

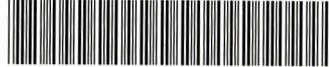
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CELEBRATIONS AT FATIMA

by  
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Last week-end Pope Paul VI flew to Portugal to worship at the shrine dedicated to the Virgin Mary at Fatima. A crowd of some one million pilgrims were reported to be present. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the shrine. The story of the shrine is told in the booklet "More about Fatima", written by a Roman Catholic priest and published in Dublin in 1945. The booklet has gone through editions totaling hundreds of thousands of copies.

It tells how three children aged 7, 9 and 10, saw an apparition of the Virgin Mary shimmering against the leaves of a tree; the apparition was repeated six times at monthly intervals. On the last occasion the book tells how, not only did the Virgin Mary appear but also Joseph with the infant Jesus in his arms. It goes on to recount how "Suddenly the sun trembles, is shaken, makes some abrupt movements and finally begins to turn giddily on itself like a

wheel of fire casting in all directions like an enormous lamp great beams of light... After about four minutes the sun stops. A moment later it resumes a second time its fantastic motion and its fairylike dance of light and colour such as could never be imagined in the most gorgeous display of fireworks... After a short stop and for the third time... the sun takes up again more varied and more colourful than ever its fantastic display of fireworks... In the midst of this crazy dance of fire and colours, like a gigantic wheel which from spinning has swung off its axis, so now the sun leaves its place in the firmament, and falling from side to side plunges zig zaggedly on the crowd below... finally stopping short in its vertiginous fall the sun climbs back to its place, zigzagging as it has come down" (More About Fatima, V. Montes de Oca, Gill and Son, Dublin, 1949, p.39-42).

According to the author of the booklet the children continued to receive private

visitations from the Virgin Mary (see p.106). Included in the last message to the children were these words: "I am Our Lady of the Rosary. I want a chapel built here in my honour, the rosary must be recited every day". As a result of these apparitions Fatima has become a place of Roman Catholic pilgrimage and the largest church in Portugal has now been erected on the site. The whole cult is entirely devoted to the Virgin Mary and the Pope has given his official approbation to the visions by himself attending the fiftieth anniversary services. It is my opinion that religious devotion directed to a female figure and based on credulity and superstition, though it may make fanatics, cannot result in strong Christian character.

Not all Roman Catholics approve of this Madonna cult which is so characteristic a feature of modern Roman Catholicism. Thus in a book written by Roman Catholics entitled "Objections to Roman Catholic-

ism" published in 1964, on p.38 we read "Whatever the real nature of the experiences of the children of Fatima in 1917 and it was seen that these contained nothing that was not traceable to their - woefully inadequate - religious training, the appearances there of Our Lady, Joseph and the child Jesus are renowned the world over. Solar miracles have been reported, a huge basilica built, thousands of pilgrims visit the spot every year, and Pope Pius himself was favoured with similar visions in the very garden of the Vatican. Since the subjects' original statements have for 'prudential reasons' never been made public, and Roman Catholic scholars admit that a great deal of devotional literature has been suppressed, altered and generally touched up, any comment on the dogmatic content of these visions must be provisional. But one can say that it is a pity that they were not treated with more reserve and a disaster if a single soul was led to think that God in any way resembles the dreadful and

cruel being suggested by the words of the apparition... At Fatima Our Lady blackmails people into making the devotion of the first Saturdays, that is by going through certain hoops they will obtain assistance at the hour of death such as is necessary for eternal bliss". This is the view of a modern Roman Catholic writing in a book for Roman Catholics in which a Roman Catholic Archbishop is a contributor. However, Pope Paul has given his approval to the visions by his personal attendance at the fiftieth anniversary.

The cult of the Virgin characterises modern Roman Catholicism. The friendly atmosphere that is growing between Roman Catholic leaders and protestant churches makes it all the more necessary for both Roman Catholics and protestants to examine this cult to see whether it is part of authentic Christianity, and the test to be applied is, of course, conformity to the Word of God.

In the New Testament St. Matthew and St. Luke tell the story of the birth of Jesus, and in St. Luke's account, Mary His mother is in the centre of the narrative. But later in the Gospels in the account of the ministry of Jesus there are very few references to Mary. "There is not one instance of her influence of Christ being invoked either in her life time or after her departure. At Cana of Galilee when she does interpose she is bidden wait His time and her advice to those whom she is sure that He will help is, 'Whatsoever He says to you, do it' (Jn. 2:4,5). On another occasion when she sent calling Him he apparently did not go but answered 'Whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my mother' (Lk. 8:21). When a woman exclaimed 'Blessed is the womb that bore thee' He replied 'Yea, rather blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it' (Lk. 11:27,28). He does not imply, of course, that Mary had not these graces, they were conspicuous in her, but He certainly puts the moral virtue

higher even than her unique privilege. And when from the cross He commends her to St. John saying 'Behold thy mother', and to her 'Behold thy son'... the obvious meaning of our Saviour's words was rather that St. John should take care of her than that she should be his protectress" (E.R.E. 8, p.475).

