

The Assassination Attempt on the Holy Father

On 13 May 2000, after disclosing the main contents of the third part of the Fatima secret, Cardinal Sodano observed: *According to the 'little shepherds' – their interpretation was recently confirmed by Sister Lucia – 'the bishop in white' who prays for the faithful stands for the Pope. As he makes his arduous way toward the Cross amid the dead bodies of martyrs (bishops, priest, monks, nuns, and numerous lay people), he too falls to the ground, apparently dead, under a hail of bullets.*

We now know that this prophecy was fulfilled on the evening of May 13, 1981. That was the day when the shocking news of the attempt on the life of the Pope John Paul II broke upon the world. It was Wednesday, the day of his general audience. The Holy Father was standing in his jeep, circling St. Peter's Square for the second time, and approaching the Bronze Gate. Without warning, Turkish terrorist Mechmed Ali Agca fired several shots at him (the gun jammed after the fourth round), wounding him in the abdominal cavity, right elbow, and index finger of the right hand.

Bishop Stanislaw Dziwisz recalls: *The reports were deafening. Of course I realized someone was shooting at us. But who? Then I realized the Holy Father was wounded. He lurched on his feet, but I could see no blood or wound. Where are you hit? I asked him. In the stomach, he replied. Does it hurt much? I asked. Yes, he answered. I went behind him to prevent him from falling back. So, with him half-lying, half-leaning against me in the vehicle, we reached the ambulance at the medical center inside the Vatican. The Holy Father was clearly in great pain. His eyes were closed, and he was uttering short, ejaculatory prayers. The one I remember in particular was: Mary, my Mother! Mary, my Mother! Dr. Buzzonetti and a male-nurse, Brother Camille, accompanied us in the ambulance. We drove off at a smart clip. After a few hundred yards, the ambulance siren broke*

down. The ride to the hospital, which normally takes at least half an hour, was completed in eight minutes flat – and this in Roman traffic! All the while, the Holy Father was in great pain. He continued praying, but his voice became increasingly weaker. Not a word of despair or anger passed his lips, only words of deep prayer welling out of the great pain he was suffering. Later, the Holy Father told

me that he had remained alert all the way to the hospital. Only inside the hospital did he finally lose consciousness. Just before he went into the operating room, I administered the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The operation began a little before six p.m. Assisting Dr. Crucitti in



Mary, my Mother! Mary, my Mother!



the operation room were anesthetist Dr. Manni, cardiologist Dr. Manzoni, internist Dr. Breda, and the Vatican doctor.

As the operation got underway, the Pope's condition was listed as critical. He had lost three quarters of his blood, and pressure had dropped to an alarming level. The pulse was barely perceptible. The Holy Father stood on the brink of death. Hope gradually rose, however, as it became clear during the operation that none of the vital organs had been touched. The surgery was very complicated, lasting about 5 hours. The abdominal cavity had to be cleaned out, the loss of blood replaced. In a few places the colon required stitching, and almost two feet of small intestine had to be removed.

Even though everything was ready by the time the Pope had arrived at the hospital, it was still necessary to prepare the patient for surgery. All this was achieved in the few minutes that intervened between life and death! As the Holy Father was brought down from the tenth floor to the operating room on the ninth, urgent calls went out in all directions for Dr. Crucitti. By a miracle he managed to reach Gemelli Clinic in time. *I'd no sooner arrived at the ninth floor – Crucitti recalls – than a sister began yelling to me: Quickly! Quickly! Nurses and assistants literally pounced on me, tearing off my jacket and trousers, getting me into my surgery scrubs, and scattering the contents of my pockets: keys, change, wallet. As I dashed over to wash my hands, one of them tied up my gown, another shod me in surgeon's boots. All the while another doctor delivered a running report from the operating room: "Pressure 80, 70, and dropping". When I entered the room, the anaesthetic had already taken*

