

CARDINAL RATZINGER: PENANCE IS THE KEY TO THE "SECRET"

VATICAN CITY, JUN 26, 2000 (VIS) - Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, writes that the "key word" of the third secret of Fatima "is the triple cry, 'Penance, Penance, Penance!'" These words appear in his "theological commentary" published at the end of the document made public today by the Holy See. Cardinal Ratzinger goes on to state that other key words are "my Immaculate heart will triumph," and "the Heart open to God, purified by contemplation of God, is stronger than guns and weapons of every kind. The 'fiat' of Mary, the word of her heart, has changed the history of the world."

The theological commentary of the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is divided into three parts: "Public Revelation and private revelations - their theological status"; "The anthropological structure of private revelations" and "An attempt to interpret the 'secret' of Fatima".

"The term 'public Revelation' refers to the revealing action of God directed to humanity as a whole and which finds its literary expression in the two parts of the Bible: the Old and New Testaments. It is called 'Revelation' because in it God gradually made himself known to men, to the point of becoming man himself, in order to draw to himself the whole world and unite it with himself through his Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. ... In Christ, God has said everything, that is, he has revealed himself completely, and therefore Revelation came to an end with the fulfillment of the mystery of Christ as enunciated in the New Testament."

'Private revelation,' on the other hand, "refers to all the visions and revelations which have taken place since the completion of the New Testament. This is the category to which we must assign the message of Fatima. ... The authority of private revelations is essentially different from that of the definitive public Revelation. The latter demands faith." Private revelation, on the other hand, "is a help to this faith, and shows its credibility precisely by leading (one) back to the definitive public Revelation."

Quoting the Flemish theologian E. Dhanis, Cardinal Ratzinger affirms that "ecclesiastical approval of a private revelation has three elements: the message contains nothing contrary to faith or morals; it is lawful to make it public; and the faithful are authorized to accept it with prudence. Such a message can be a genuine help in understanding the Gospel and living it better at a particular moment in time; therefore it should not be disregarded. It is a help which is offered, but which one is not obliged to use."

Cardinal Ratzinger also highlights that "prophecy in the biblical sense does not mean to predict the future but to explain the will of God for the present, and therefore show the right path to take for the future."

The most important part of the theological commentary is dedicated to: "An

attempt to interpret the 'secret' of Fatima." In the same way as the key word of the first and second part of the 'secret' is to 'save souls,' "the key word of this third part is the threefold cry: 'Penance, Penance, Penance!' The beginning of the Gospel comes to mind: 'Repent and believe the Good News.' To understand the signs of the times means to accept the urgency of penance þ of conversion þ of faith. This is the correct response to this moment of history, characterized by the grave perils outlined in the images that follow. Allow me to add here a personal recollection: in a conversation with me Sister Lucia said that it appeared ever more clearly to her that the purpose of all the apparitions was to help people to grow more and more in faith, hope and loveþeverything else was intended to lead to this."

The prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith then considers the "images" of the secret: "The angel with the flaming sword on the left of the Mother of God recalls similar images in the Book of Revelation. This represents the threat of judgement which looms over the world. Today the prospect that the world might be reduced to ashes by a sea of fire no longer seems pure fantasy: man himself, with his inventions, has forged the flaming sword.

"The vision then shows the power which stands opposed to the force of destruction þ the splendor of the Mother of God and, stemming from this in a certain way, the summons to penance. In this way, the importance of human freedom is underlined: the future is not in fact unchangeably set, and the image which the children saw is in no way a film preview of a future in which nothing can be changed. Indeed, the whole point of the vision is to bring freedom onto the scene and to steer freedom in a positive direction. ... Its meaning is to mobilize the forces of change in the right direction. Therefore we must totally discount fatalistic explanations of the 'secret,' such as, for example, the claim that the would-be assassin of May 13 1981 was merely an instrument of the divine plan guided by Providence. ... Rather, the vision speaks of dangers and how we might be saved from them."

Cardinal Ratzinger explains that "the place of the action is described in three symbols: a steep mountain, a great city reduced to ruins and finally a large rough-hewn cross. The mountain and city symbolize the arena of human history: history as an arduous ascent to the summit, history as the arena of human creativity and social harmony, but at the same time a place of destruction, where man actually destroys the fruits of his own work. ... On the mountain stands the crossþthe goal and guide of history. The cross transforms destruction into salvation; it stands as a sign of history's misery but also as a promise for history.

