

5. First Confession

But the appearances of Our Lady at the Cova da Iria were still some four years away. In the relative calm before the storm, the dos Santos family worked day and night to coax life out of the stubborn, rocky Portuguese hill country; and they practiced their faith.

Each Sunday the family walked down the road to St. Anthony's Church in Fatima to assist at Mass. It was a modest church, with statues of St. Anthony and St. Francis to the right of the altar, and on the left a statue of Our Lady of the Rosary, in crimson gown and blue mantle, holding the Christ Child. Here little Lucia often knelt to pray, as she prepared for her First Confession and Communion.

She was only six, which is considered a young age to receive First Communion, even to us moderns. A century ago children often had to wait until the age of twelve (or later) before going to Confession and receiving Communion. This was a perhaps overly rigorous interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas, who wrote: "When children once begin to have some use of reason so as to be able to conceive some devotion for the sacrament, then it can be given to them."¹

In the Nineteenth Century Blessed Pius IX began urging more frequent communion, especially by children. Then Pope St. Pius X published numerous decrees encouraging and allowing children to receive the sacraments at an early age in order, he said, to allow children to begin living the life of Christ and receive protection against corruption and sin.

According to the decree *Quam Singulari*, First Communion and First Confession should occur when "the child has begun to reason, that is, at about seven years, more or less," with the stipulation that the child knew "how to distinguish the Eucharistic Bread from ordinary, physical bread."²

Quam Singulari was published in 1910, when Lucia was three. Three years later she participated in catechism

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instructions for First Communicants given by Father Pena, Fatima's parish priest. "I went, radiant with joy, hoping soon to be able to receive my God for the first time," Lucia recalled.³ It is evident from this statement that Lucia knew the difference between Eucharistic Bread and ordinary bread. And thanks to the religious instruction she had received from her mother, Lucia was often called upon by the priest to answer questions the other children were unable to answer.

The day before First Communion Sunday, Father Pena decided who would be able to receive. "What was not my disappointment," Lucia wrote, "when he called me up beside him, caressed me and then said I was to wait till I was seven years old! I began to cry at once, and just as I would have done with my own mother, I laid my head on his knees and sobbed."⁴

She continued crying, alone, in a pew. Then Providence smiled on the young peasant girl. Perhaps the Sacred Heart longed to give Himself to Lucia as much as she longed to receive Him, for another priest entered the church at just that moment, and noticed the distraught Lucia.

He was "a tall man of fifty, much bent from study and austerities."⁵ He was Father Cruz, famous in Portugal for his preaching and holiness. He had recently become a Jesuit, and stopped by St. Anthony's parish to help Father Pena with Confessions. Now he approached Lucia.

"He asked me the reason for my tears (Lucia said). On being informed, he took me alone to the sacristy and examined me on the catechism and the mystery of the Eucharist. After this, he took me by the hand and brought me to the parish priest, saying:

'Father Pena, you can let this child go to Communion. She understands what she's doing better than many of the others.'

'But she's only six years old,' objected the good priest.

'Never mind! I'll take the responsibility for that.'

'Alright then,' the good priest said to me. 'Go and tell your mother that you are making your First Communion tomorrow.'

"I could never express the joy I felt (Lucia said). Off I

Sister Lucia

went, clapping my hands with delight, and running all the way home to give the good news to my mother. She at once set about preparing me for the Confession I was to make that afternoon.

“My mother took me to the church, and when we arrived, I told her that I wanted to confess to the other priest (Father Cruz). So we went to the sacristy, where he was sitting on a chair hearing Confessions. My mother knelt down in front of the high altar near the sacristy door, together with the other mothers who were waiting for their children to confess in turn. Right there before the Blessed Sacrament, my mother gave me her last recommendations.”⁶

When her turn came Lucia “went and knelt at the feet of our dear Lord, represented there in the person of His minister, imploring forgiveness for my sins. When I had finished I noticed everyone was laughing.”⁷

In her zeal Lucia had enumerated her sins so loudly that everyone outside the movable confessional heard her. Father Cruz was quieter. After Lucia finished, he said quietly: “My child, your soul is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Keep it always pure, so that He can carry on His divine action within it.”⁸ Lucia asked the age old question: “What should I do?” Father Cruz replied:

“Kneel down there before Our Lady and ask Her, with great confidence, to take care of your heart, to prepare it to receive Her beloved Son worthily tomorrow, and to keep it for Him alone.”

As she had many times before, Lucia knelt before the statue of Our Lady of the Rosary, “With all the ardor of my soul,” she asked Mary “to keep my poor heart for God alone. As I repeated this humble prayer over and over again, with my eyes fixed on the statue, it seemed to me that She smiled and, with a loving look and kindly gesture, assured me that She would. My heart was overflowing with joy, and I could scarcely utter a single word.”⁹

So began Lucia’s Eucharistic life. Father Cruz told her to ask the Blessed Virgin to take care of her heart. This request was answered definitively a few years later, when the beautiful Lady at the Cova da Iria pledged to Lucia: “My Immaculate Heart will be your refuge, and the way that will

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lead you to God." Lucia entrusted her heart to Mary, and Mary gave Lucia Her own Heart in return.

Notes

1. *Summa Theologica*, III, q.80, a.9.
2. As quoted in Yves Chiron, *Saint Pius X, Restorer of the Church*, Angelus Press, 2002, pp. 291-292.
3. Second Memoir, p. 54.
4. Ibid.
5. Walsh, op. cit., p. 8.
6. Second Memoir, pp. 54-55.
7. Ibid., p. 55.
8. Ibid., pp. 55-56.
9. Ibid., p. 56.