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# A Tale of Two Fatimas

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By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.
*Fatima, Portugal*

t In a sense, there have always been two Fatimas in the popular Catholic imagination.

One is a gentle devotion focused on Mary?s appearances to three illiterate shepherd children, an icon of God?s special favor for the simple ones of the earth.Then there?s the other Fatima, a darker and harder-edged subculture focused on speculation about the errors of Russia, nuclear annihilation, and the great apostasies of the Catholic church after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

tThat second Fatima, according to some, has often obscured and perverted the first. Writer and commentator Carlos Evaristo, for example, says feverish devotees can become so engrossed by the second Fatima that they almost have to be ?deprogrammed.?

?Unfortunately, many people who have a devotion to Fatima start with the regular devotions of the rosary and the First Saturdays, and then they get into some of the more exoteric literature,? Evaristo said.

?Once you get people into that mentality, it?s very hard to get them back.?

tEvaristo runs several foundations in Fatima ? including one launched by the late American Catholic layman and millionaire John Haffert, founder of the Blue Army ? and publishes widely on the subject. Evaristo?s father witnessed one of the reported appearances of Mary in Fatima in 1917.

Evaristo sat down with *NCR* on May 13, the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, during Pope Benedict XVI?s visit.

tEvaristo knows something about the hawkish Fatima subculture, having once been a protégé of Canadian Fr. Nicholas Gruner, the famed ?Fatima priest? who publishes the Fatima Crusader and who for decades has promoted a hard-line reading of the Fatima revelations ? insisting, among other things, that the version of the ?Third Secret? of Fatima published by the Vatican in 2000 is incomplete, omitting details about the end of the world and a condemnation of modernizing currents in the church.

tIn 1992, however, Evaristo broke with Gruner after publishing an interview with Sr. Lúcia Santos, the only one of the three visionaries of Fatima to have survived the influenza epidemic of 1918. In *Two Hours with Sr. Lucy*, Evaristo quoted Sr. Lúcia to the effect that:

?tJohn Paul?s 1984 consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary satisfied the conditions laid down in the Fatima revelations;
?tThe ?conversion? of Russia referred to in Fatima does not necessarily mean explicit conversion to the Catholic faith;
?tThe ?third secret? of Fatima did not have to be revealed in the 1960s, meaning that the Vatican had not been

guilty of a decades-long cover-up.

tEach point was anathema to Gruner and like-minded Fatima devotees, who questioned the authenticity of the interview and speculated about Evaristo?s motives for publishing it. (All this unfolded in the wake of a 1992 symposium Gruner sponsored in Fatima as a rival to an official program put on the shrine, both of which attracted 60 bishops from around the world. Evaristo says that because of his split with Gruner, he ended up with thousands of dollars in debt for the event that Gruner refused to pay.)

tToday, Evaristo, who grew up in Canada, sees Gruner as an example of an exegetical free-for-all that?s long percolated in the Fatima underground.

?What happened with the Fatima message is that Sr. Lucy related it but never interpreted it,? Evaristo said. ?That left space for all sorts of strange theories.?

Make no mistake ? Evaristo is a true believer. For example, he accepts at face value Sr. Lúcia?s claim that John Paul?s 1984 consecration prevented a nuclear war that was set to happen in 1985. Had Pius XI adequately carried out the consecration, he believes, World War II would have been prevented.

Yet Evaristo is insistent that the core elements of the Fatima message ? penance, conversion, the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the promise of salvation for performing a series of ?First Saturday? devotions ? don?t need to be ?sexed up? with end-time fervor or pervasive suspiciousness about Vatican plots.

?The message of Fatima is already so majestic that it doesn?t need science fiction,? Evaristo said. ?It doesn?t need hocus-pocus.?

Evaristo says that much of the speculation promoted by Fatima devotees amounts to a kind of ?brainwashing? premised largely on fear.

?It was a perfect spirituality for the Cold War,? he said. ?Unfortunately, a lot of people still live in the Cold War.?

In broad strokes, Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, who's in Fatima for the papal visit, echoed the point.

"I?ve always been struck by the simplicity of the message ? conversion and prayer," O'Malley told *NCR*. "It?s a devotion of the little people, and as a Franciscan, that excites me. This is where the *anawim* are. I think there?s something beautiful about that."

Simplicity, O'Malley said, and not eschatological prophecy, is what Fatima should be about.

Pope Benedict XVI?s four-day trip to Portugal concludes tomorrow with a Mass in Porto. The pontiff is scheduled to arrive back in Rome Friday evening.

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