

Part I

Before the Apparitions of Our Lady

1. Preparation of Portugal

It is a source of wonderment to some that the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared in as remote a place as Fatima, Portugal, and devoted Her attention to three unknown, illiterate Portuguese peasant children. These facts are remarked upon almost reproachfully, as if where Mary appeared, and who She appeared to, somehow casts doubt on the importance of the apparitions.

Heaven does not reason as man does. Palestine was a remote, largely unknown part of the world as well, but the Son of God chose to be born there, to suffer a terrible death, and to rise to glory there. Indeed, Palestine and Portugal are similar in shape and size. The part of Portugal Our Lady graced is also similar to Palestine: arid, rocky, difficult to cultivate, populated by olive and fig trees, and an abundance of grapes.

The small town of Fatima is said to be named after a Moorish princess who was captured by Portuguese soldiers during the *Reconquista*. Her captor, Goncalo Hermingues, brought Fatima to Portugal's King, don Alfonso Henriques, and asked for her hand in marriage. King Alfonso granted his request, with the stipulation that Fatima convert to Christianity.

Fatima consented to the marriage, converted to Christianity, and was baptized under the name of Oureana. Alfonso gave the happy couple a generous wedding gift: the city of Abdegas, which was renamed Oureana in honor of the bride.¹

It was not a long marriage. Fatima died at a young age, and the heartbroken Goncalo joined a nearby Cistercian Abbey and became a monk. Years later Father Goncalo was named superior of a neighboring monastery. A chapel was built there, and that was where Goncalo buried Oureana's remains.² He named the place Fatima, and the chapel, over centuries, became the parish church of Fatima, where Lucia dos Santos and her cousins Francisco and Jacinta Marto worshipped as children.³

Meanwhile, King Alfonso was reconquering Portugal for

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Christianity. After many years and reversals of fortune, Alfonso drove the Moors from Portugal. His next battle was achieving political independence from Spain, for Alphonsus of Castile claimed Portugal as Spanish territory.

Portugal's Alfonso astutely offered his kingdom to the Church, declared himself the Pope's vassal, and promised an annual tribute to Rome. Pope Lucius II accepted Alfonso's offer, taking Portugal under his protection and recognizing it as a country independent of Spain. A succession of popes confirmed Alfonso's kingship.⁴

Portugal's first King was a warrior and a politician known for his loose living. Yet Alfonso was a man of the faith, and a friend of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, to whom Portugal paid an annual tribute. Alfonso built the most famous monastery in Portugal at Alcobaca, and dedicated it to the Blessed Virgin. He established the Augustinian monastery of Santa Cruz at Coimbra, where St. Anthony of Lisbon (and Padua) studied before becoming a Franciscan. Equally as important, Alfonso put his country under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary. There is a legend that for a long time the Kings of Portugal wore no crown, deferring their earthly royalty to the heavenly Queenship of Mary.⁵

Free now from the Moors and from Spain, Alfonso's successors occasionally sought independence from Rome. After some stormy battles, Portugal remained under obedience to the Pope. It may have been a relief to all when the Portuguese turned their energies seaward, and began energetic mission work around the world.

Despite the growing pains of a young, violent nation, Portuguese children learned at an early age to pray their beads. They grew up to be leaders, like King John who fought the Spaniards at Aljubarrota on the vigil of the Assumption (both armies entered battle fasting). Many claimed to have seen Our Lady during the battle, which was won by the Portuguese, even though they were heavily outnumbered. Afterwards King John erected on the battle site the 'Battle Abbey', in honor of Our Lady of Victory.

At John's request, Pope Boniface IX declared that all the cathedrals of Portugal be dedicated in honor of Our Lady. This decree was read in Lisbon on May 13, the date of the first Fatima apparition.

Apostle of Mary's Immaculate Heart

In 1580 Portugal fell under Spanish domination again. In 1646 Portugal proclaimed a new King, John IV, who on December 8 declared independence from Spain and consecrated his nation to Mary Immaculate, as Patroness and defender of Portugal. King John also swore an oath to defend the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, even at the cost of his life.

In front of a large audience John laid his crown at the feet of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception and proclaimed his confidence in

“the infinite mercy of Our Lord, Who by the mediation of this Patroness and Protectress of our kingdom and our lands, of which we have the honor to call ourselves vassals and tributaries, shall protect and defend us against our enemies, while considerably increasing our lands, for the glory of Christ our God and the exaltation of the Holy Roman Catholic Faith, the conversion of pagans, and the submission of heretics.”⁶

History shows John's confidence was well placed. In the nearly thirty year war between Spain and Portugal that followed his consecration, Portugal kept her independence against the will and armies of a far more powerful neighbor. When the Immaculate Conception was defined as dogma two centuries later by Blessed Pius IX, the shrine at Lourdes was often visited by the Portuguese, but for them the dogma was nothing new; they had been making this pilgrimage for decades.

Portugal is rightly known as *terra de Santa Maria*: the land of Holy Mary. In his moving account of Fatima, the late William Thomas Walsh asked: “Why should She have appeared in Portugal in 1917, and in such a deserted and inaccessible place as the Serra de Aire?”⁷ It was a rhetorical question, for Walsh knew that the answer is the history of Portugal, a small, humble land made great by the handmaid of the Lord, the humble and glorious Mary Immaculate.

As She had been honored by the Portuguese, so did the Blessed Virgin honor Portugal by appearing there in 1917. Lucia dos Santos was born into a rich heritage of national Marian devotion. Had Portugal not for centuries been so devoted to the Mother of God, the apparitions at Fatima may never have

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happened, and Lucia would have lived a very different life. We would have too.

Notes

1. Oureana is now known as Ourem.
2. One assumes the grave was marked, but over time the grave marker disappeared, so no one knows where in Fatima Oureana was buried.
3. That is the legend, anyway, of which there are minor variations. I used the version of Canon Barthas, in *Our Lady of Light*, English translation, The Bruce Publishing Company, Milwaukee, 1947, p. 3. Regarding the Blessed Virgin's apparitions at Fatima, some Shi'ite Muslims believe Mary appeared not for Christians but for Muslims, given the name of the place She appeared. The Shi'ites are a Muslim sect that has a veneration for Mary. A more plausible theory, based on what the Blessed Virgin actually said at Fatima, is that Mary wished for the conversion of Muslims to the Catholic faith.
4. The "Old" *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Portugal.
5. Most Rev. Finbar Ryan, O.P., *Our Lady of Fatima*, The Newman Press, Maryland, 1949, p. 24.
6. Frère Michel de la Sainte Trinité, *The Whole Truth About Fatima*, Volume I, *Science and the Facts*, English translation, Immaculate Heart Publications, 1989, p. 14 (hereinafter cited as TWTAF, Vol. I, op. cit.).
7. William Thomas Walsh, *Our Lady of Fatima*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1947, p. vi.