effect. The Pope was sleeping, and I held a scalpel in my hand. The emergency staff had made all the necessary preparations. There was only one thing I needed to think about: make the incision without another second's delay. I opened up the abdominal cavity. There was a great quantity of blood. About three liters of it. We removed it with an aspirator, wiping and drying the cavity by every possible means, until we could locate the sources of the bleeding. After that I proceeded to stem the flow. Before long, with the patient no longer losing blood, and the transfusion taking effect, blood pressure began to rise. Now we could calmly proceed with the rest of the operation. Examining the abdominal cavity, I noticed several wounds. There were numerous lesions in the small intestine and colon. Some of these had been caused by direct injury, by the tearing and penetrating effect of the bullet, others by rupture. The mesentery, the membrane conducting the blood vessels into the small intestine, was damaged in several places. I performed a resection and the necessary anastomoses, rinsed the peritoneum, and stitched up the sigmoid. In the lower reaches of the colon I found a terrible wound, caused directly by the passage of the bullet.

Having stopped the bleeding, stabilized the cardiovascular system, and determined the gravity of the wounds, I decided that what the situation most required of me was a cool head. Though fully aware of the difficulty of my task, I was nevertheless convinced that the outcome would be a positive one. None of the vital organs, such as the aorta, iliac arteries or ureters had been touched. The bullet had passed through the sacrum after penetrating the front abdominal

wall. The hemorrhaging veins in front of the sacrum caused us a great deal of difficulty. In order to stop the bleeding, we had to cover the area with sterilized gel. But the bullet had merely grazed the vital organs, and it appeared that the adjacent nerve systems had also emerged intact. This was altogether amazing.

After the operation was over, the Holy Father was taken to the recovery room where he remained until May 18. In the days immediately following the operation, he suffered a great deal, mainly as a result of peritoneal drainage, but in time everything returned slowly to normal.

After performing the complex surgery, Dr. Crucitti reported that the nine-millimeter bullet had described an extraordinary trajectory through the Pope's body, bypassing all the vital organs, as though an unseen hand had guided it. It passed within a few millimeters of the aorta. A torn aorta would have meant certain death. The bullet also missed the spinal cord and other vital organs. Here, then, was a fact that did not admit of a natural explanation. "It was a real miracle, and I know who to thank for it. One hand held the gun, another guided the bullet" – that is how the Holy Father himself commented on the fact. The assassination attempt took place on May 13, the anniversary of Our Lady's first appearance in Fatima. Even the hour and the minute matched.

Observed Bishop Dziwisz: *The Holy Father saw in all this a sign from heaven. The doctors and I consider it a miracle. It seemed as if an unseen hand had hovered over the entire event. A day after the operation, the Pope received Holy Communion. The following day,*

he concelebrated with us from his bed. Not once did the Holy Father lower his breviary. I remember that his first question upon regaining consciousness a day after the shooting was: "Have we cancelled the compline?" Every evening we said Holy Mass together, and then the Litany to Our Lady. The Holy Father sang along with the hospital sisters. The staff vied with one another for the privilege of attending his Masses. On May 23, the doctors signed a communiqué stating that their patient's life was no longer in danger.

While staying at the Gemelli Clinic, John Paul II asked Bishop Hnilica to provide him with all the documentation connected with the Fatima revelations. The Pope carefully studied the documents. On leaving the hospital, he told Bishop Hnilica: *I now understand that the only way of saving the world from war or atheism is a conversion of the kind called for in the Fatima messages.*

A fascinating interpretation of the failed attempt on the life of the Holy Father comes from the lips of the gunman himself. The Holy Father visited Ali Agca at Rebibbia Prison in Rome. During his talk with the Pope, Ali Agca said: *How did you manage to escape with your life? I know that I aimed well. I know that the shots I fired were lethal, and yet they did not kill you. Why? What is this Fatima that everyone is talking about?*

The shooting took place on the anniversary of Our Lady's first apparition at Fatima. It was then that the Mother of God informed the world: *I have come to remind people of the need to repent and to do satisfaction for their sins.*

