

FATIMA

the Film



Faith and grace walk together in a new movie about the 1917 Marian apparitions in Fatima, Portugal

by Gerard Condon

IN THE SUMMER of 1917, at Fatima, Portugal, a ten-year-old girl and her two younger cousins witnessed several apparitions of the Virgin Mary. This new film about the origins of Fatima was written and directed by Marco Pontecorvo (Picturehouse, 2020). It has been endorsed by the custodians of the Marian shrine for the “dignity and integrity” with which it tells the story. But it does not shy away from a solid scrutiny of the facts.

For Lucia dos Santos (1907-2005), the only visionary to survive childhood, doubt concerning the credibility of her claims was a constant fact. The movie opens in 1989, when an investigative author, Professor Nichols (Harvey Keitel) visits the Carmelite convent she joined in 1948. He

claimed the apparitions were a projection of her desire for a perfect mother. Sr. Lucia (Sonia Braga) politely, but firmly, holds her ground. So what really happened?

Grinding poverty

In 1917 Portugal was a minor participant in World War I on the side of the Allies. Its government was secularist and anti-Church, however the rural population remained staunchly Catholic. Above all, the people of Fatima experienced grinding poverty. When Lucia (Stephanie Gil) was hungry, she would remember the advice of her mother (Lucia Moniz): “a little hunger is very good for the soul.” In 1918 the Spanish Influenza would claim the lives of tens of thousands of Portuguese, including Lucia’s fellow

visionaries, Jacinta (Alejandra Howard) and Francisco (Jorge Lamelas). Human struggle has always been the backdrop of the Marian apparitions, including Lourdes (1858), Knock (1879) and Banneux (1933). They all marked Our Lady’s solidarity with the poor in times of distress.

Pontecorvo’s camera highlights the rugged beauty of Portugal’s landscape. The three children came from families of faith, and so it was not difficult for them to recognise the face of the Creator in creation. At Cove da Iria, where they shepherded goats, their exclamation “Ave Maria” would echo around the valley. Little did they know that Our Lady would soon reply.

Lucia earnestly prayed for her brother’s safe return from the war. Like her mother, she believed that a devout life would preserve their family from harm. Once a month she would anxiously travel with her mother to the town square and hear the mayor (Goran Visnjic) list those soldiers killed or missing in action. He represented the new Portugal, rational, mechanised and warlike. He had no time for his country’s “feudal past and religious superstitions.” His brash pragmatism contrasted with the innocence of the shepherd children.

Thirteenth day

It was on May 13, 1917 that the children first saw “the Lady” (Joana Ribeiro). She asked them to return to the same spot at midday on the thirteenth day of each month. She said, “pray the rosary every day to bring peace to the world and end the war.” Their self-sacrifice, she told them, would win over the hearts and minds of many sinners.

Fifty spectators gathered at the site on June 13; 1,000 on July 13; 18,000 in August and 30,000 in September. An estimated 70,000 were present at the final apparition on October 13. Despite their growing reputation, the ‘seers’ were not believed by their own parents. They had the parish priest, Fr. Ferreira (Joacquin

DeAlmeida), try to convince the children that what they saw was only an illusion and possibly the work of the devil “who hides among the good.”

The local diocese also grew suspicious. It sent Monsenhor Quaresma (Joao D’Avila) to interview the children in a scene mildly reminiscent of the Spanish Inquisition. But Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta insisted they were telling the truth. Afterwards, as the monsignor mounted his gilded carriage, the poor people around him knelt in prayer: a telling image of the gap between the institutional church and the church of the people.

The secular opposition to the visionaries also grew. On August 13 the mayor kidnapped the children. A psychiatrist from Lisbon found nothing abnormal about them, and Fr. Ferreira secured their freedom. The priest now saw that the events were leading many of the faithful back to the sacraments. That month, “the Lady” would appear to the children on August 19. The people’s self-confidence grew. One crippled boy began to walk. Was that a miracle? Or was it the boy’s new-found determination? The movie suggests there is often a coincidence between a person’s faith and divine assistance.

Third secret

Though the apparitions brought joy and hope, the theme of suffering was never far away. In one especially effective scene, based on the memoirs



of Sr. Lucia, the Lady reveals her heart pierced by four thorns. A teardrop falls from her face. On landing in the sand by her feet, it mushrooms into a nuclear explosion. Mary points out that “if we do not stop insulting God there will be a war worse than this one.”

Several of Lucia’s visions were oriented to future tragedies. In one, she saw herself attending the funeral of Jacinta and Francisco. In another she saw the Pope walking through a war-torn city and assassinated as he knelt before a cross. This vision came to be known as the “third secret of Fatima.” It was only disclosed in the year 2000, when Pope (now Saint) John Paul II had it published, alongside a commentary by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict). The attempt on the Pope’s life in 1981 was generally interpreted as the fulfilment of the vision.

Miracle of the Sun

The movie, like the historical events it depicts, culminated in the “Miracle of the Sun” on October 13. Once again, it was only the children who saw Mary. However on this occasion something visible happened, before the vast assembly that included journalists, photographers, the sceptical mayor and the diocesan legate.

American Actor Harvey Keitel plays an atheistic journalist who doubts the authenticity of the apparitions

The film has a universal message of peace, the idea that all of us must change our behavior in order to put an end to violence and war

The sun dimmed, moved and then seemed to hurtle towards the crowd. The event was witnessed up to thirty kilometres away. This rules out an explanation of the miracle based on mass hysteria among the crowd at Fatima itself.

Church enquiries into the events were held through the 1920s. In 1930, the Church pronounced the apparitions “worthy of belief.” The message of Fatima was found to be consistent with the Gospel, adding to its vitality. The shrine’s worldwide appeal was again evident on May 13, 2017, when Jacinta and Francisco were canonised by Pope Francis at the centennial celebration.

This is not the first movie to tell the story of Fatima. *The Miracle of Our Lady of Fatima* (1952) now looks sentimental, and *The Thirteenth Day* (2009) excessively apocalyptic. Pontecorvo’s film has a more authentic and wholesome feel. It was shot in Portugal, mainly employing a Spanish-Portuguese cast. The characters are portrayed in a nuanced light. Those with faith have their doubts, while those who doubt (including the mayor), show glimpses of faith. Stephanie Gil is radiant in her role as the young Lucia. She takes the viewer inside the feelings of fright, awe and pure joy that she must have felt as a visionary. ♦