This year, the Catholic Church celebrates the 100-year anniversary of the events at the Cova da Iria area of Fatima, Portugal, witnessed by three shepherd children who reported that they saw visions of Mary beginning on May 13, 1917, and then again on the 13th day of five subsequent months.

While tending sheep in a field, Lucia dos Santos and her two younger cousins, Blessed Francisco and Jacinta Marto, reported seeing a woman dressed in all white, “more brilliant than the sun, shedding rays of light clearer and stronger than a crystal glass filled with the most sparkling water and pierced by the burning rays of the sun.”

Calling herself “Our Lady of the Rosary,” Mary asked the children to pray the Rosary daily for the conversion of sinners. She asked for prayer, penance, and the consecration of Russia to her Immaculate Heart.

On October 13, 1917, when Mary appeared with St. Joseph. A crowd of 70,000 witnessed the sun dance, spin, display in various colors and descend on them, drying their rain-soaked clothes and the land. The sun miracle was reported by people as far as 40 miles away.

Due to the 1918 influenza epidemic, the two younger children did not live long beyond the apparition events. Francisco, ten, requested his first Communion on his deathbed and passed away the following day, April 4, 1919. Jacinta died on February 20, 1920, at age nine after an unsuccessful operation for an abscess in her chest.

Lucia became a postulant at the convent of the Institute of the Sisters of St. Dorothy at Pontevedra, Spain, but later entered the Carmelite convent in Coimbra, Portugal, where she remained until her death in 2005.

Mary had given the children a secret in three parts. The first was a vision of hell. She also spoke of impending war and the need for the consecration of Russia to her Immaculate Heart; otherwise, communist Russia would “spread her errors throughout the world.”

On May 13, 2000, St. John Paul II, at the end of Mass in Fatima with Sister Lucia in attendance, authorized Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Vatican secretary of state, to make a statement regarding the third secret of Fatima, where he related the image of a “bishop clothed in white” getting shot.
After the assassination attempt by Mehmet Ali Agca of Turkey on St. John Paul II in St. Peter’s Square on May 13, 1981 (feast of Our Lady of Fatima), the pope believed that the secret applied to that event.

The next year, he took a bullet fragment that had entered his body and had it placed in the crown of the famed statue of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal. Sister Lucia herself indicated that she agreed with this interpretation as a prophetic vision of the struggle of atheistic communism against Christianity and the sufferings of the victims of the faith.

That day, St. John Paul II made the feast day of Our Lady of Fatima universal by including it in the Roman Missal and beatified the two deceased seers, Jacinta and Francisco. When canonized, they will become the youngest non-martyred saints in church history.

In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI lifted the normal five-year waiting period to begin the canonization process of Sister Lucia dos Santos who died at age 97 in 2005.

Fatima has become an important place of pilgrimage with five million people per year coming to the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary, the construction of which began in 1928.

This 100th year of the Fatima apparitions is cause for great joy and celebration, as are anniversaries of any of the very rare, highly approved, and celebrated examples of the miraculous found in the Catholic Church. Lourdes, Guadalupe, Divine Mercy, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus visions of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque are examples with papal recognition, canonized visionaries, basilicas, and feast days on the Roman calendar.

It must be remembered by the faithful, however, that these events belong to private revelation as opposed to public revelation, which is meant for all people for all time and has been completed by Christ.

When giving approval to such spectacular supernatural events, the competent authority—normally the local bishop—is declaring that they are “worthy of belief.”

Catholics are under no obligation to place their belief in such occurrences and may choose to incorporate them into their lives of faith as they wish.

Whatever the significance of the Fatima apparitions for each us personally, the 100-year anniversary of these apparitions is reminder of the central message of the Gospels, calling us to conversion and bringing us closer to Christ.

O’Neill is the author of “Exploring the Miraculous,” creator of the website MiracleHunter.com and producer of the new EWTN series “They Might Be Saints,” available on TheyMightBeSaints.com.