

Our Lady of Fatima and the Muslims

I was standing in the express line of Shop Rite with my groceries.

A pleasant young cashier soon helped me. As I handed my \$15.85 to her, I noticed her tag identified her as Fatima. We chatted. Fatima is a Muslim.

Therein is a story. The extraordinary Archbishop Fulton Sheen wrote a book in 1952 that he called *The World's First Love*. In that book, he discussed the relationship of Mary of Nazareth and the Muslims. More than half a century later, the archbishop's book stands as prophetic.

First some background. The Koran, the Muslims' bible, has references to Mary's Immaculate Conception as well as the Virgin Birth. Her genealogy is traced back to Abraham, Noah and Adam. There is reference made to Mary's mother.

In the Muslim tradition, when questions are asked about the possibility of a virgin birth, Mary takes on the questioner. The tradition has her asking, "Do you not know that God, when he created wheat, had no need of seed?" Mary pushes further, "God by his power made the trees without the help of rain."

The Koran speaks of the Annunciation, Visitation and Nativity. The 19th chapter of the Koran has 41 verses on Jesus and Mary. The 41st

chapter appears to have been borrowed from the Gospel of Luke.

The only possible rival to Mary among the Muslims is Fatima. She was the daughter of the seventh-century Mohammed. But after Fatima's death at around age 26, the sorrowful Mohammed penned a message to his child, "Thou shalt be the most blessed of women in Paradise after Mary."

And this brings us to the famed Fatima of Portugal. Mary appeared to shepherd children in Fatima in 1917. Before the vision, this hamlet was a cipher to both Portugal and Europe at large. The question before 1917, when asked at all, was, "Can any good come out of Fatima?" Today we

Father James Gilhooley

know the answer.

Ironically, the Marian phenomenon that happened to this once unknown hamlet may prove the salvation of both Portugal and her sister countries in post-Christian Europe. On two different occasions, then Christian Europe almost fell to the Muslims.

On the first occasion, the Muslims reached Tours in west central France in the eighth century before being defeated. The second time in the 16th century the Muslims rudely struck on the gates of Austria's Vienna. They were defeated at the naval battle of

Lepanto off Greece in 1571, Mary played a significant role. That naval victory occurred in October, the month traditionally given to honor her.

Sheen believed that Mary deliberately chose to be known as Our Lady of Fatima in the early 20th century. She wished to better appeal to Muslims. He believes that one day through her Muslims will also accept her Son as their Savior.

The archbishop reminds us that Portugal was occupied by the Muslims from the eighth century through the 13th. This hamlet of Fatima has of course strong name recognition to Muslims everywhere.

Sheen contended that the Muslims will one day become Christians. But he asserts this will not be accomplished by the Christian catechism but by Mary. For a start, Muslims already venerate her. Mary is for them the authentic Sayyida (Lady). Tradition says that Fatima herself said, "I surpass all the women except Mary." Once again, it will be ad Jesus per Mariam (to Jesus through Mary).

Then the choice of Fatima for Mary's apparitions was no accident at all. Neither is her almost century-old title, Our Lady of Fatima. Mary is telling Muslims everywhere that she is user-friendly. She comes to them with batteries already provided.

The Muslims have not failed to

salute her. Her pilgrim statue of Fatima has been joyously saluted in the countries of Africa and Asia where it has visited. During these festivities, Muslims came to our churches to fete Our Lady of Fatima. Processions were allowed to proceed in front of mosques and there prayers were recited. Sheen wrote in 1952, "In Mozambique, the unconverted Muslims began to be Christian when the statue of Our Lady of Fatima was erected."

We must convince the Muslims that Mary could not be the most blessed among women without being responsible for some stupendous event. That event of course was the birth of the God-Man. We must show them that without his birth Mary, in the archbishop's words, "would be nothing."

Those of us, who have misplaced our rosaries, must relocate them. We must use those beads for the conversion of Muslims. We prayed that same prayer successfully for the downfall of communism following the Russian Revolution in 1917. That was the year Mary visited Fatima. Was she telling us something?

Mary will not fail us. But neither must we fail her. R

Father James Gilhooley is the author of Reflections on the Sunday Gospels (4th edition) available at 1-800-566-6150.