

6. First Communion

On the way home Maria Rosa said to Lucia: "My child, don't you know that Confession is a secret matter and that it is made in a low voice? Everybody heard you! There is only one thing nobody heard: that is what you said at the end."¹

Maria Rosa then seemed to forget that Confession is a secret matter, for she pestered Lucia about what she said at the end of her Confession. Lucia refused to say. Mother and daughter returned to Aljustrel amid a volley of stubborn questions and equally stubborn silences.

The rest of the day was spent preparing Lucia for her First Communion. Her oldest sisters made her a white dress and a wreath of flowers. Lucia was so excited it was hard to fall asleep. The next morning her sister Maria took Lucia to her parents, to ask their pardon, to kiss their hands, and to ask them for a blessing. Her mother told Lucia: "Above all, ask Him to make you a saint."

Lucia set off for St. Anthony's with her brother and sisters. Manuel carried her in his arms, "so that not a speck of dust from the road would touch me." Here is Lucia's account of her First Communion.

"Once the Missa Cantata began and the great moment drew near, my heart beat faster and faster, in expectation of the visit of the great God who was about to descend from Heaven to unite Himself to my poor soul. The parish priest came down and passed among the rows of children, distributing the Bread of Angels. I had the good fortune to be the first one to receive. As the priest was coming down the altar steps, I felt as though my heart would leap from my breast. But he had no sooner placed the divine Host on my tongue than I felt an unalterable serenity and peace. I felt myself bathed in such a supernatural atmosphere that the presence of our dear Lord became as clearly perceptible to me as if I had seen and heard Him with my bodily senses. I then addressed my prayer to Him:

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"O Lord, make me a saint. Keep my heart always pure, for You alone.

"Then it seemed that in the depths of my heart, our dear Lord distinctly spoke these words to me: 'The grace granted to you this day will remain living in your soul, producing fruits of eternal life.' I felt as though transformed in God.

"It was almost one o'clock before the ceremonies were over, on account of the late arrival of priests coming from a distance, the sermon, and the renewal of baptismal promises. My mother came looking for me, quite distressed, thinking I might faint from weakness (Lucia had not yet eaten). But I, filled to overflowing with the Bread of Angels, found it impossible to take any food whatsoever. After this, I lost the taste and attraction for the things of the world, and only felt at home in some solitary place, where all alone, I could recall the delights of my First Communion."²

Friends and family noticed that Lucia was preoccupied: "she seemed absorbed, abstracted, almost dazed."³ This does not seem to have overly concerned anyone. Her family spent Sunday afternoon as they usually did, relaxing, and entertaining visitors.

Antonio's habit was to spend Sundays playing cards with his friends. Between hands the men drank from a large jug of wine. Eventually Maria Rosa came to the table and told them the wine was making them hot. She offered them a large bowl of fruit and a jug of cool water, flavored with honey and lemon, and deftly whisked the wine jug away (in the winter Maria Rosa exchanged the wine for hot coffee, dried figs, and roasted chestnuts). The men never complained; they were relieved, perhaps, that Maria Rosa did not sit down to play cards with them, for when she did she often won.⁴

After the evening Angelus, visitors said their good-byes, but Lucia's family continued to relax with each other. After supper Antonio would occasionally regale Lucia with stories of giants, bewitched castles, and enchanted princesses, or teach her songs that weren't in the hymnal. Maria Rosa would wait for the end of a story, or a song, then begin a story of her own; her tales were quite different from Antonio's.

On Christmas Eve the family sat around the fire before Midnight Mass, making *filhoses* – a traditional fried pastry cake made around Christmas time in Portugal. The cooled

Sister Lucia

filhoses were placed in a white wicker basket and taken to Midnight Mass, where Lucia presented them to the Baby Jesus. The next morning they were given to friends and to the poor.

When Lucia walked in processions, the white wicker basket was filled with flowers “to strew before Our Lord.” Antonio told Lucia she had come to her family from Heaven in the wicker basket.

Lucia and her family ate no meat or milk during Lent. She remembers that:

“As soon as I was seven my mother made me keep the full fast and abstinence three days a week — Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays. So that I wouldn’t be tempted to go to the drawer in the kitchen table to find something to eat, she used to take all the food out and keep it in the barn. Sometimes my father used to say that I wasn’t obliged to fast as I was still very young. But my mother used to say in reply that it was to get me used to it because, she said, you can only bend a cucumber when it’s young. When it’s fully grown, it will split rather than bend.”⁵

During Holy Week “my sisters’ work was to whitewash the whole house, inside and outside, to clean and polish, in order that everything would be in perfect readiness for the reception, on Easter Sunday, of the Risen Lord in the person of the parish priest who would come to wish us a happy Easter in the Lord’s Name.”⁶

On Holy Saturday the Easter lamb was placed in the oven in large glazed earthenware roasting pans. The next morning, when the priest neared their home, Antonio set off three fireworks in the yard in honor of the Resurrection. “Then he would run indoors so as to be kneeling with all the family in the front room ready to receive the Paschal Visit, kiss the crucifix, and receive the blessing which the parish priest gave in the name of the Risen Lord Jesus.”⁷

Lucia was chosen to present a gift to the priest: a portion of the lamb placed in the white wicker basket, along with flowers. “Then the parish priest would tell me to put my hand into a bag of sugared almonds carried by another man, and take out as many as I wanted. But my hand was very small, so I could only take out a few. Because of this, the priest used to tell me to put my hand in as many times as

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necessary to fill the two pockets in my dress...Then the parish priest would place several handfuls of almonds for all the family on the table in the outer room, and then depart after giving us his blessing."⁸

This was life in Aljustrel, a small hamlet somehow preserved from the modern world and all its conveniences and vexations, its high hopes and wretched realities. Hard work and worship were the coins of this tiny realm, where the traditions of religious practice were handed down from generation to generation. This was the life, and religion, that shaped Lucia dos Santos from the cradle, and would guide her to the grave.

Notes

1. Second Memoir, p. 55.
2. Ibid., p. 57.
3. Walsh, op. cit., p. 10.
4. Lucia says her mother "nearly always won." Sixth Memoir, p. 113.
5. Sixth Memoir, p. 78.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., pp. 78-79.