

XIII. The Chapel at the Cova da Iria



The little chapel built on the site of the apparitions (begun on August 6, 1918) which was shattered by dynamite on March 6, 1922.

After October 13, 1917, the Cova da Iria was never the same. Pilgrims were coming all the time. "They knelt before the holm oak," Maria da Capelinha recalled, "they wept and prayed to Our Lady. When there was a group, they sang hymns. They came to ask favors of Our Lady and She heard them all. No one was ever disappointed; no one felt tired. I never heard in those days that Our Lady refused anyone a grace. All those who came had faith. If they did not have it, they caught it

here. How wonderful that time was. It brings tears to our eyes. I remember once being approached by a man who was soaking wet. I asked him if he was not feeling well. He had spent the night in the open and the day was cold and rainy. 'Not at all, lady,' he replied, 'I never had a night as happy as this one. I have behind me twenty miles and I am not tired at all. I feel very happy here at Fatima.'

Almost from the beginning people had been leaving gifts of money and produce at the sacred spot as tokens of their devotion and gratitude. On the 13th of August, on the occasion when the children were absent, the crush of people around the little tree was such that all these offerings were being trampled underfoot, so Maria da Capelinha decided to save what she could, especially the money, until some decision could be made as to its use. She offered the money first to one of the elder Marto boys, who flatly refused it. The next day she thought to give it to Senhor Marto. Arriving at the Marto home, she found the Pastor there. "I can still see him leaning against the wall," she recalls. "I might have seemed a little discourteous, but in my excitement, I went right to Ti Marto, offering the money to him instead of to the Pastor. Ti Marto, of course, refused. 'Don't try me any more, lady,' he said. 'I have been tempted enough.'" Senhora Olimpia also would have nothing to do with it. Only then did Maria turn to the Pastor, and he also coldly turned it down.

"Well, it isn't mine," she insisted. "So I shall put it back just where I found it."

"Don't do that," advised the Pastor. "Keep it, or have someone else keep it until things clear up."

So Maria da Capelinha continued to collect the offerings each day, and to sell the produce, thus increasing the treasury. And as the funds increased, the people spoke more and more of erecting a chapel at the Cova da Iria. As time passed, however, nothing was being done about the building. Of course, the civil authorities were absolutely opposed

to the idea of a chapel, and the Church authorities were prudently indifferent. Meantime rumors began to go around to the effect that Maria da Capelinha was keeping the money for her family.

Maria then went to the Pastor to ask his advice. He showed her a letter from the Cardinal stating that the money be kept for the time being, but not by the parents, lest they be accused of profiting from the apparitions. Instead it should be kept by some other trustworthy person. The Pastor asked her to continue to retain the funds. Still the rumors continued and things came to a climax one day when Manuel Carreira, Maria's husband, was summoned to appear before the Magistrate. The poor man imagined all sorts of things, but nothing came of the interview except that it precipitated action on the part of those desirous of building a chapel. Senhor dos Santos readily donated the land, and within a month a pitifully small chapel was erected.

As soon as the chapel was finished, someone offered to have a statue made to complete the shrine. This proposal met with great enthusiasm, and immediately a procession was planned for the installation of the statue. It didn't take the hostile government officials long to learn of this, and forthwith they made their own plans for breaking up the demonstration. When the day of the procession arrived there was general commotion around the village church of Fatima, where the statue was to be brought. A sudden thunderstorm dispersed the government guards permitting the statue to be brought into the church, where it was blessed and venerated and then secreted for fear that it would be stolen. There was no procession. Meantime the niche in the chapel at the Cova was veiled to make it appear that the statue was already there. When nothing happened after a while, the statue was quietly moved to the niche.

Rumors started up again that everything would be stolen or set on fire, so Maria da Capelinha and her husband thought it best to take the statue to their home every night. Their fears were to be justified.

Two years later, on March 6, 1922, two bombs were placed at the Cova, one in the chapel, the other at the holm oak. The roof of the chapel was blown off, but the bomb at the holm oak failed to explode. According to Maria da Capelinha, the Bishop then forbade the rebuilding of the chapel. Consequently the people spent longer hours outside the Carreira home, where the statue was now kept.

"There was always someone there," says Senhora Capelinha, "and Our Lady continued to answer their petitions. This encouraged the people, and they wanted to have the statue return to the Cova for the 13th of May."

There being no litter on which it could be placed for the procession, everyone individually offered to carry it, to fulfill some promise or other to Our Lady. When the day of the 13th came, the procession was held, the people taking turns carrying the burden, while the crowd sang and prayed.

Meanwhile, the destruction of the chapel had aroused the people to protest to the government, and they determined to hold a great pilgrimage for May 13th of the following year (1923) in order to make reparation to Our Lady for this terrible insult. Some officials tried to prevent the demonstration, but when the day arrived, over sixty thousand persons gathered to march to Fatima to pay homage to their Queen.

Many years have now passed since the apparitions occurred and the barren fields on which Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta used to graze their sheep are now covered with large beautiful buildings. The little chapel can still be seen, but a great shrine in honor of Our Lady of Fatima dominates the area, flanked by a hospital, a convent and a retreat house, all of which testify to the power and mercy of Our Blessed Mother Mary.