In Acts chapter 1 there is an incidental reference to the mother of our Lord being present with the other disciples but after the coming of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost and the beginning of the preaching of the Christian Gospel there is no further mention of her throughout the rest of the New Testament. The Book of the Acts goes on to tell the story of the early days of the church, but there is no reference to any place of the mother of Jesus. The nineteen epistles which follow the Acts and which explain in detail the Christian gospel, and how Christians are to respond to the Gospel make no mention of Mary. The same is true of the Book of the

Revelation, which describes the heavenly worship of the Church. There can only be one conclusion: that the modern Roman Catholic cult of Mary is not authentic Christianity. This is confirmed by the early history of the Christian Church. For example, in the voluminous writings of St. Augustine no prayer is to be found addressed to the blessed Virgin, nor is there any prayer addressed to her in the early Christian liturgies. If any cult of the Virgin existed in the first centuries of the Church we would expect to find it reflected in the liturgies but there is "no mention of Mary's name in the liturgical thanksgivings in the first epistle to St. Clement of Rome, nor in the Didache, nor in Justin Martyr's or Tertullian's account of the eucharistic services". We conclude that the Mary cult of modern Roman Catholics has no place in authentic christianity. In fact it was amongst heretics that the cult of the Virgin first appeared and it was condemned as a heresy by Bishop

Epiphanius in the fourth century (Haer., 79,9).

Hans Kung, a leading modern Roman Catholic theologian recognises that the modern Marian devotion in the Roman Catholic church is a hindrance to reunion, and he refers to "the intolerable exaggerations of the Madonna cult". In speaking of the Marian dogmas, namely her sinlessness and her bodily ascension to heaven, in which the Roman Catholics believe, Kung writes "There is still much work to be done on rounding out the theological and specially the Scriptural basis of these dogmas". This is an admission that the dogmas are not at present as well founded scripturally as Kung would like, but surely it would have been better to have delayed the promulgation of these dogmas till this scriptural investigation of their truth had been completed, because such investigation will show that the dogmas have no scriptural foundation. Kung, however, goes on to say that Protestants ought to

allow a larger place than they do for the honouring of the Virgin in their worship of God. He writes "Protestants must ask themselves some questions such as this, 'What do we make of the numerous Marian passages in Scripture?'" (The Church and Reunion, p.184-186). But as we have seen, Kung is mistaken in thinking that there are numerous passages which refer to the Virgin Mary in Scripture. The fact is just the opposite. There is complete silence with regard to the Virgin Mary in the life of the church. Not one reference is to be found to her throughout the New Testament once the church has begun to come into being. The references are, as I say, in the birth narratives where she takes, naturally, an honoured prominence, and a few references in the ministry of our Lord in which she is by no means prominent; and then after Acts chapter 1, no mention at all. On what grounds, then, does Kung speak of the "numerous Marian passages in Scripture"? If we are to follow Scripture we are to be

silent about Mary in our worship of God, though recognising the uniquely honourable privilege which she received through God's grace. She was indeed blessed above women to be chosen to be the mother of our Lord, but this is very different from the Madonna cult, even from the mild variety that Kung would like to see the Roman Catholic church revert to.

Protestants have two main objections against the practical effect of the Madonna cult in Roman Catholicism. Firstly, that for the average Roman Catholic the Virgin is placed alongside God. I know Roman Catholic theologians strongly deny that this is so, but a conversation with the ordinary Roman Catholic shows that in practice this is the case. Moreover, the book "More about Fatima" concludes with a hymn:

"O come to the throne of grace  
O come to the heart most pure  
To Mary our hope of life  
In whom salvation is sure  
Immaculate heart, we kneel  
To consecrate all to thee."

Whatever the theologians may say, in this hymn Mary has taken the place of Christ, who said "Come unto me; I will give you rest". The same book on p.121 gives a prayer of Pope Pius XII which begins "Queen of the most holy rosary, help of Christians, refuge of the Christian race, conqueror in all God's battles, we humbly prostrate ourselves before thy throne, confident that we shall receive mercy, grace, bountiful assistance and protection in the present calamity, not through our own inadequate merits but solely through the great goodness of thy maternal heart". Notice the word 'solely'. Christ's merits have been completely excluded, even in theory, while of course in practice a prayer of this sort fills the mind only with the blessed Virgin when the mind should be filled only with God.

A second objection against the Madonna cult is that it brings human merit into the centre of our salvation. Roman Catholic theologians defend the

cult by saying that Mary consented to the incarnation and so human free will becomes a basis for our salvation. Thus the Roman Catholic theologian Schillebeeckx in his book "Mary, Mother of the Redemption" (p.87 Dutch edition) criticises protestants' rejection of the Madonna cult "because they deny the personal meritorious co-operation of man in his redemption. This is perfectly true. Protestants do deny that we can merit salvation at all. The response of faith, in God's promise, whether by Mary or by ourselves, is not meritorious, and to say that it is, is like praising the action of a drowning man who took hold of the outstretched hand of his rescuer who had jumped in to save him, swum to where he was and dragged him back to shore. How disproportionate and untrue it would be if the praise for the rescue was diverted from the rescuer to the drowning man because the latter had held on to the outstretched hand of his saviour. Yet this is what Schillebeeckx insists on when

he says man's response to salvation Christ offers is a meritorious act, and that Mary's response to God's purposes was so meritorious that she may be called co-Redemptrix, and be placed alongside Christ and effectively divert all attention from Him. This was certainly the effect of the Fatima celebrations last week; but authentic Christianity confines its worship to praising God in Christ. As the Book of the Revelation puts it, chapter 1, verse 5, "Unto Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, to Him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever, Amen."

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