who sows in his flesh will collect corruption, he who sows in the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. " (6, 7-8)

89 Cf.F.LEITE, *As Aparições de Fatima. Historia and mensagem*, in AA.VV., *Fatima 75 anos. Fatima 1992*. 21. To confirm this thesis of units and complementarity of the Fatima apparitions and the apparitions in Pontevedra and Tuy was presented in the international conference on Fatima in 1997, a historical-critical study rigorous and precise, by Prof. A. Ziegenaus of Augsburg Faculty of theology, aiming to achieve "de Fatima El llamado problem I and II to Comenzar en la documentacion historica".

90 *Memorias da Irma Lucia I. Fatima 1997*, 155-157

91 *Ibid.* 162

92 *Ibid.* 201. The underlined is ours

93 Cf. W.BRAUNFELS, *Dreifaltigkeit*, in E.KIRSHBAUM (ed.) *Lexicon der christlichen Iconographie I*.Rom =Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1968, 535.

94 Cf. TOB. *Nouveau Testament*, Paris 1980, 292, nota v).

95 *Mensagem ao bispo de Leiria-Fatima por ocasio do 80 aniversario das aparicoes milagrosas de Nossa Senhora*, in "Osservatore Romano" (edizione in lingua portoghese), 18-10-97, 4.

96 J. RATZINGER, *Comentario Teologico*, in *Congregacao para a Doutrina da Fe', Mensagem de Fatima*, Lisboa 2000, 44.