

FATIMA—THE GOLDEN MEAN

BY

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FOR our discursive minds things in themselves one and undivided have to be separated, sub-divided, analysed, taken apart in a way which is sufficiently real in the case of a complicated piece of machinery or even with the human body, but which when applied to things that are not material—like the human mind—becomes most unreal and unnatural. In the case of spiritual entities just because they are so one and indivisible we endeavour all the more to divide them in a feeble effort to get some understanding of what must ultimately remain mysterious. So we find that there are as many divisions and sub-divisions in theology as there are in zoology or biology.

But there is nothing reprehensible in this. It is the legitimate attempt of the human mind to exercise its proper function in acquiring knowledge. The things of God lie beyond anything but a scrappy and imperfect knowledge, but the mind must try to pierce the veils—provided that it fully recognises its limitations. We can usually recognise these in the matter of knowing about the God-head, but we are often less conscious in matters concerning the spiritual life in general. Some think that they are doing well if they keep all the commandments save one—‘although I don’t go to church, I don’t do anything else wrong, so I am as good as those that do’. Even the church-going Catholic may feel satisfied that he keeps all the commandments but the sixth. Such people fail to recognise the unity which means that to violate one part of the law seriously is in effect to turn from God and to despise the whole law. Similarly with virtues, we can try to acquire one virtue at a time, working at them piecemeal: but this can only be legitimate if we exclude no single virtue from our effort. Any effort to cultivate one virtue must involve all the others.

It is just the same with the various Catholic devotions. We see them as almost infinite in their manner and variety, but from God’s side they are simply facets of the one reality towards which they seek to draw us. Variety is needed to suit our many types, moods and tenses, and so that first one and then another is found a help to the individual or different individuals in their love of God.

This may all seem rather obvious. And yet we are often astonished to find confusion and ignorance in this matter not only among the laity but even among priests and religious. Medieval towns and

villages used each to back its own patron saint or saints against the neighbouring patrons, as though they were celestial football teams. And such a mentality dies hard, if it dies at all—which I doubt. We still find individuals backing St Philomena against the Little Flower, not to mention the religious Orders with their teams of saints and *beati*. Not that it is not quite natural and right for each Order to have a special loyalty to the canonised members of its own family, but it sometimes goes with a priggish exclusion of other saints from this veneration. The mentality underlying this party spirit, whether in individuals or in religious Orders, needs to be castigated, as it tries to limit God and his Kingdom to the confines of a very insular, parochial and atomised outlook. There is something of the ancient pagan attitude to the gods about it. Today, of course, there is little doubt among Catholics about the unity of God or about the oneness of his life into which we are all baptised. But when it comes to the means either of conceiving or attaining to this life the partisan confusion begins to appear. Because the saints are many we forget they are one in sharing the one life which incorporates them through Christ in God. And if there may be found some excuse in the matter of the saints whose multiplicity and differences are so great, there can hardly be any excuse when it concerns our Lady. She is the saint of saints, the one perfect product of the human race, single and undivided, and yet even regarding her we discover similar divisions and oppositions.

We rightly deplore the lack of devotion to our Lady or the merely external and perfunctorily liturgical respect paid to her by some people. We can easily meet the type of person who puts Mary in her place and keeps her there, though no one would acknowledge that he belonged to such a class. But on the other hand, swinging well beyond that middle and balanced way in which *stat virtus* towards the other extreme, there are those who have an exuberance of devotion that is all running to seed. Here we meet the 'fan', a type so prevalent in the modern world. They become confused by the many titles and the many manifestations which have become necessary to show forth the fulness of the perfections of our Blessed Lady, and they forget that she is only a single person, the one immaculate Mother of God, Mary of Nazareth, mother of Jesus of Nazareth. They forget that on the part of God or of our Lady none of these variations is necessary, and that it is only our frailty and foolishness which require all these new fashions to stimulate our fickleness. Whether it be our Lady of Perpetual Succour, of Good Counsel, of Loretto, of Pompeii, of Montserrat, of Czestoc-kowa, of Knock, of Walsingham, of Carfin; whether it be Our Lady of La Salette, of the Miraculous Medal, of Lourdes, or of the

Rosary, or of the hundred other places and titles, what are they but Mary, the one and self-same Holy Mary, Mother of God? True, indeed, and evident, but how often and easily forgotten by one who has a picture or statue or grotto or shrine—or who 'runs' this or that novena. 'I am for Paul'; 'I am for Cephas'. . . Is Christ therefore divided?

Rightly should we follow all and every one of these devotions which have authentic grounds of credence; but it is wrong to foster and follow them to the exclusion of others and even in a spirit of opposition. Is our Lady then divided? One would think so—and a seeker after the truth could not but be confused and scandalised.

Take for instance Lourdes and Fatima. There are no two manifestations of our Lady with so many points of similarity. They are in fact almost identical except that the later date of Fatima brings the message of Lourdes more up-to-date and urgent, as a re-edition or a re-emphasis of the focal point. Yet both priests and people will insist on comparing, contrasting and opposing the various merits and attractions of one or the other. There is a great feeling among those who have grown up with Lourdes as the dominant and unique shrine of our Lady that they must now rally to defend their favourite against the newcomer, Fatima, which seems to their minds to tend to threaten their original devotion. And yet our Lady has done many extraordinary things at Fatima.

