VI. Sacrifices and Sufferings

After this third apparition of Our Lady the three children yearned more and more to be left alone to say their prayers and make their sacrifices for Our Lady; but whenever they were seen on the streets, the crowds of people gathered to ask them all sorts of questions about the apparitions. To avoid these questioners, they had to wend their way to their pastures over back roads and deserted lanes. So filled were they with the thought of pleasing the Lady that nothing else counted, neither singing nor dancing, not even the flute playing of little Francisco.

"What are you thinking about, Jacinta," Lucia asked one morning, noticing a cloud of sadness veiling her face.

"I am thinking of Hell, and poor sinners. How sorry I am for the souls that go to Hell ... the people there, alive, burning as wood in the fire ... Lucia, why is it that Our Lady does not show Hell to sinners? If they saw it, they would not commit any more sins, so they would not go there."

Lucia, puzzled, could find no word to answer. But Jacinta insisted, "Why did you not tell Our Lady to show Hell to all those people?"

"I forgot," Lucia admitted.

Jacinta then knelt on the ground, while she raised her folded hands towards Heaven, sighing out the prayer that the Lady taught them to say: "O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of Hell, lead all souls to Heaven, especially those most in need." Lucia and Francisco both followed suit, kneeling as they said the Lady's prayer with Jacinta. Jacinta, however, was so engrossed in her prayer, she did not realize Lucia was praying with her, and she spoke up, "Lucia, Francisco, are you praying with me? We must pray a great deal to save souls from Hell. So many go there!"

The thought of Hell and the souls suffering in its fire so filled the child's mind, she could not fathom the reasons for it. "Lucia," she went to Lucia with all her problems. "Lucia, what have these people done to go to Hell?"

"I don't know! Maybe they sinned by missing Mass on Sunday. Maybe they said ugly words, stole, swore ..."

"And do they go to Hell just for one word?"

"If it is a big sin ..."

"How easy it was for them to have held their tongues or go to Mass! How sorry I am for them! If I could only show them Hell..."

Tired and weary from kneeling so long, they got up and walked to the shade of the large holm oaks to think some more on the words of their Lady. Francisco spoke up this time, "Why did Our Lady hold in Her hand a heart, spreading upon the world that great light that is God? Lucia, you were with Our Lady in the light that came towards the earth; but Jacinta and I in the light that went up to Heaven."

"You and Jacinta will go to Heaven soon, but I have to stay in the world longer."

"How many years?"

"I don't know, but for many."

"Was it the Lady who told you?"

"No, but I saw it in that light that She sent into our hearts."

"That's true," Jacinta spoke up, "I also saw in that way. I am going to Heaven but you are going to stay here. If Our Lady lets you, tell everyone what Hell is like, so that

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they won't sin any more. So many people falling into Hell, so many people..."

"You don't have to be afraid," Lucia said, "you are going to Heaven."

"Yes, I shall go; but I want everybody to go there, too."

The cool hours of the morning gave way to the stifling heat of the day. The children burned with thirst, but there was not a drop of water near. Instead of complaining, seven-year-old Jacinta seemed happy. "How good it is," she said. "I am thirsty but I offer everything for the conversion of sinners."

Lucia, the oldest of the three, realized she should look after her cousins, so she went to a nearby house to fetch some water. When she returned, she offered it first to Francisco.

"I don't want to drink," the nine-year-old boy said; "I want to suffer for sinners."

"Jacinta, you drink it."

"I also want to offer a sacrifice." So Lucia poured out the water into the hollow of a rock for the sheep to drink and returned the empty jug to the house.

Jacinta, however, became very weak and was almost fainting. The rhythmic noises of crickets, frogs and insects began to pound in her ears like thunder. Holding her head in her hands, she cried out in utter desperation, "My head aches so. Tell the crickets and frogs to stop."

"Don't you want to suffer this for sinners?" Francisco asked.

"Yes, I do, let them sing."

"Lucia," Jacinta continued, "the Lady said that Her Immaculate Heart shall be your refuge and the way that shall lead you to God. Doesn't that make you happy? I love Her Heart very much."

"I should like to go with you," Lucia confessed, thinking of the beautiful joys of Heaven.

"Lucia, don't you remember?... The Heart of Our Lady encircled by thorns? How pitiful! I am so sorry for Her... She asked for the Communion of Reparation, but how could I do it, if I can't receive Communion yet?"

Filled with such thoughts, the days sped by for these three children.

One time, Jacinta was alone near the well, while Lucia and Francisco went to look for some wild honey. All at once a vision of the Pope came before her. Thinking that the others would see everything she did, she called them back, "Lucia! Francisco! Did you see the Holy Father?"

"No."

"I don't know how it happened," Jacinta went on. "I saw the Holy Father in a very big house. He was kneeling before a table, holding his face in his hands and he was crying. Outside, there were many people; some were throwing stones at him, others were swearing at him and saying many ugly words to him. How pitiful it was! We must pray a lot for him."

Another time, while they were in the cave of the Cabeço saying the prayer of the Angel, Jacinta suddenly got up, her eyes filled with tears, "Lucia," she sobbed, "don't you see all those roads and lanes and fields covered with people crying from hunger, without anything to eat? And the Holy Father in a church praying before the Immaculate Heart of Mary? And all those praying with him?"

As news of the apparitions spread throughout the country, the number of visitors to Fatima increased daily. Some were devout, others were merely curious; but all wanted to see the Cova da Iria and to speak to the three children. Jacinta's father tells of this in his own words.