"At this point human persons appear: the Bishop dressed in white ('we had the impression that it was the Holy Father'), other Bishops, priests, men and women Religious, and men and women of different ranks and social positions. The Pope seems to precede the others, trembling and suffering because of all the horrors around him. Not only do the houses of the city lie half in ruins, but he makes his way among the corpses of the dead. The Church's path is thus described as a 'Via Crucis,' as a journey through a time of violence, destruction and persecution. The history of an entire century can be seen represented in

this image. Just as the places of the earth are synthetically described in the two images of the mountain and the city, and are directed towards the cross, so too time is presented in a compressed way.

"In the vision we can recognize the last century as a century of martyrs, a century of suffering and persecution for the Church, a century of World Wars and the many local wars which filled the last fifty years and have inflicted unprecedented forms of cruelty. In the 'mirror' of this vision we see passing before us the witnesses of the faith decade by decade."

The cardinal also states that "in the Via Crucis of an entire century, the figure of the Pope has a special role. In his arduous ascent of the mountain we can undoubtedly see a convergence of different Popes. Beginning from Pius X up to the present Pope, they all shared the sufferings of the century and strove to go forward through all the anguish along the path which leads to the Cross. In the vision, the Pope too is killed along with the martyrs. When, after the attempted assassination on 13 May 1981, the Holy Father had the text of the third part of the 'secret' brought to him, was it not inevitable that he should see in it his own fate? He had been very close to death, and he himself explained his survival in the following words: '... it was a mother's hand that guided the bullet's path and in his throes the Pope halted at the threshold of death' (May 13 1994). That here 'a mother's hand' had deflected the fateful bullet only shows once more that there is no immutable destiny, that faith and prayer are forces which can influence history and that in the end prayer is more powerful than bullets and faith more powerful than armies."

The conclusion of the secret, continues the cardinal, "uses images which Lucia may have seen in devotional books and which draw their inspiration from long-standing intuitions of faith. It is a consoling vision, which seeks to open a history of blood and tears to the healing power of God. Beneath the arms of the cross angels gather up the blood of the martyrs, and with it they give life to the souls making their way to God. Here, the blood of Christ and the blood of the martyrs are considered as one: the blood of the martyrs runs down from the arms of the cross. The martyrs die in communion with the Passion of Christ, and their death becomes one with his."

"The vision of the third part of the 'secret', so distressing at first, concludes with an image of hope: no suffering is in vain, and it is a suffering Church, a Church of martyrs, which becomes a sign-post for man in his search for God. ... From the suffering of the witnesses there comes a purifying and renewing power, because their suffering is the actualization of the suffering of Christ himself and a communication in the here and now of its saving effect."

"What is the meaning of the 'secret' of Fatima as a whole (in its three parts)?" asks the Cardinal: "First of all we must affirm with Cardinal Sodano: '... the events to which the third part of the 'secret' of Fatima refers now seem part of the past.' Insofar as individual events are described, they belong to the past. Those who expected exciting apocalyptic revelations about the end of the world or the future course of history are bound to be disappointed. Fatima does not satisfy our curiosity in this way, just as Christian faith in general cannot be

reduced to an object of mere curiosity. What remains was already evident when we began our reflections on the text of the 'secret': the exhortation to prayer as the path of 'salvation for souls' and, likewise, the summons to penance and conversion.

"I would like finally to mention another key expression of the 'secret' which has become justly famous: 'my Immaculate Heart will triumph.' What does this mean? The Heart open to God, purified by contemplation of God, is stronger than guns and weapons of every kind. The 'fiat' of Mary, the word of her heart, has changed the history of the world, because it brought the Saviour into the world because, thanks to her 'Yes,' God could become man in our world and remains so for all time. The Evil One has power in this world, as we see and experience continually; he has power because our freedom continually lets itself be led away from God.

"But since God himself took a human heart and has thus steered human freedom towards what is good, the freedom to choose evil no longer has the last word. From that time forth, the word that prevails is this: 'In the world you will have tribulation, but take heart; I have overcome the world.' The message of Fatima invites us to trust in this promise."

.../FATIMA MESSAGE/RATZINGER VIS 000626 (1940)