It is my lot to travel round the country trying to carry out the 'Message of Fatima' and so bring back the age-old devotion of the Rosary by means of the new fashion our Lady has given us. And in these journeyings it has become an experience of mine to recognise these 'fans' shouting 'Fatima' or those shouting 'Lourdes', while the majority shout nothing at all, using this spectacle of misguided and stupid partisanship to justify their standing aloof from any particular Marian devotion or enthusiasm. The 'fans' of Fatima are calculated to be more the enemies than the friends of our Lady of the Rosary. While they shout 'Fatima' because it is the new fashion they tend to forget the seven hundred-year-old Rosary which is the message of Fatima. Much is being written today even in England about 'Fatima'. In fact there is so much rolling off the presses that apart from the factual records there is much of it that might be considered cheap if not nasty. If therefore for no other reason (and there are many others), we must indeed welcome this factual record from Father Martindale.¹ It may be thirty-three years since the apparitions of Fatima, and there is a wealth of literature concerning them, both critical and otherwise, in many languages, but Father Martindale's *Message of Fatima* is

¹ *The Message of Fatima*. By C. C. Martindale, S.J. (Burns Oates; 10s. 6d.)

certainly the one work in English which sets out, not to destroy, but reverently to weigh and evaluate the prodigious facts of that distant period and the later light that can be thrown upon them.

I, personally, have had the privilege of spending many weeks at the shrine itself, and can therefore claim some familiarity with the place and the people, with the many relations of the three children involved, and even with the one surviving child, Lucy, whom I was able to visit. Indeed I have, too, read the facts again and again in various accounts until they have become just 'the same old facts', so that I find it increasingly difficult to take an interest in the new books still being written. Yet in spite of all this I had not read far into Father Martindale's book before I found myself gripped with fresh interest. I feel this is the first merit of his book: that it catches the interest and holds it from beginning to end.

The second great merit is a sincerity which can only come from the attitude of the author, since it shines out in the facts and findings as he presents them. The book is a good attempt to supply the need of a critical study of Fatima in English, and while not clarifying everything (that would be an impossibility in regard to any supernatural apparition or revelation), it does throw a certain light on sundry obscurities so that it will go far to help those who find faith in such matters difficult. Apart however from any new light which Father Martindale has been able to throw on the events, and from his success in re-sorting the profusion of rather tangled evidence, the very fact that one of his standing and authority in this country has written such a book will serve to give confidence to any doubters who may yet remain. For he deals critically with the whole subject; and, in spite of the many difficulties which may still remain and which he himself makes no effort to gloss over, he yet emerges with a still stronger and more simple faith in the reality and authenticity of all the major and most of the minor happenings. It is like a good doctor giving his diagnosis after a long and careful study of the case.

In his introduction Father Martindale arranges his 'set' in this spirit: 'Still we cannot disguise from ourselves that the story of Fatima has created difficulties for some readers, partly, may be, because they cannot enter into the imagination of the Portuguese people—let alone of the upland ignorant peasant children (so different is that world from our sophisticated one!), but also for reasons which seem to them serious and substantial. It is these whom here and there we have in mind. They deserve every attention, if only because the Message of Fatima—if it is authentic, as I hold it is—has world-wide implications to a degree that even Lourdes on the face of it had not!'

And here are some of his main conclusions. First, the impression made on him by the still surviving parents Ti Marto and Olimpia (page 19). 'In fact I thought that these two old people (Olimpia and Ti Marto) must have led during those thronged days of pilgrimage a quite appalling life, and ended every day exhausted. All the more did I marvel how upright they stood, how completely unflustered they were; how never having profited one penny by the offers showered on them, they retained their independence and dignity in poverty and, we must insist, have never deviated one hair's breadth from the story they originally told, despite the massive suggestion they have received from those who came to learn the amazing destiny of the children. *It is these old people, and the characters of those children* which first attracted me, and still do, to the whole story of Fatima.'

We may perhaps add to these two names that of Lucia's eldest sister, Maria dos Anyos, in whom one sees what must have been the best characteristics of the mother, Maria Rosa, as well as that deep and peaceful disposition, both natural and supernatural, which must have been the predominant spirit of that home. And this in spite of the unfortunate failing of the good-natured father Abóbora. Thus the characters firstly of the parents and relatives, and secondly those of the children themselves—frank, natural, unaffected and truthful—are our best guarantees in the natural order for an act of faith in the supernatural. Having myself met nephews and nieces of the three children who are as near a replica of them as one could wish, and having sensed something of their quick intelligence and maturity in things spiritual, I am wholly in agreement with Father Martindale when he says: 'He is brave indeed who imagines that he can enter into the mind of any little child. But who can guess what the mind of these small Portuguese peasants can have been like? What horizons had their world? with whom was it populated? . . . It will be very hard for us even to begin to make contact with these little souls, at once so simple and so spiritual.' (page 28.)

I began this article by pointing out the wrong mental attitudes which can easily develop in us through failing in our thought about supernatural things to distinguish between the things themselves and our own feeble and imperfect way of knowing them. That rather lengthy preface to the review was evoked by Father Martindale's perfect example of the right attitude and the right approach. His study is not partisan but dispassionate and severely judicial. He holds a balance between those who doubt Fatima, and those others (the 'fans') who keep on shouting 'Fatima'. His book will be read by each category with immense profit.