

Inside the Light

INSIDE THE LIGHT

Understanding the Message of Fatima

Sr. Angela de Fatima Coelho

TAN Books
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Angela de Fatima Coelho

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Fatima: A Review</i>	<i>xv</i>
Introduction: Meeting Lucia	1
Chapter 1: A Life Shaped by Fatima	7
Chapter 2: School of Faith	22
Chapter 3: A Light for the Post-Modern World.	40
Chapter 4: Fatima, the Trinity, and the Eucharist	55
Chapter 5: The Eucharist: Believed, Celebrated, and Lived . . .	72
Chapter 6: The Secret	88
Chapter 7: The Immaculate Heart of Mary	119
Chapter 8: The Rosary.	141
Chapter 9: Understanding Reparation.	154
Chapter 10: Understanding Consecration	172
Chapter 11: The Spirituality of Francisco	188
Chapter 12: The Spirituality of Jacinta	207
Chapter 13: Lucia: The One Left Behind	222
Conclusion: A Mantle of Light	242
<i>Bibliography</i>	245

Foreword

When a family friend invited me to a Fatima retreat being given by Sister Angela Coelho on the campus of Belmont Abbey College in March of 2019, hopeful that her talks could be turned into the book you presently hold, I had a certain expectation of who might await me.

Since she was a sister of the Aliança de Santa Maria, who live in Portugal and help to spread the Fatima message, and since she had worked on the cause for canonization of the three shepherd children, I immediately pictured a soft-spoken, elderly, and reserved woman—rather like a three-dimensional version of an image from a stained glass window.

She quickly put all my preconceptions to flight when, not ten minutes into her first talk, she was talking about the NBA! God certainly loves to surprise us.

The first thing you notice about Sister Angela is her vibrancy. She is not elderly at all, but even if she were, she would have more energy than a kindergartener on the playground. Her winsome personality makes it seem as though she is walking several feet off the air, and she takes delight in sweeping you along for the ride, no matter if you are prepared for it or not. Perhaps you know people like this, whose happiness is so contagious you can *feel* it burning in your heart. This energy she exuded despite being jetlagged and giving talks that lasted several hours across multiple days.

And yes, she did talk about going to her first NBA game. That had happened the night before, a dream from long ago finally realized (she grew up watching games in Portugal with her brother). This was a small detail from her presentations, but it stuck with me as a young man who loves sports. It made me realize holiness is not hidden in the clouds. It's nearby. Among us. Within reach. It's possible to like basketball and be holy. Who knew?

Another quality that stands out is Sister Angela's humour. She had everyone rolling with laughter, people of all ages, races, and nationalities, lay and religious alike. She knows how to tell a good story, is self-deprecating without a hint of false pride, and has a charming Portuguese accent that makes admirable and charming attempts at English expressions, often without success.

Oh yeah, one more thing . . . she's also a doctor. Yes, you read that right. A religious sister *and* a doctor. How many people can tend to the health of your body and your soul all in one check-up?

You'll soon come to learn Sister Angela's story, how it has been woven up with Fatima since she was a little girl, and how she walked this path to both medical school and her religious vows, the latter of which led her to overseeing the canonization process of the shepherd children. But for now, my own personal interaction with her can give you a glimpse into who she is.

When I eventually got to spend some time with her, she immediately said she knew who I was because she had been praying for my youngest child. At first, I was dumbfounded as to why she would be doing this. Then it came back to me. My two-month-old had experienced a scary episode of

RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) some months prior, and a family friend had asked Sister Angela to pray for her. I was nearly moved to tears that she, who probably received dozens, if not hundreds, of prayer requests a day, would pray for a young child whom she had never met on the other side of the world, not to mention remembering to ask about her months later.

Later that day, the conference held a Mass, which my wife and children attended. After the celebration, we asked for a picture with her, which she graciously agreed to. But she said it would be better to take it outside, so she grabbed two of my daughters' hands and ushered them out of the church, talking to them and making them smile. This may seem a small thing, but if you knew how shy my children were, you would know it was no small thing at all. They hesitated *not for a second* to receive her hand and walk with her, leaving mommy and daddy behind. Children can sense goodness.

We took our picture and then my family departed, leaving me some time to discuss this book with Sister. We agreed it would not be an easy process, her attempting to write a book in English and me trying to help her—all with the Atlantic between us—but we both felt it was worth the effort. Her life's work is to spread the message of Fatima, and this was a great opportunity to do it.

I will not go into detail about the content of her talks, for that is the purpose of this book, but some brief prefatory comments about Fatima could serve us well.