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"Many ladies came, elaborately dressed. We might be doing our chores in our everyday clothes and they embarrassed us very much. Oh, but were they curious, very, very curious. They were all after the secret. They sat Jacinta on their lap and plagued her with questions. But she answered only when it suited her. They petted her, offered her presents, but all in vain. It was a secret that could not be extracted, even with a corkscrew.

"Some well-dressed gentlemen came only to laugh and make fun of us, who did not even know how to read. Very often, we were the ones who laughed last. Poor things! They had no faith. How could they believe in Our Lady? The children seemed to sense this type of person and they would vanish in the wink of an eye."

Once a car stopped at the door, a large family got out. The three children scattered over the house; Lucia hid under the bed, Francisco climbed to the attic, but Jacinta, who was not so nimble, was caught. When the visitors left, Lucia came out from under the bed and said to Jacinta, "What did you say when they asked for me?"

"I kept very quiet. I knew where you were, but lying is a sin."

They laughed and joked about it, their playing "hide and seek" with the visitors. "What questions the people asked!" Ti Marto continued, "Did Our Lady also have goats and sheep? Did She eat potatoes? Such foolishness!"

The priests were no less inquisitive. "They would ask us questions," Lucia said, "then they would ask the same questions all over again. As soon as we saw a priest, if we could, we ran away. Every time we found ourselves before a priest, we prepared ourselves to offer to God one of our biggest sacrifices."

There were some exceptions among the priests: One was a source of great joy and encouragement to the children. "My dear girl," Lucia remembers this priest saying to her, "you should love God a great deal for the favors and graces He is giving you." These words, said with such great kindness, engraved themselves so deeply on her heart, that since then she made it a habit to say continually to Our Lord, "My God, I love You, in gratitude for the graces You have given me."

Lucia taught this prayer to her cousins. Jacinta loved it so much, that no matter what they were doing, she might interrupt everything to say to Lucia, "Lucia, have you forgotten to tell Our Lord that you love Him for the graces He has given us?"

There was another saintly old priest, a Father Cruz, a priest still venerated by all the people, who helped the children very much. One day, he went to Aljustrel and requested the children to take him to the place where Our Lady appeared to them. Astride his donkey, flanked by the two girls, he rode over to the Cova da Iria, all the way teaching the girls new prayers. Jacinta remembered two of them, which she frequently said, and which gave her great consolation during her illness: "My God, I love You," and "Sweet Heart of Mary, be my salvation." Explaining why she remembered these prayers, she said, "I want to tell Jesus that I love Him so much! When I say this to Him, it seems that I have a fire in my heart. I love Our Lord and Our Lady so much that I never get tired of telling Them that I love Them."

The Marto family was much more understanding of Jacinta and Francisco than was Lucia's family of her. They questioned Lucia and ridiculed her even more than outsiders.

Her mother nagged her continually and went so far as to punish her. If we cannot excuse Senhora dos Santos, we can try to understand the mother's reasons for this course of action. They were a family of ordinary means. They had only a few head of cattle and a few pieces of land in the Cova da Iria where they raised their vegetables and food, potatoes, corn, beans and olives. Since the apparitions, so many people came to visit the Cova da Iria that the vegetables were trampled upon and everything was

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ruined. "My mother, lamenting her loss, would not spare me," Lucia said. "'When you want to eat, you can go now and ask that Lady!' and my sisters would say 'you should eat only what grows in the Cova da Iria.'"

This nagging became so distressing to the child, she hardly dared to pick up a slice of bread to eat. To make things worse, her older sisters who used to weave and sew to help support the home, now had to help tend the sheep and they lost so much time with visitors, they could not do their work. Finally the family had to sell the sheep.

Lucia's life at home grew more unbearable every day. Misunderstanding and misinterpretations multiplied with the hours. Her oldest sister, Maria dos Anjos, recalled, "One day, an old lady came to mother and told her that she was not surprised any more at the children saying that they had seen Our Lady. She had seen a lady give Lucia half a dollar. Mother immediately called Lucia and asked if that were true. Lucia said that she had been given only two pennies. Mother persisted, using the old lady's words against Lucia, 'Once a liar, always a liar,' and she used the broomstick on Lucia. A few moments later Jacinta came in and showed us the half-dollar given her. But it was too late for Lucia; she had already got her thrashing."

Some neighbors were as bad in their unbelief. They were very mean to the little ten-year-old girl, calling her evil names and, at times, even striking the child. No one dared to strike the Marto children, however; Ti Marto watched them too closely. Little Jacinta, in her eagerness to suffer for sinners, one day said to Lucia, "I wish my parents were like yours so that they would hit me. Then I would have more sacrifices to offer to Our Lord."

Senhora Marto did act rather harshly at times but only at first. "You are going to get it," she would say, "for your cheating the people. Many go to the Cova da Iria just because of you."

"But we don't force anyone to go there," Jacinta spoke up. "Whoever wants to go there goes. Whoever does not want to believe will be punished. And mother, you look out, for if you don't believe..."

Meanwhile, Jacinta's father was being patient, mulling over the facts, trying to arrive at the truth. Like good Saint Joseph of old, Ti Marto was not going to judge hastily or do anything rash or unjust; he was thinking and praying, waiting for God to direct his course of thought and action.

Newspaper writers were not so considerate. The apparitions were reported in the papers, but the facts were placed in a wrong light, ridiculous details were invented and scorn was heaped upon this new "factory of miracles that the priests were setting up in Fatima." Trying to explain it away, the newspaper accounts accused the children and those who believed in them of being epileptics, the victims of fraud, greed or collective suggestions. The ridicule and accusations of the newspapers served but to divide the people, stirring up the enemies of the Church on the one hand, yet also serving to stir up the faith of the believers.

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