

Saturday, May 13, 2017
Our Lady of Fatima Church, Altoona

Good morning everyone. It is so good to see all of you here for this celebration, one of the diocesan celebrations to mark the 100th anniversary of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary to three young children in Fatima, Portugal.

Earlier today in that famous place of pilgrimage, Pope Francis celebrated the canonization of two of those children: St. Francisco Marto, who died in 1919, and his sister, St. Jacinta Marto, who died in 1920.

Their cousin, Lucia dos Santos eventually became a Carmelite nun. She died in 2005 and her cause for canonization is in process.

You know the story of the apparitions that occurred on 6 occasions between May 13 and October 13, 1917. Francisco was only 9 years old and Jacinta was only 7 at that time of that memorable experience.

What is the most profound thing that you remember from that age in your life? Nothing in my life at that age was that extraordinary.

I can remember at age 7 taking swimming lessons that summer which meant I could go into the deep end of the community pool.

At age 9, I was allowed to operate the lawnmower. I thought that was a really big deal.

Little did I know that my older brothers were happy to pass that chore down to me, and by the time I was a teenager, the glamor of operating a power mower had pretty much disappeared.

Things were much different for the three children of Fatima.

I am sure that you know that the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Fatima came at a time when Europe was suffering from the effects of the 1st World War.

The secret messages and the doom and gloom of the turmoil in the world added to a heightened focus on the significance of the appearance of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Fatima.

The whole experience had an apocalyptic tone to it. Many people were convinced that the appearances and the message of the Blessed Virgin Mary were signs of the end of the world.

In a reflection that I read about the three children, I was especially impressed by two things. First, they related that the face of the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to be sad and distressed and of course her message was rather challenging.

And the second thing is that none of these children were afraid. They all felt very much at peace and were uplifted by each of the appearances. In particular, Francisco said that the sense of being loved by the Blessed Virgin Mary was always present.

And, thinking back to when I was 9 years old and how my mind and attention would wander, it is fascinating to reflect on how Francisco was captivated by the appearances of Mary.

There was no bragging or exaggeration about his experience. Instead, it moved him to pray more intensely. Francisco often went off by himself to pray after praying together with his sister and cousin.

What is so significant about all that?

In the first reading for our Mass today, it says in the Acts of the Apostles that after Jesus had ascended to heaven, the apostles gathered in the upper room with others, including Mary, the mother of Jesus. And it says, "They devoted themselves with one accord to prayer."

The mention of the upper room reminds us of the Holy Eucharist, because it was in the upper room where Jesus instituted that sacrament and told his disciples, "Do this in memory of me."

The Acts of the Apostles says that they were devoted with one accord to prayer. The Holy Eucharist is the most important of the sacraments and it is truly the sacrament of that signifies and brings about unity, then oneness of believers which is one of the marks of the Church.

And the Acts of the Apostles mentions the presence of the Blessed Virgin Mary in that upper room. It's a reminder that Jesus entrusted his mother to his beloved disciple John when he said to him from the cross, "Behold your mother."

At the same time, Jesus directed his mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, to embrace that beloved disciple John and all of his disciples, including us. And so the role of Mary as Mother of the Church has always been part of our faith tradition.

The care and protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary for us, for the Church, and for the world is symbolized in her Immaculate Heart.

- It is a symbol of purity and holiness, because Mary was kept free from the effects of original sin.
- It is a symbol of authentic love because Mary was and is full of grace; full of the Holy Spirit; full of divine love.

Just think of a person in your life who is the source of strength, courage, gentleness, and peace, when trouble is going on in your life or the life of your family.

We are drawn to that kind of person when events seem to turn life upside down and inside out.

The entire continent of Europe was in that type of distress when Mary appeared to the children in Fatima.

Many nations were at war, and the teachings of Marxism and Communism frightened people because those ideologies were the opposite of what filled the Blessed Virgin Mary.

People were in danger of being misled because the ideologies of Marxism and Communism claimed that they had the answers to all the needs of every person.

But we know that in those ideologies there was no grace, no Holy Spirit, no values based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and there was no divine love.

It is no wonder that three young children, who shared the Catholic faith of their families and neighbors in a village in Portugal; it is no wonder that they were attracted to the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

They were able to see with faith what others could not recognize; what was hidden by all the problems of the world at that time. They could see with their eyes and allow their hearts to be touched by the love that is expressed in the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

At Fatima in 1917, Mary told Lucia that she was to remain on Earth to help promote devotion to her Immaculate Heart. The three children of Fatima saw an image of a heart surrounded by thorns in front of our Blessed Mother.

In the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the emphasis is on the love that Christ has for every human person, even if that love is ignored or rejected.

Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary is essentially concerned with the love that her heart has for Jesus, the only begotten Son of God.

As Pope Francis said just days ago in preparation for his pilgrimage to Fatima today, it means that the love of her heart is to be a model for the way we should love God. The heart of the Virgin Mary is the path for us to experience the heart of her son Jesus.

Honoring Mary's Immaculate Heart is especially a way of honoring Mary as the person who was chosen to be the Mother of God, recognizing her extraordinary holiness and the immense love she bestowed on Jesus as his mother, the person who was called to share in and co-operate in his redemptive sufferings.

Pope Paul VI wrote that Mary offers a calm vision and a reassuring word to the people of our time, especially when we are torn between anguish and hope. He explains that

- we are often defeated by our own limitations;
- assailed by limitless aspirations;

- troubled in our minds and divided in our hearts;
- uncertain as we face the riddle of death;
- oppressed at times by loneliness;
- and overcome by boredom and disgust with the circumstances of life.

But the Blessed Virgin Mary shows the victory of hope over anguish, of fellowship over loneliness, of peace over anxiety, of joy and beauty over boredom and disgust, of eternal vision over earthly perceptions, of life over death.

Through the love that is discovered in her Immaculate Heart, Mary offers us a firm assurance and hope that God is in charge, through his Son, in his Holy Spirit.

Francisco, Jacinta, and Lucia discovered that assurance and hope in a special way.

For the past 100 years, that message of hope and divine love that is manifested in the Immaculate Heart of Mary has continued to be a source of encouragement and assurance for people all over the world;

- including the millions of people who visit the Shrine in Fatima
- and including the rest of us who only have to come here or sit quietly in a chair at home and pray with the Blessed Virgin Mary whose loving heart is always directed toward the loving heart of her Son.

The Gospel reading today reminds us of how Mary went in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Their conversation was filled with the excitement and joy of being pregnant and expecting a child.

Their conversation was filled with the joy and excitement that the child to be born of Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit is the Savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is up to all of us to continue to share that excitement and joy and hope with others, in our families, our parishes, schools, where work and where we live.

As a sign of the continued hope that is manifested to us through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I am pleased to bless this statute, an image of Our Lady of Fatima, as a diocesan pilgrimage statue.

It will be brought to the announced places of celebration around our diocese between now and October.

Following that, it will be sent among the people of parishes throughout our diocese so that families, and groups of families can come together in their homes to pray for the intentions that our most important in our time.

It will serve as a reminder that the just as Mary hurried to visit Elizabeth, and just as Mary appeared to young children at Fatima 100 years ago, we can still count on her to direct our hearts to the loving and merciful heart of her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.