News



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Carmelite Sr. Lucia dos Santos is seen in this May 16, 2000, file photo. Sister Lucia, the eldest of three Portuguese children to report apparitions of the Virgin Mary in 1917 in Fatima, Portugal, died Feb. 13, 2005, at the age of 97. She was declared "venerable" on June 22 by Pope Francis. (OSV News/Courtesy of Shrine of Fatima)

Catholics in Portugal hope World Youth Day in Lisbon Aug. 1-6 will help spread devotion to Sr. Lucia dos Santos, who was one of the three little shepherd children who witnessed the apparitions of Mary in Fátima in 1917.

Pope Francis declared the Carmelite sister "venerable" with a June 22 decree that recognized her heroic virtues, filling Catholics in Portugal with joy as they await the August worldwide encounter.

A thorough study on Sister Lucia's heroic virtues was presented to the Vatican in October 2022, after a group of experts analyzed a vast set of documents related to her life, including 10,000 letters exchanged between her and numerous correspondents over decades.

Now, the next steps are beatification and canonization "if that is God's will," explained Sr. Angela de Fátima Coelho, a member of the Portuguese congregation Aliança de Santa Maria (Alliance of Holy Mary) and vice postulator for Sister Lucia's cause. In general, one verified miracle attributed to Sister Lucia's intercession is needed for beatification, and a second such miracle is needed for canonization.

"We have been receiving several interesting accounts of graces received in connection to Sister Lucia, but none has demonstrated to be a miracle yet," she told OSV News.

That is why it is "important now to incentivize the people to have faith and confidence in her power to intercede for us and to pray for it," Sister Angela added.

"Only people who know her will pray to her. It is our task now to present her to everybody," she said.

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World Youth Day is a good opportunity to talk about Sister Lucia's life, her virtues and her message to humankind, Sister Angela said, as thousands of pilgrims from the whole world are expected to take part in the event along with Pope Francis, who is scheduled to arrive in Lisbon Aug. 2 and will be with the young people Aug. 3 and 4.

On Aug. 5, the pope will visit the Shrine of Our Lady of Fátima and will end his trip to Portugal by celebrating the Aug. 6 closing Mass for World Youth Day.

Sister Lucia's life can be inspiring for young Catholics for many reasons, emphasized theologian José Carlos Carvalho, a professor at the Portuguese Catholic University who was part of the group that analyzed her letters.

Lucia was 10 years old when the Virgin Mary appeared to her and her two younger cousins, Francisco and Jacinta Marto. Lucia was the only one who could talk to Mary during the apparitions, while Jacinta could see her and listen to her and Francisco could only see her. She was the one who took notes of the messages Mary shared.

"Francisco and Jacinta died shortly after the apparitions (due to the Spanish flu pandemic) and Lucia had the privilege to live for an additional 90 years. That is why they were beatified and canonized before her," Carvalho explained.



St. John Paul II meets with Carmelite Sr. Lucia dos Santos May 13, 1982, in Fatima, Portugal. One year earlier, the pope survived an attempted assassination at the Vatican. The pope, in thanksgiving that his life was spared, had one of the bullets that struck him embedded in the crown of the statue of Our Lady of Fatima. Sister Lucia was declared "venerable" on June 22 by Pope Francis. (OSV News/Courtesy of Shrine of Fatima)

Sister Lucia was 97 when she died in 2005. Francisco and Jacinta were beatified in 2000 and canonized in 2017.

Although she was a cloistered nun all her life, Sister Lucia "accompanied the spiritual lives of many, many people, exchanged letters with national and world leaders for decades, was visited by cardinals and popes, and was able to spread her message across the world," Carvalho said.

She became a well-known and beloved figure in Portugal, Sister Angela said. When she died, many people unofficially declared she was already a saint.

"In fact, she really was a saint, despite going through such a harsh period in history, with two world wars. She had many virtues and also developed her theological thought over the years, helping to interpret Our Lady of Fátima's message," Carvalho said.

In his opinion, the central lesson in Fátima is that "God always accompanies humankind, even during tragic periods." That, according to Carvalho, is a message that can resonate among young Catholics who come to know Sister Lucia's story.

"Even in this secular and violent world, God continues to be present. That is something that can help to bring hope for the youth," he said.



Sr. Lucia dos Santos is pictured at the age of 13 in this file photo. Sister Lucia died Feb. 13, 2005, at the age of 97 at her convent in Coimbra, Portugal. She was the eldest of three shepherd children who reported seeing apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Fatima, Portugal in 1917. She was declared "venerable" on June 22 by Pope Francis. (OSV News/CNS file)

Sister Angela, who met Sister Lucia on five occasions, described her as "a woman with a young spirit who even at an old age still had dreams and ideals."

"When I first met her, I was waiting for some kind of a beyond-reach personality. And then I discovered she was a very pragmatic woman, with a great sense of humor and interested in church and world events," she recalled.

Sister Lucia also was somebody who had a strong sense of mission and "was committed to her vocation during her whole life."

One of the ways she would experience her calling was through constant prayer. Sister Angela recalled an occasion when she was translating Sister Lucia's conversation with a foreigner who would repeatedly ask her to pray for different people.

"She would always respond: 'I will, but please do pray too. And pray the rosary every day.' She insisted on that and I understood that she certainly had a good reason for saying so," Sister Angela said.

Sister Lucia's perseverance is inspiring for Catholics and can help young people to get closer to God, said Pedro Vieira, a 24-year-old employee at a shop located at the Shrine of Fátima.

"The confirmation of her heroic virtues shows that Sister Lucia is an inspiring light for all of us who try to follow the Lord, especially in the hardest moments of our lives, full of incertitude and doubts," he told OSV News.

Vieira is not attending the World Youth Day events in Lisbon, because he has to be at the shrine to welcome the pilgrims who will visit it. He thinks the young participants of the worldwide encounter can learn something from Sister Lucia's story.

"She demonstrated to us that we can and we should trust in God because he never abandons us," he concluded.