Most would acknowledge that the apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Fatima have long fascinated Catholics and non-Catholics alike. These apparitions are of great importance for many individually and spiritually, but the words

of Our Lady at Fatima are also a message for our time and to our world. She spoke not only about the necessity for personal holiness but also about the role each individual can play in changing history by helping to change our culture, our world, and the Church. As such, the apparitions at Fatima have a claim on everyone's interest, since the message communicated there is both personal and universal.

There are elements in these accounts that appeal to a wide variety of readers. For those interested in religion, the Fatima message offers a treasure trove of theological, prophetic, mystical, and devotional insights. The spiritual riches to be gleaned on the Rosary, reparation for sins, the Eucharist, the Trinity, and God's love for humanity are enough to last more than several lifetimes.

But there is also much to interest those who are not primarily students of theology. There is the fascinating, repeated miraculous presence of the Mother of God. There is the initial appearance of an angel, and subsequently, of Jesus and St. Joseph. And there is Our Lady's expression of her loving care for God's children and her assurance of God's love for each of us.

The Fatima story also features Our Lady's prophecies, a startling vision of hell, warnings about the geopolitical disasters that would ensue if humans did not turn back to God, and the amazing miracle of the sun—witnessed by as many as seventy thousand people. As if this were not enough, there is also the famous three-part “secret” revealed by the Virgin Mary at Fatima that would have significant consequences for the Church and the world. We will embark on these storylines and more shortly.

We will also soon meet the three main characters of this story, the three young, illiterate shepherd children who lived in an out-of-the-way village in Portugal a hundred years ago, when World War I was tearing Europe apart. Two of these children—Francisco and Jacinta—would become the youngest non-martyred saints in Church history, not simply because they saw the Virgin Mary but because they lived the message she delivered to them back in 1917 so fully and so perfectly.

Of course, the other figures in the story are all of us, who certainly have been affected by many of the events about which Our Lady warned: the Second World War, the spread of the Soviet Union's godless atheism, and the evident discord and trouble throughout the modern world and in the Church.

Clearly, from numerous perspectives, Fatima has always had claim on our interest, but now, a little more than one hundred years after the first apparition, the message of Fatima is particularly relevant to our times and to the spiritual and global situation in which we find ourselves. It is obviously time to re-assess the Fatima message, to put it in its full theological context, and to understand the gamut of spiritual riches that this message contains.

For Sister Angela, Fatima is more than a place, a topic of great spiritual and intellectual interest, and the subject of her talks. Fatima is more even than the source of her vocation, the charism of her congregation, and her home. It is also a path to knowledge and holiness, a path to personal sanctification that she wants to share with as many people as possible.

Sister Angela has titled her book *Inside the Light*, and she shows that the light generated from the apparitions at Fatima is very great indeed. However, this book could have been called, with equally good reason, *Encounters in Love*, because Fatima is also a school for love in which we learn how much each of the Persons of the Trinity and Our Lady love us and in which Our Lady teaches us how to live in that love. Having studied, been steeped in, and lived the mystery of Fatima for many years, Sister Angela invites each of us to step forward into the Light and Love that still radiates from the small Portuguese town where Our Lady first appeared to Francisco, Jacinta, and Lucia.

As of 2017, Francisco and Jacinta, partly through Sister Angela's hard work, were canonized saints, and Lucia was named "Servant of God," a step toward the process of canonization. Through the apparitions at Fatima, God worked wonders in the lives of these three shepherd children, helping them to embark on the path to sainthood. As Sister Angela makes clear here in this book, that is a path that Our Lady encourages all of us to walk as well.

There may be no person on earth better qualified and with more knowledge of this story and the holy children who lived it than Sister Angela. But what struck me is not so much the knowledge she possesses but the *devotion* she has to Fatima. This woman is truly in love with Our Lady and her Son. May she pass on this love and devotion to you in the pages that follow.

Brian Kennelly
TAN Books

Fatima: A Review

The primary goal of this book is to take each of us deeper into the theological message of Fatima and the spirituality of the shepherd children, with the explicit goal of deepening our relationship with Christ. To keep from getting bogged down in facts, dates, and events, Sister Angela presumes a certain level of familiarity and avoids a chronological retelling of what happened. Her goal is not to relay the details of the “event” of Fatima but to go deeper into the theological and salvific message this event propagated.

If you already know the fundamental story of Fatima, we invite you to skip this section and go straight to Sister Angela’s riveting introduction, where she describes her first meeting with Sister Lucia.

If, however, you are new to Fatima, it might be helpful to read this brief review, which chronicles all the key characters and events. If you would like to know more specifics, you can find a treasury of information online.

Fatima is a small village town in a hilly region of central Portugal on the edge of the Serra de Aire Mountains. There would be no reason for anyone to know or care about Fatima if it were not for the astonishing events that transpired there over the course of 1916 and 1917.

