

## **The Spiritualization of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**

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The late Pope John Paul II – deservedly awarded the accolade ‘the Great’ – consistently placed emphasis above all on the sanctity of human life. As head of the Roman Catholic Church, he also strove to offer new insights into the perpetual dilemma of the meaning of human suffering. Shockingly, he himself survived an attempt at assassination. It was inflicted by Mehmet Ali Agca at 5.19 p.m. on 13 May 1981, while the Pope was progressing around St. Peter’s Square in the Vatican City, the state of which the Pope was then the absolute ruler.

Mehmet Ali Agca shot the Pontiff in the abdomen and hands. Subsequently, the Pope underwent surgery for six hours at the Gemelli Hospital and was hospitalised for the next twenty-two days. Some weeks after returning to his responsibilities, on 20th July he was again admitted to hospital with infection of the wounds he had sustained. He returned to the operating theatre on 5 August, and was eventually discharged nine days later. The shooting occurred less than three years after John Paul II ascended to the papal throne.

Pope John Paul II, like any other individual undergoing a life-threatening event, may have experienced post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following the assassination attempt made on him in 1981. The classic symptoms of PTSD are depression, nightmares, flashbacks, emotional numbness and social withdrawal. Intensifying the shock of what had befallen him, the Pope had endured his ordeal in a setting that was constantly before him. Whenever he surveyed St Peter’s Square through the windows of his private apartments, he was confronted with the scene of his traumatic experience. One can only conjecture what psychological symptoms he may have endured over the years.

On 17 May 1981, Pope John Paul II memorably recited the Angelus at the Gemelli Hospital, exhorting those who heard him as follows: ‘Pray for the brother who shot me, whom I have sincerely forgiven.’ Forgiving his assassin may have constituted a form of relief for him against PTSD. Undoubtedly, the Pope’s superabundant Christian faith also constituted a prophylaxis against incipient depression; and his position as Pope – which precluded him from withdrawal from the worldwide Christian community of which he was head – involved him in a number of foreign visits, undertakings that may also have been therapeutic. But there is another factor that may also have had its influence in ameliorating the effect of his horrendous experience of a few days earlier. He may have subconsciously sustained some healing by his own association of what happened on 13 May with the transcendent events that were initiated on 13 May 1917 at Fatima in Portugal. On that day the first manifestation of the famous apparitions took place there. He may in particular have been influenced by the figure of ‘the bishop dressed in white’ who featured in the famous third secret of Fatima.

All coincidences are not paranormal, but the occurrence of a papal assassination attempt on the same day of such significance in the events at Fatima is an extraordinary coincidence, much more than a mere accident of

time. The mystical response of the late Pope to a situation that might have been predicted to lead to PTSD can be understood only if what took place at Fatima is studied in conjunction with what happened sixty-four years later. That justifies a discursion to examine the events at Fatima.

On 13 May 1917, three Portuguese children in Fatima saw 'a Lady all of Light' above a small oak tree in the Cova da Iria. They recounted later that she asked them to return there on the thirteenth day of every month, for the next five months. She confided to them three special messages that were not to be revealed until later – the third of them is popularly known as the third secret of Fatima. In the series of Fatima apparitional occurrences, three percipients were involved on each occasion. Significant features of the events that were reported are the fulfilment of predictions, collective percipience, the quasi-physical features of the apparitions, the powerful motivation on the part of the apparition, the quintessential loyalty and obedience of the percipients to the agent, and visible solar signs. All of these indicators support the case for there having been an authentic apparitional experience at Fatima.

Sister Lucia is a key figure in the apparitions at Fatima. As one of the three children present at all of them, she alone was accorded permission to reveal the first two parts of the special messages in 1927. In 1941, while resident at the religious community of the convent of Tuy, Sister Lucia received further permission to reveal the third secret. She was instructed to write down what the three children had experienced, and to send what she had written to the Pope. Three years later, to accompany her report, she sent a letter suggesting that the Pope might, if he considered it wise to do so, make the content of the message known publicly after the year 1960.

Pope John Paul II asked for the sealed envelope enclosing Sister Lucia's communication to be brought to him when he regained consciousness after the assassination attempt on 13 May 1981. Evidently he did not then consider it appropriate to promulgate the message to others. On 26 June 2000, the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, released the text of the third secret on the authority of the Pope. Written down in Portuguese by Sister Lucia in 1944, it had been kept in the Vatican archives ever since. Part of the original text of the third secret reads in translation as follows:

...And we saw in an immense light that is God: 'something similar to how people appear in a mirror when they pass in front of it', a bishop dressed in white; 'we had the impression it was the Holy Father'. Other bishops, priests, men and women were going up a steep mountain, at the top of which there was a big cross of rough-hewn trunks as of a cork tree with the bark still on; before reaching it, the Holy Father passed through a big city half in ruins, and half trembling, with halting step, afflicted by pain and sorrow, he prayed for the souls of the corpses he met; having reached the top of the mountain, he was on his knees at the foot of the cross when he was killed by soldiers firing bullets and arrows, and in the same way there died the other bishops and priests and various lay people of different ranks and positions...

[Tuy, 3 January 1944]

## **Discussion**

The assassination attempt on the life of the late Pontiff may be understood as a manifestation of the assassination that was revealed to the three children, and that was later reported by Sister Lucia. The similarity of the events, and the occurrence of the real-life events on the anniversary of the opening of the series of apparitions at Fatima, convinced Pope John Paul II that he was a fulfilment of the predicted bishop dressed in white. It is not clear how far his psychological needs at the time coloured his personal interpretation of what was foretold at Fatima.<sup>1</sup> The third secret is undoubtedly focused upon a suffering pope in turbulent times, but inevitably some controversy has ensued regarding the identity of this very significant personage.<sup>2</sup>

## **References**

1. Pandarakalam J, P, (2005) Letter to the Editor. *The Christian Parapsychologist*, Vol. 16, No 6, p193-194
2. Pandarakalam J, P, (2001) Letter to the Editor. *The Christian Parapsychologist*, Vol. 14, No 5, p169-170

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