Was Russia consecrated in 1984?

By Agostino Bono
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Has Russia been consecrated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary according to the conditions received by Carmelite Sister Lucia Dos Santos in a dream from Our Lady of Fatima?

According to the 84-year-old nun, the sole survivor of three shepherd children who saw Mary in visions at Fatima, Portugal, Pope John Paul II performed the consecration properly in 1984.

For decades the question has been controversial among Fatima followers because it is tied to many alleged messages from Mary regarding the conversion of Russia and the fight against communism.

Pope John Paul is scheduled to visit Fatima May 12-13 to mark the 10th anniversary of the assassination attempt that almost killed him.

For years Sister Lucia has been asking popes to make the consecration according to regulations she says Mary once told her in a dream years after the Fatima apparitions.

The church recognizes as valid the six appearances of Mary to the three children at Fatima in 1917, but has not taken a position on subsequent apparitions reported by Sister Lucia. Among many Marian devotees, these later apparitions nevertheless have become part of the Fatima message.

According to Sister Lucia, several popes made the consecration, but none did it just right until Pope John Paul's act on March 25, 1984, in St. Peter's Square.

In three 1989 letters, Sister Lucia adds that the pope himself failed to do it right during an attempt at Fatima in 1982.

The main flaw in the previous attempts was that the papal consecration was not done in unison with all the world's bishops in their own dioceses. A lesser problem has been whether the popes specifically intended to consecrate Russia, since they mentioned the entire world.

Sister Lucia is a cloistered Carmelite allowed only limited contact with close relatives, and the letters are her only public statements on the matter. For years, her religious superiors have refused journalists' requests to interview her.

The letters — similar in content — were written in answer to specific requests that she clarify the situation.

"Yes, it was done as Our Lady requested on the day, March 25, 1984," she wrote.

Previous efforts — including those by Pope Pius XII in 1942 and Pope Paul VI in 1967 — lacked the "indispensable" union with all the bishops, she wrote.

The consecration "must not be done with all the bishops united in a room, but must be done by every bishop in his diocese with the People of God of which he is the leader in union with the Holy Father," she said.

It was done properly in 1984 because the pope beforehand "wrote to all the bishops of the world, asking them to do it in their own dioceses," she said.

Sister Lucia added that the pope also brought the original statue of Our Lady of Fatima from Fatima to St. Peter's for the ceremony.

The letters were given to several news organizations by Sister Lucia's nephew, Salesian Father Jose Valinho.

Copies were made available to Catholic News Service by Aura Miguel, reporter for Radio Renascenca, station of the Portuguese bishops, who was with Father Valinho when he called Sister Lucia and received her permission to release the letters.

"The letters are authentic," said Joaquin Navarro-Valls, Vatican spokesman. 'Who is in a better position than her to judge" the consecration, he asked.

The pope wanted to make the consecration but has not been explicit whether he did as an anti-communist effort, Navarro-Valls added.

AP/Wide World Photos

LOST ALL IN QUAKE — A resident of the Soviet village of Shkmeri holds an icon — his only possession not destroyed in an April 29 earthquake. The quake killed more than 80 people, injured 500 and left some 80,000 homeless.

Number of major seminarians up

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — The latest Vatican figures show an increase of nearly 50 percent in the world's major seminarians since 1978.

The sharp rise also has surpassed the growth in number of Catholics. But the expansion might be starting to level off, figures indicate.

Totals have shot up everywhere but in the United States and Canada, which combined for a stiff decline, according to a statistical report issued by the Vatican press office in late April.

The report said 93,405 major seminarians were studying at the end of 1989, the last year for which worldwide figures are available. The figure for 1978 was 62,670.

Diocesan seminarians in 1978 totaled 40,978. There were 62,336 in 1989. Religious seminarians numbered 21,692 in 1978 and totaled 31,069 in 1989.

During the same period the number of seminarians per 1 million Catholics rose from 84 to 103, said the report. It did not give reasons for the trend.

Africa led the growth with a 138.3 percent increase. Sharp increases were also registered in Mexico and Central America, 119.9 percent; South America, 88.9 percent; and Asia, 73.3 percent.

The only decline was registered by the United States and Canada, a 30.9 percent loss. The combined figures were 9,636 in 1978 and 6,659 in 1989. No breakdown was given for each country.

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