The story begins with three simple shepherd children: Lucia dos Santos and her two cousins, Francisco Marto and his sister Jacinta. In the spring of 1916, when Lucia was nine, Francisco eight, and Jacinta six, an angel appeared to them on a secluded hillside where they were tending their flocks. He told them not to be afraid and revealed himself as the “Angel of Peace.” He taught them a new prayer and asked that they pray it with him, assuring them that the “hearts of Jesus and Mary” were listening to their prayers.

This angel also appeared later that summer. At that time, he once again encouraged the children to pray. In addition, he asked them to make sacrifices to save sinners. The angel asked the little shepherds to offer up penances and sacrifices to console Jesus and Mary for the innumerable sins committed against the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. In the fall of that year, the angel would appear a third time, when he gave the children Holy Communion.

They did not tell anyone about these supernatural visits, but they had a profound impact on the children and prepared them for what would happen the following year.

On May 13, 1917, while Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta were out tending flocks and playing games in a secluded area called the Cova da Iria, they noticed what seemed like a sudden storm and flash of lightning. The two girls saw a woman “more brilliant than the sun” resting over a small tree, but at first, Francisco saw nothing; only once he started praying the Rosary were his eyes opened. This woman would eventually reveal herself to be the Mother of God, but she specifically called herself “Our Lady of the Rosary” (and is also commonly referred to today as Our Lady of Fatima). But on this

first visit, she did not give her name. She simply said she was from heaven and asked that the children return to this same spot five more times on the same day and time in each of the following months.

Lucia warned her cousins not to say anything about what they'd seen, but little Jacinta, unable to contain her excitement, immediately told her mother, and the news quickly spread around the town. Some people believed the children while others scoffed. Lucia's mother fell into this latter group, considering her daughter a liar. This would become a great source of pain for Lucia.

Nonetheless, the children obeyed the Lady and returned to the Cova da Iria on June 13, when she appeared to them again. A small group of people came with them but could see nothing. Lucia asked Our Lady if she would take her, Francisco, and Jacinta to heaven. Mary replied that she would take Francisco and Jacinta very soon but that Lucia would remain behind. Our Lady told Lucia that God wanted to establish devotion to the Immaculate Heart and that Lucia would be an instrument to make this happen. During this visit, the Blessed Mother also asked the children to pray the Rosary every day.

The following month—July 13—was perhaps the most dramatic visit, when Our Lady revealed the famous three-part “secret” of Fatima. After telling the children again to pray the Rosary and make sacrifices for sinners, she promised to tell them who she was in October, when she said she would perform a miracle for all to see, to help verify the shepherds' stories. She then showed the children a violent image of hell and told them that many souls were being

lost not only because of their own immorality but because there was no one to pray and make sacrifices for them. To save them, she told the children to pray and offer sacrifices, encouraging them to develop a compassionate heart for sinners. Finally, she said that God wanted to establish devotion to her Immaculate Heart. This was the first part.

In the second part of the secret, she said that World War I, raging across Europe at the time, would end but that a worse war would break out if people did not stop offending God. Our Lady said that she would return at a later date and ask for the consecration of Russia to her Immaculate Heart and for the Communion of Reparation on the First Saturdays. If her requests were heeded, she prophesied that there would be peace, but if not, Russia would spread her errors throughout the world.

Finally, in the third part of the secret, Our Lady showed them yet another vision that predicted the suffering of the Church and the persecution of the “bishop dressed in white,” the Holy Father, who, in the vision, was shot by legions of soldiers with bullets and arrows.

News that the children had been told a “secret” spread around town, and the local authorities demanded that its contents be revealed. Things reached such a fever pitch that the administrator of the town actually imprisoned them, keeping them from meeting Our Lady on August 13. He even threatened them with death if they did not reveal the secret. But the children stood firm and would not betray Our Lady’s trust.

Eventually, after they were released, Mary appeared to them again, this time on the nineteenth of the month. She

once again asked them to pray the Rosary and said there would still be a miracle in October, but it would not be as extraordinary as it would have been if the local authorities had not imprisoned the children and threatened them with death.

With each visit, the number of people accompanying the children to the site of the apparitions grew, and in September, there were so many people that the children struggled to reach the Cova da Iria. Our Lady appeared again and told them God was pleased with their sacrifices. She also said that the following month, when the promised miracle would occur, Our Lord would come, and that she would appear as Our Lady of Sorrows and Our Lady of Mount Carmel. She foretold that St. Joseph would also appear with the Child Jesus to bless the world.

Finally, October 13 came. More than seventy thousand people showed up to see the miracle, including many non-believers, some of whom worked for news and media outlets hoping to debunk the children's story and embarrass those who believed.

