

The 'silence' of Fatima offers important message for world today By [Elise Harris](#) Fatima, Portugal, [May 11, 2017](#)

While Fatima is famous for the mystifying candlelight procession and vigil that take place annually the night between May 12 and 13, there is an essential element that can easily be overlooked, but which bears special significance: silence. "Silence is important, because only in silence can we listen to the Word of God, only in silence can we listen to the whispers of God in our hearts," Fr. Francisco Pereira, chaplain of the Fatima Shrine, told CNA in an interview. It's been this way in Fatima since the very beginning, he said, noting that the bishop who arrived on site after the diocese was established in 1918 immediately wrote a letter to all parish priests in Fatima saying the shrine "is a place of silence, of prayer and of sacrifice."

Because of this, it's forbidden to set off fireworks, play music or sell alcohol on the property, Fr. Pereira said, stressing that that the shrine wants to preserve Fatima as much as possible as a place "of silence to pray and make sacrifices." Fr. Pereira, who oversees all of the shrine's liturgies, said the presence of silence in Fatima is especially seen and felt during the annual vigil marking Mary's first apparition at the site.

On May 13, 1917, Mary appeared to three shepherd children – Lucia dos Santos, 10, and her cousins Francisco and Jacinta Marto, 9 and 7 – in a field in Fatima, Portugal, bringing requests for the recitation of the rosary, for sacrifices on behalf of sinners, and a three-part secret regarding the fate of the world. After her initial appearance May 13, she requested that the children return on the 13th of each month until October, making similar requests in each conversation with the shepherds.

In 1930, Bishop Dom Jose Aleves Correia da Silva of the Diocese of Leiria declared that based on the results of the investigative commission, the apparitions at Fatima were "worthy of belief," the highest recognition a Marian apparition can receive from the Church. To mark the day of the first apparition, each year on the night of May 12 the Fatima shrine holds a large-scale version of their nightly candlelight vigil and rosary, followed by Mass. This year, Pope Francis will preside over the vigil to mark the 100th anniversary of Our Lady's first appearance.

The night begins with a blessing of the candles and a procession in which the shrine's resident statue of Our Lady of Fatima is carried up to the main altar, often with hymns being sung in the background. The rosary is then prayed and Mass offered before the statue is returned to its place in the Chapel of the Apparitions at the center of the shrine's large square, marking the place where Mary appeared. However, rather than being accompanied by music and hymns, this return procession is done completely in silence, Fr. Pereira said, adding that "it's amazing that even when the shrine is full of people, all the people make absolute silence because it's a sign that we want to listen to the presence of God."

"We always have a night of vigil in silence," he said, explaining that they try to maintain this silence for as long as possible. While the rest of the vigil, which ends at 7 a.m., is filled with different prayers including Masses, the Stations of the Cross and the Liturgy of the Hours, to start this vigil in silence is key to placing oneself in the presence of God. It's an opportunity, the priest said, "to stop a moment in our life, in our agitated lives, to stop a moment," and focus on what's essential. To be able to sit in front of Our Lady and pray in silence, even when surrounded by other people, is "very impressive," he said, but noted that it's not always easy to keep this silence with the buzz of people and pilgrims constantly coming through.

However, he said the shrine always tries to help pilgrims see the place as "a big church, even in the open ... so that we can see this place as a place of silence, so that we can pray and meditate on this message of Our Lady." "Seeing the image of Our Lady in silence is impressive because after five or ten minutes in silence, we can see something that is born in our heart," he said. "We can feel something very profound: this connection with God, with Our Lady."

This silence is also a key time to reflect on how to live "after our conversion," because after going on pilgrimage to any holy place, "when we return to our homes we always return changed, as changed persons in our hearts, in our souls, in our minds, in our spirits." "And this silence," he said, "is an important condition so that we can change ourselves." Pope Francis will preside over the vigil after a meeting with Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, and a brief visit to the chapel at the Monte Real airbase where he lands.

He'll open the night with a prayer before going to dinner, and then return to bless the candles used during the vigil and to lead pilgrims in the rosary. The Pope is expected to leave around 10 p.m., but Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin will then offer Mass for the pilgrims gathered. According to official estimates from the shrine itself, some between 500,000 and 800,000 pilgrims are expected to participate in the vigil and Mass with Pope Francis the next morning, during which he will canonize Fatima visionaries Francisco and Jacinta Marto.