

The Church and the World at War

Our Catholic Heritage

The Blessed Virgin Asks for Prayer, Repentance

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

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While the armies were bloodying each other along the Western Front during World War I, three young children in the sleepy town of Aljustrel, Portugal, were little disturbed by the war news. They were Lucia dos Santos (born 1907), and her cousins Francisco (born 1908) and Jacinta (born 1910) Marto.

May 13, 1917 changed their tranquil lives and made them world famous. That Sunday they went to a place called the Cova de Iria near Fatima. Suddenly, there were frightening flashes of lightning although the sky was perfectly clear, and they saw a young girl dressed in white and gold and carrying a rosary standing on the top of a small oak tree. She told them

that she came from heaven and asked them to return to the spot on the 13th day of the month for the next six months and she would tell them who she was and what she wanted. She told them that they would have to sacrifice for the sins of the world and that they must pray the rosary for world peace. Then she moved off quickly towards the east and disappeared in the dazzling light which enveloped her.

News of the apparition spread through the little village and beyond. The families were upset; the parish priest was skeptical; the local anti-clerical civil administrator was downright hostile. But the children remained serene and curious. They returned to the spot as the vision had bidden them, even though crowds of people preceded them, jostled for space and surrounded them.

On Oct. 13, 70,000 people stood in a drizzling rain at the site to await the apparition. They saw the children kneel in the midst which obscured the tree but they did not see the vision, nor did they hear the apparition tell Lucia, "I am the Lady of the Rosary." Our Lady told Lucia to have a chapel built on the site; to continue to say the Rosary; and that the war was going to end.

The crowd, however, did experience sensational physical phenomena. After Our Lady disappeared from the children's sight, the rain abruptly stopped. The mist lifted; the sun became visible through a break in the clouds and appeared to spin and emit prismatic rays. Then the sun seemed to hurl itself toward the crowd. It cast out a red glow and intense heat and then almost immediately resumed its

normal appearance. No one could explain what had happened. The story of Fatima was international news and devotion to Our Lady of Fatima became extremely popular.

The secret of Fatima, which the Blessed Mother gave to the little children died with Francisco (1918) and Jacinta (1920). Lucia became a Carmelite nun. The secret of Fatima lives with her but has yet to be revealed.

The message of Fatima was repentance and the Rosary, and secondarily prayer for the conversion of Russia. It is a message of devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Pope Pius XII heeded that message in 1942 when he consecrated the Church and the human race to Mary's Immaculate Heart.

Church Exerts Moral Authority Among Nations

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

World War I (1914-1918) was a most devastating war. Ten million lives were lost; 20 million people were wounded and countless others suffered from hunger, disease and exile.

The United States, which only entered the war in 1917, lost 115,000 of her sons in battle, while 57,000 died from disease and 200,000 were wounded. The financial costs to the combatants were so huge that the economies of the warring nations were ruined. The Holy See alone spent millions of dollars on its relief work, which the warring nations left unrewarded and, in large measure, unrecognized.

As the war continued, the Holy See was faced with moral, legal, diplomatic and spiritual challenges which, because of their universality, were far different than any the Church had experienced before. The war involved not only the Central Powers of Germany, Austria and their comrades against the Allies of England, France and Italy, but also Poles, Slavs, Canadians, Russians, Australians, New Zealanders, Africans, Indians and, in the final stages, the forces of the United States. It was a war which changed the course of world history and left in the defeated nations a simmering resentment, which surfaced in the more vicious and total war some years later.

The Holy See tried to see that worship and sacraments were provided for the Catholics of every army and navy. It took effective steps to ease the lot of many refugees and exiles of every religion. As an internationally recognized neutral state, it assisted in the exchange of prisoners of war and in transmitting mail from such prisoners to their fam-

ilies. The most important duty of the Holy See, however, was to exert its moral authority among the

nations to bring about a just settlement of the war.

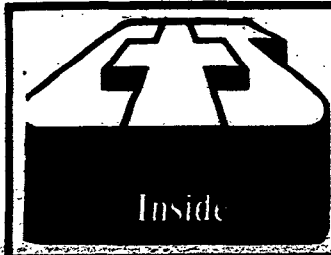
Unfortunately, the Holy Father's attempts to mediate the peace met with failure and even distrust. Both sides were convinced of the justice of their causes and severely criticized the Holy Father for not branding the other side as an unjust aggressor. But Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922) stayed to his course of strict neutrality and refused to condemn or back either the Central Powers or the Allies. Time and again he repeated: "I do not bless war."

In August 1917, the Holy See sent a peace proposal to the warring nations. It was rejected, just as those nations would later refuse to seat a representative of the Holy See at the Versailles peace conference, which ended the war. The Vatican, although a universally recognized sovereign state with interest in world peace, was also refused a seat in the League of Nations. These refusals demonstrated how little Christian nations valued the role of religion in international affairs.

Although World War I and its aftermath darkened the pontificate of Pope Benedict XV, he was successful in reviving the spiritual life of the Church by his insistence on a reform of Catholic seminaries, his promulgation of the Code of Canon Law, and his compassionate assistance of the Catholics of the Eastern Rites, who were particularly suffering in Russia. A revived Church was in a position to alleviate the pains of a ruined Europe after the war, and Pope Benedict XV plunged it into Christian social work on a grand scale. But when he died in 1922, he was largely misunderstood and unappreciated by the leaders of the secular world.



(Art by Robert McGovern)



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