The weather was dire all morning and the fields were soaked in rain and mud. When Our Lady appeared, she finally told the children her name, identifying herself as Our Lady of the Rosary. She told the children she wanted a chapel built in her honor in the place where she had appeared. She pleaded with them on behalf of humanity to stop offending God, who was already gravely offended by the world's sins. She then ascended, and as promised, Our Lady of Carmel and Our Lady of Dolores appeared, as well as St. Joseph and the Child Jesus, who blessed the world.

The sun then grew brighter and began to spin and emit vivid colors before dropping to the earth. The thousands present screamed in terror. People cried out for mercy, thinking it was the end of the world. Yet a moment later, the sun resumed its normal position. When the uproar calmed down, all who were there noticed that the ground had dried and people's clothes were no longer muddy and wet. This event, which came to be known as the miracle of the sun, was seen by people for miles around. As a result of this miracle, many non-believers came to believe and converted to Christianity.

After this, the children struggled to live a normal life, often being swarmed by crowds. For Francisco and Jacinta, however, this life in the limelight would not last long. Our Lady had promised to take them to heaven soon, and indeed, both of them were stricken by the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. Francisco died on April 4, 1919. Meanwhile, Jacinta was moved to a hospital several miles away. But she told the doctors and her family that she was going to die and that their efforts to save her would be futile. Her prophecy was fulfilled when she died on February 20, 1920 in Lisbon.

Lucia was grief-stricken not just because she had lost her cousins but because she had also lost the only two people in the world with whom she had shared the apparitions of Fatima. Many people continued to seek out Lucia, some coming from far away to see her. The local bishop recommended that she leave for Porto, where she could avoid the crowds and attend a special school. She did not want to leave Fatima, but when she visited the Cova da Iria on June 15,

1921, Our Lady appeared to Lucia for a seventh time and assured her it was God's will for her to go to Porto.

After several years spent studying in Porto, Lucia entered the Institute of the Sisters of St. Dorothy as a postulant in a convent in Pontevedra, Spain, on October 24, 1925. Just a few months later on December 10, Our Lady fulfilled her promise of coming again—appearing to Lucia in the Dorothean convent. On this visit, Mary explained the specific requirements for the Communion of Reparation on First Saturdays. In another visit in Tui, four years later in 1929, Our Lady appeared alongside a visible presence of the Most Holy Trinity and asked for the consecration of Russia to her Immaculate Heart.

Though Lucia had taken her final vows in 1934 to become a Dorothean sister, she was later released from these vows so she could become a Carmelite sister in 1948. During this period, Our Lady's prediction of a worse worldwide conflict came to pass with the outbreak of World War II. Lucia felt the pain of this war most acutely, feeling a strong personal responsibility to pray for peace. She spent the rest of her life trying to spread devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and imploring people to pray the Rosary and embrace a spirituality of reparation. Under holy obedience, she was directed to record all that had happened to her and all that Our Lady had told her, which we find today in several different books (though the contents of the secret were only released to the pope and special members of the Magisterium for some time, not being released to the general public until much later).

Over the years, Lucia also met with several popes, urging them to consecrate Russia to Our Lady, according to what she had specified. Though several holy fathers tried to make this consecration, confusion and unforeseen circumstances prevented it from taking place. One specific area of confusion concerned the consecration being made in union with the bishops around the world, which failed to happen on several occasions.

This all took place amidst the backdrop of the Cold War, when the atheistic Soviet Union began a systematic takeover of Eastern Europe and became embroiled in a nuclear arms race with the United States.

St. John Paul II, one of the popes most devoted to the Blessed Mother, and who had grown up under Soviet oppression in Poland, would play a significant role in the Fatima story. On May 13, 1981, on the anniversary of Our Lady's first apparition to the children, he was shot in St. Peter's Square by Mehmet Ali Agca, a Turkish man with unclear motives. John Paul credited Our Lady of Fatima with saving his life. While recovering, he read Lucia's words about the secret, specifically about the "bishop dressed in white" being shot. This obviously resonated with him, and he became determined to fulfill Our Lady's request to consecrate Russia to her Immaculate Heart. Though it took several tries, he was able to accomplish this on March 25, 1984, in front of 250,000 people in Rome. Lucia gave credence to this attempt by assuring everyone that heaven had finally accepted the consecration.

In the years that followed, Communist Russia began to collapse, symbolically illustrated by the dramatic fall of the

Berlin Wall in 1989. Though many factors no doubt contributed to this outcome, believers pointed to the consecration as a divine aid in defeating the Soviet Union, which had been the globe's leading atheistic world power.

Lucia herself saw the turn of the millennium, dying on February 13, 2005, at the age of ninety-seven. Her cause for canonization is still ongoing at the time of this writing, but her cousins, Jacinta and Francisco, were canonized on May 13, 2017, the hundredth anniversary of Our Lady's first apparition at the Cova da Iria. Today, millions seek their intercession and practice a strong devotion to Our Lady of Fatima.