The Fatima message is clear and unambiguous: in order to avoid self-destruction, the world must undergo a conversion, and return to God. On the first anniversary of the shooting, the Pope made a pilgrimage to Fatima, offering thanks for his miraculous healing. He observed then: *The dates converged in such a way that I could not but feel that I have been called here in a very special way. So here I am today. I have come to thank Divine Providence. One hand aimed the weapon, another guided the path of the bullet.* The Holy Father reminded his audience that he had come to Fatima *to hear again on behalf of the whole Church the message, which 65 years*



John Paul II in Gemelli Clinic, a few days after the assassination attempt on his life

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ago issued from the lips of our heavenly Mother, who cares for all her children. Today this message is more timely and urgent than ever. How can one view without dread the wave of secularism and license which so threatens Christianity's basic moral principles? In dramatic words, the Pope expressed his grief that *the call to penance, conversion and prayer, has not met with the response it requires! O Immaculate Heart! – begged the Holy Father – Help us counter the menace of evil which hovers over mankind and shuts the door to the future.*

On July 13, 1917, while appearing

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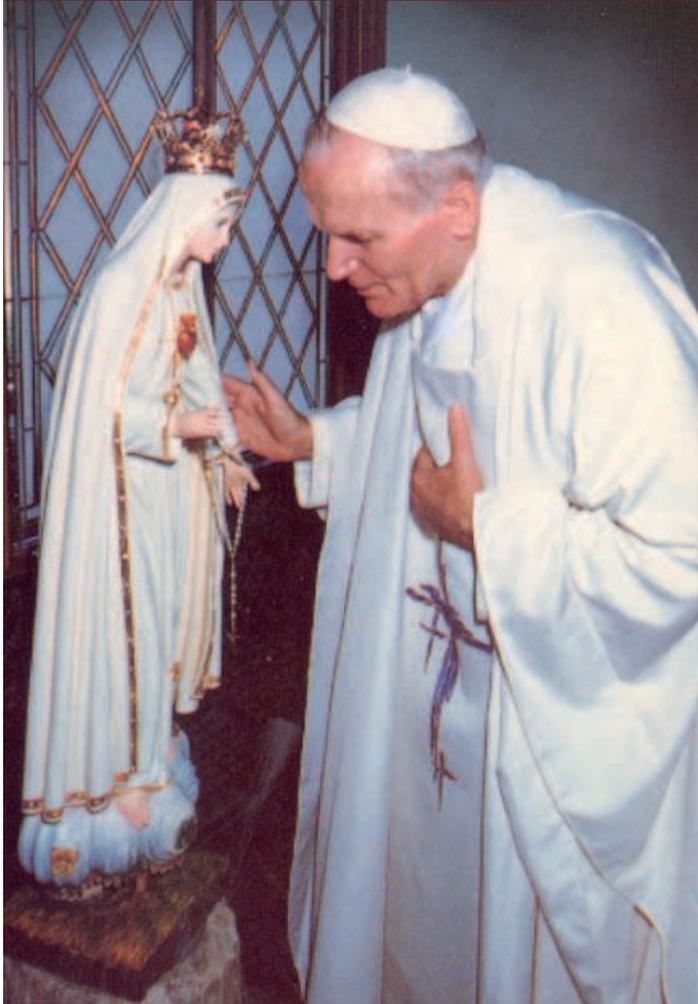


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in Fatima, the Blessed Mother said: *The Holy Father will consecrate Russia to me, and she will convert... Then, appearing to Sister Lucia in Tuy on June 13, 1929, she declared: The time has come when God will call on the Holy Father along with the bishops of the whole world to consecrate Russia to my Immaculate Heart, promising to save her by this means.*

On the memorable day of March 25, 1984, in St. Peter's Square in Rome, the Holy Father and the bishops of the whole world, in the presence of the statue of Our Lady of Fatima brought over especially for the occasion, carried out the solemn act of consecration of the world and Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The two hundred cardinals and bishops, who were present with the faithful on this day at St. Peter's Square, realized that this was an event that – as the Fatima message made clear – would change the course of the world. The act of consecration would counter the power of evil that threatened to engulf all of humanity: *The power of this consecration – said the Holy Father – endures for all ages, embraces all individuals, peoples and nations. It thwarts every evil that the spirit of darkness is capable of awakening in the heart of man, both in the past and in our times... Having entrusted the world, all its peoples and nations to You, O Mother... I place them in your motherly Heart. Immaculate Heart! Help us to conquer the menace of evil, which so readily takes root in the hearts of people today, and whose immeasurable effects weigh down upon our present age, and seem to close the doors on the future.*

