

Homily for Pilgrimage to Fatima: World Apostolate

What a great privilege has been ours to be in Fatima in these days. You will know that when the Holy Father was here in May he canonised our two young saints, St Jacinta and St Francesco. So, now, we have two new saints to intercede for us. Of course they are best known to us because of the visits made to them by Our Lady a century ago. But their sanctity, their heroic virtue, does not rest in this fact, but rather in the fact that, in their lives, they sought to put into practise the lessons they had learnt from Our Lady. These were lessons about prayer, particularly for others, and about sacrifices or penances - to put your own will aside in order to seek to do God's will more fully. To put the other person first as a sign of love and of service, so that they might know the love of Jesus and Mary more.

These lessons they lived in the personal circumstances of daily life, at home, in their village, among their friends and neighbours. St Jacinta and St Francesco are a reminder that sanctity, holiness of life, can be lived in the home, even among the youngest members in a family. And in receiving the struggles and sufferings of daily existence. We know that in their deaths especially Francisco and Jacinta showed enormous courage. Jacinta had a premonition of hers and asked for the Sacrament. The priest said he would bring it the following day and she shouldn't be too dramatic. She died before he came that day, and alone. She was only nine, but had made it clear she knew she was going to her heavenly mother. We should never assume that someone is too young to hear about God, to be taught about Our Lady, to begin a path of following Jesus. Many of you here are parents or grandparents. Do we have any great grandparents? Particularly nowadays parents and grandparents have a sacred task to help their children and grandchildren receive our Catholic faith, in simple ways. Please pray with them, teach them the Our Father and the Hail Mary, pray and teach them the rosary, and continue to teach them about Jesus and Mary.

When I was a child, we often prayed the rosary at home, usually in the evening. It was always with a particular style, on our knees, with each of us facing into a chair, with head down. We knelt in a circle but turned outwards, not facing one another. There were five of us all together - my parents, my two older brothers and I, and my mother insisted that each of us led a decade of the rosary. I think it was so that we didn't fall asleep. Yet these simple things taught me that I had to find my own voice in prayer and that prayer wasn't talking to one another but turning in another direction, to talk to God. When we visited my Grandmother's house during

the summer holidays, she would often have a rosary in her hands and seemed to use it most of the day. She lived in a simple house in the West of Ireland and the back door was left constantly opened and her chickens would often wonder in looking for specks of food on the stone floor. The words of her Hail Mary's would be interspersed with her shooing the chickens away and swearing at them in Irish. I'm afraid they were some of the first Irish words I learnt! But I learned, too, that the language of prayer and the language of life is intertwined, and in prayer nothing that comes is a distraction, but something merely to be taken up, and offered to God along with everything else.

When we pray with our young ones, when we teach them to pray, we give them a very precious gift. A gift that only Jesus can give. It is the gift of His inner life. None of us are Spiritual orphans. We have a Father who loves us so much, that He gave His only Son. In Jesus we have a brother who is with us always. And in Mary we have a mother. Our mother in heaven, the greatest and most loyal of all mothers. You know the story of someone who was praying to Mary at the shrine in Fatima and it was the 13th of the month, and there were tens of thousands of people there, and this person became a little despondent. They started to think to themselves, 'But how can she know and see me, how can she divide up her love between all these thousands of people'. And then the thought came to him as though the voice of Mary were whispering gently to him in the depths of his heart, "But I don't divide it up, I multiply it." And this is what our heavenly mother does. She sees us, she looks us and she loves us. She does not abandon us. She mirrors the fidelity of her Son. This is why we call the Church our Mother. Indeed, my favourite title of Mary is Mother. As St Therese of the Child Jesus used to often say, Mary is so much mother, than Queen. People go to Mary and they say "Show us Jesus....".

We know that Mary had unsettling and dark moments in her life. Yet she continued to trust and to hope. At the beginning, in the Annunciation, her witness is one of courage in accepting her vocation and the new life entrusted to her. The Gospels speak of a kind of "eclipse" of Mary during the public ministry of Jesus. Following the miracle of Cana she is silent and she follows her Son's ministry in silence. Yet in His passion, when the disciples flee, Mary remains with Him to the end. The image of Mary receiving her dead Son - the pieta - has inspired artists for centuries. It is often the image to which people offer their deepest devotion when they come across it in a Church.

It is a reminder to us, that the Peace which only Jesus can give us, is a peace which we find in Our mother, the Church. She is with us, with her Son, in our suffering. So let us be like Mary, open to receiving Jesus when he comes to us. Like her, willing to be faithful and courageous in the dark or difficult moments of life, knowing that Jesus is with us and does not abandon us. Let us place our young people and all children under her protection, and help them step by step to discover Jesus and Mary. To find in Jesus and Mary, the source of our peace.

Mary, mother of Jesus pray for us and for our young people. Help us to show them the way to you so that you can bring them to Jesus. Amen.

+Mark O'Toole

Bishop of Plymouth