After consecrating the world



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to Mary, the Mother of the Church, the Holy Father handed the Bishop of Fatima an unusual gift, saying: *This is the bullet removed from my body on May 13, 1981. The other was lost somewhere in St. Peter’s Square. This bullet does not belong to me but to her who watched over me and rescued me. Please take it back with you to Fatima and have it displayed at the shrine as a token of my gratitude*

to the Mary the Blessed Mother, and as a testimony to the great works of God.

The day the world was consecrated to the Blessed Mother proved to be a turning point in the history of mankind. Not long after, the world was to witness the beginning of the end of the USSR, the first atheistic empire in history. This evil dominion had sought at all costs to wipe out the Christian religion. Having attained power in the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev set in motion the changes known as *perestroika*, which in turn led to the final collapse of the entire Communist system.

The Soviet Union disintegrated. Poland and other nations won their independence, and believers regained the

right to practice their religion. Those who remember those years are witnesses of the great miracle of the Mother of God, the miracle prophesied at Fatima.

On May 13, 1994, the Holy Father was again being treated at the Gemelli Clinic, this time for a broken hip. That day, in his Easter message to the Italian Bishops, he wrote: *I write these words today, May 13, from the Agostino Gemelli Polyclinic. Allow me, dear Brothers, to hark back to what happened 13 years ago in St. Peter’s Square. We all remember that moment, when in the late afternoon shots were fired at the Pope with the purpose of killing him. The bullet that tore into his abdominal cavity is now at the shrine in Fatima. The belt pierced by the bullet lies in the Marian shrine in Jasna Gora, Poland. A mother’s hand guided the path of that bullet, and the dying Pope, who was quickly taken to Gemelli Clinic, was saved at death’s door. In September of last year, when I was able to contemplate the face of the Mother of God at the shrine of Ostra Brama in Vilnius, Lithuania, I recited the words of the great Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz:*

“Holy Virgin, you who keep watch / Over Czestochowa’s bright mount! Beacon of Ostra Brama! / As once in my boyhood you wrought a miraculous sign / (My weeping mother had scarcely entrusted me to your care / When, raising a dying eyelid, I instantly found the strength / To walk to your shrine and thank the Lord for life restored): / So, by a miracle, you shall restore us...” And as I recited these words after saying the rosary at the Ostra Brama shrine, my voice failed me.

In the context of all these events, Cardinal Sodano’s statement given on May 13, 2000, during the beatification mass of the two little shepherds, Francisco and Jacinta, carries extraordinary weight and significance: the Cardinal observed that after the assassination attempt of May 13, 1981, the Holy Father became convinced that “it was a mother’s hand that guided the bullet’s path, and in his throes the Pope halted at the threshold of death.” Subsequently, during a visit to Rome by the Bishop of Leira-Fatima, the Pope decided to donate to the Fatima shrine a second bullet, found later in the jeep that had carried him on the day of the shooting. The Bishop decided to have the bullet set into the crown of the statue of Our Lady of Fatima.

The subsequent events of 1989 brought about the total collapse of the militantly atheistic Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and countries of Central and Eastern Europe. These events the Pope also gratefully attributes to the Blessed Virgin. Nevertheless, the attacks on the Church and Christianity, and the suffering that accompanies them, persist in other parts of the world. Even if the events to which the third secret of Fatima apply seem to be a thing of the past, the call for conversion and penance made by Our Lady at the beginning of the twentieth century remains timely and urgent as ever. *The Lady of the message – observes John Paul II in his Message for the 1997 World Day of the Sick – seems to read the signs of the times with special insight. The insistent invitation of Mary Most Holy to penance is simply a manifestation of her maternal concern for the fate of the human family, which stands in the greatest need of conversion and forgiveness.*

(M.P.) ●